Interpreting Parliament, but how? An assessment of the value of participant observation in parliamentary research

Abstract

What is the role of participant observation in understanding political practices and phenomena? This is a perennial question for many researchers, of which a vast array of answers already exist in most social science sections of university libraries. This paper does not seek to challenge this body of research, but instead hopes to make a very specific and practical contribution to the study of contemporary British parliamentary affairs. Participant observation has not been applied widely to the study of Parliament, which this paper seeks to address in three ways. First, it will identify the ways in which we have understood parliamentary affairs in the past. Second, it will offer an appraisal of the interpretive approach to political studies, and specifically how this may be applied to a parliamentary setting. Third, this paper will demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of an interpretive methodology, specifically participant observation, to the study of Parliament and the potential insights that this would bring the parliamentary studies.

Key words: interpretivism, parliamentary affairs, methodology, participant observation, political anthropology, select committees, interpretive political studies

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The study of Parliament has arguably become somewhat insular and focused on a familiar terrain that is predominantly interested in the legal function of Parliament, its impact on policy-making, and its relationship to the executive. In particular, the scholarship has remained committed to a traditional interpretation of the Westminster Model. These have offered significant contributions to our understanding of Parliament, such as the influence of select committees or the effect of intra-party dynamics on parliamentary voting.\(^2\) In doing so, however, sections of the literature have neglected the people at the centre of Parliament – MPs and permanent support staff – with the consequence that research questions that could offer new insights into the practices and behaviour of our politicians at the Palace of Westminster have been ignored. This means that legislative studies is becoming a minority subject of interest, not just among the public, but in academic circles too.

This paper does not seek to challenge this body of research or offer a comprehensive solution to these issues, but instead hopes to make a specific and practical contribution to parliamentary studies in offering a positive appraisal of applying an interpretive methodology to the study of Parliament. First, it gives a brief summary of the current themes in parliamentary studies, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of approaches to parliamentary affairs. In particular, this looks at the Westminster Model, historical institutionalism, the chain of delegation, and studies looking at the role and behaviour of MPs. Second, it offers an alternative lens through which it is possible to analyse parliamentary government. Specifically, this builds on the interpretive political framework developed by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes.\(^3\) Third, and finally, as the title of the paper suggests, it argues that participant observation offer a useful method through which it is possible to explore

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parliamentary relationships. This will look at the specific methodological benefits and pitfalls, as well as a brief explanation of how the method may be operationalised with respect to research on Parliament. Together, these three sections come together to offer an alternative approach to the study of Parliament, which is perhaps a little bold because it seeks to crack open, albeit marginally, a novel agenda for parliamentary studies through an analysis that focuses on the centrality of the practices of parliamentarians, the traditions that guide those practices, and the contest that ensues when practices clash, conflict and collide with pre-existing traditions. Such an analysis is arguably only possible by using an inductive methodology, something with which the contemporary literature has not engaged.⁴

Part I: Themes in Parliamentary Studies

Traditionally, understanding British politics meant understanding British political history through the prism of Edmund Burke and other Whig historians, all of whom stressed the importance of political institutions, continuity in British history, and the gradual change of the political system over centuries.⁵ This dominating ‘British political tradition’ has receded in some areas of political research. With respect to parliamentary studies, however, the discipline has changed only incrementally. Authoritative accounts of the British parliamentary system of government remain wedded to the historical development of an uncodified constitution. This ranges from introductory textbooks, such as Michael Rush’s *Parliament Today*, to technical accounts of British parliamentary procedure, such as *Griffith and Ryle on Parliament*.⁶ Philip Norton notes that his book provides a ‘rich description’ of the institution of Parliament and explains how Parliament serves British politics.⁷ This type of descriptive/technical analysis underpins a significant portion of parliamentary studies, in which the focus of analysis is usually on locating the decision-making powers of Parliament and where controversy focuses less on Parliament and more on the definition of ‘power’.⁸

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⁴ Of course, exceptions do exist, such as E. Crewe (2006) *Lords of Parliament*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.


Such studies often rely on textual analysis or interpretations of primary documents in order to establish formal and informal powers, occasionally supplementing these with interviews. The descriptive/technical approach frequently stresses continuity, of which Vernon Bogdanor’s edited volume on the British constitution in the twentieth century is a key example. The strength of this is that it offers a clear understanding or framework that places Parliament in its wider historical and constitutional context. The weakness, however, is that it commonly has prescriptive overtones that echo a traditional interpretation of the Westminster Model that has reverberated across all other analytical frameworks.

The Westminster Model

The Westminster Model (WM) emerged through incremental historical changes from the Glorious Revolution in 1688 onwards and has stabilised ever since. The Model has been accepted and enshrined through day-to-day practices of parliamentary officials, politicians and, ultimately, students of Parliament themselves. The WM has become a paradigm through which a multitude of actors view the British political system, characterised by the sovereignty of parliamentary law, the centrality of individual ministerial responsibility to Parliament, and the selection of the executive through a competitive and adversarial electoral system:

1. Parliamentary Sovereignty. A.V. Dicey wrote in 1885: ‘The principle of Parliamentary sovereignty means […] that Parliament [has] the right to make or unmake any law whatsoever; 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’. Some have argued that this principle is a myth and that it is in fact the executive that is sovereign; that the doctrine ‘provides the legitimating cloak for routine executive dominance’. Peter Riddell goes even further, arguing that we must abandon the concept altogether as it clouds almost all debates about reform. Others maintain that the study of the doctrine is important because ‘it

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continues to dictate the formal structures of the British constitution’, a view that has seemingly prevailed among practitioners and scholars.\footnote{Norton, \textit{Parliament in British Politics}, p.203.}

