

The Structure-Agency Debate and its Historiographical Utility

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‘Questions of Theory and Method in Political Science’

Introduction

Within this paper I argue that, while mainstream political science seeks to distance itself from theoretically-informed analyses, it also remains informed by (unstated) theoretical assumptions, which are in themselves highly political. First, at an ontological level it views the study of politics as the study of government. Second, at an epistemological level it adopts a positivist theoretical position. Consequently, it is primarily concerned with observable decision-making and ignores unobservable structural constraints. This leads to an agency-centred approach in which political change is explained as a consequence of the motivations of political actors. In contrast, in adopting a realist epistemological position I argue that power cannot be simply observed. As such, I suggest that we need to account for the existence of structures which are not always directly observable.

The ontological position of mainstream political science

The reduction of politics to the study of the machinery of government has a strong tradition with British political science. Gamble identifies a Whig tradition in which ‘Understanding British politics meant understanding the workings of British parliamentary government’ (1990, p.407). Within this *Westminster model*, politics is narrowly conceptualised as the domain of a political élite competing for power within the central institutions of the state. As Mackintosh argues in his book, *The Government and Politics of Britain*: ‘The first objective for a student of politics is to try and discover where power lies within the system’ (quoted in Leys 1983, p.7). As such, it is assumed that power is located within the system. Politics is narrowly constructed as an electoral competition between the parties and the often conflictual relationship between Whitehall and pressure groups.

Further, the dominant tradition within British political science emphasises the notion of parliamentary sovereignty. Dicey argues that parliamentary sovereignty means that Parliament has ‘the right to make or unmake any law whatever; and, further, that no person or body is recognised by the law of England as having a right to override or set aside the legislation of Parliament’ (quoted in Norton 1991, p.79). As such, Parliament is uniquely unaccountable to any other institutional body. The judiciary has no constitutional power over Parliament and merely upholds laws introduced by the government. Gamble argues that this explains the historical aversion to notions of the state within British political science. As Parliament was considered to be an omnipotent institution within the British political system, other public institutions are conceptualised as having a subordinate role in the political process. So, for example, the Civil Service is viewed as a largely neutral, advisory and technocratic body, offering advice to Government ministers on the feasibility of their preferred policies.

Although this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of civil servants opposing government policy (for example, on practical grounds) the seniority of government is always emphasised.

The central point here is that British politics has been historically dominated by an instrumentalist view of the state, in which control of the machinery of government is seen as a sufficient basis of power to realise political change. As Miliband argues:

‘From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, and on the basis of the struggles of that century, the whole of political life in Britain has been dominated by the belief that the House of Commons was, or could be made to become, the effective instrument of such changes as various classes, groups, and interests might at different times want to achieve in the economic, social and political character of British society.’ (1982, p.21)

It is this, essentially pluralist view of the political process which has dominated both British political science and British party politics. For example, historically within the Labour Party there has been a strong belief that a parliamentary majority was a sufficient basis for the implementation of its policy commitments. As Jones & Keating argue:

‘... while social democracy in other countries rested on a revolutionary establishment of its democratic prerequisites, British social democrats (and the Labour Party) sought to adapt to existing mechanisms’. (1985, pp.6-7)

This is a belief which historically has been shared by British political scientists. As Gamble argues, within the Westminster model, ‘the state is enlightened, neutral, representative, parliamentary and national’ (1990, p.413). As such, I suggest that many political scientists share a similar normative view of the political process with the élite political actors they study. In particular, they are driven by an inherent belief in the efficacy of liberal democracy.

A basic tenet of liberal democracy is that power lies with elected representatives and that political change is possible through a change in government. If we begin to suggest that power does not wholly lie within Westminster, then we also question the fundamental basis of British democracy. For in arguing that governments are subject to wide-ranging political, economic and ideological constraints we question the extent to which they are able to realise the peoples’ will. As the notion of parliamentary democracy is essentially voluntarist, then any account which emphasises structures inevitably questions the extent to which power is located within the palace of Westminster.

An instructive example here is Harold Wilson’s recollection of the sterling crisis on Labour’s election in October 1964. In his memoirs on the 1964-70 Government Wilson recalls how he was faced with a virtual ultimatum from the Governor of the Bank of England that wide-ranging public expenditure cuts should be introduced which were completely at odds with Labour’s manifesto proposals. Wilson gives a heroic account of how he resolutely refused such democratic demands:

‘To accept his argument would mean that the Queen’s First Minister was being asked to ring down the curtain on parliamentary democracy, by accepting the doctrine that an election in Britain was a farce, that the British people could not make a choice between policies, and that the policies were

directed from outside the country'. (1971, p.38)

Wilson clearly believes that such an appalling vista was avoided by his patriotic defence of parliamentary democracy and his rejection of the governor's demands.

