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The politics of behaviour change: nudge, neoliberalism and the state

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Behaviour change is increasingly central to policy and politics. The exemplar of nudge, and its relationship to behavioural economics and psychology, is outlined. Nudge's claim to libertarian paternalism is evaluated in the context of the neoliberal state. A sociological critique of behavioural economic assumptions enables a still wider account of shifting state–citizen relations. Foucauldian analyses of such relations, as well as deliberative 'think' perspectives, are assessed. A more explicitly political, social-democratic model of the behaviour change state is advocated. This would be more attuned to the socioeconomic context of behaviour, and also be prepared to defend citizens against ubiquitous attempts to shape their subjectivity.

key words nudge • behavioural economics • libertarian paternalism • governmentality • social democracy

Introduction: the behaviour change agenda

While policy and politics are always concerned with influencing preferences and actions, there is an acute contemporary emphasis on behaviour change. Policy makers increasingly believe that – in the face of social complexity and an individualised citizenry – the only way to address 'wicked' challenges such as climate change or obesity is to encourage citizens themselves to, for example, recycle or take more exercise. One toolkit for this approach has been provided by behavioural economics (BE), drawing on social psychology.

BE rejects the crude homo economicus associated with mainstream economics. This depicts an abstracted agent, with fully formed interests that are pursued rationally. By contrast, BE attempts to understand the psychological complexity and fallibility of individuals who are influenced by their operating environment. BE has been most famously expounded in the bestselling *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*, by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (TS) (2009). This has been eulogised by David Cameron's Conservatives and widely taken up in policy circles. TS' *Nudge* calls for a more nuanced account of the agent, develops the science of 'choice architecture' and offers case studies ranging from everyday situations to macro policy challenges such as public health. Not content with this, TS also claim that their ideas represent a new, 'libertarian paternalist' Third Way, overcoming the pitfalls of overbearing statism and laissez-faire neoliberalism.

This article is concerned with the theoretical assumptions and political implications of the behavioural economic turn in general, and nudge in particular. The political impact of *Nudge* has been dramatic. To be sure, British governments have engaged with ideas about behaviour change for some time (6 et al, 2010; Wells, 2010). Under New Labour, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit produced an influential document entitled *Personal responsibility and changing behaviour* (Halpern et al, 2004), and this was followed by further Cabinet Office outputs on behaviour change (Knott et al, 2008; Dolan et al, 2010). But it was the publication and take-up of *Nudge* that proved most significant. Sunstein took the lead role in regulatory reform in the Obama administration, while in the UK, Thaler has acted as an unpaid adviser to Cameron. In 2010, behaviour change thinking was placed at the heart of government, with the establishment in the Cabinet Office of a small but wide-ranging Behavioural Insights Team (referred to here as COBIT) – colloquially known as the 'Nudge Unit' (COBIT, 2011). COBIT has developed interventions and publications showing how behavioural insights might be applied to a range of areas, including public health (COBIT, 2010), energy use (COBIT et al, 2011) and consumer empowerment (COBIT and BIS, 2011). BE theory is explicitly used to justify these emerging policies. This has been reinforced by Cameron, George Osborne and Nick Clegg all publicly eulogising BE and nudge (Osborne, 2008; Wintour, 2010). Furthermore, the wider policy establishment is increasingly engaged, including a Royal Society of Arts' (RSA) research programme on the 'Social Brain' (Grist, 2009, 2010) and a House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee (2011) commission on behaviour change. While nudge is only one variant of behavioural policy experiments, it is the seminal reference point and its influence looks set to endure.

In what follows, the historical emergence of BE and its embodiment in TS' *Nudge* are outlined. The article then identifies critical responses to nudge's claims to a libertarian paternalism, in the context of debates over its relationship to the state and neoliberalism. Libertarian, statist, Foucauldian and deliberative (so-called 'think') responses to nudge are identified and evaluated. The final section seeks to build on these in developing a wider account of the politics of behaviour change. The platform for this is a sociological critique of BE's assumptions about the agent and their operating environment. This enables analysis of how the behaviour change agenda may alter state–citizen relations and engender resistance. While the Foucauldian critique in particular provides resources for understanding these relations, it is ultimately unable to offer a more reconstructive agenda, which I develop in the final section on the role of the behaviour change state. In nudge the state is reduced to mimicking the techniques of other societal actors (eg, in the private sector) engaged in behaviour change, while in think the state has a necessary – but still insufficient – facilitating remit. By contrast, I argue that the state should adopt a more explicitly political role, and on this basis I offer a social–democratic model of the behaviour change state.