2. \textit{Ministerial Responsibility}. David Judge argues that this is the principle around which the British central state has been organised and the relationship between elected politicians and non-elected officials has been defined.\footnote{Judge, \textit{The Parliamentary State}, p.135.} A considerable number of articles and monographs have been published that detail competing interpretations of this precept, and its consequences for executive-legislative relationships.\footnote{For instance, see M. Flinders (2002) ‘Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the executive and the British constitution’, \textit{Political Studies} 50:2, pp.23-42.} Other debates have developed in response to the ostensible hollowing out of the state, revolving around a distinction between ‘responsibility’ (culpability for errors) and ‘accountability’ (explanations for errors).\footnote{D. Woodhouse (2003) ‘Ministerial Responsibility’, in V. Bogdanor (ed.) \textit{The British Constitution in the Twentieth Century}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.313.} This forms part of a broader discussion over a perceived shrinking of ministerial responsibilities without concomitant increases in parliamentary capacities to scrutinise ministerial departments or arm’s-length bodies (ALBs).\footnote{D. Woodhouse (1993) ‘Ministerial Responsibility in the 1990s: When do ministers resign?’, \textit{Parliamentary Affairs}, 46:3, pp.290-2; see also M. Flinders (2004) ‘Icebergs and MPs: Delegated governance and parliament’, \textit{Parliamentary Affairs} 57:4, pp.767-84.}

political parties has been a considerable focus of analysis for many scholars of Parliament, including Philip Norton, Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart.23

Due to the evolutionary development of the WM, British political scholars have been attuned to the historical context in following analyses, and place a premium on the interpretation of parliamentary procedure and convention. This means that, methodologically, many technical works that subscribe to the Westminster Model have relied on textual analysis and commentary of constitutional events. This is particularly the case for research on select committee research, which purports that they have ‘influence’, but not ‘power’, which unconsciously frames analyses within the paradigm of the WM.24

More widely, debates have consequently often focused on how the WM has changed or is changing, which are usually ‘external institutional pressures’, which usually includes devolution, the European Union (EU), judicialisation, and the fragmentation of public service delivery.25 Debate often centres on the extent to which the British polity still adheres to the ideal-type model. Judge, for example, argues that the WM provides the ‘constitutional morality’ against which the UK government is judged, and Paul Seaward and Paul Silk have argued that, while the political constraints on Westminster have grown, ‘parliamentary sovereignty was as applicable a doctrine in 2000 as it was in 1900’.26 Others lament that Parliament is failing to keep up with constitutional changes.27


Irrespective of these debates, the model has been used to underpin almost all analyses of the UK Parliament, although some have taken a different reading of the model through alternative approaches.

**Historical Institutionalism**

Axiomatically, this approach places critical importance to historical context. Alexandra Kelso argues that this approach is significant in the context of Parliament in the UK because the institution itself emerged as an historical product. Historical Institutionalism (HI) perceives political actors to be rule-following satisfiers, who will fit their actions to the institutional ‘rules of the game’. Actors’ preferences are, therefore, socially and politically constructed and part of an institutional setting. In this way, historical factors play an important role in mediating political outcomes. Policy choices are ‘path dependent’ in the sense that historical actions can constrain subsequent policies. That is not to say that the approach is static or fails to appreciate political change. Rather, analysts view change as evolutionary and incremental, caused through ‘critical junctures’ or ‘policy learning’, which presumes equilibrium or inertia until there is a confluence of circumstances that are capable of provoking change to take place. This basic framework structures Kelso’s subsequent analysis of parliamentary reform in Parliament during the twentieth century, which allows her to explain the reasons for incremental change in British political reform. Similar research has been conducted by others, such as Faith Armitage’s research into the House of Commons Speakership and Matthew Flinders’ work on executive-legislative relations.

The research from these scholars is largely informed by textual analysis in a similar vein to WM-based analyses; however, some have also supplemented their research with interviews with stakeholders including MPs and officials. This allows academics to delve into the historical background and to assess the views of those involved in parliamentary affairs, something which would otherwise not be possible. Interviews are perceived to be particularly important because they allow researchers to access the views of political actors at the heart of decision-making.

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30 Flinders, *Democratic Drift*, p.126.
predominantly qualitative methodological outlook matches the ontological and epistemological precepts of historical institutionalism in the sense that it focuses on political actors involved in the context that they find themselves. That said, this institutional setting is usually assumed to be the traditional Westminster Model. It is in this context that the debate over parliamentary reform takes place. There are arguably two approaches to the study of institutional reform: the attitudinal perspective and the contextual perspective. The former is based on ‘the Norton view’ of reform, which relies on the ‘will’ of parliamentarians to pursue reform; the latter argues that the Norton view fails to take account of the ‘executive mentality’ of Parliament, proposing instead that all political reform depends on executive consent.\(^{31}\)

There are two consequences to this approach to parliamentary studies. First, it limits the potential for agency, which marginalises the role that relationships between actors themselves may play in bringing about political change (with further consequences of how we view parliamentary reform). Second, and in part as a consequence of the first, the framework focuses on research questions that are often about the long-term changing relationships between institutions (such as the executive and Parliament) and less about the individuals that act within them. As a result, these studies may overlook political agency, the unintended consequences of daily life in Parliament and neglect the importance of political change.

*Rational Choice and the Chain of Delegation*

The approach adopted by rational choice theorists places political agency at the heart of their research. However, political agency is developed in a very particular fashion: ‘Besides all their other charming idiosyncracies [sic], legislators are goal-seeking men or women who choose their behaviour to fit the destinations they have in mind’, i.e., re-election or promotion.\(^{32}\) The most important model with respect to parliamentary government is Principal-Agent Theory (PAT), in which one person or group of individuals, called a principal, relies on another individual or group, called the agent, to act on the principal’s behalf.\(^{33}\) This has developed into a wider model of

\(^{31}\) For a broad overview of this debate, see A. Kelso (2003) ‘Where were the massed ranks of parliamentary reformers? Attitudinal and contextual approaches to parliamentary reform’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 59:4, pp.563-81.


