Disaggregating the State: Exploring Interdisciplinary Possibilities for the Study of Policy

Russell Prince

Everyday Life in British Government, RAW Rhodes. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2011).

The State as Cultural Practice, Mark Bevir and RAW Rhodes. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2010).

Policy World: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power, Cris Shore, Susan Wright and Davide Però (eds). Berghahn Book, New York and Oxford (2011).

While debate still rages over whether neoliberalism is the best epithet for the contemporary political moment (for a recent contribution to this debate, see Peck and Tickell, 2012), the transformations that have occurred within and across states over the last few decades have long been recognised as putting serious strain on conventional and methodologically nationalist explanatory frameworks. Themes like transnationalism, state rescaling and, more recently, policy mobility have emerged in geography to try to take account of the changing socio-spatial constitution of political

processes and to offer a language for its description and analysis. But there is a lot of potential for inter-disciplinary conversation here as well. Emerging research programmes in both anthropology and political science/studies show considerable conceptual and methodological overlap with this recent work in geography, and it is likely all three disciplines would benefit from further engagement with one another.

It perhaps comes as something of a surprise to suggest that geographers might be able to talk to political scientists at all, given the latter's well established and ongoing predilection for empiricist and positivist frameworks and standards of evidence that have been increasingly marginalised within critical geographical scholarship. These different approaches often mean the two disciplines talk past each other, even when they are talking about areas of shared interest (see the recent exchange in *Political Studies Review* between Benson and Jordan, 2012; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2012; McCann and Ward, 2012). This situation means that I am not sure there is much hope at the present moment for geographers to engage with the political science mainstream, but there is work on the edges of the discipline that provide some opportunity for fruitful engagement. The work I have in mind here has been called within political science interpretive policy analysis, and one of its lead advocates is a significant figure in the discipline, Rod Rhodes, who recently stepped down after a quarter of a century editing the highly-ranked academic journal *Public Administration*.

The interpretive turn in political science has seen a small but growing community within the discipline using discourse analysis and observational methodologies in their work, in stark and deliberate contrast to the dominant institutionalism and methodological individualism. Over the last ten years, Rhodes has been at the forefront

of this movement in collaboration with a number of colleagues but most notably Mark

Bevir, with whom he co-authored a strong theoretical statement of this programme as

The State as Cultural Practice. This work intersects with Rhodes's single authored

Everyday Life in the British Government to the point that exactly the same passages can

be read in each, although the latter has a shallower treatment of the theoretical issues in

play and a much deeper analysis of the empirical case. The latter is the culmination of

Rhodes's endeavours on this terrain and is based on an extended period of remarkable

access to the inner domains of the second 'New' Labour Government of 2001-2005.

Focusing on three departments (the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the

Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department for Environment, Food

and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)), Rhodes spent two days each observing the workings of the

offices of two ministers and three permanent secretaries as well as shadowing each of

them for five days. He supplemented this with 67 hours of interviews with various

ministers, secretaries and other officials, as well as information from insider accounts.

Out of this he produces a partial narrative account of how British Government actually

worked on the day-to-day level.

Rhodes's project is to offer an account of what he and Bevir call the 'stateless state'. This

is an image of the state that focuses on the agents of the state – the civil servants,

politicians and special advisors – rather than its institutional structure. The state for

Rhodes is effectively the sum of their actions. But they do not have free reign: their

agency is situated in various webs of relations and beliefs, which are themselves shaped

and influenced by particular longstanding narratives and traditions. Rhodes identifies

three particular narratives which are highly influential: the Westminster narrative,

which are the longstanding codes of conduct around political neutrality and service to

the minister which govern the behaviour of civil servants; the managerial narrative, which has become increasingly prominent in the UK since the 1960s and in which the practices of managing, reputedly based on the private sector, according to identifiable targets and with appropriate sanctions shape conduct in the departments; and the governance narrative, in which coordination is achieved through the internal and external organisation of networks across the state and often into civil society as well. These narratives are not necessarily complementary and often competing. Government proceeds through the agents of the state contending with the various dilemmas that crop up between and within these traditions as events unfold. The image that is produced is one of various agents reproducing the state through their constant negotiation between these received traditions and the problems and dilemmas that confront them, rather than the more familiar image of the state as powerful, hierarchical and ossified institutions wielding structural power.

Rhodes observational methods and post-positivist theoretical framing allows him to adopt a language that, if not entirely familiar to those geographers using relational approaches, suggest there are points of overlap where dialogue might take place. He meditates at length on the relational practices that exist within and across different departments and across which competing political imperatives are transmitted, resisted and diverted, bringing that relational work to the fore as vital to holding together the disparate edifice of the state. His focus on what many would consider the mundane and ritualistic aspects of day-to-day life in government, such as time management and codes of politeness, would resonate with those geographers familiar with Foucauldian governmentality and actor-network approaches to understanding power. Rhodes provides enough insight to consider how governmentality approaches, for example,

which have been founded on how political power works 'beyond the state', might be used to venture inside the formal state and reconsider power there. From this point of view, there are intersections with geography worth exploring.

