The Geographies of Soft Paternalism in the UK: the rise of the avuncular state and changing behaviour after neoliberalism

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Abstract

Soft paternalism or libertarian paternalism has emerged as a new rationality of governing in the UK under New Labour, denoting a style of governing which is aimed at both increasing choice and ensuring welfare. Popularised in Thaler and Sunstein's best-selling title, Nudge, the approach of libertarian paternalism poses new questions for critical human geographers interested in how the philosophies and practices of the Third Way are being adapted and developed in a range of public policy spheres, including the environment, personal finance and health policy. Focusing specifically on the case of the UK, this article charts how soft paternalism appeals to the intellectual influences of behavioural economics, psychology and the neurosciences, amongst others, to justify government interventions based on the 'non-ideal' or irrational citizen. By identifying the distinctive mechanisms associated with this 'behaviour change' agenda, such as 'choice architecture', we explore the contribution of behavioural geographies and political geographies of the state to further understanding of the techniques and rationalities of governing.

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1. Introduction: The Chicago School comes to Britain Mark II.

On March 24 2009, David Cameron stood next to the eminent behavioural economist Richard Thaler at the London Stock Exchange. David Cameron was in the City of London to deliver his keynote speech on banking reform and the Tory's response to the credit crunch. Thaler's presence, as the co-author of the best selling book *Nudge* and one of the founding fathers of libertarian or soft paternalist thinking, was intended to add intellectual weight to the programmes of reform Cameron outlined.[1] It is perhaps more than a passing point of historical coincidence that Richard Thaler is a Professor of Behavioural Science and Economics at the University of Chicago. It is now thirty-one years ago that the economic theories of a very different type of University of Chicago Professor would help to propel a Tory leader into power, and instigate a significant change in course for British public policy. In 1979 the *Chicago School* economics of Milton Friedman (and his numerous colleagues) paved the way for a new era of neoliberal policies that would see the wholesale privatization of public institutions, the deregulation of the financial sector, and new limits imposed on what constitutes legitimate state intervention within social and economic life

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[1] Thaler later co-wrote a newspaper article with Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne on the potential contribution of behavioural economics to Conservative plans for government (Osborne and Thaler, 2010). At the time, the *New Statesman* went as far as to speculate that Thaler could be to Cameron what Keynes was to Clement Atlee, Milton Friedman was to Margaret Thatcher, and Anthony Giddens was to Tony Blair (Wilby, 2008).

(see Klein, 2007; Gray, 1998; Harvey, 2005). What is interesting about the socio-economic principles of *Chicago School II²* that are being promoted by Thaler, and embraced by Cameron, is that they simultaneously represent a stark reaction to the doctrines of original Chicago School economics, and at the same time reinforce many of its key tenets.

We argue that at its core soft paternalism embodies a new rationale of government: a rationale that exists somewhere between neoliberalism and the harder forms of paternalism. In contrast to harder kinds of paternalism (see Mead 1997), and more liberal notions of self-government (see Foucault 2007 [2004]), the notion of soft paternalism refers to a more overt process through which subjects are encouraged and, indeed, actively buy in to particular kinds of behaviour to improve their own (and others) welfare (see Sunstein and Thaler, 2003; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). To these ends, soft paternalism is about the careful design of collective structures of choice, in a range of different policy areas, which facilitate more effective decision-making while enhancing personal freedom.

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² It is important not to draw too close a comparison between what we have termed Chicago Schools I and II. In addition to ascribing to very different theories of the economy and economic decision-making (as we will explain later in this paper), Richard Thaler is actually professor at The University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and not the University of Chicago's Department of Economics (as Milton Friedman had been). It is also worth noting that Richard Thaler has only been at the University of Chicago since July 1995, having spent a significant portion of his academic career elsewhere.

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Our aims in this paper are twofold. First, we seek to explain the character of soft paternalism and its emergence as a new form of government in the UK.[3] Second, we attempt to demonstrate two ways in which soft paternalism can be interrogated by critical geographers, drawing specifically on themes relating to 'critical behavioural geographies' and geographies of the mundane state..