parliamentary government, termed ‘the chain of delegation’ (see Figure 1). This ‘delegation regime’ runs from voter to elected representative, from elected representative to the executive, and from the executive to the civil service. Conceived in this way, Parliament remains the principal over the executive and the civil service, and ultimately the people remain in control of the political class. Although an idealistic simplification of reality, it mirrors the Westminster Model whilst putting it on a rational choice footing. Rational choice analyses then go on to explore the principal-agent relationship in some detail, especially how institutions mitigate so-called ‘agency problems’ to make the chain more effective such as ‘omission’ (i.e., shirking jobs with which the agent was tasked) and ‘commission’ (i.e., active sabotage of a task by the agent). This is exacerbated by ‘hidden information’ (i.e., lack of knowledge by the principal about the agent’s preferences) and ‘hidden action’ (whereby the principal cannot observe or prevent the agent from acting contrary to the principal’s wishes). The root cause for these problems comes from ‘adverse selection’ and ‘moral hazards’, which essentially incentivises the principal to find out information about the agent and their motivations.\(^\text{35}\)

This framework underpins the vast majority of rational choice inquiry on parliamentary government, used to gauge the outcomes of ostensibly ‘rational’ decision-making by political actors and institutions. Its deductive and simple nature makes it ideal for quantitative analyses using large datasets in the hope to make generalisable claims about political phenomena. The numeric focus of


such analyses ensures that broader and usually comparative trends in parliamentary politics can be explored, which are perceived to be authoritative because of their emphasis on positivist principles of empirical research.36 However, rational choice analysis relies on the availability of such data sets, which consequently means that research focuses on publicly identifiable and quantifiable data, such as the formal powers of parliamentary committees or the voting behaviour of politicians.37 Hidden relationships, or informal power relations, are consequently overlooked, as are non-policy motivations in decision-making.38 Moreover, assertion by rational choice analysts that actions are motivated by self-interest alone seems unconvincing, and the use of ‘game theoretic modelling’ or ‘spatial modelling’ sits uneasily with the British political tradition.39 This, in part, explains why there are few mainstream rational choice perspectives in British parliamentary studies.40

Sociological Approaches

A noticeable trend in research on parliamentary studies attempts to address the problems posed by HI (such as the lack of agency) and those of rational choice (equating agency with self-interest). Donald Searing’s Westminster World is arguably one of the most well-known, detailed studies that looks at the norms and values of politicians at the Palace of Westminster. Searing’s approach has brought together elements of institutionalist and behaviouralist studies in which he does not completely reject the rational choice approach, but argues that self-interest can be one of many causes for political agents to pursue a particular course of action.41 He is not alone in conducting this type of research; other studies include Anthony King’s British Members of Parliament (1974) and Lisanne Radice et.

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al.’s *Member of Parliament* (1990).\(^{42}\) Far more recent research has been conducted by Michael Rush and Philip Giddings, who look at socialisation of MPs in the House of Commons.\(^{43}\) The focal point of this type of analysis is to look at the interaction of norms and rules with perceived political identities and the institutional context in which actors find themselves.\(^{44}\) In order to do so, the above-quoted studies rely on survey data collected from MPs, but also make use of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis where appropriate. These have been very useful to help us understand the socialisation processes and conception of MPs’ roles, posing questions that other approaches have not, such as the extent to which MPs perceive themselves to be following the will of their party, their constituents, or the will of Parliament. Some have taken this analysis even further, looking at the effect of symbolism and ritual on parliamentary government. Such anthropological approaches offer distinctive research in the sense that their priorities focus on the ceremonials that make up Parliament, the symbolic power of space and the consequences of rituals on political legitimacy.\(^{45}\) One example of this would be Marion Müller’s comparative study of constitutional oath-taking in the UK, USA, France, the European Parliament and Germany, which, she argues, helps us to understand the political orientation of legislative actors.\(^{46}\)

Ultimately, the aim of the anthropological approach is to avoid ‘falling victim to the fascination of the institutional-state model and the language of which it is a vehicle’.\(^{47}\) That said, it has made sparse inroads into British political studies, of which Emma Crewe’s study of the House of Lords is the only exception.\(^{48}\) That is not altogether surprising, given that there is a perceived concern that a focus on

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Table 1: Approaches to the Study of Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Summary of Analytical Focus</th>
<th>Contribution to Parliamentary Studies</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Key Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Institutionalism</td>
<td>Role of historical context in shaping the behaviour of MPs</td>
<td>Situates parliamentary change and reform in its historical context</td>
<td>Textual analysis, supplemented with semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>A. Kelso (2009) <em>Parliamentary Reform at Westminster</em>, Manchester: MUP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Choice Theory</td>
<td>Asserts that all institutions and actors are goal-seeking individuals</td>
<td>Explains institutional behaviour in rational, self-interest terms</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis of data sets, including surveys and voting records</td>
<td>W. Müller, K. Strom and T. Bergman (eds.) (2003) <em>Delegation and Accountability in European Democracies</em>, Oxford: OUP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological Approaches</td>
<td>Influence of rules and norms on MPs and the behaviour of MPs more widely</td>
<td>Helps us to understand how MPs conceptualise of their role</td>
<td>Qualitative and quantitative surveys, some descriptive statistics</td>
<td>D. Searing (1994) <em>Westminster’s World</em>, Cambridge: Harvard University Press</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Public manifestations of symbols of power may marginalise research on different ways in which other forms of power are exercised beneath public spectacles. That is not to say that this kind of analysis offers no insights, as it clearly does, but rather that we must locate this in a broader analytical framework and explicitly identify the consequences of rituals and ceremonies, which arguably has not happened to date.

The above summary demonstrates that there are a variety of explicit approaches to the study of Parliament. However, what should be clear by looking at the footnotes alone, there is much more research on Parliament that does not fit these approaches very clearly. This is because much research does not set out a theoretical approach with which they begin their study of parliamentary affairs. They often, and rather implicitly, frame their discussions in an historical context followed by an analysis that usually (though not always) rests on an assumption that the Westminster Model is intact.49 This incoherence of the sub-discipline has been acknowledged by other scholars.50 As a

49 For example, see P. Giddings (1994) ‘Select Committees and Parliamentary Scrutiny: Plus ça change’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 47:4, pp.669-86.

result, some aspects of research are untested or simply unclear. Ultimately, all approaches engage with the Westminster Model; sometimes this has underpinned entire research projects, at others it has been used to demonstrate context for subsequent research. Regardless, it demonstrates a deep commitment by the scholarship despite substantial critique levelled against it over the years.\(^{51}\) As a consequence, analysis has maintained its focus on the function of legislatures in twenty-first century democracies, the demands placed on the WM following far-reaching constitutional reforms, and the relationship between the executive, political parties and Parliament. These are worthwhile investigative subjects. However, this has placed constraints on potentially alternative ways through which it is possible to explore parliamentary politics. Consequently, the literature has become inward-looking and limited, contributing to the perception that Parliament does not matter to British politics.\(^{52}\) An alternative is possible, to which our discussion now turns.

