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Introduction: Interpreting British Foreign Policy

Mark Bevir, Oliver Daddow and Ian Hall

This special issue collects together a series of essays that investigate the analytical possibilities offered to the study of British foreign policy by the interpretive approach to political science and international relations. The interpretive approach concentrates on the beliefs of various policy actors, the meanings of their actions, and, crucially, explains the beliefs by locating them in historical traditions and as responses to dilemmas. It highlights the contingency, diversity, and contestability of the beliefs, narratives, and expertise that inform political action. This interpretive approach is widespread in the study of governance and domestic policy (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010; Bevir et al. 2003; Dudley 2003; Richards and Smith 2004; Irazabal 2005; Orr 2005, 2009; Craig 2006; Monro 2006; Morrell 2006; Stoker 2006; Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Clark and Gains 2007; Finlayson 2008; Jose 2007; Rhodes et al. 2007; Sullivan 2007; Yi-Chong and Weller 2007; Bache and Catney 2008; Dinham and Lowndes 2008; Wood et al. 2008; Bevir and Richards 2009; O'Brien et al. 2009; Orr and Vince 2009; Bevir 2010; Booth 2010; Edwards 2011; Kenny 2010; Krueger and Gibbs 2010; Richards and Mathers 2010; and for earlier critical discussions in this journal see Finlayson 2004; Marsh 2008).

However, the interpretive approach has not yet had much impact on studies of foreign policy (but see Beech 2011; Bratburg 2011; Daddow and Gaskarth 2011). This special issue addresses that omission. It focuses on the traditions and dilemmas that have shaped British foreign policy in the post-Cold War period.

The Practice of Foreign Policy

British foreign policy has never been immune from 'external' influences—from public opinion and the press, for example, or commercial interest—but today it is a far messier practice than it once was. Two developments, in particular, have been responsible for increasing the sense of messiness in British foreign policy. The first is the erosion of the influence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the emergence of a range of other actors (domestic and external; state and non-state) which impact upon foreign policy-making. The second is the increasing complexity of the areas in which British foreign policy is conducted following the rise of devolution, the European Union (EU), and global governance. Ministries and agencies across government now routinely conduct relations with counterparts in other European states and states outside the EU. Prime ministers engage in telephone diplomacy with other leaders; finance, defence, environment and other ministers hold regular meetings with their equivalents overseas. Sometimes officials from the FCO play a role in these contacts, but often they do not. Foreign policy-making and implementation is thus fragmented, and the lines between domestic

1 and foreign policy have become blurred, with many issues and challenges cutting
2 across familiar departmental demarcations.

3 Nowhere are the changes in the practice of foreign policy more obvious than in
4 Europe. The removal of the threat of force from European international relations
5 has transformed diplomacy proper into 'politics' (Keens-Soper 1999). But the
6 manner in which matters are dealt with is also significant. While high-level issues
7 such as defence and international security largely remain the preserve of leaders and
8 ministers and are settled in forums that more resemble multilateral summits than
9 parliaments, most lower-level issues are negotiated by officials or simply decided
10 upon by Brussels-based bureaucrats or politicians.

11 The blurring of domestic and foreign policy, of politics and diplomacy, is not
12 confined to Europe. It has spread with the new practices of global governance that
13 have emerged in the post-Cold War era (Bevir and Hall 2011). International rules [2](#)
14 and standards are sometimes now set by private authorities (Hall and Biersteker
15 2002). Transnational networks of scholars, businesspeople, think-tanks and non-
16 governmental organisations (NGOs) shape policy responses to global challenges. To
17 address these issues, foreign policy-makers have also turned to new practices and
18 techniques derived from social scientific theories—new 'rationalities' (Bevir and
19 Hall 2011, 359–362). These rationalities have been used to change the institutions
20 of government, to draw new actors into policy-making processes, and to justify new
21 modes of work.

22 British foreign policy is thus being made and implemented in significant new ways.
23 The centralisation of decision-making in British government has resulted in greater
24 involvement in policy-making by the Prime Minister's Office and more oversight of
25 diplomacy being performed by the Treasury (Williams 2004). Internal reforms to
26 the FCO have attempted to transform it from a repository of expertise and a source
27 of policy advice to a 'network actor' designed to facilitate the implementation of
28 decisions made elsewhere (see Hall 2013). Parallel reforms to other ministries have
29 given them new channels to the outside world. For example, European depart-
30 ments and sustainability divisions now coordinate internal working with global
31 climate policy.

32 All of these changes have occurred as the role of British foreign policy and the place
33 of Britain in the world have been redefined. At the start of the post-Cold War era,
34 Britain was often perceived as a principally European power, albeit one with a
35 cherished 'special relationship' with the US and increasing attenuated ties to the
36 Commonwealth. Its military forces made a major contribution to the defence of
37 Europe and British overseas territories, but were not considered to have a wider
38 role. Under John Major, but especially under Tony Blair and New Labour (see
39 Daddow and Gaskarth 2011), these beliefs were set aside as Britain was reinvented
40 as a global power fit for an age of globalisation and humanitarian intervention.