Here, I suggest that whether or not we agree with Wilson's recollection of events will be highly influenced by our normative understanding of the British political system. If on the one hand, we believe in the efficacy of parliamentary sovereignty then we are more likely to privilege the political in our analysis. As such, in the above example, we may argue that unelected economic interests are unlikely to force their preferred policy agenda on a democratically elected government. Consequently, we may emphasise the Wilson Government's political acumen in employing the notion of parliamentary sovereignty to defend his government's policy agenda.

In contrast, Marxists have always been sceptical of the efficacy of parliamentary sovereignty and have certainly rejected the idea that socialism can be achieved through parliamentary means. Within the Marxist literature, the Wilson Government's record is viewed as a marked illustration of the dominance of economic interests over elected governments. For example, as Miliband argues:

'[Wilson's] account would be a lot more edifying if the Wilson Government had not in fact pursued throughout its period of office economic and social policies (not to speak of foreign ones) orthodox enough to be broadly acceptable to 'those who exercised decisive economic power' (1982, p.109)

In privileging the political power of capital, Marxists have always questioned the autonomy of the state. However, in recent years a number of literature's have begun to emphasise the structural constraints which elected governments inevitably face. For example, within the political economy, political sociology, political geography and comparative politics literature's it is widely acknowledged that governments are constrained by the wider economic, social, political and ideological environment in which they are located. An obvious contemporary example is the widespread literature on 'globalisation'.

However, while I agree that the study of British politics has become increasingly diffuse, political science continues to be dominated by the view that the study of politics is primarily the study of institutions and mechanisms of government. Indeed, this is a position which is vehemently defended within the mainstream of the discipline. For example, Nash argues:

'in political science our essential concern is with government, and only then with the politics of a given collectivity. The fact of this sequence is important. For thereby we argue against the meaningfulness of the claim that it is possible to address politics when we lack a detailed understanding of government, governing procedures and the structure of "constituted powers" of a given people.' (1996, p.1108)

Here, in order to understand politics we must first comprehend the machinery of government. That is, the aim of the political scientist should be to explain how the political system works. For example, what are the processes and mechanisms which policies pass through before becoming Law. However, while there is certainly nothing wrong in seeking to understand how the system works, we also need to ask why it works in that way. More specifically, we need to ask in whose interests is the political

system constructed. Politics is not about the lofty pursuit of the public interest. It is about power: who gets what, when and how.

Epistemological positions

Having established what they believe the study of politics should entail many authors then argue that we should seek to be objective as possible in our research.

Consequently, they argue for an empirical approach which draws upon available primary evidence. In emphasising the empirical nature of their research, mainstream political scientists claim a far greater degree of objectivity and hence explanatory utility than that achieved by theoretically-informed analyses.

It is argued that as far as possible we should develop an objectively informed and impartial analysis of the available primary evidence. As Hennessy argues: 'the best antidote to the poison of ideological distortion distilled from prejudice and hindsight is an abundance of primary evidence' (1987, p.50). In particular, he praises studies such as those by Morgan and Pelling which draw upon political biographies and archival material in the Public Records Office. As such, much of the post-war literature rests on positivist notions of objectivity and value-neutrality, while theory-driven analyses are perennially suspected of ideological bias. However, this ignores the theoretical assumptions which influenced their ontology in the first place.

The parameters which divide economics or history or sociology from politics are not as easily identifiable as those, for example, between chemistry and physics. Inherent within any discussion of what we believe the study of politics should entail is a normative belief in what politics is. That is, in setting the parameters of political science we also reveal what we believe the purpose and aim of politics should be.

Historically, British political science has been dominated by a conservative view of the political. As Gamble argues: 'The leading practitioners of political science were convinced that change needed to be evolutionary and gradual and that there were strict limits to what could be achieved through political action' (1990, p.408). Further, there is a strong belief in the possibility of change through existing state institutions. This normative belief determines the boundaries of the *political* and establishes a suitable terrain for political analysis.

