



The Time-Spaces of Soft Paternalism

Project Aims

This research has investigated the recent emergence of 'soft' or 'libertarian paternalist' modes of governing in the UK. Rather than focus on identifying or evaluating so-called 'nudge' tactics, the research has interrogated the broader political agenda signified by new governmental practices of behavioural change across a range of policy sectors including health, personal finance and the environment.

This briefing examines the 'Behaviour Change' agenda as a political project. We ask what implications this has in terms of:

- the **ethics** of government intervention;
- the changing **time-spaces** of decision-making;
- new conceptions of the human **citizen-subject**.

The project has been funded by the Leverhulme Trust from 2009-2011 and has been carried out by researchers at Aberystwyth University.

Research Insights

- The publication of 'nudge', by Thaler and Sunstein, in 2008 popularised the discipline of behavioural economics, but forms part of a longer agenda of Behaviour Change in UK public policy making which can be traced at least as far as the re-construction of New Labour in the mid-1990s.
- As a set of policy tools, nudge tactics are not politically neutral but are highly malleable, as seen in the changing approach of nudge within Coalition health policy. But it is often confused as an ends, not a means. There are risks associated with de-politicising such policy tools—namely, that such a move curtails political criticism and denies the need for collective deliberation of social and political goals.

- The justification for Behaviour Change tends to over-value the scientific certainty of particular disciplinary knowledges of human conduct and decision-making—specifically from behavioural economics, neurosciences, social marketing and behavioural psychology. This narrows substantially what counts as evidence in policy-making.
- The enthusiasm for nudges in public policy making de-historicises the role of shaping citizenly conduct by over-claiming novelty. It does not sufficiently question how notions of 'will', 'harm', 'choice', 'welfare', 'health' and 'happiness' have changed over time and relate to political processes of norm-formation.
- Behaviour Change tactics may suffer a democratic deficit, in that many are intended to be subtle, to compensate for cognitive flaws, or to by-pass our rational brains. This raises questions of openness—how can these vulnerable citizen-subjects hold the nudging government to account?
- Some of the policy tools promoted are techniques derived from the corporate sphere (particularly the use of social marketing) and which rely on a narrow conception of individual choice. This ignores the role of a consumer and corporate culture in producing many of the problems to be solved by nudging, e.g. obesity, personal debt, carbon footprints. Little attention is paid to changing cultural values beyond the realm of choosing and decision-making.
- In deconstructing 'homo economicus', in favour of pointing out the forever-flawed decisions, mental shortcuts and biases that humans predictably enact, Behaviour Change risks creating an 'irrational underclass'. It tends to demote the emotional or inexperienced drivers of decision-making as problems to be overcome. In targeting particular social groups as less rational, it risks stigmatising certain people as uneducable.
- An obsession with individual behaviour reframes social problems as issues of psychological pathology. In this sense, it is an unambitious political project which has little to say about the government's role in reducing wider social and spatial inequalities.

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Article

Governing temptation: Changing behaviour in an age of libertarian paternalism

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Big Society's Little Nudges:

The Changing Politics of Health Care in an Age of Austerity

The Conservative-led government has called for a new approach to public health in the UK. The nanny state is out; 'nudging' citizens into making sensible lifestyle choices is in. But what will this 'paradigm shift' mean for health policy? Rhys Jones, Jessica Pykett and Mark Whitehead investigate.



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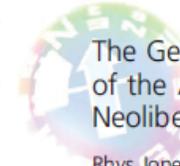
Interventions in the political geography of 'libertarian paternalism'

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The Geographies of Soft Paternalism in the UK: The Rise of the Avuncular State and Changing Behaviour after Neoliberalism

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The New Maternal State: The Gendered Politics of Governing through Behaviour Change

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Environment
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Governing Irrationality, or a More Than Rational Government?
Reflections on the Re-Scientisation of Decision-Making in British
Public Policy.

Mark Whitehead, Rhys Jones and Jessica Pykett, Aberystwyth University

In Press: *Environment and Planning A*

Area (2011)

Review Forum

MINDSPACE: State knowledges and the new philosopher kings

Jessica Pykett, Aberystwyth University; response by Michael
Hallsworth, Institute for Government

<http://governingtemptation.wordpress.com/>