2. The philosophies and practicalities of soft paternalism in the UK.

a. Organs, defaults, and marketing strategies: a brief anatomy of soft paternalism.

Although soft paternalism enjoys popularity within the current Coalition Government in the UK, it is an emergent policy agenda of the previous Labour administration. In 2004, the Cabinet Office published a report – *Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour* (Halpern *et al.,* 2004) – which provided an overview of the ways in which a British style of libertarian paternalism could be realized in a range of policy arenas. This document and related pronunciations facilitated the spread of soft paternalist principles and practises throughout a wide array of public policy sectors in the UK (see Darnton, 2008; Dawnay and Shah, 2005; DCMS, 2001; DEFRA's 2007; Dolan *et al.,* 2010; DWP, 2006; Futerra, 2007; Knott et *al.,* 2008; Lewis, 2007; O'Leary 2008; Prendergrast *et al.,* 2008). A

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[3] Although we focus on the case of the UK in this paper, to find out more about the rise and operation of soft paternalism in other countries we recommend the following texts: USA (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008); New Zealand (Thompson et al 2007).

useful way of introducing some of the key features of soft paternalism is to consider its effects on one sector of public policy.

If you are currently on, or are considering joining, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) Organ Donor Register, you have already been involved in an area of public policy that has arguably been most heavily influenced by the principles, values and techniques of soft paternalism. Organ donation has become an intensive site for soft paternalist policy experimentation for the simple reason that while most surveys indicate that the majority of the British population are willing to donate organs following their death, far fewer people actually add their name to the National Organ Donor Register. Soft paternalism is relevant in this policy scenario because its appears to offer a series of mechanisms that attempt to encourage/cajole/nudge people towards making decisions that they themselves have a predisposition to favour, and which would be of clear benefit to the wider community.

Your first encounter with the vestiges of soft paternalism within the UK organ donation programme would, most likely, come through exposure to the powerful television advertising campaign that the National Health Service has run. At one level, soft paternalism encourages the public sector deployment of the same marketing strategies that corporations have been using for decades. Often referred to as *social marketing* (or the deployment of marketing techniques to serve public causes), this aspect of soft paternalism is about more than the simple production of generic public service advertisements. It also involves the

careful crafting of marketing techniques to strategically target particular parts of the population in specific ways. This process of *segmentation* is evident in the NHS campaign through the production of an advert that has been specifically designed to target British Asian communities (a segment of the population that has a particularly low rate of subscription to the Organ Donor Register).

Your second encounter with the contours of soft paternalism within this programme would most likely come in the actual registration process. A key goal of soft paternalism is to make it easier for people to make the decisions that they would like to make (and would serve their own and others best interests) if only they had the time, or ability, to do so. It is precisely in this context that joining the Organ Donor Register has become a quick and accessible process. Online registration, for example, can now be completed within a matter of two minutes. At the same time, you are also now prompted to join the programme whenever you register for a driving licence or even apply for certain store loyalty card.

The Third expression of soft paternalism you will experience on joining the Donor Register comes at the very end of the registration process. It is at this point that, as a potential donor yourself, you are enrolled to act as an advocate of the process to others. You are thus encouraged to raise awareness of organ donation among your friends, family and work colleagues. For those who have registered online there is also an opportunity to upload your photo to the *Wall of Life* and create a *Personal Profile* where you can explain your own motivation for

becoming a donor. The utilization of *peer-to-peer pressure* and respected intermediaries (including celebrities, teachers, doctors, nutritionists, financial advisers) is another core characteristic of soft paternalism. The creation of such networks of influence, fashion creation, and social norm formation are seen by the soft paternalist as much more effective conduits for public policy delivery than the traditional deployments of the "government expert."

