



‘The Unanticipated Consequences of Reigning Ideas’: Samuel Beer and the Study of British Politics¹

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The American study of British politics has a long lineage. Samuel Beer was its most distinguished 20th century exponent. However, Beer has an added significance: he closed the period of anglophile scholarship. The reasons for the exhaustion of this tradition have much to do with the crises of British politics from the mid-1960s onwards, and Beer’s writings illuminate strikingly how crisis destroyed the old anglophile enchantment.

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Beer and the American Science of British Politics

Samuel Beer is a central figure in the study of British politics at least in two ways, one obvious and one less so. The obvious importance lies in the fact that he was probably the most distinguished foreign scholar of our system of government in the 20th century. His masterpiece, published in Britain as *Modern British Politics*, was the most influential ‘advanced’ text in the teaching of British politics for a generation. However, Beer’s other importance lies precisely in the tradition to which he belongs: foreign, often anglophile, scholars who illuminated Britain in part precisely because they were outsiders, albeit sympathetic outsiders. As I shall show, however, Beer lies at the end of that tradition.

The canon of work examined here is not large, but it spans critical decades in British politics — decades when illusions of government competence were destroyed by policy failure. At one end of the time continuum lies *Treasury Control* (1956). This close examination of the routines, institutions and cultural assumptions underlying the role of the Treasury in the early 1950s is in effect an essay on British central administration, and the study of the Treasury, notably of the conventions guiding its operation, is offered as a key to understanding the constitution itself:



If...the theme of the book is narrow, in another it is as broad as the constitution itself. To try to understand the relations of the Treasury with the other great departments of state is to be led into an inquiry which ramifies throughout the complex and ancient architecture of British government (Beer, 1956, v).

At the other end of the continuum of the work examined here lies *Britain Against Itself* (1982). Just over a quarter of a century after the publication of his study of the Treasury, Beer was then examining the wider crisis of the whole system of politics, and at the heart of his examination lay many of the tools of (then) modern policy analysis. These are most notable in his account of 'pluralistic stagnation' and his use of decision theory to try to explain how individual rationality produced what he viewed as the collective irrationality of the 'benefits scramble', 'pay scramble' and 'subsidy scramble.'

The substance of Beer's work is therefore central to the study of public policy in Britain in the 20th century. However, his 'outsider' status, as an American scholar, conveys even greater importance — and not just because it is precisely this outsider status, coupled with a fascination for, and great sensitivity to, British culture, which makes him such an original observer. Beer the American observer is not an isolated figure. He is the most distinguished in a long line of American scholars who have been fascinated by the British system of government. As Kavanagh (1982) has shown that fascination has a distinct historical trajectory. From the modern beginnings of American 'political science' to the early 1960s, Britain was usually a model to be envied, and if possible, emulated: a model of stable democracy; of responsible two-party government; and, a great theme of much of Beer's own work, a model of the workings of a ruling elite bound together by cultural consensus. That fascination was encouraged because, until the 1950s, the other large West European states hardly offered alternative models to emulate because either they were chronically unstable or had a history of dictatorship. From about the middle of the 1960s, however, American scholars fell out of love with Britain: it became an example to be warned against, or a pathological, dysfunctional system to anatomised. The shift in perceptions was one of which Beer was acutely aware (see 1982, xi–xiii, 6). And no wonder, for it described his own intellectual trajectory. The journey from the admiration of *Treasury Control* and the first American edition of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age* (1965) to the disenchantment of *Britain Against Itself* is thus part of the wider journey of that part of American political science which studied Britain. To anticipate the main argument of this paper, the difficulty in making that journey for an enthusiastic anglophile explains many of the silences and puzzles that recur in Beer's writing.



I unfold this argument, using a narrow range of material. Most of what follows consists of an examination of three works (1956, 1965/69 and 1982). There is much more to Beer's intellectual life than these three works; as far as his study of British politics is concerned, as far as his wider comparative interests are concerned and as far as his distinguished contributions to the study of American federalism are concerned. However, they are his three most sustained statements about Britain; the middle of the three is generally recognised as the best, and is probably the most influential, modern study of British politics; and the last is crucial to my main theme — Beer as an exemplification of American disenchantment with Britain. I will, however, later note in passing that at one key point in the publishing history of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age*, Beer's comparative interests are used, unsuccessfully I argue, to cope with some of the problems arising from this disenchantment.