There is a symbiotic relationship between theory and the methodological approach which is adopted. As such, while mainstream political science is generally perceived as being empirically-driven as opposed to theory-driven it is nonetheless underpinned by distinct theoretical assumptions. Indeed, the notion of a value-free science is impossible; for example, as Rosenberg argues:

'the way in which a social scientist selects the problems on which to work, the factors he cites to explain behaviour, and the evidence he seeks to substantiate these explanations all reflect the significance and meaning the social scientist attaches to them'. (1988, p.188)

In focusing on a particular area the social scientist implicitly suggests that it is more important than others. As Popper also contends: 'Observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem' (quoted in Magee 1985, p.33). As such, the idea of an objective observer simply collating data is erroneous. The research process does not begin with observation but with theory.

Although any hypothesis can be said to have developed from some observation, that observation must have been influenced by some form of theory. In essence, knowledge is evolutionary.

In rejecting the notion of a value-free science I argue that mainstream British political science is underpinned by, often unstated, theoretical assumptions. For example, as I argued above, an ontological belief that the study of politics equals the study of government leads to the development of a specific methodological approach. The discerning historiographer armed with a resolute belief in government as the principle conduit of political, economic and social change is inevitably drawn towards historical records of the governmental process.

Through a detailed examination and cross-reference of political memoirs and governmental archives mainstream historiography aims to develop a reasonably accurate picture of the historical political process. However, in emphasising the empirical validity of their research, the discerning historiographer (often unwittingly) adopts an essentially positivistic epistemology which leads to an overly intentionalist account of political change.

The format of government documents and, especially, political memoirs, focuses attention on the role of political actors. Whereas, such data offers a lucid snapshot of the intricacies of micro-level élite political conflict, it is less useful in encapsulating the wider structural environment in which the decision-making process is located. Through this approach, political history is pieced together from the day-to-day mechanics of the governmental process. Political conflict is reproduced as a struggle between dominant historical figures.

In drawing on the recollections of élite actors and minutes of government meetings it is inevitable that the personalities of the main protagonists on the historical stage will be prioritised over the prevailing political, economic and social environment in which decisions were made. As Hay argues, while archival data may be useful for extrapolating the principle conflicts among the major players within the political arena, they cannot 'be used so easily to depict the constraints imposed by inherited state and economic structures, nor indeed public opinion' (1994, p.33). Consequently, policy outcomes are viewed as the result of conflict among relatively autonomous political actors.

Arguably this reliance on public records, political memoirs and biographies and anecdotal evidence leads towards a methodological individualism (MI):

'the unassailable doctrine that we must understand all collective phenomena as due to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes and thoughts of individual men and as due to traditions created and preserved by individual men'. (Bhargava 1992, p.23)

As such, the social scientist should only be concerned with the observable behaviour of individuals and all explanations of social phenomena become an aggregation of individual action. However, this is not to suggest that society is viewed as an aggregation of atomistic individuals. Indeed, as Raymond Boudon argues, 'methodological individualism in no way implies an atomistic view of society, indeed it requires that individuals be inscribed in a social context'. This reflects a growing contempt, within the social sciences, for crudely polaristic accounts of the relationship

between individuals and society. As Bhargava contends: 'the more seasoned views on methodology in the social sciences see that neither the individual nor the social can be given absolute explanatory priority at all levels' (1992, p.11). Individuals are neither passive bearers of structures or fully autonomous actors. Within intentionalist accounts there is a recognition of the need to account for the social context in which individuals exist.

However, whereas I agree that all societal explanations need to account for the actions of individuals I argue that MI overstates the autonomy of individual actors and exaggerates their ability to transcend structural constraints. Although they claim to account for the influence of structures on individual action their methodological approach and ontology inevitably leads to an understatement of structures. In particular, the empirical nature of their methodology means that they are only concerned with observable behaviour. This ignores the impact of unobservable constraints such as ideology and hegemonic value-systems.

The classic intentionalist accounts within political science are those which seek to explain political events in terms of the personal characteristics of the principal protagonists. Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomena is the extensive literature on the Thatcherism which prioritises Mrs Thatcher's personality in explaining her government's policies. For example, King writes that 'in her relations with her fellow ministers, civil servants and Conservative MPs her distinctive weapon – far more than in the cases of men like Churchill, MacMillan or Wilson – is fear. She seeks to control the content of public policy and through it, Britain's destiny' (1988, p .57). Within such accounts political change is primarily attributed to Mrs Thatcher's self-proclaimed status as a conviction politician. The pursuit of a radical policy agenda is explained in terms of Mrs Thatcher's forceful, committed and domineering personality. Consequently, the Thatcher era is viewed as a period of strong and decisive government in which radical changes were implemented at the behest of a determined and robust Prime Minister. The most striking factor in such accounts is the extent to which they concur with Mrs Thatcher's own interpretation of events.

