

Negotiating Austerity and Local Traditions

Lowndes, Vivien; Gardner, Alison

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Negotiating Austerity and Local Traditions

By Vivien Lowndes

(in Rethinking Governance: Ruling, Rationalities and Resistance, 2016, Routledge, 9781138889354)

1. We want to develop the 'traditions' framework to conceptualise what is happening to English local government and where the strategic options lie, and to structure future research. We have attached a book chapter (recently published) which we want to develop into a journal article, using additional/alternative data from a regional and national policy workshop that discussed traditions in local government and their role at the present time. Key points are noted below, with some questions/issues for discussion.
2. The advantages of the framework lie in its emphasis on: ideas, agency and historical legacies. Traditions are the inherited beliefs that actors work with in addressing dilemmas (turning points) in public policy; they shape how situations are framed and also the strategies to address them; actors modify traditions in developing governance narratives at particular points in time (pp 3-4).
3. We can think of traditions as the soil, actors as the gardeners, and narratives as the plants – which suit specific circumstances, but are limited by the nature of the soil, and enabled by the skill of the gardener/s.
4. We have taken the Bevir and Rhodes' concept (which they apply to Whitehall) and identified and elaborated 5 local government traditions: civic, collectivist, professional, enabling and communitarian. These are summarised in Table 1 (p21) and explained in pp 5-9. These traditions are non-party political and have historical resonance, whilst still being relevant. Examples show how strategic actors (political, managerial and civil society – and probably business) have worked within and across these traditions to develop forms of local government over time.
5. Are these traditions the 'right' ones, or have we missed something out? Specifically, should 'commercial' be involved, given the long history of local authority companies, and evidence of the rehabilitation of that tradition in responding to austerity? It is not the same thing as 'enabling'... And have we captured 'managerial' sufficiently in our 5 traditions? Governance narratives might be fashioned from/draw on several traditions, so we don't need to list everything, but we need to be happy we have the key underpinning elements.
6. Our case study (pp 9-15) shows how the conceptual framework can be applied, discussing more and less successful governance narratives (municipal enterprise and community commissioning respectively) and relating them to working out of specific traditions (from our 5) in that local authority's. The case study draws attention to the role of particular historical trajectories and of locality-specific effects on the process of 'negotiating austerity'.
7. In concluding the chapter, we also critique the Bevir and Rhodes notion of traditions, at a theoretical level and also in order to get a better framework for understanding contemporary local government. The limitations of the framework lie in its lack of attention to: institutions, power, material resources and place. ('Ideology' and 'politics' may also need more attention.)
8. Bevir and Rhodes argue against 'reifying' traditions, but we are interested in how traditions become sedimented in institutional forms (they are not just free-floating), which limits the choice of strategies in a material as well as ideational sense. Institutions allocate resources

and express particular power settlements (central/local, professional/managerial, budgets and investments). Not everything is possible, and different actors have more or less power to influence strategies – as the current local government situation shows.

9. Moreover, they stress the importance of the ‘local knowledge’ of actors interpreting (and modifying) traditions, but this is not spatialized – i.e. it refers to the immediate context in which public servant work (e.g. a particular ministry or agency) rather than the effects of place itself. We know that responses to austerity have been very different in different places, and studying local government gives us the opportunity to reflect on this variable theoretically. How are different traditions experienced in different localities, and across North/South and urban/rural divides, as well as different socioeconomic conditions and demographics (this point was stressed by policymakers in our workshops – see 13- 15, below). What opportunities, but also obstacles, do they afford in different places? Indeed, does it make sense to generalise beyond the locality about a set of ‘local government traditions’?
10. While B&R’s stress on the importance of history allows us to give due attention to historical legacies, it makes it harder to explain change. Where do really big ideas come from? Hay and Blyth work on critical junctures, and argue that ‘crisis’ is the moment in which new ideas emerge. Surely we have a crisis in local government - are there any big new ideas out there, or just recombinations and adjustments? We have tended to go for the latter explanation, but is that too modest – and are we missing something?
11. When have we seen big ideas emerge and stick... what are the conditions for that? (corporate management in the past, NPM from 1980s, partnerships and ‘local governance’ from 2000s) What is the read-across between big ideas in academia and big ideas on the ground: which actors ‘carry them’ and what conditions enable them to be adopted and endure? And what is the difference between big ideas ‘about’ local government circulating at the national (or international) level, and them being taken up, and influencing institutional design and practice, in different localities?
12. The attraction of some revised version of the framework is that it could enable us to hold together the ideational and material aspects of the current crisis, and range of responses, in local governance. This is important because, despite the cuts (alongside rising demand), local government hasn’t collapsed – what is keeping it going? In part, the response involves ‘actors working with ideas’ that enable them to do new things with existing resources (commercialisation, investment, channel shift), or leverage new resources (coproduction, partnership, devolution and business rate retention). How far are these ideas ‘new’ and how far are they derived from/within established traditions (like the 5 we have identified)?
13. Among local authorities, there appears to be no ‘match’ between the biggest cuts and being closest to collapse. So there are intervening variables – how do we explain ‘differential resilience’, and its internal dynamics? And how sustainable are current strategies? Practitioners have told us that the ‘austerity puzzle’ is close to being blown apart – how long can local government resilience continue, and how does this vary across place, type of authority, and type/style of leadership (political... managerial... joint local elites including business and civil society)?
14. New research via two interactive workshops with policymakers further convinced us of the utility of the framework, both in analytical terms and because it resonated so powerfully with the participants. In the workshops we were able to talk directly with participants about

the idea of traditions, rather than impute the importance of traditions post hoc to case study findings. Participants liked the 5 traditions but also discussed managerialism, localism, community representation and resilience as potential additions – or hybrids.

15. There was a debate as to whether local authorities had sufficient 'thinking capacity' – whether they were 'self-aware' enough to reflect upon traditions and consciously develop narratives as resources for change. One participant explained the potential: 'This can produce lightbulb moments. People are getting it, it's a new currency. Traditions are collective stories.' There was a discussion about the role of narratives in potentially changing norms of local governance and public services, which could be key to changing behaviours, and went deeper than 'nudge' approaches (which could be cynical and short-lived in their effects).
16. But it was also pointed out that deeply held traditions could act as constraints too, limiting what was seen as possible in terms of policy development. Greater space for reflection was needed to address this. It was argued that there was a skills gap in generating and mobilizing new narratives, linked to limited space for discussion. Participants talked of spending 'a lot of time on strategy but not much on narrative'. ('We need to give people more time and space for reflection in order to surface and appreciate their narratives. Currently people don't appreciate their narratives or the value of them. Without the space to surface narratives they are lost.')
17. Participants also argued that: 'we should continue contesting stories that are not ours' in order to determine whose story would 'hold'. This reminds us of the power dimensions; traditions and narratives are not just 'descriptions' or 'spin'... they allocate resources and privilege some interests over others. Contests over which traditions are important, and why, are important.
18. As one participant put it: 'We need a greater understanding of those classes of local government organisations that have been constrained or trapped by traditions and those others that have used traditions to drive change. And what are the characteristics of these classes.' This seems like a pretty good research agenda!

Vivien Lowndes, 2.12.16