Part II: An Alternative Framework: Interpretive political studies

The interpretive approach to political analysis has a long and distinguished history, especially in research on public administration and in the literature on policy analysis, but it has only recently become mainstream as a result of the publication of *Interpreting British Governance* (2003). This book, published by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes, principally concentrates on governance practices at an elite-level in the UK, particularly those of Secretaries of State, permanent secretaries and other senior civil servants in Whitehall departments. Their work has become an established reference point for numerous scholars that have sought to employ a similar approach.\(^{53}\) Indeed, it has arguably challenged assumptions on studies of the core executive, opening new avenues for debate. Moreover, given that some of their empirical research has already touched upon legislative research, this makes it especially feasible to apply to parliamentary studies in the UK.\(^{54}\) This section takes the interpretive framework as a starting point that focuses on the beliefs and practices of


parliamentarians, as well as the traditions within which they operate and the dilemmas they face and negotiate. Due to the brevity of this paper, it is not possible to fully evaluate the theoretical framework.\(^{56}\) However, by providing a succinct summary and a definition of each concept (see Table 2), it is possible to demonstrate that there is an alternative research agenda for parliamentary studies.

Interpretive Political Studies (IPS) is based on the anti-foundationalist epistemology rooted in Mark Bevir’s hallmark book, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, and the work of R.A.W. Rhodes on the core executive.\(^{57}\) This post-analytic philosophy has been used to ‘decentre’ the British state, which has been defined in the following way:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentredness</td>
<td>To decentre is to unpack or to disaggregate how governance practices, traditions and beliefs are sustained, modified or discarded through an analysis of said practices, traditions and beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated Agency</td>
<td>An individual is ‘situated’ in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which will largely shape the individuals’ beliefs. However, the individual has a capacity for ‘agency’ in that he or she may alter, modify or discard practices, traditions or beliefs (usually in response to dilemmas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and Ideas</td>
<td>Ideas are the heuristic devices by which individuals and groups are able to identify and interpret the world around them. Situated agents act on these, which elevates ‘ideas’ into ‘beliefs’, which is how individuals and groups negotiate their social world around them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>For Bevir and Rhodes, a practice is a macro-level analysis of a set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs are manifested, allowing us to situate beliefs in practices. Meanwhile, practices are usually embedded in traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Traditions are the ideational background within which agents find themselves. Usually, agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them (usually in response to dilemmas). Traditions form an aggregate level of analysis of ideas, beliefs and practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>A dilemma is an idea that manifests itself as a belief for an individual and/or group, which, if it stands in contradiction to any other belief, practice or tradition, poses a problem for the individual and/or group. This ‘dilemma’ may be resolved by either accommodating or discarding the new belief.</td>
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\(^{55}\) Based on a range of publications by M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes – for a full list, see bibliography.

\(^{56}\) A more detailed discussion can be found in: M. Geddes (2014) ‘A Dilemma for Dilemmas: Amending the research agenda for interpretive political studies’, Paper presented to the Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Manchester, 14-16 April 2014.

forces are driving a shift from hierarchies to networks. Instead, it suggests that networks are constructed differently by many actors against the background of diverse traditions.\textsuperscript{58}

This quote neatly summarises the basic approach taken by Bevir and Rhodes, and other scholars with interpretive overtones. A decentred study of politics reveals the way in which traditions are created and sustained through practices and beliefs by situated agents. It is worth exploring each of these concepts in more depth with reference to how they may be applied to parliamentary research:

1. \textit{Situated Agency}. This implies that Members of Parliament, clerks, researchers, parliamentary support staff, and even administrative and cleaning staff, are all situated into what is commonly referred to as ‘the Westminster bubble’. This means that there are norms that politicians and staff are expected to follow. However, these are not the formal rules of procedure or archaic language that actors must adopt (although this does have an influence). Rather, it is about the day-to-day behaviour, the daily rituals, that affects how actors perceive the world around them. Presently we do not know how this affects parliamentary life. Political scholars have focused on the rules of procedure or on the socialisation of newly elected politicians to fully fledged MPs.\textsuperscript{59} Typically, this has situated actors in the WM, but this has often been a tacit assumption without reference to the beliefs of individual MPs. This concept of situated agency, therefore, seeks to redress this problem by actively interpreting behaviour both in the context within which actors find themselves and linking this with individual beliefs.

2. \textit{Ideas and Beliefs}. These two concepts focus our analysis away from the historical context or constitutional setting and points it towards the interpretation of the historical context, of the constitutional principles, and of other political traditions and practices from the point of view of the MP or parliamentary official. This means that the political actor and her or his beliefs matter in shaping her or his behaviour. Interpretive scholars consequently do not assert that the principle of ministerial responsibility does or should restrict select committee behaviour, unless committee members, parliamentary staff and frontbench MPs believe that it should (and this is indeed the case in most instances). Equally, scholars do not presume that all actors act with rational self-interest but rather that agents follow their beliefs, which may of course be to seek re-election or promotion, but may also be to live up to respectable standards, propriety, or other, completely different and ostensibly non-policy motivations. It suggests


\textsuperscript{59} Norton, ‘Playing by the Rules’, pp.13-33; Rush and Giddings, \textit{Parliamentary Socialisation}. 

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that political actors will ‘stick to cherished beliefs even when they are confounded by their behaviour’. This makes the study of parliamentary behaviour – at the day-to-day level – especially interesting and worthwhile.

