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Introduction

Philosophy, Organization, and Politics

Governance refers to all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market, or network; whether over a family, tribe, corporation, or territory; and whether by laws, norms, power, or language. Governance is a broader term than government because it focuses not only on the state and its institutions but also on the creation of rule and order in social practices.

As governance is a broad term, so the literature on it is diffuse. Different scholarly communities use “governance” to discuss issues across fields such as development studies, economics, geography, international relations, planning, political science, public administration, and sociology. Each community adds something to the literature. Social theorists use “governance” to conceptualize abstract analyses of social coordination and organization. Other social scientists debate changes in patterns of governance across corporate, public, and global affairs. Ideally, a theory of governance should cover both abstract analyses of hierarchy, market, and network as types of organization, and more empirical debates about the changing nature of social and political life.

This book advances a decentered theory of governance. Current accounts of governance are generally too attached to reified concepts and formal explanations. In contrast, decentered theory emphasizes the diversity of governing practices and the importance of historical explanations of these practices. Governance is seen as a set of diverse practices that people are constantly creating and recreating through their concrete activity. Governance is explained by the narratives that the relevant actors first inherit as historical traditions and then revise in response to dilemmas.

Because the literature on governance is broad, this decentered theory

contributes to several conversations. One prominent conversation concerns social organization. Parts of the literature on governance discuss the laws, rules, and norms that coordinate people's actions in ways that give rise to formal and informal organizations. Decentered theory emphasizes the contingency and contestability of all such governance.

Another prominent conversation concerns the changing nature of politics. The relevant literature discusses the consequences for public organization and action of the emergence of markets and networks as alternatives to hierarchic bureaucracy. Decentered theory, with its emphasis on contingency and contestability, offers a distinct perspective on this new politics. On the one hand, the new politics embeds narratives and forms of knowledge that are rooted in modernist social science. Yet, on the other, the new politics is extraordinarily diverse in part because people draw on various traditions to interpret and to resist these narratives and forms of knowledge.

Because this book provides a general theory of governance, it necessarily engages several literatures and audiences, trying to show each audience what decentered theory contributes to its conversation, and trying to point each audience to related conversations that are taking place elsewhere. For a start, Part I of this book addresses philosophical debates about postpositivism with particular reference to the study of governance. The relevant chapters make the general case for decentered theory through discussions of broad schools of thought rather than a specific body of literature. This part of the book speaks most obviously to postfoundationalists and their discussions about the nature of a post-positivist social science. Other audiences might benefit from seeing the relevance of these discussions for their conversations about governance.

Part II of the book on social organization applies decentered theory to the analysis of the state, nation, network, and market choice. The relevant chapters are about more specific topics and they are usually grounded in more substantive discussions, such as those about the changing nature of the state, the future of national histories, and the analysis of change in policy networks. Participants in these discussions might benefit from having their concerns cast in postfoundational terms and placed alongside debates about the analysis of related social concepts.

Finally, Part III of the book on the new politics uses the same decentered theory to provide a historicist account of the changing nature of public organization and action. The relevant chapters are about more empirical topics, and although some of them are again grounded in concrete discussions, they aim mainly to give a new history of the present.

Social scientists interested in changes in public organization and action might benefit from the way this narrative draws explicitly on postfoundationalism with its decentering of social concepts such as the state, network, and choice.

PHILOSOPHY

This book makes the case for a decentered theory of governance by moving from postfoundational philosophy through theories of social organization and on to an account of changing patterns of public organization and action. Unfortunately, social scientists rarely think about philosophical questions, let alone respond to them and modify their scholarship accordingly. Disputes in social science exhibit, instead, a hypersensitivity to methods. Methodological differences and methodological claims have supplanted philosophical reflections about the ontology of social objects and about the types of explanation appropriate to social objects. Even on those rare occasions when social scientists explicitly foreground philosophical questions, they regularly get sidetracked into methodological debates. Philosophical debates get displaced onto methodological terrain.

Clearly, however, the nature and relevance of methodological rigor cannot be assumed without any thought being given to the relevant philosophical issues. On the contrary, if social scientists ignore philosophy, their work is seriously impoverished, for they know neither what they do nor why they do it. For example, social scientists cannot intelligently discuss whether or not networks are spreading unless they have a clear idea of what a network is, where the ontology of networks is a philosophical matter, not a methodological one. Social scientists can certainly operationalize the concept of a network in order to measure networks, but the adequacy of the concept they thereby create is a matter for philosophical analysis, and if their operationalized concept lacks philosophical plausibility, their findings are liable to be trite or false.

Although social scientists rarely think about philosophical questions, their work often exhibits a lingering positivism that is most apparent in a naïve form of realism and especially a predilection for formal explanations. Of course, positivism often has a more specific association with a belief in brute facts. Consequently, “modernism” is perhaps a better word for the broader lingering positivism found in much social science, especially as “modernism” better reflects the historical narrative defended in this book. Chapter 1 argues that this modernism, or lingering positivism, lacks philosophical plausibility. Present-day philosophy is dominated by

a wide-ranging postfoundationalism and more particularly by meaning holism.

Meaning holism states that propositions, meanings, and beliefs can be understood only in the context of wider language games or webs of belief.¹ This meaning holism precludes—save as an explicit oversimplification—the atomistic stance that isolates a particular belief so that it can act as a variable. Meaning holism also precludes—save as an explicit oversimplification—the objectivizing stance that uses social categories and social locations as markers for particular beliefs. More generally, meaning holism thereby challenges both the reifications associated with a naïvely realist social ontology and the classifications, correlations, and models that are constitutive of formal social explanations. Meaning holism leads, instead, to a humanist concern with the ways in which people forge webs of belief, and to a historicist concern with the ways in which these webs of belief reflect contingent historical circumstances.

Some social scientists are clearly committed to a reified ontology and to formal explanations. Other social scientists—perhaps more insidiously—are vague or just plain confused about their commitments. Even when social scientists pay lip service to a more decentered approach, they still often oscillate between humanism and historicism, on the one hand, and a reified ontology and appeals to formal explanations on the other. Sometimes they explicitly treat “ideas” as a variable alongside “interests” in a way that clearly gestures toward formal explanations based on correlations between variables and outcomes.² More generally, social scientists characteristically appeal to mechanisms, structures, and institutions not only to describe the patterns that arise out of activity but also to suggest that these patterns explain the relevant activity.³ They use these concepts in explanations and generalizations that allegedly operate either irrespective of agency or, more usually, through the impact of institutions, mechanisms, norms, or a universal rationality on the relevant agents. These concepts thus entangle them with reification and determinism. For a start, social scientists then treat mechanisms and norms as reifications that have core properties divorced from the specific influences of time and place. Only by doing so can they suggest that the pattern is anything more than a contingent result of concrete activity. In addition, they treat concrete activity as determined by the relevant reified category. Only by doing so can they suggest that the pattern itself explains why people act so as to produce the pattern.