The arena of organ donation is important not only because it reveals the key policy parameters of soft paternalist action, but also because it begins to expose some of the controversies that surround its modes of operation. One classic tool of soft paternalism has been controversially proposed as an ultimate solution to organ donation shortfalls: the re-setting of the organ donation default. Default positions are of particular interest to soft paternalists, because, it is argued, they are often structured in ways that do not reflect people's best interests, or even expressed preferences.[4] The British government, with the support of the British Medical Council, have consequently been considering the viability of moving to a *presumed consent* default position in relation to organ donation. In this situation people would not have to make the active step of opting-on to the organ donation register, but they would remain free to opt-out of if should they so choose (New Scientist, 2007). Such plans have, however, resulted in public resistance, with some arguing that subtle changes in the default position reflects

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[4] Unfavourable defaults classically include the non-automatic enrolment of employees in favourable company pension schemes; or the minimum repayments specified on credit card bills.

the over-reaching of the state and people's loss of control over their own bodies following death. As we will see throughout this paper, the political and ethical controversies of soft paternalism are not confined to the realm of organ donation and touch on fundamental questions about legitimate state action and personal freedom.

b. Overcoming the inertias of everyday life: the origins of soft paternalism.

Before moving on to consider the role which geographers can potentially play in bringing important critical perspectives to this novel area of policy development, it is important to offer some sense of the diverse nature of what we term *actually existing soft paternalism*. Actually existing soft paternalism has two key features: 1) it is often practised without explicit reference to the founding principles and safeguards associated with soft paternalism; and 2) it is commonly comprised of a complex mix of soft paternalist practises that come from different parts of its intellectual heritage. It is the varied nature of actually existing soft paternalism, as it is applied in a different sectors, states and regions, that often leads to its controversial status. This is also why it is necessary to know something of the history of the term.

The rise of soft paternalism in various states throughout the world has been predominately shaped by developments within what could broadly be termed behavioural sciences and the sciences of decision-making. In this context it is the

emerging field of behavioural economics that has provided much of the epistemological drive for soft paternalism. Behavioural economics started to emerge as a coherent school of thought from the mid 1950s onwards. At the core of this new brand of economics was Herbert Simon's revolutionary notion of *bounded rationality* (1955; 1982). The concept of bounded rationality points out the limits that exist to the ability of humans to make consistently rational decisions (limits that include time, cognitive ability, availability of information). This simple observation had significant implications for classical Chicago school economics, as it simultaneously challenged the assumption that humans make what could be defined as economically rational choices, and thus questioned the neoliberal assumption that the key to an innovative, efficient, and ultimately successful economy was simply to release the free will of the individual to pursue their own economic initiative. The later work of Tversky and Kahneman (1974), Thaler (2000), and Benartzi and Thaler (2004) has served to consolidate behavioural economics into a distinctive school within economic theory, with a primary concern with the irrational constitution of economic decisions[5].

It is very difficult to understand the evolution of behavioural economics without an appreciation of two interrelated intellectual traditions. As a discipline, it has been influenced as much by theories of psychology, as it has by economics. Behavioural psychology has played a vital role in exposing the emotional,

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[5] It is important to also recognize the important role that feminist economists have played in shedding new light on the limits of 'rational economic man' (see Nelson, 1995; Ferber and Nelson, 2003).

visceral, and instinctive decision-making, which defines most of our everyday lives, to the purview of behavioural economists. More recently, the work of neuroscientists has also been influential in apparently 're-humanising' the economic decision-making process. Joseph Le Doux (1996) and Antonio Damasio's (1994) focus on the emotional apparatus of the brain has, for example, provided influential insights into the neurobiological drivers of decision-making (see also recent developments in neuroeconomics (Camerer *et al.*, 2005))[6].