3. **Practices.** Building on Bevir and Rhodes (by way of Hendrik Wagenaar and S. D. Noam Cook, David Kertzer and Pierre Bourdieu), this indicates that practices, the day-to-day rituals of behaviour, sustain parliamentary life. The ways in which MPs behave towards one another, let alone outsiders (or, as parliamentary language tellingly dictates, ‘strangers’) and even their parliamentary support staff has broader implications for the way in which parliamentary life is upheld (or, indeed, changed). The way in which select committee members ask their questions to witnesses and the howling and shouting in the main chamber at Prime Minister’s Questions are important in this context (to name just two examples). It ritualises the behaviour of MPs, but crucially also perpetuates dominant attitudes of, respectively, consensual working and adversarial battle in the two environments. There is a dearth of studies on this topic. There are anecdotal observations by some academics, and assertions by many more journalists. It seems that academics prefer to count votes or survey results, which, while offering the quantity of some types of behaviour, rarely goes beneath to reveal the quality of that behaviour, what it means, or the consequences.

4. **Traditions.** The concept of tradition concentrates analysis at the macro-level. For Bevir and Rhodes, this meant the traditions that underpin British governance; for parliamentary research, this would mean the traditions that make up parliamentary government. This centralises the principles that sustain parliamentary behaviour. In other words, this means that interpretive scholars ought to analyse how actors have interpreted dominant political traditions in parliamentary government. This draws attention towards the Westminster Model, which remains the prism through which actors interpret Parliament. Interestingly, it suggests that research on Parliament should look at the impact of traditions on individual beliefs and practices. Some actors may interpret the WM differently; others may act in accordance with the precepts, while others detract from it. How do political actors interpret the Westminster Model with their everyday actions? This is an important question because of its obvious repercussions on the notion of the WM, and British politics more widely. It is also a question to which we seemingly do not have a well-established answer. Crucially, it does not take the WM for granted, as other approaches seemingly do.

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60 Crewe, Lords of Parliament, p.106.
5. **Dilemmas.** This concept is decisive to the interpretive approach because it adds the much-needed dynamism of the approach, and the analytical focus for political change: they are the moments where traditions and beliefs can no longer be taken for granted, where the ‘web of beliefs’ is ruptured because ‘rival traditions and narratives have clashed’. It is in this context, too, that dilemmas matter to parliamentary studies. Parliament, where we encounter opposing worldviews, is the heart of conflict and therefore the place where dilemmas are played out. Moreover, given the constant shifts in the relationships between the executive and Parliament, this indicates that the current interpretations of parliamentary government seem to be in tension. This is particularly the case given the widespread perceptions of parliamentary decline, the presumed pressures from devolution, the EU and the judiciary, and the concern over the dominance of the executive. In this context, Parliament is under continuous re-negotiation with other institutions of the British political system. Furthermore, it shows that parliamentarians and officials are constantly reshaping the boundaries of the parliamentary state. One of the consequences of this is that it makes ‘dilemmas’ a fruitful subject of research for the future of parliamentary studies.

The discussion above has traced the possibilities of applying an interpretive approach to the study of Parliament. It demonstrates that it is empirically feasible and normatively interesting to pursue such an analysis. However, it also raises the question as to how we can identify, examine and evaluate political actors’ beliefs, practices and traditions, and how these have changed through dilemmas. With this in mind, we can appreciate the value of participant observation in parliamentary research.

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**Part III: Advantages and Disadvantages of Participant Observation**

Bevir and Rhodes call on scholars to ‘tell stories about other people’s stories’ and to ‘recover their stories and explain them’. A variety of different methods can be employed to do this because, as Mark Bevir points out, the interpretive approach offers an analytical focus and a philosophical foundation but not a prescriptive methodology. As a result, some have made use of textual data to

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give a ‘frame analysis’; others have combined documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews; and others still have added participant observation as part of their research, of which the clearest example is perhaps the recently published book by R.A.W. Rhodes, *Everyday Life in British Government* (2011). This section will specifically focus on the role of participant observation, especially because it has not received widespread attention despite the potential value of this method to parliamentary studies. The foregoing discussion will explore the key issues in participant observation with reference to the study of Parliament, namely: (i) the analytical focus of observation; (ii) adjudicating between depth and breadth; (iii) negotiating access and gaining entry; and (iv) the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the research and the observed. The section will then conclude by bringing together the key elements of a combinative ethnographic technique that is suitable for parliamentary research.

*The Analytical Focus*

Participant observation opens what is ordinarily hidden in official accounts. Documents, in particular, have been written for a specific audience and a specific purpose, which may make it difficult to tease out hidden meanings in texts (or, indeed, meanings in plain sight). Moreover, documents – usually reports and publicly available information – tends to be a *final* product. The *process* of writing has been airbrushed out. The value of participant observation is that the researcher is able to access meaning ‘in the making’. Everyday practices are the process by which we create meaning, and it is only possible to access this through being there, by being able to observe it. Albert Hunter, for example, notes that heroes are made and villains are vilified through gossip in local coffee shops and social notes in local newspapers. A researcher, in observing those processes, and in some cases participating in group activities, is able to see social behaviour through their vantage point. In this way, participant observation analyses the everyday behaviour of groups and individuals – both in terms of the decisions they take and the language they use. Textual analysis and interviews may offer

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a partial view of these, but it is only through observation that researchers have access to what Dvora Yanow calls ‘local knowledge’: ‘a kind of non-verbal knowing that evolves from seeing, interacting with someone (or some place or something) over time’. If, as the dictum goes, actions speak louder than words, then the analysis of body language, active pauses in conversations, facial expressions, and tone of voice all play a part in shaping the production of political theatre. This analogy can be taken further as, indeed, Erving Goffman has done in his influential study of everyday social behaviour. Of note is his distinction between a front stage, the official and conscious performances of individuals, and a backstage, where hidden behaviour is performed. The backstage is more exclusive, intimate, informal and sometimes even deviant (in the sense that it undermines the official, front stage, performance). Moreover, it is where power is exercised and individuals act more truthfully, that is, in line with their ideal preferences. Hunter notes that we must remain vigilant when studying elites, especially political ones. Politicians have many secrets and are not often trustworthy, which means that their backstage may have a further backstage. That is not to argue that there is an infinite regress of backstages, but rather that researchers must remain alert at all times in their research and should not become complacent in their position.