The issue here is not whether institutions exist. On the contrary, there obviously are patterns in contingent activity, and there is nothing intrin-

sically wrong about labeling these patterns “institutions,” although social scientists would do better to use the label “practice” if only to remind themselves of the dangers of reification and determinism.⁴ The issue is whether or not these patterns explain anything. Even when social scientists acknowledge the role of meanings and agency, they are tempted to ascribe explanatory power to institutions and processes. As a result social scientists drift toward reification and determinism. Their explanations appeal to the alleged logic of institutions or mechanisms. The institution or mechanism may be located in history, so the explanation may be temporal in the sense of taking time to unfold, but the explanation is not historical in the sense of appealing to a specific context in order to account for what happened next. To avoid reifications and determinism, social scientists have to adopt historical explanations. Proper historical explanations explain social phenomena not by evoking reified institutions and mechanisms but by putting contingent patterns of action in their specific contexts. These explanations are not only temporal in that they move through time; they are also historical in that they locate the phenomena at a specific moment in time.

Decentered theory challenges reification and determinism because it is committed to historicism and humanism. So, although decentered theory overlaps with other types of postfoundationalism, it differs from them in that it deploys aggregate concepts that make clear this commitment to historicism and humanism. Chapter 2 discusses the relevant differences and concepts. The concept of a tradition captures the impact of the historical background on individuals, their actions, and the practices to which their actions give rise. The concept of a dilemma suggests that people are situated agents who possess an ability to innovate for reasons of their own against the background of inherited traditions. Decentered theory thus explains types of governance as the contingent results of situated agents acting on beliefs that they reach by drawing on inherited traditions to respond to dilemmas. People adopt new beliefs that lead them to modify their actions, and their new actions coalesce in organizations and new patterns of public action.

Postfoundationalism requires social scientists to decenter governance. Social organization is not a matter of formal institutional types characterized by fixed essences. Changes in governance are not products of ineluctable social processes. On the contrary, governance, whether conceived as social organization or as a new politics, is a series of disparate social practices that are constantly being created and recreated through concrete and meaningful human activity.

Decentered theory combines a humanist appreciation of the diversity of the relevant meanings and actions with a historicist appreciation of their contingency. To decenter organizations is to recognize the diversity and contingency of the activity within them. A decentered theory of governance thus moves social scientists away from modernist reifications and toward a constructivist and historical ontology. Similarly, to decenter the new politics is to recognize its diversity and contingency. Again, a decentered theory of governance moves social scientists away from formal explanations and toward narratives and genealogies.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Some social scientists use the term “governance” to refer to abstract patterns of organization. Typically these social scientists focus on how order and coordination are possible especially in the absence of effective hierarchical government. Chapters 3 through 6 contribute to these conversations in social theory. These chapters suggest that postfoundationalism can inspire not just critique but also, just as importantly, a distinct social theory. Postfoundationalism decenters social formations such as the state, nation, network, and market choice, drawing attention to the diverse actions of which these social formations consist. The result is a constructivist and historical ontology in which organizations are conceived as products of contingent historical processes in which people make and remake the world through their local reasoning and their situated agency.⁵

For much of the twentieth century, societies across the globe valorized two forms of social organization—the market and state planning.⁶ All too often the market and the state appeared as polar opposites. Proponents of the market portrayed it as a natural and spontaneous form of order in which the free activities of individuals are coordinated for the public benefit by an invisible hand. Proponents of the state portrayed hierarchical planning as a rational and just form of order by which humans take control of their activity and overcome the irrationality and exploitation of unbridled capitalism. Today there are growing doubts about each of these visions and the dichotomy they seem to instantiate. Of course, there remains a prominent neoliberal discourse that holds to an idealized vision of the market as a spontaneous coordinating mechanism that will operate for the public good provided only that individuals are left to exchange freely with one another. Nonetheless, there is also a blossoming new political economy that points to the superficialities and blindspots of

this idealized view of the market. The new political economy draws on transactional, institutional, and evolutionary economics to argue that all economic institutions, including markets, are necessarily established and transformed in the context of political, social, and cultural authorities.⁷ All economies are governed through complex patterns of rule that order and regulate economic actors and their interactions. Neither the state nor the market is a separate and self-sustaining institution. The new political economy has thus broadened discussions of social organization, giving prominence to networks as an alternative to markets and hierarchies.⁸

Generally, however, the new political economy draws on midlevel social theories that reify norms and structures to sustain formal ahistorical explanations. In contrast, Chapters 3 through 6 extend decentered theory to abstract analyses of social organization in state hierarchies, national cultures, policy networks, and civic choices. These chapters emphasize that organizations consist of human activity, where this activity is inherently contingent and changeable. Of course, both actors and observers can identify patterns—including, for example, states, nations, networks, and markets—arising from people's actions. Nonetheless, as was suggested previously, the patterns are practices, not institutions. The patterns are merely the results of the relevant actions; they do not fix the actions. Further, the patterns are neither monolithic nor static; people are constantly breaking out of them and opening them to contestation and transformation.

Chapter 3 presents the state as a cultural practice. The state is a practice because it is contingent activity. The state is a cultural practice because this activity is meaningful. A decentered theory of the state contrasts with the literatures on network governance and on metagovernance. Compared with these literatures, decentered theory depicts a stateless state. The hollow state and the state as metagovernance are reifications. They abstract the state from meaningful activity. They postulate the state as an entity that determines practices and explains outcomes. Decentered theory suggests instead that the state is merely an aggregate descriptive term for a vast array of meaningful actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting, and contested practices. The state is stateless in that it has no essence, no structural quality, and no power to decide the actions of which it consists. These actions are explained instead by the beliefs that actors inherit from traditions and then change for reasons of their own.