What behavioural psychology, and various branches of neuroscience, have afforded behavioural economics, is an ability to insist on the irrational nature of economic decision-making, without having to concede the impossibility of shaping economic fortunes. In the words of Dan Ariely (2008), behavioural psychology and neurosciences have not uncovered an impenetrable emotional register of decision-making, but rather a 'predictably irrational' subject (Shiller, 2005; see also Cialdini, 2007; Brafman and Brafman, 2009; Gladwell, 2005). Advocates of soft paternalism argue, therefore, that policy makers need to work with this predicable irrationality so that citizens can be 'nudged' into making appropriate decisions (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Proponents of soft paternalism have identified the subtle psychological ways in which the conscious and sub-conscious mind can be targeted by policy makers and corporations (Cialdini, 2007). In order to govern this predicable irrationality the practical arts

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[6] These accounts are not, however, without contestation (e.g. Prokhovnik, 1999; Papoulias and Callard, 2010).

of behaviour change derived from cognitive designers, engineering psychologists, and psychographic practitioners have been deployed (see here Norman 1988; Norman 2007). These practical sciences (see table 1 below) have provided the basis for thinking about how the decision-making environments (or *choice architectures*) that surround us all, could be redesigned in order to encourage more consistently beneficial decision-making. The results of these interventions have already seen the transformation of both hard (buildings, surfaces, canteen floor plans, public spaces) and soft (media technologies, administrative processes, public advertisements, disclosure forms) architectures in the UK along soft paternalist lines (see table 2).

Behavioural Economics	Preference Theory
Behavioural Psychology	Psychographics
Cognitive Design	Social Cognition
Engineering Psychology	Social Influence Theory
Ethology	Social Marketing
Game Theory	Theories of Affect
Intuitive Judgement Theory	Time Preference Theories
Material Psychology	User Centred Design
Neuroeconomics	Visual Perception Theory
Neuropsychology	

Table 1. Key intellectual influences of soft paternalism.

Non-conscious Priming	Collaborative Filtering
Incentives	Disclosure
Intelligent Assignment	Feedback
Presumed Consent	Self-Registered Control Strategies
Mandated Choices	Peer-to-Peer Pressure
Anchoring	Norm Formation
Culture Change	Choice Editing
Channelling Factors	Default positions

Table 2. Key mechanisms of soft paternalism.

The scientific origins of much of what passes as soft paternalism often means that it is presented as a kind of apolitical tool of government, which can be umproblemtically utilised by politicians and policy-makers coming from different parts of the political spectrum. Closer inspection of actually existing libertarian paternalism does, however, reveal its inherently political form. In the USA, for example it is clear that soft paternalism is being utilized by the Obama administration to justify a greater role for the state within social and economic life. In the UK, however, soft paternalism is now being mobilised by the Coalition Government as the basis for a low cost, budget-busting form of government, which it is hoped will facilitate the emergence of a much smaller state bureaucracy. Beyond party politics, it is also clear that soft paternalism energizes forms of political resistance which take very different forms: with libertarians conceiving of it as a form of "big government by the backdoor", and socialists

bemoaning its role in submerging the broader structural features which lead to disadvantage. It is with these political sensibilities in mind that we now turn to consider the potential role of critical human geography in the analysis of soft paternalism.

3. Soft paternalism: a critical human geography

This section examines the potential contribution of human geography to a critical analysis of soft paternalism. It is important to point out initially that significant progress has already been made in certain parts of discipline when it comes to analyzing actually existing soft paternalisms. Current work in geography has, for example, explored the impacts of soft paternalist techniques in developing pro-environmental behaviour changes (Anable, 2005; Barr and Gilg, 2006; Hobson, 2001); analyzed the role of behavioural approaches in relation to personal pension planning (Clark, 1998; Strauss, 2008; 2009); explored the production of reflexive financial subjectivities (Hall and Appleyard, 2009); considered the emergence of apparently "economically-irrational behaviour" by individuals in relation to family commitments (McDowell, 2005: 366; Smith, 2005; Christie, *et al.,* 2008); and assessed the rise of behavioural modification techniques in public health promotion (Duncan *et al.* 1996: 819; Stead *et al.,* 2001; Reidpath *et al.,* 2002; Thompson *et al.*, 2007; Guthman and DuPuis, 2006; Williamson, 2004).