Of course, political elites have been studied for decades – but this offers a new perspective because it connects the day-to-day practices with reactions to crises or particular political phenomena. It also connects the relationships between political actors and institutions, and how these relationships are negotiated in an ideational framework. Interviews and documents may also offer this, but their reach is limited in the sense that these techniques offer a snapshot (and usually a ‘front stage’ view). Crucially, they are discontinuous. Consistent participant observation, over a period of months enables a deeper immersion and the impact of so many factors into an analysis of everyday practices. In terms of parliamentary research, this means working in that environment and offering a sustained view from the Palace. The advantage of studying Parliament in this way is that it is such an open and public institution – evidence sessions for public bill and select committees are public, as are sittings of the main chamber. However, a truly worthwhile study of Parliament would also engage in spaces cloaked in shadow – the lobbies of the House of Commons, the corridors between offices, inside

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69 Ibid., pp.109-140.
parliamentary buildings, and even the local pubs outside Westminster. This is, to continue the analogy made by Goffman above, the ‘backstage’ view of Parliament. This is an area of limited access, where ordinarily hidden views of the Palace can offer new insights of everyday practices – whether it is how MPs relate to their parliamentary support staff, or what language they use to interact with one another. This is the key advantage of participant observation that scholars of Parliament have thus far not fully exploited, asking questions such as: How do MPs relate to one another in private? What is their relationship to support staff? Does their ‘front stage’ performance match their ‘backstage’ behaviour? What is their impact on parliamentary activities, such as oversight?

*Depth versus Breadth*

What follows from the above issue is that an anthropological approach to the study of Parliament will be inductive. Meaning, analysis and reasoning for the researcher will come through fieldwork and gathering a wide range of data, rather than testing ‘variables’. This contrasts to many deductive studies that apply a particular theory or problem and analyse this in isolation to a range of other factors. Deductive research may overlook political relationships between people, for example. That is not to say that there are no difficulties with inductive reasoning. A perennial issue for the researcher engaged in fieldwork is when and how to reach what Rosanna Hertz and Jonathan Imber call ‘critical decision points’; that is, when to move from the broader, panoramic view to a specific analysis of social and political behaviour.\(^{71}\) This makes anthropological fieldwork a seemingly more subjective study of political behaviour. That said, researchers make subjective decisions about their research all the time (especially with regard to what is important to study, what interests them, and so on). In this way, it is perhaps more useful to see these decisions as part of the intellectual curiosity of the scholar (rather than following rigid research designs and pre-determining independent and dependent variables). Put in these terms, sacrificing breadth for depth allows participant observers to achieve a ‘thick’ description full of detail that other methods cannot achieve.\(^{72}\) These detailed

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observations provide texture and nuance that provides an authenticity hitherto out of reach. Furthermore, Isabelle Baszanger and Nicolas Dodier make a worthwhile distinction between ‘totalisation’ and ‘generalisation’: while the former concept implies a full, comprehensive account of behaviour, the latter suggests that we can relate particular events as part of broader patterns (traditions) of behaviour but which does not mean that it predetermines how agents must act (thereby falling broadly in line with the concept of situated agency (see Part II). As James Peacock notes: ‘Ethnography reveals the general through the particular, the abstract through the concrete’. 

What does this mean for the study of Parliament? There are broadly three issues. First, it suggests that an anthropological approach is able to offer depth. The Palace of Westminster is steeped in hundreds of years of history, and the ostensible traditions on which it is built have developed incrementally through convention and ‘muddling through’. This means that a detailed focus on everyday practices is valuable as it is these practices that inform parliamentary government. Two pitfalls must be avoided: getting swamped with data and, relatedly, ‘going native’. Too much data could make analysis unmanageable simply because it is not possible to take in ‘everything’. This can be prevented by ensuring the right balance between depth and analytical focus. To cope with ‘going native’, it is necessary to maintain a critical eye, pursue an holistic approach and sustain the identity of a ‘professional stranger’. Second, and relatedly, participant observation of Parliament must be seen as one technique to uncover a partial picture of legislative practices. That is not to say it is subjective, but rather that no comprehensive, totalised view of Parliament will come to the fore. With this in mind, analytical focus will become clearer (such as a study on a specific set of practices, rather than attempting to study every practice, belief and tradition under the sun). This means that we may not attain the positivist ideals of objectivity and representativeness, but that is in part because the anthropological approach has different priorities. Third, and finally, participant observation can shed new light on old data. Through observation and participation in, for example, the construction of the a select committee report, it will be possible for the researcher to fully grasp minute details of

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76 R. Rhodes et. al., ‘So What?’, pp.223.
written publications. It can develop new insights simply because the researcher has a nuanced and
deeper understanding of how the select committee derived at its decision. With reference to
parliamentary oversight, for instance, observations of committee meetings and participation in
research for MPs could help explain why those MPs then go on to ask public appointees certain types
of questions, and in a certain way. Moreover, it can help to explain why governments react in
particular ways, too. This last point is the clearest advantage for using participant observation rather
than only focusing on documents, as some in the HI and WM tradition might. It would simply not be
possible to understand how public appointees are questioned or the consequences of this on ALBs.

*Entry and Access*

All of the above, of course, depends on access. Gaining formal entry to the field has been cited as
one of the most difficult aspects of engaging in ethnographic research.\(^77\) This is especially true of
political elites, which are, by their very definition, exclusive social groups and as a result will have
high entry barriers. Political elites keep their cards close to their chests for this is imperative to their
political survival in which different political parties, factions and groupings out-compete one another.
This means that the issue of trust becomes a central concern for both the researcher and the research
participants. Mutual trust is a key foundation for both sides: the researcher needs to trust participants
to tell the truth; participants need to trust the researcher not to twist or exploit what they say and do
in private. Without a sense of trust that sensitive information will remain private (or at least
anonymous), ethnographic research will not be possible. Anthropologists have noted that the best
way to gain entry to the field is through a personal contact.\(^78\) This highlights the tension raised in the
previous sub-section about subjectivity in research. However, so long as researchers are sensitive to
this issue, and do not predetermine with whom they engage as a result of this, then the method of
snowballing can be an effective mechanism to build high-trust relationships with some groups – and
after all, some access is better than none. Indeed, in its absence, gaining trust and breaking down the
outsider status can take many months, if not years, which is not an option for a significant proportion
of political scholars. If we can remain intellectually honest about our work, then the integrity of our
research will not be compromised.\(^79\)

\(^77\) Hunter, ‘Local Knowledge and Local Power’, pp.154-6.