To decenter the state is to present it as arising out of meaningful activity and so, in a sense, to conceive of the state as a product of social life. Chapters 4 through 6 explore different theories of the social basis of the

state—that is, different ways in which social organization can arise out of society itself. These chapters look at nations, networks, and markets, arguing that social scientists should not reify these organizations, but rather treat them, like the state, as fluid and contingent products of meaningful action. For a start, nations are not based on anything like a fixed cultural core or shared language; they are always constructed, transnational, differentiated, and discontinuous. Ideas of a nation are simplifications based on networks of peoples. In addition, networks are neither tightly bounded nor defined by something like the number or closeness of their members; they are the fluid products of peoples' contingent and conflicting actions. Appeals to policy networks are simplifications that tame a chaotic world of multiple actors creating policies through their reasoning, choices, and activity. Finally, market choices cannot be equated with self-interest or any other fixed set of preferences. People's choices reflect an open-ended process of local reasoning carried out against a historically specific tradition. Reductions of choice and consumption to self-interest simply ignore vast swathes of the complex emotions, decisions, and actions that make up everyday life.

In general, decentered theory turns from reified analyses of social organization toward narratives. The term "narrative" plays a dual role here. Narrative refers, first, to the stories by which the people social scientists study make sense of their worlds. Narrative refers, secondly, to the stories by which social scientists make sense of the narratives and actions of those they study. In organization studies, there is a growing literature on storytelling that is consistent with this idea of narratives as an insightful way of analyzing governance.⁹ Further, most, if not all, civil servants will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Such phrases as: "Have we got our story straight?", "Are we telling a consistent story?", and "What is our story?" abound. Civil servants and ministers learn and filter current events through the stories they hear and tell one another. Their stories explain past practice and events and justify recommendations for the future.

Practitioners' storytelling often includes a language game, a performing game, and a management game.¹⁰ The language game identifies and constructs the storyline, answering the questions of what happened and why. The resulting story has to be reliable, defensible, accurate, and reconcilable with the department's traditions. The performing game tells the story to a wider audience, inside and outside the department. Civil servants test the facts and rehearse the storyline in official meetings to see how their colleagues respond. They have to adapt the story to suit

the minister, and both ministers and civil servants have to judge how the story will play publicly. They then perform the agreed story on a public stage to the media, legislature, and public. Finally, there is the management game, which implements any relevant policy changes and, perhaps more important, lets those involved get on with “business as usual” as quickly as possible.

THE NEW POLITICS

Social scientists use the word “governance” not only to discuss abstract theories of social organization but also to describe a new politics. Governance here refers to a shift in public organization and public action from hierarchic bureaucracies to markets and networks. This shift can be overstated: hierarchy almost certainly remains the most common form of public organization. Nonetheless, there clearly has been some such shift or at least attempts to create some such shift. From the late 1970s onward, governments at the local, national, regional, and global levels have experienced a vast array of reforms associated with marketization, contracting out, new management fads, joining up, and partnerships.

Governance is associated, therefore, not just with greater sensitivity to networks as a type of social organization but also to the spread of networks in a new politics. Many social scientists argue that the neoliberal reforms of the public sector both increased the membership of existing networks and created new networks. As a result present-day governance increasingly involves private- and voluntary-sector organizations working alongside public ones. Complex packages of organizations deliver most public services today. The resulting fragmentation means that the state increasingly depends on other organizations to implement its policies and secure its intentions. Further, the state has swapped direct for indirect controls. Central departments are no longer invariably the fulcrum of policy networks. The state sometimes may set limits to network actions, but it has increased its dependence on other actors. State power is dispersed among spatially and functionally distinct networks. Phrases such as “hollow crown,” “core executive,” and “differentiated polity” all suggest that the center is constrained and splintered.¹¹

Chapters 7 through 10 use decentered theory to provide a historicist explanation of this new politics. Chapter 7 locates the new politics in a broad historical narrative. The narrative sets out against the backdrop of the nineteenth century when social theorists relied largely on developmental histories. Social theorists believed that national histories

unfolded in accord with principles and toward a defined endpoint. The clearest examples of this developmental historicism were national histories that recounted the progress of a prepolitical people toward national consciousness, civil society, statehood, and liberty. By the early twentieth century, these developmental histories were losing their hold on the social imagination. In their stead there rose modernist social science with its reliance on formal and ahistorical explanations couched in terms of models, correlations, functions, systems, and structures.

For much of the twentieth century, many social scientists viewed the bureaucracy as an institutional home for modernist expertise and as a check on the problems associated with representative government. By the late 1970s, however, the bureaucratic state confronted a number of dilemmas. Policymakers responded to these dilemmas in terms derived from modernist social science. Ideas linked to neoclassical economics and rational choice theory encouraged policymakers to turn to markets and private-sector management techniques. Ideas linked to institutionalism and other midlevel theories encouraged them to turn to networks, partnerships, and joined-up arrangements. Chapter 8 continues this historical narrative, relating it to those that describe present-day governance as either network governance or a neoliberal governmentality.

Like other genealogies, Chapters 7 and 8 offer not only an explanation of their object but also a critique of the forms of knowledge embedded in that object. Recall that narrative refers both to the stories with which social actors make sense of the world and the stories by which social scientists make sense of social actors. As narrative has this dual meaning, so social science is not just a way of describing the world but also potentially a way of transforming it. To state the same point differently: as social scientists necessarily rely on philosophical assumptions, so these assumptions have normative implications. Whether social scientists are aware of it or not, their studies tacitly point policymakers toward some types of knowledge and some approaches to decision making and away from others. Their assumptions about human action and social science spill over into the ways people conceive of effective and legitimate public policy. Theories of governance are not just academic; they constantly touch on the viability and desirability of particular democratic practices and innovations.

Chapter 9 explores tensions between modernist social science and democratic ideals. Governments have begun to adopt democratic innovations inspired by those modernist theories that suggest that building civic spirit, social capital, and multisector and multijurisdictional networks

can help to solve legitimacy problems. Again, governments have begun to adopt the language of dialogue, participation, consensus, empowerment, and social inclusion. All too often, however, this “democratic” turn is an elite project based on expert assertions that democratic innovations will promote efficient and effective governance. The result resembles neocorporatist incorporation more than a genuinely dialogic process. The state aims almost wholly at the involvement of organised groups of stakeholders and it retains control over which groups are involved. Further, the state restricts participation to consultation, for even those organized groups that the state recognizes as stakeholders are not themselves given decision-making powers.