While there is much to commend in this existing geographical literature, we want to focus our attention on a series of conceptual tools available to human geographers that can play an important part in critically analysing soft paternalism. First, we speculate on the potential of developing a *new behavioural geography* – not just to understand the geographical determinants of behaviour, but also to offer critical insights into a behaviourist approach to public policy and social change. Second, we explore the potential of existing work on the *political geographies of the state* in developing our understanding of the particular style of power deployed through soft paternalist strategies.

a. Pathology and geographical behaviour

Given the clear set of intersections that exist between the manipulation of space (whether in the form of new architectures, material deigns, or public spaces) and the behaviour changing goals of soft paternalism, it is our contention that the long legacy of work within, and criticism of, behavioural geography can bring to bear important critical perspectives on related policy developments. Detailed reviews of the contested trajectory of behavioural geography (e.g. Gold, 1980; Golledge and Stimson, 1987; Peet, 1998; Pile, 1996; Johnston, 1997; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993) are, on the whole, agreed that the behavioural geographers who reached prominence during the 1960s shared four principal concerns: to correct the mechanistic assumptions of spatial science which treated space as a surface and humans as 'rational economic men'; to promote a wider concept of space including not just physical space, but human perception, or the

'behavioural environment'; to foreground individual experiences of space rather than study aggregate patterns; to model cognitive processes and better understand the relationship between humans, the environment and psychology. Significantly, behavioural geographers were amongst the first to challenge the account of rational economic man assumed in mainstream economics, drawing specific attention to Simon's (1955; 1982) conception of 'bounded rationality'. Wolpert (1964: 545), for instance, argued that people were not 'optimisers' (profit-maximisers) but 'satisficers' looking for the best possible option within a constrained environment. And Kates (1962, cited in Johnston, 1997: 151) stated that decision-making was not carried out by rational economic man, but "men [sic] bounded by inherent computational disabilities".

During the 1970s and 80s behavioural geography was subjected to major criticisms, both from within the sub-field itself and from the new theoretical approaches of Marxist and humanistic geographies. From a Marxist perspective, Cox (1981) derided the behavioural approach as 'bourgeois', and Massey (1975) dismissed it as empiricist and idealist – too concerned with describing observable behaviour than with thinking through how the world could or should be. Humanistic geographers (e.g. Buttimer, 1971; Ley, 1981; Lowenthal, 1961; Tuan, 1971) also challenged the assumptions of behavioural geography, objecting most vociferously to the continued positivistic tendencies of the behavioural approach. As Pile (1996: 46) notes, both the Marxist and humanistic critiques levelled at behavioural geography shared a common concern to reinstate human agency – for humanists, a concern for human meaning and for

Marxists a concern for the structural constraints that shaped both meaning and behaviour.

The criticisms made of behavioural geography – and the recent emergence of a revitalised form of behavioural geography – can act as templates for a critique of some of the theoretical assumptions that underpin soft paternalism. It is important that proponents of soft paternalism do not repeat the mistakes and misdemeanours of past behavioural geography in their conceptualisations of human spatial behaviours. First, proponents of soft paternalism should take heed of the fact that human behaviour cannot be 'read off' particular environments in a deterministic manner. Geographers and others should be wary of the simplistic or naïve understandings of space that are often employed by advocates of soft paternalism; in which 'choice architectures' are said to be able to shape – almost automatically – human behaviour. Human subjectivity, (including the shaping and enacting of certain subject positions), and people's *active* interpretation of the environment influence the way in which individuals respond to environmental cues and 'choice architectures'. Secondly, it is important to appreciate the fact that advocates of soft paternalism rarely pay due attention to the structural constraints on decision-making, relying instead on an individualistic conception of the autonomous chooser. Certain individuals, depending on their material conditions, are able to make decisions deemed more 'appropriate' than others, and certain social groups will be more powerful in defining which behaviours are seen as good or appropriate. In other words it is not just psychological blips that produce pathological behaviours – they can

actually be the product of quite rational responses to the constraints of poverty, low self-esteem, or discrimination.