Nudge and the behavioural revolution

Nudge needs to be located in the wider context of the long-term development of BE. The historical relationship between mainstream economics, psychology and BE is complex (Sent, 2004; Strauss, 2009; Davis, 2011; Jones et al, 2011a; Whitehead et al, 2011). A crucial distinction is between an 'old' and 'new' BE, and the way that each has drawn on psychology. In the mid-20th century, economists had long understood the

empirical limits of the utility maximiser model, but disagreed over how far insights from psychology should be used to develop it. Their eventual take-up informed first-wave ('old') BE, with potentially radical implications (Sent, 2004). Rather than assuming a given, profit-seeking utility function, behavioural economists wanted to empirically describe actual behaviour. This included the content of the utility function itself, as well as the implications of departures from the supposed rational norm. However, rather than this radical path being taken, what developed from the 1970s was the so-called 'new' behavioural economics (NBE). This reasserted utility maximisation as given and – still drawing on psychology – 'evaluated the cognitive character of conformity or deviation from these benchmarks' (Sent, 2004: 742). The developing use of psychology was new, but the assumption of a unified rational actor was a regression to the mainstream. Subsequently, TS' *Nudge* has become an exemplar of some key elements of NBE.

Bounded rationality and fallible humans

In *Nudge*, TS distinguish between the 'econs' of mainstream economic theory and the 'humans' who inhabit the real world. Econs are utility maximisers, while humans are rather shambolic – TS (2009: 24) identify a Homer Simpson 'lurking somewhere in each of us'. Humans are too lazy or busy to process all the information available. Their sense of their interests is subject to external influences – especially comparison against social norms. Even when they are strategic, humans make repeated mistakes in pursuit of their objectives. And the more important and complex the decision, and the less experienced they are at having to take it (eg, getting married), the higher the chances of a poor outcome. These risks and confusions generate chronic inertia. But even when finally making decisions, humans seek easy short-cuts (eg, a trusted brand) to simplify the process. This also dovetails negatively with a human propensity for impulsivity and a general lack of self-control. TS conclude that humans are ripe for being nudged towards better decisions. In so doing they draw on a simple dichotomy common to all variants of behavioural theory: that we possess both 'reflective' (rational) and 'automatic' (emotion-driven) 'systems', arguing that the automatic system repeatedly wins out. The strength of nudge is that by tapping into this automatic system it goes with the grain of what is depicted as human nature.

Choice architecture

Having identified a 'nudgeable' human subject, the second justification TS offer concerns 'choice architecture'. As they define it, '[a] choice architect [is anyone who] has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions' (2009: 3). TS give the example of those responsible for arranging the layout of products on supermarket shelves or in a cafeteria. But in contemporary societies multiple occupations involve structuring people's choices, such as through web design, developing curricula or presenting information to patients. More fundamentally, as well as being ubiquitous, choice architecture is also *inevitable*: we cannot avoid presenting choices to people in some form. Given this, nudge advocates can brush aside ethical objections to what might be regarded as manipulation: to put any information, policy or product into the world necessarily involves framing the choices of – or nudging – the end user in some way. The inevitability of structured choices means that there

is no neutral design in any scenario involving a user and a product. Consequently, there can be no 'pure', unmediated agential preference (as implied by the figure of the econ): it is always constructed through interaction with choice architecture. TS make this central to their definition of a nudge as 'any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives' (2009: 6).

Furthermore, given the inevitability of choice architecture, 'it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people's behaviour in order to make their lives longer, healthier and better … to steer people's choices in directions that will improve their lives' (2009: 5). Indeed, on this view, it is a dereliction of responsibility not to nudge: benevolent nudging becomes a moral duty.

Mechanics of nudging

Evidence for the practical efficacy of nudge is still relatively thin. Even Oliver Letwin, the minister responsible for coordinating government policy, cheerfully testified to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee (2011: 5.10) that 'it is of course open to question whether any of this will have any effect whatsoever'. Here we are not concerned with the detailed techniques of nudge, but how TS' case studies reveal an attempt to go with the grain of the fallible human in three key areas. The first is to harness our inherent inertia over difficult or tedious decisions by making use of defaults. Defaults are the best-known element of BE (Dolan et al, 2010) and also embody the inevitability of choice architecture: something has to be initially in place for a product or system to operate, even if users have alternatives. Our inertia regularly leads us to accept the default option, ranging from a phone ringtone up to what we want employers to do with our pension contributions. Given this, the default presents the ideal opportunity for a nudge. However, the user is not precluded from switching to other options if they so wish, as with the right of individuals to withdraw from automatic 'opt-in' organ donation schemes.

Second, despite their inertia, humans are prone to act impulsively so need nudging into a space where their reflective systems can evaluate consequences. The typical mechanism for this is the 'cooling-off' period. As with defaults, this can be for relatively minor situations such as a statutory gap between a credit agreement being signed and coming into effect, up to life-changing decisions such as marriage or divorce, both of which have statutory cooling-off periods in some American states.

The third element of implementing nudges concerns social norms, mobilising our 'herd mentality' (Cialdini, 2009). In contrast to the asocial econ, humans are reluctant to depart from what they perceive to be normal behaviour. TS offer the striking example of how to nudge consumers to reduce their energy use. Evidence suggests that high users will consume less if their bill shows average levels of energy usage in the neighbourhood. An extraordinary caveat is the so-called 'boomerang effect', where users who see they are below the average actually *increase* their energy consumption. Using the nudge maxim of giving feedback on how 'well' users are doing, this is mitigated against by placing either a 'smiley' or 'frownie' visual cue next to the individual usage figure on the bill (TS, 2009: 74–5).