Although social scientists might support participatory and dialogic innovations, decentered theory cautions them against defending these innovations in modernist terms. Any attempt to base deliberation, self-governance, and other democratic innovations on modernist expertise is more or less doomed to fail. When social scientists rely on modernist expertise, they reinforce a false belief in formal expertise at the expense of a more dialogic and democratic ethos. Further, when policymakers adopt dialogic and participatory reforms because modernist experts assure them of certain outcomes, the policymakers are likely to overturn the reforms should the reforms not actually have those outcomes. Finally, if democratic reforms are premised on modernist expertise, dialogue drifts into consultation and participation drifts into incorporation.

Social scientists need an alternative to modernist studies of when and where to introduce democratic innovations. One alternative is the kind of open-ended menu provided in Chapter 10. That chapter draws attention to attempts to promote dialogue and participation throughout the policy cascade. During the stage of opinion formation, social scientists might look at examples of participatory learning and action, deliberative polling, and mini publics such as consensus conferences and town hall meetings. During the decision-making stage, they might explore examples of decentralized development planning, participatory budgeting, and citizens’ assemblies. During the implementation stage, they might highlight innovative forms of coproduction and self-governance. Finally, they could examine participatory and dialogic approaches to regulation and dispute resolution, including peer mediation.

CONCLUSION

This book draws on postfoundational philosophy to develop a decentered theory of governance as social organization and as a new politics. Some readers may think that governance and postfoundationalism are strange bedfellows. Governance is commonly associated with practical and policy orientated voices; postfoundationalism with critical and theoretical ones. The literature on governance focuses on institutions and policies; postfoundationalists typically concentrate on meanings and discourses. Studies of governance often rely on formal ahistorical modes of explanation; postfoundationalism sometimes encourages historical genealogies.

Nonetheless, readers should not overstate the differences between the literatures on governance and on postfoundationalism. For a start, these literatures share important themes, most notably a concern to open up the black box of the state. Parts of both literatures explicitly oppose the idea that the state is a monolithic entity capable of acting unproblematically as a dependent or independent variable. They disaggregate the state, drawing attention to the diffusion of political power and the variety of political action, and so exploring the porosity of the border between state and civil society. In addition, the literatures on governance and postfoundationalism have shown some signs, at least at their margins, of moving closer to one another. On the one side, the governance literature has begun to pay greater attention to beliefs and traditions. Policymakers are no longer treated straightforwardly as rational pursuers of power or as cogs in institutional wheels. Some of the governance literature recognizes that policymakers draw on historically contingent webs of meaning. Then, on the other side, the postfoundational literature has begun to extend beyond its roots in the particular ideas of poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault.¹² Even some governmentality theorists define neoliberalism in ways that seem less indebted to Foucault's lectures on biopolitics than to the governance literature's accounts of marketization and the new public management.

So, the literatures on governance and postfoundationalism are surprisingly promising bedfellows. They have enough similarities to be able to speak to one another about overlapping theoretical perspectives and empirical concerns. But they have enough differences to be able to learn from one another—hopefully to the enrichment of both.

PART I

Philosophy

I A Decentered Theory

In 1992 the World Bank introduced “good governance” as part of its criteria for lending to developing countries.¹ Governance here referred to those neoliberal reforms of the public sector—marketization and the new public management—that the World Bank believed led to greater efficiency. In contrast, the Local Government and Whitehall Programmes of the British Economic and Social Research Council used “governance” to describe a new pattern of relationships between the state and civil society. Governance here referred to networks defined in contrast to hierarchies and markets.² People’s understanding of governance varies with the narratives they tell and with the prior theories they use in constructing those narratives

When social scientists take the concepts of prior theory and narrative seriously, they imply that the world is not given to people as pure perception. People perceive the world differently in part because they hold different theories. All perception is theory laden. This postfoundational insight informs a decentered theory of governance. This decentered theory stands at odds with the familiar alternatives upheld by the economists of the World Bank and the social scientists who headed the Local Government and Whitehall Programmes. A decentered theory analyzes governance in terms of contingent meanings embedded in activity.

Before describing a decentered theory of governance more fully, however, this chapter first examines the leading narratives of governance in relation to rational choice theory and institutionalism, thereby opening up a space in which to push and pull those theories closer to an interpretive social science. Then this chapter introduces a decentered theory of governance, indicating the distinctive answers it gives to questions about

governance, and examining its implications for public policymaking and democracy.

POSITIVIST THEORIES

Many social scientists became interested in the concept of governance in response to neoliberal reforms of the public sector. Neoliberals understand governance in terms of the increased efficiency allegedly brought to the public sector by relying on markets, contracting out, cutting staff, and budgeting under strict guidelines. The neoliberal narrative emphasizes bureaucratic inefficiency, the burden of excessive taxation, the mobility of capital, and competition among states. Neoliberals condemn the hierarchic approach to the provision of public services as inherently inefficient. They argue that the state should not itself deliver services but rather develop an entrepreneurial system based on competition and markets. "Less government" and "more governance" is a prominent neoliberal slogan.³

The neoliberal narrative of governance overlaps with rational choice theory. Both draw on neoclassical economics, which derives formal models of social life from microlevel assumptions about rationality and profit maximization. The neoliberal narrative of governance deploys neoclassical economics to promote reform programs such as the new public management. Rational choice theory extends neoclassical ideas from economics to politics. The economic approach to politics, as it is also known, presupposes that actors choose a particular action (or course of actions) because they believe it to be the most efficient way of realizing a given end, where the ends actors seek are associated with their utility functions.⁴

Among social scientists, the most prominent alternative to the neoliberal narrative of governance is that of governance as networks. This latter narrative depicts a massive proliferation of networks following as an unintended consequence of neoliberal policies.⁵ Neoliberal reforms fragmented service delivery and weakened central control. Instead of establishing functioning markets, neoliberal reforms created networks. The Local Government and Whitehall Programmes generally suggest, for example, that the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s undermined the capacity of the state to act but the reforms failed to establish anything resembling the neoliberal vision. In this narrative, the state acts as one of several organizations that come together in diverse networks to deliver services. Often the state is incapable of effectively commanding others;

instead it must rely on limited steering mechanisms and diplomacy. Governance is thus characterized by power-dependent organizations that come together to form semiautonomous and self-governing networks.