A Window on the Constitution: *Treasury Control*

The form of *Treasury Control* is simple; the content anything but. It is announced as 'not concerned with all aspects of the Treasury's work, but only with its role as co-ordinator of financial and economic policy' (p v). The book is in effect a long essay, not overburdened with citations. A brief note on sources at the end is strikingly high on pictures offered by officials — for instance, Hawtrey, Heath and Bridges. The most important sources are announced as unattributed conversations, notably with Treasury and other civil servants. There are several, fairly casually introduced, comparisons with the budgetary process in the United States, and although Beer is much too subtle a scholar to offer judgments about superiority and inferiority, the book breathes an air of admiration and affection for the British mandarin elite. It is not too fanciful to detect here the influence of Beer's first encounters with Britain as a Rhodes Scholar.

Three themes should be highlighted because they anticipate key features of Beer's later work.

First, although the word 'culture' is never, so far as I can discover, mentioned in the book, it lies at the centre of the analysis. Frazer is invoked at the beginning: 'to explain some simple Treasury decision.... would be a hardly less formidable undertaking than that on which Sir James Frazer embarked when he set out to understand the strange ceremony of the priests of Nemi' (p v). How does the priesthood of Whitehall exercise authority? More concretely, how is 'energy, direction and coordination in the administrative machine' (p 112) produced in what Beer calls a plural executive? Essentially by cultural mechanisms: by professional norms that press towards consensus; by a collegial culture that stresses the superiority of corporate life; and by 'the psychology, not merely of the civil servant, but also of the Englishman and the



Briton' (p 115). By the close, the account has been explicitly couched in the language of Bagehot, both in the sense of invoking the distinction between the dignified and efficient parts of the constitution, and in arguing that dignified institutions and practices provide a necessary foundation for efficient practices. These Bagehot-like themes reappear, we shall see, over a quarter of a century later in *Britain Against Itself*.

A second theme of *Treasury Control* anticipates a key substantive part of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age*. As we have seen, Beer's study of the Treasury is about its central role in the coordination of economic policy. Chapter III is the hinge of the book; for it is here that the rise of the Treasury as a Keynesian economic manager is described, and described as the product of the great crisis of, and abandonment of, physical planning in 1947. Chapter III thus sketches one of the central arguments of the key part of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age*; that part which pictures 1947 as the moment when physical planning gave way to a new, Keynesian policy order (1965, 189–216).

The third key theme might be expressed as endorsement for the values of the mandarin elite. Beer is too subtle an observer to be unaware of tensions and deficiencies in the governing process, but the book is, in its account of elite British administrative culture, an authentic product of the age of American enchantment with British government.

An American will note that as compared with the massed ranks of accountants, statisticians, and professional budget examiners in the (US) Bureau of the Budget, the officials of Supply divisions seem amateur and few. Amateur they are in the sense that most of them are members of the Administrative class, lacking specialized training in economics, accountancy, public administration, and similar subjects and looking forward to a career which may well take them to other departments. Faithful to the orthodoxy of the British Civil Service, they hold, however, that preferable to expert knowledge is their varied experience in government. And they will point out that from their continuing day-to-day control they quickly gain an intimate acquaintance with departments and officials (1956, 59).

This invaluable summary of what the members of the elite told Beer wonderfully conveys the combination of the bizarre and the complacent that passed for administrative theory in British government half a century or so ago. For the purposes of this paper, we can read it with the benefit of these two kinds of hindsight: with the knowledge that this contented elite, already with an established history of incompetence, was about to embark on two decades of spectacular economic mismanagement; and with the knowledge that this latter history was to have profound consequences for how American scholars, like Beer, viewed British government.