Additional insight may also be provided by the work of scholars who have sought to promote alternative understandings of behavioural geography. Pile (ibid.: 20) usefully identifies traces (and lost opportunities) of psychoanalysis within the wide literature of behavioural geography: in its concern with emotions, motivations and images, the limits of rationality and the (albeit oversimplified) mind. One can go even further to identify within behavioural geography, a nascent concern for the 'affective' aspects of the mind, which echo issues being addressed in more critical and creative ways within the 'affect' turn in the social sciences and geography more generally (e.g. Thrift, 2004). Gold (1980: 22) notes for instance, behavioural research on "the affective (emotional) attributes of the physical environment and their relationship to behaviour", and the "affective component" (ibid.: 24) within attitude. While this avenue of enquiry was not strongly developed by behavioural geographers themselves, re-establishing this link between geographies of affect and the concerns of behavioural geographers has the potential to offer insights into what are important ethical questions concerning the mechanisms and legitimacy of 'attitude change', behaviour change, and their connection with emotional and affective registers of human action. Making these connections helps us to further challenge the individualist and atomistic notions of human consciousness promoted in the behaviouralist account.

b. Geographical Perspectives on the Mundane State.

A second strand of geographical enquiry that appears to contribute critical insight to analyses of soft paternalism is an emerging body of work exploring the varied everyday spaces and prosaic technologies in and through which governmental power is realised. It is through this strand of geography that more overtly political questions arise concerning not only the justification of mechanisms and rationalities of soft paternalism, but the outcomes of its policy initiatives for particular people in particular places. There are two interconnected schools of geographical enquiry that address what could be termed the mundane constitution of state power. The first has been influence by the writings of Michel Foucault (Crampton and Elden, 2007; Legg, 2007), the second by post-foundationalist state theory (Painter, 2006; Sparke, 2005). What both Foucauldian and related post-foundationalist[7] theories of the state have in common is a rejection of the pre-emptive deployment of a structural entity labelled the state as an explanatory category within social and political science. In this context the state is positioned as a contingent outcome with specific characteristics (in the case of soft paternalism avuncular), not structural determinant, of the various ways in which governmental power insinuates itself into the mundane realities of our everyday existence (see Foucault 1978[2007]). Sensitivity towards the local, and often overlooked banalities of state power is,

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[7] Post-foundationalist accounts of the state assert that the state is not a pre-given category of analysis, but a set of interconnected political institutions, whose ongoing evolution is marked by fluctuating levels of internal cohesion. While post-foudationalist state theory is often inspired by post-structuralism, it is possible to discern within Foucault's theories of governmentality clear post-foundationalist reference points.

for us at least, an important requisite to the study of soft paternalism. This is because soft paternalism specifically targets the flawed architectures of everyday existence (from the designs of the streets on which we live, to the layout of bars and canteens). This is not, of course, to deny that all forms of governmental policy do not attempt to support the *statization* of everyday life in some way (see here Hirsch, 1983). But it is the particularly subtle, and often undisclosed, ways in which soft paternalism insinuates itself within the banalities of the everyday—often by deliberately targeting the collective human sub-conscious—that increases the political importance of the kinds of methodological vigilance promoted within these mundane approaches to the state.

Geographers inspired by the work of Foucault have sought to excavate the micro-technologies of spatial power that have historically been deployed to illicit certain forms of behavioural discipline (Crampton and Elden, 2007; Elden, 2001; Huxley, 2006; Legg, 2007; Philo, 1989). It is possible, in an admittedly crude fashion, to isolate two broad poles of enquiry within the Foucault school of geography. At one end is a concern with the disciplinary spaces of prisons, clinics, schools and asylums that embody spatial structures that are devoted to active surveillance and the overt control of human subjects. Related work has, however, drawn attention to the more subtle forms of spatial power which cultivate various prompts to the self-activation of what may be defined as conducive social and economic behaviour (see Allen, 2006). While its is clear that public and quasi-public spaces in the UK are composed of a mix of disciplinary