Just as the neoliberal narrative overlaps with rational choice, so the narrative of governance as networks overlaps with institutionalism.⁶ As with many neoliberal theorists, the proponents of institutionalism typically accept that problems associated with globalization, inflation, and state overload brought about neoliberal reforms. However, in contrast to neoliberal theorists, institutionists then suggest that embedded institutional patterns meant that the reforms did not operate as neoliberals had hoped. Institutions, they argue, create a space between the intentions informing policies and the unintended consequences of those policies. Institutions allegedly explain the gap between the market vision sought by the neoliberals and the emerging reality of networks. An institutional theory thus shifts attention from an allegedly inexorable process fuelled by the pressures of globalization, capital mobility, and competition among states to the ways in which institutions generate diverse responses to these pressures.

By no means do all uses of the word “governance” fit within the neoliberal story about markets or the institutionalist story about networks. Nonetheless, these two stories remain the dominant ones. One way to introduce an alternative decentered theory of governance is thus to explore the relationship of institutionalism and rational choice theory to concepts—such as narrative—that imply that people’s perceptions of the world vary partly according to their prior theories. These concepts suggest that people’s perceptions always incorporate theories. They are, in this respect, postfoundational.

Postfoundationalism has become increasingly common in philosophy since the 1960s. In philosophy the atomistic theories of the logical positivists have largely given way to a widespread meaning holism.⁷ This holism asserts that the meaning of a proposition necessarily depends on the paradigm, web of beliefs, or language game in which it is located. What would have to be the case for a proposition to be true (or false) necessarily depends on the other propositions one holds true. The meaning of an idea or the content of an experience necessarily depends on the contingent background theories one holds. For meaning holists, therefore, even everyday accounts of experiences embody realist assumptions, such as that objects exist independently of individual’s perceptions, that objects persist through time, and that other people can perceive the same objects. The ineluctable place of people’s prior theories in their percep-

tions does not mean that people's theories determine the sensations they have. It means only that people's categories influence the way they experience the sensations they have.

Although positivism was subjected to forceful philosophical criticism as early as the 1950s, institutionalism and rational choice fail to take seriously the consequences of rejecting a positivist belief in pure experience. Many social scientists cling tenaciously to the positivist faith in explaining human behavior by reference to allegedly objective social facts about people. In doing so, they remove the interpretation of beliefs and meanings from their visions of social science. Indeed, when social scientists repudiate positivism, they are usually distancing themselves from the idea of pure experience without intending thereby to repudiate the goal of a social science that eschews interpretation. They may renounce a narrowly defined positivism, but they remain firmly enmeshed in a broader modernism.

Modernist social scientists generally try to avoid direct appeals to the beliefs of the actors they study by reducing those beliefs to intervening variables between social facts and actions. Instead of explaining why people voted for the British Labour Party by reference to their beliefs, for example, a modernist social scientist might do so by saying that the relevant voters were working class. Similarly, as this explanation creates an anomaly of workers who vote for the British Conservative Party, so a modernist social scientist might explain that anomaly not by examining the workers' beliefs but by referring to something such as religious affiliation, gender, or housing occupancy. Few social scientists would claim that class and the like generate actions without passing through human consciousness. Rather, they imply that the correlation between class and action allows them to bypass beliefs. The implication is that belonging to a particular class gives one a set of beliefs and desires such that one acts in a given way. To be working class in Britain is, for example, allegedly to recognize that one has an interest in, and so desire for, the redistributive policies historically associated with the Labour Party.

When postfoundationalists argue that there are no pure experiences, they undermine the modernist dismissal of the interpretation of beliefs. A rejection of pure experience implies that social scientists cannot reduce beliefs and meanings to intervening variables. When we say that a person X in a position Y has given interests Z, we necessarily use our particular theories to derive their interests from their position and even to identify their position. So, someone with a different set of theories might believe either that someone in the position Y has different interests or that X is

not in position Y. The important point is that how the people we study see their position and their interests inevitably depends on their theories, which might differ significantly from our theories. A person X might possess theories that lead her to see her position as A, rather than Y, or to see her interests as B, rather than Z. For example, some working-class voters might consider themselves to be middle class, with an interest in preventing further redistributive measures, while others might consider themselves working class but believe redistributive measures are contrary to the interests of workers.

To explain peoples' actions, we implicitly or explicitly examine their beliefs, their desires, and their consequent interests. A rejection of modernism implies that social scientists cannot properly explain people's actions by reference to allegedly objective social facts about them. Instead, social scientists must explore the theories and meanings against the background of which people construct their world, including the ways in which people understand their location, the norms that affect them, and their interests. Because people cannot have pure experiences, their beliefs and desires are saturated with contingent theories. Thus, social scientists cannot deduce beliefs and desires from allegedly objective categories such as class. Instead social scientists have to interpret beliefs and desires by relating them to other theories and meanings.

Of course, institutionalists and rational choice theorists have grappled with all of these issues. Although some institutionalists and rational choice theorists seem to remain wedded to a modernist dismissal of interpretation, others do not. However, the more they disentangle themselves from this modernism, the further they depart from the principles that give their approaches content. Social scientists can avoid the problems that come from an entanglement with modernism only by allowing considerable latitude for interpretation—so much latitude that it is unclear that what remains of their approaches can be helpfully described as institutionalism or rational choice theory.

Institutionalists attempt to explain actions and social trajectories by reference to entrenched institutions. Typically they define institutions, in the words of James March and Johan Olsen, as "the collections of standard operating procedures and structures that define and defend interest." Institutionalists imply that there are operating procedures, understood as rules or norms, which explain the actions of individuals and that even, again in the words of March and Olsen, "constitute" social and "political actors in their own right."⁸ However, considerable ambiguity remains as to how we should conceive of institutions. On the one hand, the concept

of an institution often takes on an unacceptably reified form that elides its contingency, inner conflicts, and social construction. Institutions appear as the allegedly fixed operating rules and procedures that limit—or, for some, arguably even determine—the actions of the individuals that operate within them. On the other hand, institutions are sometimes opened up to include cultural meanings in a way that suggests institutions themselves cannot fix meanings or therefore the actions of the individuals operating within them. If social scientists open up institutions in this way, however, they cannot treat institutions as given. Instead they have to ask how meanings, and so actions, are created, recreated, and changed in ways that create and modify institutions.