But there are problems with the framework as well. The deliberately contradictory 'stateless state' is a formulation meant to emphasise the agential as opposed to structural nature of the state favoured in political science, but it is also emblematic of a descent into particularity that may lose sight of other significant aspects and processes. Mainstream political science has tended to see Rhodes's project as over-emphasising agency, flattening out hierarchies, and so eliding the importance of structural power (see Marsh, 2008 for an early and typical response to this trajectory). For these political scientists, situated agency might help us to understand how certain individuals and groups see themselves and their roles, but it is the roles within a power structure that give them power. No doubt many geographers would agree, but others might equally see the problem as an unwillingness to go far enough in terms of his theoretical shift.

Writing with Bevir, Rhodes expounds his approach as avoiding reification by using concepts that focus on the construction of common meanings, such as practice, and explaining these in historicist terms like narrative and tradition, as opposed to modernist-empirical concepts like institution and norm, which determine meaning. But he is dismissive of post-structuralist approaches as 'anti-realist', in which 'a concept would insist there is no group of things, not even a vague one, to which it refers' (Bevir and Rhodes, p. 70). So he talks of institutions like the state as made up of the practices of agents and their 'webs of belief' based on the traditions and narratives they draw on, such as the governance and Westminster narratives, while also contending that

elements of those webs can still refer to things in the world. Although this allows

Rhodes to continue to use important political science mainstay concepts like

governance, just understood in narrative rather than structural terms, it also prevents

him from exploring all the implications of his analysis.

The agents Rhodes describes are understood as actively engaging with narratives like

governance and managerialism, and these in turn are understood as forming a

constitutive outside of those agents' situated agency, rather than through the

subjectivity of the agents. The result is little more than 'unconventional portraits' (see

Rhodes, 2009, p. 298) of these agents which show how they negotiate these different

narratives in their daily lives. If we instead understand these narratives as the

abstractions they are, we may be able to see instead how these narratives are used and

reproduced by the agents themselves to help them to understand their work and their

place in the world: their subjectivity. The advantage of this post-structural approach is

that it leaves a space for thinking about the diversity of action that often gets reduced to

'the Westminster story' and the kinds of hybrid agents and actions that can emerge as a

result of the consolidation and circulation of these ways of knowing. Post-structural

arguments, including governmentality and actor-network arguments, are not

necessarily 'anti-realist' in the terms that Rhodes uses, but point out how discourses like

these narratives make the world, while leaving us open to the possibility of new kinds of

subjectivity and politics emerging. Rhodes it seems, who in previous incarnations is

himself partly responsible for introducing the narrative of governance to the world of

public administration, and despite his nods to his own presence in the stories he tells,

still wants to be the impartial, external observer, identifying the underlying currents

that shape the state. His conclusion, that we need to better recognise the virtues of the

Westminster narrative above those of governance and managerialism, is certainly worth reflecting on, but it perhaps also represents a weakness of the analytical imagination on display here.

This criticism aside, it is still a fascinating and rich account that geographers should be able to engage with. Of course, we cannot all expect to be able to get the kind of access that Rhodes was able to, but it is perhaps when we move away from the seemingly powerful and relatively enduring centres towards and across the boundaries of the state, such as they are, that we really start to get insight into how the state and political power are changing. These are the analytical spaces that many geographers, such as those interested in policy mobility, occupy. Since Laura Nader's call in the 1970s for them to 'study up' and think about the elites in their own societies, anthropologists have been here as well (Nader, 1972). One strand of this work has been driven by Cris Shore and Susan Wright since the 1990s, focusing on what they call the anthropology of policy. With Davide Però, they have brought recent work in this area together in an edited collection titled *Policy Worlds: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power*. Geographers are already engaging with this literature and with anthropologists, so it is worth considering what anthropological approaches have to offer.

Rhodes's construction of state actors brings their agency to the fore and gives them depth, but they are still conceived as relatively coherent, just with bounded and constrained rationality informing their decisions. Anthropologists in this volume on the other hand regard them as multiply constituted in a range of social settings, including policy-making centres, but also within their networks of friends, allies and co-conspirators, their education and vocational training, and in response to resistance from

citizens 'below' and pressure from 'above' by supranational actors. The actors who make the policy are as much subjects of the policy as those fractions of the population targeted within it. In his chapter, David Mosse writes about the negative reaction he received about his ethnography from the development experts and professionals that were his subjects, who felt his account was 'inaccurate, disrespectful and... damaging to their professional reputations' (p. 50). Mosse's account was of how a key part of technocratic policy-making is the creation of a gap between a messy 'real' world and the idealised and abstract world of the policy models in order to make the latter defensible and reproducible even when they failed. This 'gap' is vital to the modernist development project because it allows it to keep going despite frequent failure, which he argues is the reason those who are tied to it, and so in many ways constituted by it, will defend it in the way they did. Thinking about policy-makers and the associated experts as more than just functionaries of state power but subjects constituted through the work of policy-making can help us to grasp how these seemingly distant, impersonal, but still powerful coalitions of expertise and state power are maintained in their position.