A slippery slope? Libertarian paternalism and its critics

Unsurprisingly, nudge has attracted substantial critical comment. Much of this revolves around TS' claim that their programme represents a new political philosophy of libertarian paternalism, or 'real third way' (2009: 253–4), avoiding both overbearing statism and laissez-faire dogmatism. While recognising its paternalistic elements, they insist that this is a 'soft' paternalism as nudging 'tries to influence choices in a way that will make choosers better off, *as judged by themselves*' (2009: 5, emphasis in original). This is in contrast to a harder paternalism, which ignores the wishes of the agent. In addition, TS insist on the 'liberty-preserving' aspect of nudge, in that ultimately nudgees always have the right to opt out or choose differently (2009: 5). TS (2009: 9) are bold in stating what nudge and libertarian paternalism can achieve: 'By properly deploying both incentives and nudges, we can improve our ability to improve people's lives, and help solve many of society's major problems. And we can do so while still insisting on everyone's freedom to choose.'

It could be argued that the take-up of nudge in very different political contexts gives credence to its Third Way claims. New Labour policy thinkers saw BE as a vehicle for extending state activity, but not on traditional command-and-control lines. And yet the same intellectual framework is attractive to the current coalition government as a means of fiscal and state retrenchment (Whitehead et al, 2011). This flexibility is reflected in the variety of critical standpoints on behaviour change. Below I identify libertarian, statist and what I label as 'critical-democratic' perspectives (encompassing both Foucauldian and think approaches). It should be noted that individual critics may not necessarily self-identify with these ideal-type categories. However, they serve to capture how nudge's libertarian paternalist claims attract criticism of its political character, which is further explored in the final section.

Libertarians

Given the explicit paternalism of nudge, it is unsurprising that libertarian criticisms abound (Selinger and Whyte, 2011). Despite TS' claims that nudge is liberty-preserving, the argument that it is a technocratic and top-down technology is compelling. Libertarian criticisms focus on the central role that nudge accords to experts, and the assumption that this is unproblematic as long as citizens' 'best interests' are being promoted (Sugden, 2009; Hausman and Welch, 2010). Furthermore, nudge offers such a disabling account of agential capacities (our 'inner Homer Simpson') that the scope for expert interventions is likely to be considerable. The further logical objection follows that if nudge's claims about human fallibility are universal, then surely experts are as prone to inertia, error and impulsivity as everyday citizens: who will nudge the nudgers? (Whitehead et al, 2011).

Such criticisms feed into wider concerns that nudge is a statist project to repackage 'big government' (*The Economist*, 2006). Neoliberals may fear that NBE's critique of homo economicus amounts to a challenge to market principles in general. A harder libertarian argument would be that nudge takes state power to unprecedented new heights. Habermas (1987) famously characterised modernity in terms of the encroachment of the 'system' (the steering power of both the state and market) on the 'lifeworld' (people's everyday subjectivity). Nudge could be seen as the logical conclusion of this twin assault: the state is deploying techniques well established in

the market sphere in order to interfere in the most micro-level aspects of decision making. Worse still, in so doing, nudge seeks to operate on people's unreflective, unconscious systems (Horton, 2009). Put this way, nudge appears as a thought control experiment beyond even the most technologically advanced totalitarian regimes. It is thus perhaps surprising that nudge has been embraced by Cameron's notoriously anti-state inner circle. This suggests a complex relationship between the theory and practice of behaviour change and neoliberalism, explored below through statist and then Foucauldian critiques.

Statists

As if to confirm nudge's Third Way credentials, the concerns of statists are a mirror opposite to those of libertarians. Thus, sceptical statists also reject TS' claims that libertarian paternalism represents a real Third Way, but on the grounds that it is pro-market and anti-state. As Fitzpatrick (2011) notes, TS clearly lean towards market-liberal rather than egalitarian initiatives in their recommendations. For example, although TS introduce the idea of 'asymmetrical paternalism' aimed at helping the 'least sophisticated people in society', this nevertheless assumes that 'the costs imposed on the sophisticated are kept close to zero' (2009: 249). This qualifier helps to explain the attraction of libertarian paternalism to New Labour modernisers, as well as Democrats in the US. The behaviour change agenda facilitates an 'active' social policy, but one that leaves inequality and the distribution of wealth relatively untouched.

While this indicates that libertarian paternalism is not recognisably social democratic, stronger statist critics go further. They claim that it is the latest ideological vehicle for extending neoliberalism, justifying state retrenchment while spreading market relations. Wells (2010: 114) observes that throughout TS' work 'there is a strong case made that a *nudging* state is likely to be a much smaller one', while Jones et al (2010: 86) see a 'thinly veiled assault on the welfare state' and its organisational forms. In this sense, the appeal of nudge to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition operating in a climate of deficit crisis is clear (Osborne, 2008; Osborne and Thaler, 2010). In addition, sceptics see the leading role granted to commercial actors in delivering behaviour change strategies (eg, in public health) as a means of bringing private interests into the state, as part of a wider strategy of rolling back traditional forms of industry regulation. This leads to social-democratic objections, made as much on grounds of efficacy as ideology, that nudge underplays the continuing effectiveness of state legislation – including the mandates and bans that TS are weary of (Horton, 2009).