By and large institutionalists like to take institutions for granted. They treat them as if the people within them were bound to follow the relevant rules; the rules, rather than contingent agency, produce path dependency. However, to reify institutions is to rely on the outdated and mistaken modernist eschewal of interpretation. Institutionalism, so conceived, assumes that allegedly objective rules prescribe or cause behavior so that people who are in a position X subject to a rule Y will behave in a manner Z. The problem with this assumption is not just that people can willfully choose to disobey a rule but also, as has just been argued, that social scientists cannot read off people's beliefs and desires from their social location. People who are in a position X might not grasp that they fall under rule Y, or they might understand the implications of rule Y differently from the social scientists, and in such circumstances they might not act in a manner Z even if they intend to follow the relevant rules.

Faced with such considerations, institutionalists might open up the concept of an institution to incorporate meanings. They might conceive of an institution as a product of actions informed by the varied and contingent beliefs and desires of the relevant actors. We should welcome such an opening up, or decentering, of institutionalism. Even while we do so, however, we might wonder whether or not we should still think of the approach as, in any significant sense, institutionalist. All the explanatory work would be done not by allegedly given rules but by the multiple and diverse ways people understood and reacted to conventions. Appeals to institutions would thus do no real work. They would just be misleading shorthand for tacit assumptions about, or explicit studies of, the beliefs and desires of the people who acted so as to maintain and modify institutions in the ways they did.

The preceding discussion of institutionalism suggests that a rejection of modernism leaves institutionalists desperately needing a microtheory.

Institutionalists can avoid engaging beliefs and preferences only if they assume that social scientists can read these things off of people's "objective" social locations, but, of course, that is exactly what a rejection of modernism suggests social scientists cannot do. The lack of a microtheory in a postpositivist world does much to explain the vulnerability of institutionalism to the challenge of rational choice theory. Similarly, the fact that rational choice theory constitutes a microtheory does much to explain the ways in which social scientists have sought to bring it together with institutionalism.⁹ Turning to rational choice theory, however, one finds that it too confronts a choice between an unacceptable modernism and a more interpretive approach.

Because rational choice theory conceptualizes actions as rational strategies for realizing the preferences of the actor, it seems to reduce the motives of political actors to self-interest. However, as most rational choice theorists would recognize, social scientists have no valid grounds for privileging self-interest as a motive.¹⁰ Even if an action happens to have beneficial consequences for the actor, social scientists cannot conclude that the actor acted in order to bring about those beneficial consequences. Besides, a theory predicated solely on self-interest cannot properly make sense of altruistic actions. These obvious problems with reliance on self-interest have led rational choice theorists to expand their notion of preference so as to move toward a "thin" analysis of preferences that requires motives only to be consistent.¹¹ The problem with thus reducing all motives to an expanded concept of preference is that it is either false, or valid but of limited value. If rational choice theorists use an expanded notion of preference merely as a cloak under which to smuggle back in a naïve view of self-interest, it is false. If rational choice theorists extend the concept of preference to cover any motive for any action, they leave the concept devoid of useful content.

Given that a valid concept of preference is one devoid of content, the problem for rational choice theorists becomes how to fill out a concept of preference on particular occasions. Sometimes they do so by appealing to a quasi-analytic notion of self-interest, even if they also pay lip service to the problems of doing so. More often, they attempt to do so in terms of what they suggest are the more or less self-evident (natural or assumed) preferences of people in certain positions. For example, bureaucrats supposedly want the increased power that comes from increasing the size of their fiefdoms. Typically, as in this example, the relevant preferences are made to appear natural by a loose reference to self-interest in the context of an institutional framework. Obviously, however, this way of filling

out the concept of preference falls prey to the general criticisms of modernism. Even if social scientists assume that the dominant motivation of most bureaucrats is to increase their power—an awkward assumption as many bureaucrats probably also value things such as time with their families and interesting work—social scientists cannot blithely assume that bureaucrats understand and judge their institutional context as the social scientists do.

Faced with such considerations, rational choice theorists might decide to return to a largely empty notion of preference. Rational choice theorists would then conceive of people's actions as products of their beliefs and desires without saying anything substantive about the content of these beliefs and desires.¹² Once again, we should welcome this opening up, or decentering, of rational choice theory, but also wonder whether or not we should still think of the approach as, in any significant sense, rational choice theory. All the explanatory work would now be based not on assumptions of self-interest, but on the multiple and diverse beliefs and desires that motivated the actors. The formal models developed by rational choice theorists would thus be heuristics or ideal types, save when empirical interpretations of the beliefs and preferences of actors showed these corresponded to those informing the models.

The purpose of these theoretical reflections is not to undermine all appeals to institutions or rules, nor is it to preclude appeals to self-interest or the use of deductive models, nor yet to deny that quantitative techniques have a role in social science. To reject any of these things outright would be far too hasty, partly because approaches to social science are not monolithic, and partly because social scientists inspired by a particular approach often do work that manages to overcome the limitations of the theories to which that approach explicitly appeals. The preceding theoretical reflections suggest only that social scientists need to tailor their appeals to institutions, rationality, models, and statistics to recognize that social science is inherently interpretive.

The overlapping nature of different approaches to social science opens up at least three ways of locating a decentered theory of governance. First, one might equate decentered theory with a rational choice theory that remains properly agnostic about the preferences at work in any given case, and so aware of the need to interpret the beliefs and desires of the actors. Alternatively, one might equate decentered theory with an institutional theory that takes seriously the contingent nature of institutions, and so treats institutions as products of human agency informed by diverse beliefs and desire. Finally, one might suggest that decentered

theory offers such a radical challenge to the dominant concepts of preference and institution that it constitutes a distinct alternative to both rational choice and institutionalism.

THE DECENTERED ALTERNATIVE

An adequate theory of governance should eschew modernism and recognize the interpretive nature of social science. The neoliberal and network narratives of governance suffer from difficulties that mirror, respectively, those that have just been identified in rational choice theory and institutionalism. The neoliberal narrative, with its overlap with rational choice theory, defines governance in terms of a revitalized and efficient public sector based on markets, competition, and management techniques imported from the private sector. This narrative relies on neoclassical ideas about preference formation, utility, rationality, and profit maximization. The argument is that because social democracy, with its Keynesianism and bureaucratic hierarchies, did not allow for such ideas, it ran aground on problems of inflation and overload. Neoliberal reforms are allegedly needed to restructure the state in accord with neoclassical ideas.