and more ambient power technologies, it is clear that spaces of soft paternalism prioritise the construction of subtle architectures of persuasion. These architectures of persuasion range from the various spatial prompts that are deployed to change the behaviour of drivers and pedestrians on British streets (see Department of Transport, 2007), to the internal design of school canteens and supermarket checkout facilities. In this context, studies of soft paternalism could gain important critically insight from Foucauldian studies of spatial power. What is, perhaps, most significant in this context is the particular suspicion that Foucauldians have over seemingly innocuous forms of ambient power. This suspicion stems from the realization that such subtle spatial powers are much more difficult to contest than more overt disciplinary techniques, because they are far harder to recognize and often afford little fulcrum around which to organize protest (see Allen 2005). To these ends, it is clear that when not supported by clear lines of disclosure, soft paternalism may be associated with forms of governmental power that are very difficult to publically mobilize against.

Geographers who have been inspired by post-foundational accounts of the state also have important critical insights to offer research on soft paternalism. The work of Painter on the prosaic nature of the state has a particular valence for the analysis of soft paternalist strategies. While also drawing attention to often overlooked aspects of state influence in everyday life, Painter's recourse to the notion of the prosaic state seeks to draw attention to the unpredictable nature of orchestrated state programmes for socio-economic change. The prosaic is used

by Painter to reveal the multiple local factors (including human error, political struggles, and accidents of design) that result in state action having very different outcomes in different places. Painter's work is important because it indicates the inevitable unevenness of the geographies that will become characteristic of soft paternalism. While in its official codifications, it is often presented as a policy solution that can be applied across Western democratic society in a reasonably uniform way; it is likely (particularly given its varied intellectual and practical antecedents) that it will have very different effects in different places. In some areas of the UK it could be utilised by left-wing city councils to support an extension of the welfare state and associated forms of state influence. In other borough councils (such as Conservative-led, Barnet), soft paternalism is already providing the intellectual justification for the promotion of a form of, no-frills, *Easy Jet* style of local government, with services being cut and residents having to choose between the public services they really want and those they can do without (Booth, 2009). This experience highlights the variable political inflections of actually existing soft paternalism as it is deployed across traditional political divides, and in specific political contexts. We argue that analyses of emergent geographies such as these will play a vital role in the normative assessment of the profile of soft paternalism in the UK.

4. Conclusion

Our aims in this paper have been twofold. First, we have shown the way in which ideas relating to soft paternalism have begun to influence policy agendas

in the UK. While a considerable amount has been written about the theory and practicalities of 'nudging' citizens, what has been less evident is a concern with the ethics of doing so. As soft paternalism becomes a more prominent aspect of the modern apparatus of governing it is clear that such forms of ethical interrogation will become more prominent. Existing work in this area is already beginning to uncover the uncertain relationship that exists between the psychological prompting of behaviour and modern notions of democracy. While libertarian paternalists address such issues by arguing that the public disclosure of such psychological techniques address concerns over democratic legitimacy (see Thaler and Sustein, 2008), advocates of deeper forms of democracy may argue that such techniques need to be connected to deliberative styles of public consultation and accreditation. In a different ethical context, the Institute for Public Policy Research recently articulated the growing concern that soft paternalist strategies would focus on persistently problematic social groups: namely those of lower incomes who on average eat unhealthier food, don't save, smoke, and are more likely to be involved in gambling (IPPR, 2007). According to the IPPR, this system of policy targeting could contribute to forms of social stigmatisation and related feelings of helplessness among effected groups (see also Thompson et al 2007). A third major ethical concern relates to the dangers of manipulating the collective subconscious. Soft Paternalism involves the deployment of psychology techniques at a population scales. The potential impact of the unintended consequences of such a strategy (perhaps in relation to personal neuroses), remain a major area of ethical debate within public policy.

Such ethical issues bring us on to the second aim of the paper; namely our goal of showing how critical human geographers can intervene in debates concerning soft paternalism. We noted the value of re-visiting discussions about behavioural geography as a way of formulating critiques of soft paternalist thought. We also showed the way in which work on the mundane geographical constitution of the state could inform our understanding of the soft paternalist project. In discussing these themes, we have sought to elaborate on the potential of geographers to contribute to what is likely to be a key area of future debate for public policy makers and critics alike.

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