A more expansive critique of nudge's relationship to neoliberalism complicates the role of the state. Peck (2010) usefully characterises neoliberalism in terms of 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' phases. Roll-back involved the deregulation and dismantling of the Keynesian social settlement in the 1980s. But when this reached its political and social limits, an adaptation was required, which has taken the form of the roll-out phase. In a mutation of laissez-faire doctrine, state activity became a means of using economic policy – and an increasingly disciplinary and invasive social policy – to develop neoliberal institutions and subjects. However, since the financial crisis of 2007, neoliberalism has confronted a major legitimacy crisis. Nudge and the wider behaviour change agenda can be seen as a means of adapting to this crisis, while still facilitating the roll-out phase. Theoretically, NBE appears as an attempt to develop a more 'humanised' understanding of the agent, in contrast to the discredited figure of

homo economicus (Jones et al, 2011b). In terms of wider political and public discourse, as Wilby (2010) argues, 'Nudge … came at a convenient moment for free market capitalism. It argues that there's nothing wrong with markets, only with people, and the state's role is to make people fit for markets, not the other way about.'

On this analysis, nudge is at the leading edge of roll-out neoliberalism: human irrationality and emotional complexity are not seen as a refutation of neoliberal economic theory, but as the means of re-legitimising it. However, it is difficult on this view to make the argument that the behavioural turn straightforwardly represents state retrenchment: it does in many respects, but it also facilitates the extension of state activity. And shouldn't statists favour this development? Such complexity demands additional theoretical resources for understanding the shifting state–citizen relations that behaviour change embodies.

Critical-Democrats

A third set of critical perspectives focuses on what the behaviour change agenda entails not just for the reach of the state, but also for the active, reflective citizen so integral to a functioning democracy. Two differing theoretical traditions inform such criticism: Foucauldian perspectives, and approaches based on deliberative democratic theory, which have been popularised as 'think'.

Foucault's work on governmentality and the 'conduct of conduct' offers a promising toolkit for critically analysing the behaviour change agenda (Jones et al, 2011b). A key Foucauldian claim is that the operation of power is not simply negative, in the form of repressing or blocking freedom or identity. On the contrary, power is productive in that it is constitutive of subjectivity. Foucauldians are thus concerned with how power increasingly operates 'through' rather than straightforwardly 'over' subjects. This generates the crucial insight that the very centrality of 'autonomy' and 'choice' to the discourse of liberalism is integral to the operation of power. In contemporary societies it is on the terrain of individual choices and identity formation itself that power is exercised – and potentially contested (Dean, 2010).

Foucauldian analysis highlights in particular the role of expertise in constructing subjectivities, and is thus well placed to grasp the complex, roll-out mode of neoliberalism. Foucauldians identify increasingly invasive forms of governing technologies as part of an 'advanced liberal' mode of government (Dean, 2010). This suggests that we should not just take neoliberal ideology (eg, minimal state, negative conception of liberty) at face value, or think of it only in terms of economic relations. Rather, advances in forms of expertise generate new governing practices, discourses and subjectivities, within which individualising themes such as 'choice' and 'personal responsibility' become central.

This twin concern with expert knowledges and the (self) constitution of subjectivities offers critical purchase on nudge, and the behavioural–economic, social-psychological and neuroscientific discourses it invokes. Nudge could even be seen as the 'highest stage' of advanced liberalism and the scientific discourses of late modernity. On this reading, nudge is the point at which the mechanics of human choice itself, in apparently even the most mundane settings, become scientised and subject to disciplinary interventions, or what has been suggestively characterised as 'neuroliberalism' (Jones et al, 2011b). Despite these important insights, enduring limits of Foucauldian approaches apply and these are detailed in the final section. Here we

should note that to the extent that Foucauldian analyses of behaviour change imply a political strategy, it is in calls for the empowerment of a more deliberative citizen. Such a citizen would be able to make individual choices, and participate in collective ones, free from the distortions of behavioural governing techniques.

This leads into the territory of think approaches. Most closely associated with the work of John et al (2009, 2011), think is grounded in a more participative and deliberative democratic tradition. While think advocates typically recognise practical advantages of nudge, they fear it threatens participative versions of the democratic ideal. Nudge's foregrounding of the fallible, emotive human gives up on – and possibly undermines – the rational, deliberative citizen. Bovens (2009) points to the risks of repeated behavioural interventions creating a fragmented self, lacking the capacity for learning and diminished in moral character. Echoing the libertarian critique, others highlight how nudgees have the preferences of experts substituted for their own critical reflection (Davis, 2011). This diminished individual in turn presents problems for collective deliberation: the subject of nudge remains an essentially atomised figure with fixed preferences. But think sees preferences as revisable through reflection and public debate. As John et al (2009: 361) argue, 'citizens, given the right context and framing, can think themselves collectively towards a better understanding of problems and more effective collective solutions, avoiding thereby a narrow focus on their short term self-interest'. The focus of think is thus on optimising the institutional settings for collective decision making. Furthermore, the *public* character of deliberation is crucial to both its legitimacy and effectiveness. In nudge, by contrast, the settings for decision making are manipulated by choice architects.