The Dialectics of Culture: *British Politics In The Collectivist Age*²

The influence of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age* lies in more than its intellectual quality, at least as far as the British study of British politics is concerned. More or less simultaneous publication in Britain as *Modern British Politics* coincided both with an expansion of the university student population and with the growing institutionalisation of the discipline of political studies in Britain. The study of British politics in universities grew rapidly in popularity; the specialist literature was thin. Beer's book, shaped as a monograph, soon became a kind of advanced textbook. There can hardly be a political scientist in Britain over the age of 40, including myself, who did not first start to grasp British politics through Beer.

An additional reason for the British popularity of Beer was that its intellectual approach was sympathetic to the dominant style of the emerging field of British political studies. At a moment when the behavioural revolution was just starting to reach its point of ascendancy in the United States, it explored politics through means that the British teacher of politics — characteristically then the product of a university education in law, history, philosophy or the classics — found immediately congenial.

The substantive content of *British Politics In The Collectivist Age* is well known, and I will offer only a brief summary before turning to these two other issues: the methodological assumptions of Beer's work; and the way he responds to the twists and turns of modern British politics. In compressed summary: the book is about the theory and practice of representation in British politics.³ It begins with a long excavation of the historical roots of theories of representation. It first examines two pre-industrial (and pre-democratic) theories, which Beer labels 'Old Tory' and 'Old Whig' politics. A second chapter on 'Liberal and Radical Politics' is essentially about political representation at the height of the industrial revolution and the dawn of democracy, and it functions as a kind of bridge to what is possibly the most important chapter in the book: that chapter, which sketches the two dominant modern theories of collectivist politics, summarised by Beer as 'Socialist and Tory Democracy'. Socialist Democracy is seen as a novel form of politics, the product of the working class produced by industrialism. However, it has been joined as the dominant form in modern British politics by Tory Democracy, the inheritor of an older theory of state power and representation. These nominally very different theories, the old and the new, actually share important key presuppositions:

In this century, the Labour Party introduced the question of Socialism into British politics. It has been the principal means by which a new theory of representation has been propagated...which we may designate as 'Socialist Democracy'. This includes a distinctive view of party, interest groups, and



indeed of the British constitution and the meaning of democracy. But in Britain the old — and not least the very old — often blends with the new. The Toryism of the Conservative Party is a case in point. The pre-capitalist, pre-individualist, pre-liberal creed ought surely to have died out in the nineteenth century. Yet not only has it survived into the era of the Welfare State and the Managed Economy, it can also claim credit for having created them. British Tories are in some degree Collectivists, not only in certain aims of policy, but also in certain methods of political action. In both respects, they often have more in common with Socialists than with their contemporaries in the Liberal Party. Old traditions of strong government, paternalism, and the organic society have made easier the massive reassertion of state power that has taken place in recent decades, often under Conservative auspices. Old ideals of authority have been adapted to the conditions of mass suffrage in a theory of representation which we may call ‘Tory Democracy’ (1965, 69).

Parts two and three of the book then work through these theories in the institutions, in turn, of the Labour and the Conservative Parties; so much for the bare substance. However, as the passage quoted above shows, the methodological assumptions of Beer’s work are both distinctive and, in part, involve making explicit what underlay the approach of *Treasury Control*. In particular, ‘culture’ emerges now as fundamental:

I lay great stress on the political culture as one of the main variables of a political system and a major factor in explaining the political behavior of individuals, groups, and parties. Specifically, it is in the political culture of the time that I have found the most useful clues to the prevailing type (or types) of political behavior (1965, x).

This use of ‘culture’ is relatively relaxed and flexible: ‘Political culture, its values, beliefs and emotional symbols, while a major variable, is only one of the variables determining behavior. As interesting as the correspondence with theory are its not infrequent deviations’ (1965, xi). It is this flexibility that gives much of the power to Beer’s employment of the concept, and perhaps is also a source of its weakness as a variable. However, the way Beer is able to use its power of illumination is nicely brought out by his summary of the connection between interests and ideas in Old Whig politics:

The politics of the middle decades of the eighteenth century did not consist solely in the struggle of aristocratic connections pursuing power and patronage. At times one can also detect the clash of principle. Moreover, as I have stressed, groups vigorously pursued their economic self-interest in a manner fully legitimised by Old Whig norms. Over a period of time this group politics might produce significant shifts in policy, as in the case of the enclosure acts. Yet on the whole it presupposed a wide consensus within the



active political community. Almost without question, the members of that community accepted not only the aristocratic order and the balanced constitution, but also the mercantile system (1965, 32).