Within the neoliberal narrative of governance, there are difficulties with the concepts of preference, utility, and rationality that mirror those in rational choice theory. Typically, neoliberals rely more or less explicitly on a fairly naïve view of self-interest; they treat preferences, utility, and rationality as unproblematic. Only by doing so can they conclude that reforms such as the new public management will lead to greater efficiency without regard for the particular circumstances in which the reforms are introduced. Perhaps neoliberals might deploy a richer notion of self-interest in order to allow that people have all sorts of motivations based on their particular contingent beliefs. However, if neoliberals adopted this expanded notion of self-interest, they would have to allow particularity and contingency to appear in both the workings of hierarchies and the consequences of neoliberal reforms. They would have to tell a far more complex story of governance. They would have to decenter governance by unpacking it in terms of actual and contingent beliefs and preferences.

Institutionalists often define governance as self-organizing interorganizational networks. Behind this definition lurks the idea that the rise of governance embodies functional and institutional specialization and differentiation. The argument is that entrenched institutional patterns ensured that neoliberal reforms led not to markets but to the proliferation and differentiation of policy networks in an increasingly hollow state.

Within this narrative of governance as networks, there is an ambiguity that mirrors that in institutionalism. On the one hand, differentiation can evoke recognition of differences (or the specialist parts of a whole) based on function. This concept of differentiation leads to a modernist account of governance. Governance appears as a complex set of institutions and institutional linkages that are defined by their social role or function. Appeals to the contingent beliefs and preferences of agents are irrelevant. On the other hand, differentiation can evoke recognition of differences and contingent patterns that are based on meaning. If advocates of the narrative of governance as networks understood differentiation in this way, they would move toward a decentered account of governance. They would unpack the institutions of governance through a study of the various contingent meanings embedded in the actions of individuals.

Whereas the leading narratives of governance embody modernist commitments, decentered theory arises out of postfoundationalism. Decentered theory thus echoes several themes that are shared by those social scientists who apply postfoundationalism to governance. Post-structuralists such as Mitchell Dean, pragmatist constructivists such as Chris Ansell, practical philosophers such as James Tully, and democratic pluralists such as Henrik Bang share a focus on meanings, a sympathy for bottom-up approaches, and a recognition of contingency—themes that are also widespread among social scientists who advocate postfoundational approaches to public administration more generally.¹³

Postfoundationalists share, most obviously, a concern to take seriously the languages, meanings, and beliefs that shape governance. Typically, postfoundationalists believe that forms of governance arise out of people's actions, and that social scientists can adequately explore these actions only by reference to the languages, meanings, or beliefs animating them. Social scientists cannot properly apprehend a form of governance solely in terms of its legal character, its class composition, or the patterns of behavior associated with it. On the contrary, all these things, like the form of governance itself, can be adequately understood only in terms of meaningful activity.

The concept of action that informs postfoundationalism is, at least in some respects, commonplace. Our standard everyday way of explaining actions is by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors. What distinguishes postfoundationalism is arguably an insistence on carrying this standard form of explanation into the academic study of governance. Other students of governance often remain indebted, explicitly or implicitly, to a modernist commitment to explaining human

actions in terms of allegedly objective social facts. Although these social scientists accept that individuals act on beliefs, they attempt to avoid direct appeals to beliefs by reducing them to either a formal rationality or intervening variables between social facts and actions.

Postfoundationalism undermines the modernist program of reducing languages, meanings, and beliefs to mere intervening variables. A rejection of the possibility of pure experience leads to a recognition of the way in which people actively construct the content of their experiences. Allegedly objective norms and interests are never simply given to people. Different individuals variously construct the norms and interests associated with their social roles by drawing on different languages, discourses, and traditions. Properly to explain different forms of governance, social scientists have to pay attention to the various webs of meaning against the background of which people act.

A second theme shared by postfoundationalists concerns their sympathy for bottom-up forms of inquiry. This sympathy has strong links to the postfoundational rebuttal of modernism. A rejection of pure experience implies that people in the same social situation could hold very different beliefs because their experiences of that situation could be laden with very different prior theories. Thus, social scientists cannot assume that people in a given social situation will act in a uniform manner. Aggregate concepts, such as an institution or a class, cannot be adequate markers for people's beliefs, interests, or actions. On the contrary, these aggregate concepts can only be abstractions based on the multiple and complex beliefs and actions of the individuals who others place under them. Postfoundationalists often conclude, therefore, that the study of governance requires bottom-up accounts of the beliefs and actions that constitute practices. There are, however, differences of degree among postfoundationalists here. Pragmatist constructivists are more willing than many other postfoundationalists to bypass bottom-up studies and to focus on the ways in which institutions operate and interact in particular settings. That said, even when pragmatists postulate institutional unity, they generally conceive of this unity as an emergent property of individual actions guided by intersubjective norms that at least in principle could be contested. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that postfoundationalists favor bottom-up studies of the ways in which forms of governance are created, sustained, and transformed through the interplay and contest of the meanings embedded in human activity.

A third theme shared by postfoundationalists concerns their emphasis on the contingency of social life. This theme too has strong links to the

postfoundational rebuttal of modernism. Once social scientists accept that people in any given situation can interpret that situation, and also their interests, in all sorts of ways, social scientists are pressed to accept that people's actions are radically open. In other words, no practice or institution can itself fix the ways in which its participants will act, let alone the ways in which they might innovate in response to novel circumstances so as to transform it. Practices are thus radically contingent in that they lack any fixed essence or any predetermined path of development. This emphasis on contingency explains why postfoundationalists often denaturalize alternative theories. In so far as other social scientists attempt to ground their theories in allegedly given facts about human life, the path dependence of institutions, or the inexorability of social developments, they tend to efface the contingency of different forms of governance. Postfoundationalists try to expose the contingency of those aspects of governance that other social scientists represent as natural or inexorable.¹⁴

The overlapping themes shared by postfoundationalists help to explain the content that they characteristically give to the concept of governance. Postfoundationalists, as with other social scientists, identify governance with a form of rule in which markets and networks operate at and cross over the boundary of state and civil society. However, postfoundationalists then depart from modernist social scientists in ways that reflect their distinctive theoretical positions. For a start, postfoundationalists explore the rise of markets and networks in relation to changing patterns of meaning or belief. In addition, their sympathy for bottom-up studies prompts postfoundationalists to explain the origins and processes of modes of governance by referring not only to the central state but also to multifarious activities in civil society; they have examined the operation of governance in practices such as child care and accountancy.¹⁵ Finally, postfoundationalists stress the contingent and contested nature of all modes of governance; they explore the diversity of beliefs and discourses about techniques of rule, they trace the historical roots of different traditions, they examine the varied policy prescriptions associated with particular discourses, and they ask about the relations of power by which certain techniques come to dominate.¹⁶

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

A decentered theory of governance departs from both the neoliberal narrative and the narrative of governance as networks. Decentered theory

encourages social scientists to understand governance as something akin to a political contest based on competing and contingent narratives. The rest of this book gives more details to this decentered theory. This section focuses solely on the implications of decentered theory for some of the questions that have bedeviled modernist theories of governance.