Within intentionalist accounts, policy outcomes are explained in terms of individual aims and ideas. Consequently, it is argued that ideas are the greatest influence on political change. However, in adopting a realist position I argue that ideas are often employed to legitimise political action as opposed to driving it. Therefore, we need to contextualise the ideas and policy-decisions of individual political actors within the wider political, economic, social and ideological environment which governments face. For example, we cannot understand Thatcherism without accounting for the deepening world economic crisis in the early 1980s and the increasing globalisation of the capitalist economic system. While Mrs Thatcher was clearly influential in her government's response to economic crisis, she was also deeply constrained by it.

Intentionalist accounts also fail to acknowledge the origin of preferences. Here, action is often assumed to mean intent. However, we cannot assume intention. That is, actors may accommodate preferences within the existing structural constraints rather than seeking to overcome them. To give one example, many accounts of the Attlee Government emphasise the dominant personal influence of the foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, over British foreign policy.

Morgan argues that 'Bevin, physically imposing and temperamentally aggressive, had the presence and personality that Attlee lacked' (1984, p.49). Similarly, Barnett contends that 'Bevin hunched his massive weight behind the chiefs of staff' (1995, p.71). As such, Bevin's physical appearance is viewed as a useful metaphor for explaining Britain's foreign policy goals in the immediate post-war period. Further, it is also suggested that Bevin was the principal architect of British foreign policy. Again, as Morgan argues 'he was the personal originator of foreign policy in the style of Canning, Palmerston and Salisbury ... Bevin's foreign policy was vividly his own' (1984, p.236).

However, although many authors emphasise the importance of Bevin's influence on foreign policy they tend to downplay the fact that his foreign policy agenda was broadly in line with his predecessors. In particular, he remained committed to Britain's global military role, was 'passionately anti-Communist' and 'belligerently defended the Churchill Government's policy of opposing the left-wing ELAS movement' (Barnett 1995, p.235). As such, Bevin's policy agenda was framed firmly within foreign policy orthodoxy. As Sir Anthony Eden writes in his memoirs:

'Though my handling of some events would have been different from his [Bevin's], I was in agreement with the aims of his foreign policy and with most of what he did, and we met quite frequently. He would invite me to his room in the House of Commons where we discussed events informally. In Parliament I usually followed him in debate and I would publicly have agreed with him more, if I had not been anxious to embarrass him less.' (Sir Anthony Eden, 1960, p.5, quoted in Miliband 1969, p.113)

An account which locates Bevin's foreign policy within the context of Britain's historical priorities provides a much more sober view of his personal impact on the foreign office than we find in intentionalist accounts. Within a historical context it becomes clear that Bevin adopts a policy agenda which is acceptable to the wider political Establishment. As such, despite his working class background, his support for traditional policies ensured that he was a 'suitable' candidate for foreign secretary. A more illuminating intentionalist account would have been one in which Bevin had managed to implement a radical agenda despite the opposition of the Foreign Office establishment.

However, at the same time the subject matter of the social sciences cannot be treated as independent and objective sets of pre-established facts. Because people are skilled and knowledgeable they cannot be viewed as mere bearers of social structures. Social structures are reproduced everyday in people's ordinary activities. Individuals are not simply compelled by external forces; they do not act mechanically as if compelled by laws of nature.

Beyond the dualism of structure and agency

Consequently, within this paper I argue for the need to avoid both intentionalist and structuralist accounts of the political process. Intentionalist accounts reduce social life and social analysis to the intentions of free-acting individuals. In contrast, structuralist accounts provide a deterministic analysis which reduces social life to the effects of macro forces. In seeking to avoid the pitfalls of voluntarism, inherent in intentionalist explanations and determinism, inherent in structuralist explanations, a number of

authors have attempted to develop a dialectical conception of the relationship between structure and agency. Two main theories have emerged: structuration theory and critical realism and the closely related, strategic-relational approach.