Although John et al see think as resting on fundamentally different, more optimistic, assumptions about human nature to nudge, they conclude that both strategies have their place. By providing the information and access to alternative viewpoints that are a prerequisite of deliberation, public agencies are well placed for 'nudging citizens to think' (John et al, 2011: 14). There is also room for what we might call 'thinking about nudging': engaging citizens in debate over a nudge's objectives in specific contexts could increase its legitimacy (John et al, 2009, 2011).

The emerging politics of behaviour change

In what follows I extend current criticisms of nudge and contribute to an emerging, wider political analysis of behaviour change. Returning to the theoretical assumptions of BE, a more sociological understanding of the agent is introduced, and the behaviour change agenda is identified as a new phase of state–citizen relations characterised by extreme reflexivity. Foucauldian approaches are useful in describing and challenging elements of these relations. However, the Foucauldian analysis is ultimately hampered by its own deconstructive tendencies, which undermine its potential for developing alternatives. Turning to a more reconstructive agenda, I conclude by considering the function of the behaviour change state. Nudge is depoliticising in that it reduces the state to being just one more behaviour change seeker among many. Think approaches are preferable to the extent that they imply the state as facilitator. But the case is made for a more explicitly political, social–democratic behaviour change state.

The agent, society and politics in nudge

To fully assess the political character and implications of nudge, we need to return to its behavioural economic assumptions. NBE prides itself on offering a more rounded view of human behaviour than homo economicus. However, the extent to which nudge's account of the agent improves upon the rational utility maximiser is overstated. Davis (2011) argues that NBE not only remains fixated on an ideal of the rational actor, but also actively promotes the normative notion of individuality itself. NBE tries to construct a figure of the individual 'to help make *Homo sapiens* behave as much as possible as *Homo economicus* would….' (Davis, 2011: 62). This would be consonant with roll-out neoliberalism and the construction of neoliberal subjectivities. However, it could equally be argued that nudge's agent is in fact a *regression* from homo economicus: the latter is at least capable of purposive reasoning and action. By contrast, nudge relies on a human subject forever dominated by its impulsive, unreflective automatic systems.

In addition to a one-dimensional account of the agent, nudge theory lacks an adequate conception of social environment. Again in common with traditional economic models, TS' 'human' still operates in an asocial way, without being either enabled or constrained by wider social structures or processes (Strauss, 2009; Jones et al, 2011a). The 'social' in nudge assumes two main forms. The first is as a limited conception of environment, defined as the immediate physical space encountered by an agent (eg, the layout of a cafeteria). The second, social norms, shows more promise in terms a thicker sense of social relations, but is understood quantitatively as simply what the majority of agents tend to do at a specific moment ('the herd'). Of course, these basic senses of environment and norms are important to understanding decision making, but they imply a very thin conception of the social. Again, this can be linked back to the limits of NBE. Part of the old BE's potential radicalism was to challenge the very idea of individual preferences, by indicating how they may be socially constructed. However, what came to dominate in NBE was the concept of a social 'reference point', imported from psychology. This acknowledges the role of social phenomena such as social norms and group identities but, vitally, these simply inform the processing of information by individuals: individual subjectivity and preferences themselves remain unproblematised (Davis, 2011).

Nudge's conception of 'social' thus excludes fundamental elements that are commonplace elsewhere in the social sciences. The first is the straightforward observation that before agents have even reached the moment of nudge, they are unevenly distributed within social structures. In particular, agents' uneven access to economic, cultural and other forms of capital will filter and constrain (or enable) their choices and actions (eg, Bourdieu, 1990).

Second, while nudge provides useful insights concerning the interface between the agent and their immediate physical environment, it neglects how that environment is itself a historical product, and one shot through with the traces of previous decisions, contestations and relations of power. Thus, the arrangement of a cafeteria or supermarket shelf does not begin or end with the strategy of an individual choice architect, themselves abstracted from time, space and institutional relations (Strauss, 2009).

The third element is a thicker sense of social norms. In nudge and related social marketing theories of crowd behaviour, 'norms' are simply the aggregate of agents'

choices – but there is no sense of ideational structures that pre-date and shape those choices (eg, Archer, 1988). Nudge thus lacks a sense of the weight of social norms manifest as, for example, traditional values or ideological messages. At the micro level of agents engaging with choice architectures, their identities and preferences can be shaped *prior* to them 'choosing' (Strauss, 2009; Shove, 2010). More broadly, the received meaning of 'behaviour change' or 'nudge' itself cannot be taken as a stable reference point: it forms part of a complex ensemble of ideological messages and social and political interests (Fairclough, 2010). The definition(s) of behaviour change that come to dominate will influence how related policies, and their reception by agents, play out. In this respect, nudge needs to be seen as ideologically contested, and possible ideological alternatives specified.

