Rising Waters. The Concept of "Bureaucracy" and the Crisis of Government in Great-Britain 1957-1979

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▌Abstract

This paper studies the discursive emergence of a "crisis of bureaucracy" in British parliamentary debates between 1957 and 1979. It demonstrates how different types of arguments involving the concept of bureaucracy converged into a cross-party systemic critique of government, marked by a sense of lingering crisis and popularized in the late 1970s through concepts of administrative "overload" and "ungovernability" (King, 1975; Castellani, 2018; Theakston, 1992). Current literature presents the view that conservative and neoliberal answers to these conceived crises - austerity and administrative reform - were pushed forward by think tanks and conservative media between 1977 and 1979, thereby "seizing the moment" during widespread strikes (Hay, 1996, 1995; Matthijs, 2008). However, such a perspective ascribes the success of these ideas only to the short-term actions of conservative actors during a "moment" of crisis (Hay, 1996; Jessop, 2015; Warlouzet, 2017).

Instead, this paper maps the arguments involving "bureaucracy" in the period between 1957 and 1979. Using digitized parliamentary proceedings and methods from computational linguistics, it reconstructs a process of convergence in these arguments. Driven by declinist thought and Fabianist ideas about administrative efficiency, this convergence resulted in the idea of a "crisis of bureaucracy", captured by Anthony King in the metaphor of "rising waters" (King, 1975, pp. 286). This notion of crisis and its specific temporalities, shared by both Labour and Conservative actors, set the stage for the formulation of a (Thatcherite) state project, focused on administrative reform.

The paper combines parliamentary "big data" and computational methods to reconsider the "discursive construction of crisis" that stands at the center of the intellectual history of neoliberalism (Hay, 1996). As such, it contributes to the integration of computational methods into intellectual history and combines ideas and concepts in a data-driven focus on micro-level arguments (Palti, 2014).

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