Structuration theory

Developed by Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984), structuration theory attempts to transcend the theoretical separation of structure and agency. Instead of a *dualism*, Giddens argues that we should think in terms of a *duality*. As such, he conceptualises the relationship between structure and agency as two sides of the same coin. While he accepts that social institutions pre-exist individuals, he rejects the notion of structural forces which 'externally' constrain and determine behaviour. Individuals' reasons and motivations are central to social analysis. Giddens also rejects the idea that societies as 'social systems' have properties of their own which can be analysed independently of actors' wants and reasons. As Layder points out, within Giddens analysis, 'Ontologically ... institutions and systems only exist insofar as they are bound up with people's reasons and motivations' (1994, p.140). Institutions do not have a 'life of their own'.

Through social practices, structures are inherently linked to action and vice-versa. Practices are part of the duality of structure as they consist of both action and structures. Social practices both allow individuals to modify the circumstances in which they find themselves while also recreating the social conditions which they inherit. Giddens terms this process, 'the recursive nature of social life'. Hence the need to identify intentional as well as unintentional outcomes. Giddens rejects the idea that we can define human action solely in terms of intentions. Individuals do intend to do things but at the same time they reproduce the social fabric which underpins the rules of the game.

However, critics of Giddens' structuration theory argue that he transcends the theoretical dualism largely by redefining structure and agency (see, for example, Layder 1994 and Hay 1995). For example, Layder argues that Giddens redefines structures as 'rules and resources' which actors draw upon as they produce and reproduce society in their activities. As such, within Giddens' theory 'structure does not mean anything like the same thing as it does in conventional approaches' (Layder 1994, p.138). Further, Layder argues that Giddens emphasises the enabling properties of rules and resources rather than the constraining elements of structures: 'in Giddens' sense, structure is 'internal' to activity-it has no existence beyond the situations in which people are acting' (Ibid.). As such, Giddens tends towards an intentionalist view of human behaviour which denies any existence of structures which are external to activity and distinct from actors' reasons and motivations.

Strategic-relational approach

Developed by Jessop (1990) and Hay (1995) this approach emphasises the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Following on from Giddens' structuration theory the aim is to conceptualise a much more dynamic model of the structure/agency relationship which privileges neither one nor the other. The actions of agents alter structures which, in turn, form the context within which agents act. Although structures may constrain action they do not determine it. Rather, the strategies which informed actors adopt to alleviate the constraints which they face leads to a continual re-

moulding of the structural environment.

Action takes place within a structured context which privileges some strategies over others. For example, as Hay argues, the state is 'an uneven playing field' which is *strategically selective*:

'The state is dynamic and constantly unfolding system. Its specific form at a given moment in time in a particular national setting represents a "crystallisation of past strategies" which privileges certain strategies and actors over others.' (1996, p.32)

Certain types of political strategy are more likely to succeed than others. However, actors also have strategic knowledge of their situation which can be employed to alleviate the structural constraints which they may face. Consequently, it is necessary to view the structure-agency relationship as a complex interplay of intentions and constraints rather than as a simple dualism. We need to develop an inherently relational and dialectical notion of structures. As with Giddens' structuration theory, structures are seen as both enabling and constraining, depending on the vantage point of individual actors; constraints may also be viewed as resources.

The emphasis within Jessop's strategic-relational approach is on the ability of actors to alleviate the structural constraints which they face through a reflexive learning process. In place of the orthodox analytical distinction between structure and agency, Jessop postulates that between strategic action on the one hand and the strategically-selective context within which it is formulated on the other. Agents with 'strategically calculating structural orientation' are able to reflect on their current situation and adopt a particular strategy to achieve their aims, despite the constraints which they may face: '... agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation' (Hay 1996, p.124). As such, this strategy may include partially altering one's own identity and interests.

The need for a temporal analysis of change

In seeking to establish the relationship between structure and agency Jessop and Hay aim to uncover the processes and mechanisms of social and political change. They suggest that processes and mechanisms relate neither to structures or agency but to the relationship between the two. Further, in conceptualising political change as a continuous process they emphasise the need to locate political events within a historical context. So, for example, it is impossible to understand Thatcherism without a wider analysis of post-war British politics. Purely intentionalist accounts which focus on Mrs Thatcher's personality can provide only a snapshot of the wider political process. As Hay argues: 'For pure intentionalists ... time is merely the unfolding of preferences instantiated in action' (1997, p.13) In contrast, as Archer contends: 'it is only through analysing the processes by which structure and agency shape and re-shape one another over time that we can account for variable social outcomes at different times' (1995, p.64).