The general barrier of formally gaining access, however, is not enough. At all times, access is a fragile opening through which the researcher can conduct her or his research. This is where the power of elites is at its clearest for the researcher. Hugh Gusterson, in his study on scientists in laboratories working on nuclear weapons, was beset with problems over access as he was unable to gain necessary security clearance for some of his research, which meant that whilst the personnel were ‘polite’ and ‘friendly’, they were also ‘profoundly unhelpful’.\textsuperscript{80} Access, therefore, cannot be taken for granted and demands constant re-negotiation. Axiomatically, this has implications for later analyses of fieldwork and the extent to which field notes can be used in published work. R.A.W. Rhodes \textit{et. al.} point out that the powerful can refuse interviews, deny access, delay publication and declare documents secret at their own discretion – even after previously giving the researcher permission. This can not only frustrate research design, but even limit a future career for the researcher.\textsuperscript{81} Of course, this becomes less and less likely as the outsider/insider distinction breaks down (usually as trust increases). Mirko Noordegraaf comments, on his research in the Dutch civil service: ‘Once I was ‘in’, there were hardly any signs of hesitation or attempts to obscure things. In fact, after a few meetings, ‘being there’ is either regarded as ‘normal’ or it is not noticed at all, especially when encounters involve lots of people and outsiders’.\textsuperscript{82} Similarly, Rhodes comments that: ‘I became part of the furniture, blended in with the wallpaper. Often the inhabitants forgot I was there. I know because on occasion I was nearly left behind as we rushed from one meeting to the next’.\textsuperscript{83} This is the kind of status that an ethnographer should aspire to because it demonstrates full trust in the researcher, in which the observed are no longer guarded and permit full (although still qualified) access to the ‘backstage’.

Some of these issues are less pronounced for parliamentary research. Parliament prides itself on its transparent working methods and, as mentioned previously, many political settings are already public.


\textsuperscript{81} R. Rhodes \textit{et. al.}, ‘So What?’, pp.214-6.


However, gaining access to the backstage of the institution requires a further build-up of trust. That is not to say that access is not impossible: many MPs employ interns, and parliamentary support staff regularly take on specialists to support the scrutiny work of select and public bill committees. Indeed, the regularity of this means that MPs and staff are continuously aware of researchers around them most of the time, which has de-sensitised them to outsiders. However, internships, secondments and research placements are often temporary. Additionally, higher levels of access such as private sessions and close contact between senior support staff and MPs still depends on their discretion. That said, there are a number of mechanisms available to researchers to build trust. First, and most obviously, guaranteeing the anonymity of participants and/or respecting their preferred boundaries where possible should prevent the view that you are out there to ‘get them’. Second, personal contacts become invaluable (see above). Third, being open about your research and the conditions in which you wish to study Parliament matters, as this will put individuals and groups at ease about your intentions. Hunter argues that being open about one’s research is necessary for participants to be open about their views.84 Rhodes et. al. are more explicit: being covert about your intentions is the equivalent of guerrilla warfare. It signals the end of co-operation and the beginning of exist strategies and unpleasant tactics.85 For Peacock, covert observation is tantamount to spying and manipulation.86 It is unlikely that you will be asked to conduct a follow-up study. Indeed, it could even shut down links between entire institutions and prevent others in the same discipline to research the same topic, which is why universities take ethical issues so seriously.

This discussion shows that access is most certainly possible for parliamentary research, and personal contacts may be less crucial due to the transparent way in which Parliament works. However, it also implies that parliamentary observation needs to be open and clearly defined, and, as almost all ethnographic research, depends on the build-up of trust.

The Position of the Researcher

The implication of the above discussion puts the position of the researcher in the limelight. Clearly, the consequence of the presence of a researcher carries with it the possibility of a change of

84 Hunter, ‘Local Knowledge and Local Power’, p.158.
86 Peacock, The Anthropological Lens, p.82.
behaviour, or what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Hawthorne effect’.\(^{87}\) This can take a number of forms: for example, participants can behave in terms of how they expect their researcher to behave, as opposed to how they would naturally behave; some participants may feel uncomfortable being observed, and so try to limit any controversial or normatively ‘deviant’ behaviour; others may accentuate practices that they deem as normatively good; still others might ascribe reasons for acting in a particular way because that is what they believe the researcher wants to see or hear; and, finally, some participants may react (positively or negatively) to the way that the researcher dresses or speaks. These effects may be conscious or unconscious, but they all reveal that, in some shape or form, the presence of an ethnographer does not go unnoticed. There are at least three ways to deal with this. First, some researchers have conducted research covertly.\(^{88}\) This is not really an option if you consider the discussion above. Second, some researchers believe that the researcher bias can have positive effects as well as negative ones, so it is worth being sensitive to the effects without necessarily mitigating them. Reactions of participants to being studied allows for elites to be self-reflective of their behaviour. It highlights their priorities, what characteristics they use to show markers of trust, and what kind of people they value. This offers insights in itself that would not be possible without the presence of the researcher.\(^{89}\) Third, sustained involvement over time can mitigate the official or ‘front stage’ of behaviour. Over time, getting to know people and building trust will enable the researcher to break down barriers. This is especially probable if the observer is also a participant.

This last point feeds into a much broader issue about the relationship the two roles, observer and participant, on the researcher. Numerous anthropologists have pointed out that conducting fieldwork can have a profound effect on the researcher because it combines research with experience and identity. This makes observation more than a method. Entering the field can be disorienting, confusing and difficult to control.\(^{90}\) It can impact your own sense of self, and consequently affect your priorities (both personal and academic).\(^{91}\) This is not necessarily a drawback to conducting such


\(^{89}\) For this view, see Hunter, ‘Local Knowledge and Local Power’, p.160.