Politicising behaviour change

This more sociological account of the context of nudge enables further analysis of its political dimensions. Critics have begun to explore how behaviour change strategies are embedded in institutional and social relations (Strauss, 2009; Shove, 2010; Jones et al, 2011a, 2011b; Whitehead et al, 2011; Webb, 2012). One way of approaching this is in terms of a wider reconfiguration of state–citizen relations, which I argue are now characterised by extreme *reflexivity*.

The established sociological definition of reflexivity refers to how 'social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character', a condition that is heightened in information-saturated contemporary societies (Giddens, 1990: 38). In the field of governance, the behaviour change agenda takes such reflexivity to its logical extreme. The increasingly public nature of behaviour change discourse is striking: not just the government's embracing of nudge, but the theory and mechanisms for delivering nudges are regularly discussed in the public domain. This is a highly reflexive condition, in that the ethics and technologies of behaviour change are subject to interrogation by its architects and, crucially, its intended subjects. An apolitical or technocratic interpretation of this would be to imbue both governors and citizens with an ironic disposition towards behaviour change. Jessop (2003) argues that social complexity means governors need to adopt a 'requisite irony': all governing projects ultimately fail, and reflexive governors know this. However, to be able to go on, governors must proceed 'as if' their strategies can succeed. Widespread nudging could constitute a hyper-reflexive scenario in which certain citizens know they are subject to nudging, and governors will know that they know. But nudge advocates seem to assume that both will carry on regardless: a condition of ironic governance *and* citizenship. As one policy practitioner from the Institute of Economic Affairs remarked in interview: 'if you're being nudged and you understand you're being nudged and you know what's in your best interests and all the rest of it then you can work round the nudge fairly easily' (cited in Whitehead et al, 2011: 2827).

To adapt Foucault, we might label such reflexivity as 'domesticated governmentality'. Behind Foucault's account of the conduct of conduct lay a critical intent: to unmask the complexity and pervasive extent of governing practices, with the hope of identifying sites of resistance. However, the theory and reception of nudge operate as if the policy establishment itself has embraced the idea of governmentality, through an *entirely explicit* commitment to eroding any remaining boundaries between state, civil

society and individual identities. Of course, this is not in the critical sense understood by Foucault, but rather as a tool of governance itself. But an approach closer to the critical aspects of the Foucauldian tradition continues to suggest possible sites of resistance and subversion. Certainly, direct opposition to nudge of the traditional sort may be unlikely. Despite the potential for ironic governance and citizenship depicted above, the majority of the population are likely to remain unaware of behaviour change interventions. Even those alert to an increasing government emphasis on behaviour change in general may not know they are the subject of specific nudges. However, given this, campaigners might seek to raise awareness among the wider population as to how their choices are being covertly manipulated, and indeed to equip citizens to engage critically with prefabricated choice environments.

Jones et al (2011a) suggest that the covert, subtle technologies of 'soft paternalism' may be more difficult to mobilise against than traditional disciplinary state interventions. Similarly, Shove (2010: 1280) criticises 'sneaky' governmental attempts to use apparently banal, everyday solutions as a means of gradually changing group norms towards pro-environmental behaviours. But it is precisely the cultural, everyday nature of behaviour change interventions that also make them ripe for subversion. The first objective of deconstructive theory with a political intent is to reveal the political character of taken-for-granted practices. Nudge's ontology of the choice environment already (unwittingly) achieves this task: the hyper-politicising assertion that even the most micro, banal elements of an agent's environment contain possibilities for structuring their behaviours reads as if from Foucault himself. The field is thus left open to present alternatives for what might be done with – or within – choice environments. Furthermore, the very technologies of choice architecture (slogans, signs and symbols, physical layouts, appeals to group norms) are particularly amenable to subversion and viral forms of resistance or, at the very least, subject to discussions about alternatives. Thus, Barnett (2010: 1884–5) points to examples (eg, Transition Towns, Slow Cities) where nudge-type interventions are 'configured in more creative, participatory ways … not achieved behind people's backs, but by configuring the everyday spaces of urban life, leisure, and work as communicative spaces of public education and mobilization'.

Just as the choice environment provides tools for reading everyday spaces in a political way, so can nudge's insights from social psychology be co-opted to empower citizens as critical and reflexive agents. The RSA's work on the 'Social Brain' claims to go beyond nudge with what it calls a model of 'steer'. Through this, citizens are trained in the theory and techniques of behavioural psychology, in order that they might define and implement their own behaviour change agenda (Grist, 2009, 2010). This use of behavioural science to empower rather than pacify citizens echoes Jones et al's (2011b: 492) invocation of the later Foucault's hope for the subject to have access to 'a more self-reflective and self-empowering mode of ethical assessment'.

However, while the Foucauldian critique is fruitful in exposing the power relations embedded in attempts to shape everyday conduct, its deconstructive ethos militates against using behavioural tools to empower individual citizens. Any such project would be subject to the same Foucauldian critique of expertise and discipline. Foucauldians cannot adequately distinguish between ideological inflections of behaviour change strategy, as they all ultimately represent burgeoning technocratic domination. As Jones et al (2011b: 491) themselves note in their advocacy of a Foucauldian approach: 'From a governmentality perspective, the issue of why a libertarian paternalist rationality

of government has emerged becomes less about charting an ideological shift … and more about understanding the systems of knowledge production that have made this possible.' As a consequence, Foucauldians are (perhaps necessarily) silent on the possibility of 'good' behavioural interventions, and unable to engage with the idea of the state as a positive actor in the field of behaviour change.