However, here, I argue that in developing a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency there is a tendency to overstate the extent of change. The relationship is conceptualised as a dynamic process in which strategic

actors continually interact with a structured context, producing both a change in the actor's strategic knowledge and a partial transformation of the structured context. As such, the implication of their conceptual framework is a constantly changing (however minimal) structured context.

The basis of the strategic-relational approach is that actors are able to transform the structural constraints which they face through adopting specific strategies which they have learnt through a strategic-learning process. However, arguably actors may transform their own goals and intentions in order to maximise their chances of success within a given structured context, thus leaving the constraints which they initially faced intact. That is, they may adopt a strategy which internalises the constraints which they face and ultimately reproduces the structured context which they inhabit.

Rather than viewing strategic-learning solely as a means of overcoming structural constraints I suggest that we also view it as a process of accommodating preferences within an existing strategic context. It may be that the most feasible strategy for an actor faced with a number of structural constraints is to internalise those constraints. Consequently, rather than seeking to transform the structural environment which they inhabit, they will aim to transform their own identity and interests. Here, the example of Ernest Bevin's role as foreign secretary is again instructive.

Despite the Labour Party's ostensible anti-imperial position, Bevin continued to pursue policies which were more amenable to the foreign office than they were to his own rank and file. While Bevin may have gained a large degree of political autonomy this was achieved through the pursuit of a policy agenda which was framed firmly within the traditional priorities of the foreign office. For example, he remained stoically committed to defending Britain's role as a global power. As such, while we may view the ascension of a working class trade union leader to foreign secretary as indeed altering the contours of the British political system, our analysis of political change becomes much more cautious when locating his policy agenda within a historical framework. Therefore, we need to develop a layered view of society in which some structures are seen as more durable than others.

Here, I agree with Layder who argues that there is a 'depth ontology' to society (1994, p.142). He argues that as societies develop over time complex institutional structures emerge which have a degree of autonomy from human action. This is not to suggest that structures exist independently of agency but that their continued existence over a prolonged period of time suggests a degree of autonomy from agency.

Actors may adopt strategies which alter some of the structures which they face while leaving more entrenched structures intact. On one level, we may be able to identify a dynamic process in which political actors are continually interacting with their structural environment. However, this action may take place within a wider setting which remains largely unaffected by agential strategy. This may be due to actors being unaware of the wider structural constraints or may be due to a conscious strategy of attempting to achieve their aims within the existing strategic context. To illustrate this point I briefly examine the effect of the British political tradition on post-war Labour governments.

In seeking to become 'electable' Labour sought to position itself within the dominant political paradigm (the British political tradition). In particular, it remained committed

to achieving change within the existing parliamentary system. As such, historically Labour has viewed the state as enabling rather than as a constraint. This suggests the need to examine actors' perceptions of the structures which they face. For as McAnulla argues: 'Actors reflection of particular conditions will crucially depend on their understanding, construction and interpretation of a given context' (1998, p.11).

Historically, the Labour leadership has not perceived the existing political system to be a constraint on the attainment of its objectives. However, the dominant political paradigm was not conducive to many of the socialist policies which many Labour voters had expected. For example, Tomlinson argues that Labour's commitment to the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty ruled out the possibility of creating a separate planning department outwith the 'normal administrative machinery' (1995, p.95). Rather than creating a planning department with some autonomy from other government departments it was subsumed within existing parliamentary channels. The convention of parliamentary sovereignty ruled out the possibility of taking power away from the executive. Consequently, this lack of 'institutional distance' meant that as Britain's short-term economic problems worsened in the immediate post-war period, planning fell victim to more pressing concerns.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to raise some fundamental questions relating to theory and methodology within political science. First, the notion of an objective social science is erroneous. Observation is always selective. In focusing on a particular area, the social scientist implicitly suggests that it is more important than others. The selection of the processes and mechanisms of government as the principal site of political science investigation raises not only methodological questions but also reflects theoretical assumptions about what politics is. In particular, it reflects an essentially pluralist notion of politics in which power is seen as the preserve of dominant political élites within the palace of Westminster. Second, in adopting a positivist methodology much of the literature fails to adequately account for the broader structural and strategic context which political actors inhabit. In contrast, in adopting a realist position I argue for the need to account for unobservable as well as observable decision-making. Bevin may well have been committed to continuity within British foreign policy, but would he have been foreign secretary without such a commitment.

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