Although Beer's conception of culture is therefore flexible enough to accommodate modes of politics where ideas are 'buried' in the routines of interests, it does nevertheless, I think, account for an odd imbalance in the content of the book. Beer's primary interest is in explaining modern British politics; the title that he gave, after all, to the British edition of the work. Now it is acknowledged that the dominant party in modern British politics up to the mid-1960s was the Conservative Party, and indeed, the book was published at the end of 13 years of Conservative rule. Yet, there is much more in the book about the culture of the Labour than the Conservative Party. It is true that the page allocation of Parts two and three, on the parties, is almost equal. However, Part Two on the Labour Party is much more focused on Labour and its debates than are the chapters on the Conservative Party, which have to accommodate also wider themes to do with the creation of the new group politics in the 1950s. This imbalance seems a natural consequence of the methodological commitment to culture, for it is well documented that open intellectual and symbolic struggle were then much more important in the Labour than in the Conservative Party. In short, the focus on culture makes Labour a more interesting object of study. The odd treatment of the Conservative Party is strikingly illustrated by the transition between Chapters ix and x: the former is about the evolution of Disraelian Conservatism into the party that simultaneously sought to preserve traditional privilege and subvert the constitution in the years immediately before 1914; the latter jumps straight to the economic debates of the 1920s and the emergence of a Conservatism committed to active intervention. One does not have to be an ardent disciple of Cowling (1971) to think that there are some odd omissions here: the First World War, the emergent threat of Bolshevism, the destruction of Liberalism and the consequent positioning of the Party as the defender of the social order alongside a moderate Labour opposition.

Culture is the great theme embedded in *British Politics In The Collectivist Age*. Making sense of the growing failure of the British system emerges as a key theme of successive editions. The conclusion to the 1965 edition begins on a note approaching the triumphal: 'In postwar Britain, the new group politics — the group politics of the period of Collectivism — came to maturity' (1965, 386). It would be possible to write this whole paper on Beer around the afterthoughts to successive editions, as the British crisis became more acute. However, as in the next section, I consider closely his most detailed response to that crisis, I here look only briefly at his first attempt to deal with disenchantment, the epilogue to the 1969 (2nd British) edition. This is a



curiously indirect chapter in view of the fact that by the late 1960s, it was plain that the system of politics that Beer had so wonderfully described in his first edition was in serious trouble. The latter parts of the 'epilogue' do summarise many of the travails of the Labour Government (1969, 409ff.). However, the chapter is dominated by unexpected analytical concerns. It is entitled 'The Modernizing of British Politics', and attempts to fit the British case to wider theories of political and social modernization, in part drawn from Beer's own comparative interests. I call this focus 'unexpected' because it is out of kilter with the whole balance of the first edition. It is true that the theme of 'the modernization of British politics' is introduced right at the start of the 1965 edition (1965, x). However, not only is almost nothing made of it in the substance of the book, the whole character of the argument confounds any linear theory of modernisation. The great achievement of the book is to show the complex mix of the old and the new. It is essentially a book about the unexpected. As Beer himself puts it: 'One of our main concerns has been to detect the unanticipated consequences of reigning ideas of the Collectivist period' (1965, 389).

It is pointless to speculate why Beer attempted to shoe horn his account of British political history into a highly schematic model of modernisation. However, one important function that this effort served in 1969 was to delay direct confrontation with the disenchanting effects of British policy failure. Beer's most elaborate attempt to confront disenchantment was to come in 1982.

Deference, Romanticism and Populism: *Britain Against Itself*

Britain Against Itself is best understood against the background of three themes.