The behaviour change state: nudge, think and social democracy

Much of the critical literature on behaviour change is fearful of growing state power, or exposes how the state is embroiled in roll-out neoliberalism. But little has been said about alternative visions for the state in a society beset with behaviour change technologies. Historically, most state theories have recognised that – for better or worse – the state represents something qualitatively different from private interests, and is able to legitimate itself by appealing to a common good. However, a novel feature of nudge theory is that while it certainly assumes that the state can adjudicate on public goods (eg, in public health), in implementing nudges it simply becomes one more player in the widespread quest to gain citizen/consumer attention and shape behaviour. In this, the state mimics the long-established, and always developing, psychological techniques of the private sector. The state thus attempts to become the most skilful nudger, rather than making more traditional appeals to legitimacy and defending a universal interest.

The argument here is that, despite the policy utility of behavioural approaches, there should be a more active role for the state in governing behaviour change practices. The think project goes some way to addressing this. Think envisages the citizen as reflective and capable of participating in collective decision making. The model of the state implied is not as nudger, but as facilitator for dialogue about the ends and means of behaviour change, 'willing to act as an organizer of citizen-driven investigation' (John et al, 2011: 20). However, despite its higher hopes for human agency, think – like nudge – offers a relatively thin conception of the agent's social context. Think adopts a procedural approach, seeking to optimise the institutional settings for decision making. It lacks a sense of how material and normative structures can shape the preferences and actions of agents prior to, and during, deliberation. Additionally, think is idealist in its assumption that it lends itself towards collectivist solutions in the public interest. But there is no necessary reason why outcomes of thinking should be any less individualist than those of nudging. Such outcomes are a political matter: they cannot simply be read off from deliberative procedures. Consequently, think is not of itself sufficient to challenge the ideology of roll-out neoliberalism that is bound up with nudge in its present form. Indeed, purely procedural – rather than ideologically substantive – gestures towards deliberation could serve a neoliberal agenda just as well as nudge, but with the added veneer of 'citizen engagement'.

This model of the state as a facilitator for behaviour change does not fulfil the need for what I term its explicitly political function, one that could be met by a more active, social-democratic approach. This would have three key elements, which differentiate it from nudge and think. The first is the recognition of the continuing legitimacy of the democratic state to explicitly shape behaviours in the public interest. This would manifest in the familiar social-democratic preparedness to use mandates and bans, regulation and legislation, in order to shape individual and institutional behaviour and wider social norms. In political debates this is sometimes referred to as a 'shove',

in contrast to nudge or think. As Horton (2009: 297) argues: 'from wearing seat belts to the erosion of discriminatory attitudes towards homosexuality, huge changes in British social behaviour have been wrought in recent decades through the change in values and norms signalled by legislation'. Indeed, the need for legislation and regulation alongside nudge-type strategies was a key finding of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee (2011).

The second element, based on the preceding critique of behavioural economics, would be to recognise that agents are deeply and unevenly embedded in structural, social contexts. These can shape preferences and behaviours before, during and after behaviour change interventions. As such, behaviour change needs to be understood as something that cannot be easily separated out from broader social and economic policy. Certainly, as the work of the Nudge Unit shows, some policy 'quick wins' can be achieved despite the wider economic and social context (COBIT, 2011). But this context is nevertheless crucial, and as a minimum, behaviour change interventions need to be tailored to social circumstances. An example is the 'segmentation model' through which one government department used demographic information to identify how different sections of the population might behave in relation to climate change (Defra, 2008). However, this social marketing approach has been criticised for failing to appreciate the social and political dynamics behind the population 'segments' identified (Webb, 2012). Not least of these is the political-economic strategy of the state itself. At present, the Nudge Unit works in a context of fiscal austerity, and a coalition government insistence on 'one in, one out' with regard to any new regulations. Clearly, an alternative social-democratic political economy, predicated on growth and a willingness to regulate whenever necessary, would set a different context to the work of behaviour change practitioners.

The third, most novel element of a social-democratic approach would see the state acting to *protect* citizens against proliferating attempts to shape their behaviours and subjectivity. As the Foucauldian critique highlights, the choice environment is far from neutral: it is shaped by the prior and ongoing, increasingly sophisticated interventions of choice architects (Newman, 2011). These are represented predominantly in the everyday activities of commercial actors – for example through marketing, public relations and advertising – in which 'subtle forms of psychological manipulation have become something of an art form' (Whitehead et al, 2011: 2829). Hausman and Welch (2010) argue that having such a proliferation of actors (including the state) engaged in nudging is in fact the best defence against coercion – the sheer multiplicity of messages in circulation will undercut one another, rendering them unthreatening. But this underestimates the strength and ubiquity of attempts to shape citizen and consumer behaviour, and the consequent need for a robust role for the state in response. In a departure from command-and-control versions of social democracy, the state could help educate citizens with regard to the many behaviour change interventions they are subject to, equipping them to make choices about and perhaps contest them. In so doing, the participatory and deliberative ethos of think would prove useful. However, as was noted in discussing the limitations of think, this does not of itself guarantee the full inclusion and empowerment of the participating individuals.