The multiple constitution of state actors and policy-makers extends to thinking about policy as well. A basic assumption of the volume as a whole is that policy is always more than just a document, even if this is a convenient site to focus on from a methodological point of view. Rather, policy is conceived as taking shape through the arrangement of people and things in relation to one another across space and time. A number of chapters ask the question of where a policy begins and ends, who is responsible for its creation and who for its delivery, and they often find this to be a question that is not easily answered if it is answerable at all. Moreover, policy never works as planned or produces the world that is imagined by it. This latter point is perhaps routine for critical

scholars, but ethnographic methods can provide useful insights into how policy makes particular kinds of subjects, such as responsibilised but insecure citizens produced by individualising pension reform or students who shape their political action around their subjectification as paying consumers of education. And it can help us to place and conceive of resistance to particular policies as the remaking and reconstruction of policy by the governed themselves, as Però shows in his case studies of resistance by immigrants to immigration policy. Instead of just focusing on the words of a policy document, when we conceive of policy as assemblages or networks that take shape across social space the challenge becomes how to understand the way power works within these arrangements to make our critique.

Thinking about this challenge is also central to thinking about how entities like the state, and governing institutions in general, are formed and given shape. If policies are assemblages that go right across the social space, then where is the line drawn that separates the formal state where policy is *prima facie* produced, such as those spaces analysed by Rhodes, and the non-state spaces where policy is targeted? Insofar as such a line exists, it is a blurry one, and it is ever-shifting as agencies find ways to shift, reconstruct and transcend it. An anthropological focus on the social worlds of the subjects involved is ideal for this. Janine Wedel offers a compelling account of what she calls 'flex nets': networks of elite actors, such as the neo-conservative cabal around the presidency of George W. Bush, that she argues conflate state and personal interests, pool their resources, and work to subvert state power towards their projects by moving in and out of state and non-state roles and effectively side-stepping democratic processes. Flex nets actively construct a line between state and non-state, but as a collective they cut across it, with all the advantages this brings for using state power

while avoiding accountability. Usually these policy worlds are more mundane than this, but for anthropologists, who prioritise the field, the details of these worlds can offer a powerful angle of vision out to the wider systems and processes that they are a part of.

So what in particular does geography offer to an inter-disciplinary conversation around contemporary state and policy processes? The emerging literature on policy mobility in geography overlaps both conceptually and methodologically with this anthropological literature, and to a certain extent with interpretive policy analysis. Given its focus on the mutation of policy as it moves (see Peck, 2011), the orientation of this geographical literature chimes particularly well with the kind of multi-sited ethnography advocated in Shore, Wright and Però's volume, as well as with exhortations to 'follow the policy' as a useful starting point to analysis. The policy mobility literature also suggests a more dynamic sense of the networks and assemblages that constitute policy, understanding these as crossing state borders and cutting across administrative scales in various ways, so policy is seen as multiply-constituted but interconnected across different administrative spaces. Indeed these spaces have been understood in the geographical literature as assemblages themselves (McCann and Ward, 2011), of which policy assemblages will be a constitutive part. Furthermore, by engaging with Rhodes's ethnography, these networks and assemblages can more clearly be understood as cutting across the boundaries of the formal state and into places like Whitehall through particular situated agents, serving to further disaggregate the edifice of the state and policy-making apparatus.

Geographers' particular sensibilities, as expressed in discussions and debates within the discipline, can also offer a lot to this conversation. I will briefly mention two examples

here. The policy mobility literature has in part been a response to the issue of scale that has recently been widely debated in geography. Conceptualising the relationships between, for example, the local, the national and the global has been a key disciplinary concern for decades, most recently as geographers have tried to find ways to talk about the apparent rescaling of state power that has occurred with globalisation. For example, how is policy implicated in the conversion to different, multiple scales of governance? And how does the production of scale serve to channel the networks and assemblages that make policy, if they do at all? Geographical conceptions of the production of scale can resonate with ethnographic accounts trying to grasp the interrelations that pertain between, for example, national state actors and supranational agencies like the World Bank.

My second example has a quite different theoretical provenance: topological space. The sense of policy as a network or assemblage that is distributed across space is an appealing one for geographers, but it isn't just that 'policy' itself is actually spatial: it also has spatial effects. From a topological point of view, policy can have the effect of drawing certain places closer and pushing other places away, such as with decisions of which cities a 'creative city' policy might benchmark itself against. It can pull the subjects of policy into the same comparative space as 'students' or 'immigrants', and it can push them into categories with certain moral relationships between them as, for example, 'single mothers' and 'families'. The topologies of policy interact with the topographical spaces they act on and through, resulting in multiple spatial dimensions to the assemblage. Geographical work in this vein has the potential to enhance our conceptions of policy and the state.

The overlaps of concerns, conceptions and methods that we can see here between geography, anthropology and political science is potentially very rewarding and worth exploring further. Together they can provide ways of thinking about political processes and state power that are less beholden to naturalised categories of space and reified conceptions of hierarchy. They have the potential to grasp dynamism and change more effectively, to disaggregate apparent overwhelming structural power and reveal its often mundane and resistible bases, and to consider paths towards more progressive political futures in both small and large ways.

Acknowledgements

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