The first is, precisely, American disenchantment, which is introduced from the first page of the book. Beer recounts the answer given by a student enrolling in his class to his query about why she was taking the course: because her father had advised her to study England, a country on its knees, as a portent of the American future (1982, xi). This is then used to sketch the historical trajectory of American studies of Britain (including Beer's own) from admiration to the growing disenchantment and even despair of the late 1960s and 1970s. *Britain Against Itself* is therefore Beer's most explicit attempt to set his own work in the context of the American study of British politics.

The second theme turns Beer to the task of understanding what went wrong, given that his account in *British Politics In The Collectivist Age* was couched in admiring tones. Indeed, *Britain Against Itself* is offered as the 'second volume' of that original work (1982, xiii). In essence, his account utilises three critical features from the original volume. First, the UK is pictured as a case of



‘pluralist stagnation’; in effect, there has developed a diseased version of the ‘new group politics’, which was celebrated in 1965. To make this case, Beer employs the versions of social choice theory, and Schumpeterian democratic theory, popularised by Brittan (1975). Government is pictured as overwhelmed by a pay, subsidy and benefits scramble. Second, Beer returns to one of the building blocks of his great study — class — and argues, using mostly psephological evidence, that the class foundations of both Socialist and Tory Democracy are decomposing. Finally, he turns to the account with which he seems most comfortable, returning to his cultural preoccupations. The meaning of political culture as employed in *Modern British Politics* is invoked (p 110). There, then follow two deeply pessimistic chapters tracing, among other things: the decline of the civic culture, with its patterns of deference; the rise of a new romanticism deeply suspicious of technocratic politics; and the spread of a new populism through the classic institutions of the old order anatomised by Beer, like the Labour Party, through the student movement and through the rise of a newly assertive pop music culture (107ff.).

That takes us to the third theme, which provides the background for *Britain Against Itself*: the central role played by culture in Beer’s methodology. Culture was a key explanatory variable in both Beer’s earlier books, although, as we have seen one hardly made explicit in *Treasury Control*. Now, at the height of disenchantment with Britain, he returns to it as the key to his account of the failings of the British system. It is obvious that this helps explain the pessimism that pervades *Britain Against Itself*: a civic culture that was the product of a long, complex historical process was being destroyed, and it was unclear how one equally supportive of effective democratic government could be recreated. What is less obvious is that, I think, it also explains some of the blind spots in the analysis, notably his view of Thatcherite Conservatism. In the concluding passages of the book, he reviews ‘probable futures’ (213ff.). A variety of futures are examined, all with less or greater degrees of scepticism: for instance, a revival of Toryism, of socialism, neo-radicalism of the sort associated with Liberalism and the SDP, or the rise of Thatcherite neo-radicalism. What is striking is not the scepticism about the prospects for most of these, but the dismissal of the prospects of Thatcherite radicalism. This, of course, was the ‘future’ that did indeed triumph. This is Beer’s view of Thatcherite prospects:

The failure of Mrs Thatcher’s effort to mobilize consent for many of her principal measures, even within the leading echelons of the government and the economy, casts doubt on the chances of the neo-liberal strategy to dominate the future. For the political task of that strategy is not simply to persist in a deflationary policy against all pressures. That could merely postpone and prepare the U-turn taken by a successor government. Nor is the political task of neoliberalism merely to win reelection for Mrs Thatcher.



It is rather to create a wide and sustained basis in public opinion for the neoliberal goal. That goal is a system of social choice which has been shifted markedly from public choice to market choice. But that goal itself must be achieved by a process of public choice which mobilizes for it a wide and lasting consent. This neoliberal option is still a possible future, but the political record of Mrs Thatcher's Government during its first two years does not enhance the probabilities (1982, 218).

If we view this passage from the vantage point of the present, some striking features are plain. The weight of survey data suggests that the Thatcherites did not indeed manage to mobilise public opinion behind their reforms. However, despite this, they did manage to embed those reforms irreversibly into the British political economy; we really have seen the institutionalisation of 'a system of social choice which has been shifted markedly from public choice to market choice'.