Recognising this, the RSA's model of steer adopts a 'reflexive holistic approach', which seeks to educate individuals in the underlying theories and practices of behaviour change and their relationship to neuroscience (Grist, 2010). More controversially, this approach is presented as being inherently politically progressive

and social democratic (Grist, 2009, 2010). Reflexivity – having knowledge about the underlying principles of an activity – is seen as crucial to autonomy and empowering individuals to decide on the goals and means of changing behaviour. In addition, neuroscientifc evidence is invoked to indicate that *collectivist* institutions are crucial to providing individuals with the context from which they can make sense of their own behaviours (Grist, 2010), thus reintroducing the importance of thick social context. However, despite its laudable aims, the RSA project does not ultimately convince in its claims to have found a synergy between steer and progressive politics. Although it identifies the behavioural pathologies of a market-driven, individualist culture and points to countervailing social institutions, its vision of behavioural transformation remains voluntarist. It suggests that the central question is 'whether a change in how we think of ourselves can lead to a change in our culture, which in turn can lead to effective responses to our shared problems' (Grist, 2010: 13). The report on steer notes that it is both routine and attractive to individuals to 'think about thinking' (Grist, 2010: 42). But elevating this to a political philosophy is profoundly individualising, and pushes social, political and economic questions to the margins. The fact that '[m]any influences on behaviour are structural [and require] structural changes' is only recognised as an afterthought (Grist, 2010: 95). Such individualising tendencies are characteristic of the Third Way political stable within which steer (like nudge) seeks to locate itself, and makes its claims to be inherently 'progressive' highly contestable.

Empowering individual citizens is of course important to a progressive understanding of behaviour change, but is not alone sufficient. The state remains the only institution that has the resources and legitimacy to direct – or push back against – other powerful corporate behaviour change seekers. A more traditional social-democratic willingness to intervene thus remains essential. This could be through direct regulation (eg, of advertising aimed at children). It could also involve public information that is not merely 'neutral', but prepared to run directly contrary to the interests of private actors (eg, on (un)healthy eating or the dangers of tanning beds). It might also involve intervening to make the choice architecture itself transparent (eg, a government-backed 'best-value' portal on private providers in energy or financial products). Interestingly, the UK coalition government has been drawn onto this ground, most notably with David Cameron's executive announcement in 2012 that he intended to force energy companies to 'default' customers onto the cheapest available tariffs. Such a move represents a 'shove' for corporate actors, rather than relying on nudging individual customers to make optimum choices. This, and the fact that the measure was opposed by Labour, again reveals the political complexity of the behaviour change state: a social-democratic variant need not be enacted by social-democratic parties.

Ultimately, whatever the specific political character of the state, citizens will increasingly find themselves at the intersection of competing behavioural interventions: between the state and private actors, between competing private actors, and even between competing or contradictory branches of the state. The legitimacy, objectives and mechanisms of behaviour change are likely to become a key site of political contestation. The argument here is that, given this, the state itself should be more than just another nudger.

Conclusion

Politics always involves seeking to change attitudes and behaviours, but there is now an explicit and central behaviour change agenda. Nudge, drawing on behavioural economics and psychology, has been at the leading edge of this development. By foregrounding human fallibility, it provides a corrective to the discredited figure of homo economicus: policy that goes with the grain of everyday human behaviour seems eminently sensible. In presenting nudge as a 'real third way' of libertarian paternalism, Thaler and Sunstein could be accused of overreach. Nevertheless, their bold claim has been useful in provoking debate over where behaviour change sits in relation to the state and neoliberalism. But it has been argued here that behaviour change represents still broader issues about the changing nature of state–citizen relations. The new behavioural economics still offers a thin conception of human agency, and an underdeveloped sense of social structure. A more sociological account acknowledges the wider material and ideational influences on choice architecture interactions. The increasingly public nature of debates over behaviour change points to highly reflexive state–citizen relations, which could open out new sites of political conflict. Foucauldian critique is invaluable for deconstructing pervasive technologies of behaviour change, and identifying possible sites of resistance. But it is simultaneously limited by its deconstructive concern with techniques and expertise. This prevents Foucauldians from identifying a positive role for the state, one that might deliver an ideologically distinct behaviour change agenda to that of neoliberalism. In considering alternative models, we have seen that nudge diminishes the explicitly political functions of the state altogether, while deliberative, 'think' approaches envisage a more facilitating role. By contrast, a social-democratic behaviour change state could deploy elements of both nudging and thinking. But it would also use the state's privileged political role to implement, regulate and indeed defend against behaviour change interventions in ways that are anathema to neoliberals. Far from being at the heart of a libertarian paternalist, technocratic consensus, behaviour change is set to become a key political battleground.

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