Table 3: Advantages and Disadvantages of Participant Observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Relationship to Parliamentary Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thicker description</td>
<td>Might not be representative</td>
<td>Moves beyond technical description to offer new forms of explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalises through specific case studies</td>
<td>Tension between objectivity and subjectivity</td>
<td>Centralises the importance of everyday behaviour of MPs and other political actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opens what is ordinarily hidden</td>
<td>Elites potentially have control over what is published</td>
<td>Opens the backstage view of Parliament rather than focuses on publicly available information alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New perspectives on old data</td>
<td>Intellectual curiosity versus rigorous research design</td>
<td>Provides much needed context for voting behaviour or the publications of select committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows elites to be self-reflective</td>
<td>Elites may change behaviour (Hawthorne Effect)</td>
<td>Gives the researcher an opportunity to explore the relationships between political actors in Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to elites offers new insights</td>
<td>Access barriers</td>
<td>Parliament offers numerous internships, secondments and research placements that offer entry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deep, immersive fieldwork because it means that the researcher is able to grasp questions that she or he had hitherto not even considered previously; alternatively, it could lead the researcher to conclusions that were unexpected or even confounding. Crucially, it highlights the tension discussed above about the subjective/objective dimension of using ethnographic methods. It is a demanding balancing act, but also one that demonstrates the plurality of social practices and the dilemmas of inductive research.

In light of this, it becomes clear that scholars of Parliament need to take care in relation to their appropriate ‘place’. However, some of the issues above will not have a demonstrably negative impact on ethnographic research on Parliament, and should not deter us from trying to use this approach. As already mentioned, MPs employ interns and the House of Commons offers similar opportunities. As a result, many people are already exposed to the glare of observation, which goes some way to limit the extent of the Hawthorne effect. Coupled with medium- or long-term involvement, such as a three month commitment to the field, then this will give the researcher considerable opportunities to build trust.

This wide ranging discussion has, hopefully, demonstrated that participant observation can offer new insights to parliamentary research (see Table 3 for a summary). Indeed, it is possible to identify broadly four key principles:
1. An ethnographic technique should focus on the backstage practices of Parliament. The public, official front stage is important, but they are usually underpinned and sustained by private discussions, one-to-one meetings and personal relationships. An ethnographer must be aware of this and attempt to observe the impact of everyday practices. Indeed, given that British parliamentary politics is based as much on convention as it is on formalised procedure, this is especially important.

2. Consequently, ethnographic techniques should aim for depth, but relate these to the wider normative framework in which it takes place, or as Baszanger and Dodier point out: ‘From this viewpoint, ethnography […] aims to take stock of the dynamic relationship between the real activities of individuals within the framework of complex, normative references, which are related to the situation and are not unified’.  

3. Formal entry is not enough. Access to the ‘backstage’ matters because this is where the activities of individuals and groups are at their most natural and important. This is particularly important in parliamentary research because there is a stark distinction between official accounts and private information. MPs are conflicted with dividing loyalties: they are equally party members, parliamentarians and constituency representatives. These conflicts are usually negotiated away from the public glare.

4. Finally, the researcher must be extremely careful about her or his position in the field. Access will be renegotiated constantly; levels of trust will not remain the same throughout engagement in the field. These issues are compounded by the tension between intellectual curiosity and a rigorous research design. Each researcher has a distinctive method by which to deal with these issues. However, the aforementioned techniques do offer principled hints: being open, clear, and trusted are the keys to the backstage.

What then, does this offer to contribute to parliamentary studies?

Concluding Remarks: Interpreting Parliament

In some ways, participant observation (and interpretive studies of Parliament) ought to be seen as a complement to the current and mainstream studies of Parliament. For instance, a study of the

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93 A good example of this is the ‘internalisation of discontent’. See Cowley, Revolts and Rebellions, pp.148-67.
‘backstage’ still requires knowledge and analysis of the front stage. Although there is a need for depth in parliamentary research, it ought to complement other, comparative and broader research. Most importantly, other methods matter, particularly (although not exclusively) textual analysis and elite interviews. Furthermore, practical issues play a role. As David Fetterman has pointed out, contracts, research budgets and time schedules often do not allow for such detailed periods of study as many anthropologists would like to conduct. In such situations, the researcher can use ethnographic techniques but cannot conduct an ethnography.\footnote{Fetterman, Ethnography, p.39.} This is likely to be the case for many scholars of Parliament, as it is for the author of this paper. That is not to say that participant observation is limited. Far from it: if researchers take care with how they engage with fieldwork, then it is a hugely satisfying and, crucially, insightful experience.

In other ways, Interpretive Political Studies seeks to offer a challenge to current methods of studying Parliament. In particular, it offers a challenge to traditional interpretations of the Westminster Model because it defies the way in which it is often treated, i.e., as an ontological reality rather than as an ideational construct. This does not mean that we must condemn the WM, but view it through the beliefs, practices and traditions that sustain it, and the dilemmas that have changed it. As a result, participant observation offers a new tool by which we can change the analytical focus on the Palace of Westminster. It asks different research questions, such as: What are the consequences of competing traditions of Parliament on parliamentary oversight? How has this affected the beliefs of Members of Parliament and their support staff? To what extent do the daily practices chime in support or contradiction of these traditions? What are the dilemmas that parliamentarians encounter and what is their impact on parliamentary government? These questions hope to shed new light on parliamentary practices that have been marginalised until recently. It offers a tantalising hope to reinvigorate the study of Parliament using new methodological tools and a broader epistemological outlook to offer greater pluralism in our discipline.\footnote{This feeds into a much broader debate about not only parliamentary studies but political studies more widely. See: B. Flyvbjerg (2001) Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again, Cambridge: CUP; and, C. Donovan and P. Larkin (2006) ‘The Problem of Political Science and Practical Politics’, Politics 26:1, pp.11-17.} I hope that this is a worthwhile agenda.
Bibliography