Is Governance New?

Modernist social scientists sometimes suggest that the emergence of markets or networks in the public sector is a new phenomenon characterizing a new epoch. Their skeptical critics argue that markets and networks are not new and even that governance is no different from government. In reply to such skeptics, proponents of one or another governance narrative might then accept that neither markets nor networks are new while still insisting that both of them are now noticeably more common than they used to be. The difficulty with this debate about the novelty of governance is, of course, that it gets reduced to the facile and no doubt impossible task of counting markets and networks in the past and present.

A decentered theory of governance casts a new light on this debate. For a start, decentered theory encourages social scientists to treat hierarchies and markets as meaningful practices created and constantly recreated through contingent actions informed by diverse webs of belief. Governance is not new, therefore, in that it is an integral part of social and political life. The allegedly special characteristics of networks appear in hierarchies and markets as well as in governance. For example, the rules and commands of a bureaucracy do not have a fixed form but rather are constantly interpreted and made afresh through the creative activity of individuals as they constantly encounter at least slightly novel circumstances. Likewise, the operation of competition in markets depends on the contingent beliefs and interactions of interdependent producers and consumers who rely on trust and diplomacy as well as economic rationality to make decisions. Once social scientists stop reifying hierarchies and markets, they will find that many of the allegedly unique characteristics of networks are ubiquitous aspects of social organization. In addition, however, a decentered theory of governance encourages a shift of focus from reified networks, now recognized as an integral part of political life, to the beliefs of political actors and the stories told by social scientists. Governance is new, therefore, in that it marks and inspires a significant change in these beliefs and stories.

Is Governance a Vague Metaphor?

Skeptics who argue that governance is nothing new often go on to denounce the concept as uninformative and inelegant. Peter Riddell has said, for example, "every time I see the word 'governance' I have to think again what it means and how it is not the same as government." He complains that "terms such as 'core executive,' 'differentiated polity' and 'hollowed out executive' have become almost a private patois of political science."¹⁷

Presumably social scientists should defend concepts on the grounds that the concepts provide a more accurate and fruitful way of discussing the world than do the alternatives. However, Riddle opposes the language of governance not because he thinks it inaccurate but because he thinks it lacks clarity. To respond to his concerns, one might begin by asking: What gives clarity to a concept? Postfoundationalism suggests that concepts derive meaning from their location in a web of concepts. All concepts are vague when taken on their own. Just as the concept of governance gains clarity only by being filled out by ideas such as networks, the hollow state, and the core executive, so the older concepts associated with the Westminster system gained clarity only in relation to others such as the unitary state and cabinet government. No doubt people who are unfamiliar with concepts such as the hollow state will benefit from having them explicitly related to processes such as the erosion of state authority by new regional and international linkages. Equally, however, people who are unfamiliar with the concept of a unitary state might benefit from having it explicitly related to the creation of a single transnational authority or the contrast provided by federal systems.

Although the terminology of governance can sound metaphorical, that need not be a worry. The language of governance is metaphorical only in that it applies novel terms, such as "hollow state," to describe perceived processes and practices. Further, most aggregate concepts begin as metaphors in just this sense; they begin as novel terms, such as "loyal opposition," for perceived processes and practices, and only later do they acquire a familiarity such that they no longer have the unsettling effect they once did. The once unfamiliar language of governance is rapidly becoming as much a part of our everyday vocabulary as are the concepts associated with the Westminster system.

Is Governance Uniform?

Neoliberals portray governance as consisting of policies, such as marketization and the new public management, which are allegedly inevi-

table outcomes of global economic pressures. Institutionalists argue that the consequences of these neoliberal policies are not uniform but rather vary across states according to the content and strength of entrenched institutions. Decentered theory suggests, in addition, that the pressures are not given as brute facts; the pressures are constructed as different dilemmas from within particular traditions. Decentered theory implies that the policies a state adopts are not necessary responses to given pressures but a set of perceived solutions to one particular conception of these pressures.

Decentered theory thereby raises the possibility of continuing diversity of inputs and policies as well as of outputs. As a result, decentered theory might even prompt some social scientists to query the value of the concept of governance. Governance typically refers to a set of shared inputs, policies, and outputs tied to economic and technological developments from the 1970s onward. Once social scientists challenge the necessity, and so commonality, of not only the outputs, as do institutionalists, but also the inputs and policies, they will be wary not only of any straightforward dichotomy between governance and government but also of any attempt to use abstract ideas of governance to explain particular developments in particular states. The relevance of an omnibus concept of governance will depend on empirical studies that explore the ways in which different states have constructed their public sectors. How similar are their conceptions of the relevant dilemmas, the policies they have adopted, and the consequences of these policies? How far have different state traditions fed through into diverse inputs, policies, and outputs?

How Does Governance Change?

The question of how governance changes is far more difficult for network theorists than it is for neoliberals. Neoliberals can unpack change in terms of the self-interest of actors. Network theorists, in contrast, often deploy an institutionalism that remains ambiguous about the nature of change. In order to avoid the need to interpret beliefs and desires, institutionalists often reduce individual behavior to the following of rules that constitute institutions. For example, Dave Marsh and Rod Rhodes effectively dismiss the way in which individuals constantly create and recreate the networks of which they are a part by emphasizing that networks create routines for policymaking.¹⁸ However, if individuals merely follow rules, individuals cannot be the causes of change. In order to explain change, therefore, institutionalists often appeal to external factors. For example, Marsh and Rhodes identify four categories of change—economic, ideo-