The issue here is not that Beer got the prospects for Thatcherism 'wrong'. So did virtually everyone else; even Thatcherites, including possibly Mrs Thatcher herself, were gloomy about the prospects of the neo-liberal revolution in 1981, when Beer would have written these words. It would be impertinent to criticise the most distinguished scholar of modern British politics for failing to predict what nobody else could get right. The pertinent issue is the extent to which Beer's particular blind spot about Thatcherism arose from the presuppositions on which his work was founded. The most fundamental presupposition, as Beer insisted with increasing frequency over the years, was that forms of politics were founded on cultural patterns; and these cultural patterns had deep historical roots. The disenchantment in *Britain Against Itself* thus arose not only from the contingent evidence of particular policy failures of the 1960s and 1970s, but also arose from the conviction that the political culture, which had been the foundation of governing success, had decayed. The world first sketched in 1956 — 'the psychology, not merely of the civil servant, but also of the Englishman and the Briton' — was no more. A new governing order, to be successful, would have to accommodate the new political culture created by the decline of civility (1982, 110).

However, the subsequent history, and triumph, of Thatcherism showed that quite another outcome was possible. Culture was irrelevant. A mix of creative statecraft, historical contingencies such as the Falklands War, and the tactical ineptness of the trade union opposition to the government, meant that a new market order could indeed be imposed by the Party that controlled the state, and could then be institutionalised to the point of irreversibility. We were all wrong in the early 1980s about the prospects of Thatcherite success, and we were all wrong because of our own individual blind spots. Beer's 'blind spot' arose out of the theory of British politics, which he had created in earlier work,



notably in the great middle book of the trilogy examined here. His conception that a nation's politics grew out of deep cultural foundations made it hard to envisage what we experienced in the Thatcherite triumph; a revolution from above in which the instruments of the state were used to reshape civil society more or less regardless of popular preferences.

The End of the American Science of British Politics?

Beer was not only the greatest figure in the long tradition of American studies of Britain; he came at the end of that tradition. He grew up in a world of Anglophile scholarship, which valued the British experience for its own sake, and which often looked to Britain to learn lessons in democratic government. British politics is still widely studied by distinguished American scholars, but the intellectual presuppositions of study are very different from those that animated Beer and the tradition in which he grew up. Britain now is a 'case', sometimes admired, and sometimes not; but essentially, a unit of analysis to be considered alongside other units for comparative purposes. The two most distinguished 'thick' case studies produced by Harvard scholars after Beer, for instance, involved putting Britain into a two-country comparison (Hall, 1986; Pierson, 1994). There are many reasons for this. Some have to do with the history of disenchantment. Although on some views, the Thatcher revolution reversed the long history of economic decline and policy failure, the tradition of anglophile enchantment in which Beer developed could never be recreated after the disasters of the 1970s and the bruising Thatcher counter-revolution of the 1980s. Some have to do with changes in the nature of academic disciplines. Beer's interests in comparative analysis never greatly intruded into his accounts of Britain. However, the kind of scholarship that he favoured — sweeping in range, often discursive in mode — simply fell out of fashion as political science became more professionalised. And finally, increasing integration into the European Union did indeed turn Britain more objectively into a 'case'; one unit in a system of multi-level government, which was hard to understand by close analysis of Britain alone. Beer's work, notably the great middle volume of the trilogy considered here, still astounds by its insights and delights by its elegance. However, the tradition of American scholarship about Britain that Beer represented has passed away as certainly as has the old mandarin culture, which he so admired in the Treasury nearly 50 years ago.

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Notes

- 1 The title is from Beer (1965, 389): 'To give such weight to ideas is not to overlook the role of the "blind forces" in history. One of our main concerns has been to detect the unanticipated consequences of reigning ideas of the Collectivist period'.
- 2 'A culture is nothing if not a dialectic': Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination*, New York, 1953, p 20, quoted in Beer (1965, xi).
- 3 Similar themes are also present in another remarkable study published just before Beer's American edition appeared, Birch (1964).

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