41 42 **The Study of Foreign Policy**

43 While the practice of foreign policy is rapidly changing, mainstream scholarship
44 on the subject has largely stood still. Foreign policy analysis continues to appeal
45 to capabilities, structural determinants, or the attributes of leaders to explain why

1 states behave as they do. There are surprisingly few attempts to explore either
2 the increasing messiness of policy making or the diverse actors involved with their
3 varying beliefs and desires. The focus remains on reified capacities and structures or
4 on the 'operational codes' or psychologies of leaders. Realists argue that foreign
5 policy is a function of the distribution of capabilities—that all states seek power, that
6 strong states aim either for a stable balance of power between great powers or
7 for hegemony, and that weak states ally or bandwagon depending on which gains
8 them security (Waltz 1979; Walt 1990; Rose 1998; Mearsheimer 2001). Marxists
9 maintain that foreign policy is driven not by the distribution of military capabilities
10 but by the material logics of global capitalism (Wallerstein 2004). By contrast, 3
11 institutionalists concentrate on other kinds of structural constraints, notably con-
12 stitutional forms, bureaucratic politics or organizational processes (Allison 1971;
13 Fioretos 2011). Lastly, some analysts of foreign policy have focussed on the 'belief
14 systems', 'operational codes', 'national role conceptions', or the psychologies of
15 individuals (George 1969; Jervis 1976; Hermann 1980; Goldstein and Keohane
16 1993; Larson 1994).

17
18 The study of British foreign policy has tended to concentrate more on institutional
19 and personal factors, with the occasional nod toward material capabilities as back-
20 ground enablers or constraints. The traditional approach remains a historical one,
21 normally narrating the actions of Prime Ministers and their governments and
22 explaining them in terms of the interaction between political preferences and
23 material capabilities (Northedge 1961; Reynolds 2000). But studies using different
24 approaches can also be found. There are a number of analytical studies of the
25 institutional arrangements of the foreign policy-making apparatus (Beloff 1955;
26 Frankel 1963; Jones 1974). These studies offer institutional or structural explana-
27 tions for foreign policy formulation and implementation grounded in modernist
28 empiricist social science.

29
30 While mainstream foreign policy analysis may appear to have stood still, recent
31 years have seen the rise of various constructivist, critical and poststructural
32 approaches in the subfield of International Relations that have spilled over into
33 studies of foreign policy. These emphasise the role of identities and discourses in
34 shaping foreign policy preferences. Constructivists have alighted on conceptions of
35 national identity and on the effects of norms on political behaviour. They argue that
36 inter-subjectively generated ideas and norms rather than capabilities and institu-
37 tions shape foreign policy behaviour (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1992, 1994, 1999; Katzen-
38 stein 1996a, 1996b; Weldes 1996, 1999; Laffey and Weldes 1997; Finnemore and
39 Sikkink 1999; Risse et al. 1999). Critical theorists and poststructuralists, by contrast,
40 concentrate on the deconstructions of discourses that they argue form the back-
41 ground to foreign and security policy decision-making (Campbell 1998; McDonald
42 2005; Fierke 2007; Burke 2008; Bulley 2009).

43
44 These approaches are concerned with interpreting the meaning of identities and
45 discourses, but—like earlier studies of 'belief systems' and 'operational codes'—
46 commonly appeal to *structures* to explain why political actors behave as they do.
47 Constructivists recognise that identities and norms are generated inter-subjectively,
48 but often imply that once they are generated, they function as constraints or even
49 as determinants of political behaviour (Wendt 1987, 1995; Carlsnaes 1992). Critical

1 theorists also argue that social structures determine behaviour, but in many cases
2 they also appeal—at least implicitly—to materialist explanations of political action.
3 Robert Cox's oft-quoted observation that '[t]heory is always *for* someone and *for*
4 some purpose' (Cox 1996) illustrates this well, signalling a Gramscian belief that the
5 content of hegemonic discourses indicate particular relationships of material power.
6 For many critical theoretical and poststructural students of foreign policy, decon-
7 structing dominant discourses is a means of exposing these underlying structures
8 (George and Campbell 1990; Doty 1996).

9 The rise of constructivism, critical theory and poststructuralism in foreign policy
10 analysis has thus led to the use of interpretive methods but not, we argue, to a
11 thorough-going interpretive approach.

13 The Interpretive Approach

14 The interpretive approach often runs parallel to the constructivist and poststruc-
15 turalist approaches that are increasingly common in the study of foreign policy.
16 Crucially, the rise of constructivism and poststructuralism has brought greater
17 attention to meanings and the ways ideas, norms and discourses shape policy.
18 Further, constructivists and poststructuralists often explicitly reject the positivism
19 that informs much realism and institutionalism. They argue that positivism rests on
20 the erroneous philosophical idea that knowledge of the world can come from pure
21 reason or pure experience. They insist instead that knowledge is always mediated
22 by beliefs and languages. Again, norms and discourses crucially shape the ways in
23 which people approach foreign policy problems.

24 Although the interpretive approach echoes constructivism and poststructuralism
25 in eschewing positivism and focusing on meanings, it also differs from them (Bevir
26 and Rhodes 2010, 25–80). The interpretive approach is avowedly humanist and
27 historicist, emphasising agency rather than structure. In contrast, constructivism
28 often remains wedded to formal modernist explanations, and poststructuralism often
29 contains strong residues of anti-humanism. Interpretivists thus worry that construc-
30 tivism and poststructuralism still remain tied to reified ontologies and formal
31 explanations. It is true that constructivists and poststructuralists rarely discuss these
32 issues explicitly, and when they challenged on them, they sometimes pay lip-service
33 to the humanist and historicist orientation of the interpretive approach. Nonetheless,
34 even when they pay lip-service to humanist and historicist ideas, they typically drift
35 towards reified ontologies and formal explanations. Thin constructivists treat 'ideas'
36 as variables alongside 'interests', thus gesturing towards formal explanations based
37 on correlations between variables and outcomes (Keohane 1988; Goldstein and
38 Keohane 1993). Thick constructivists treat ideas differently, seeing them as consti-
39 tutive of social structures that shape and sometimes even determine behaviour
40 (Wendt 1999). And despite their name, poststructuralists treat discourses as reified
41 entities that are defined by the relations among units or signs, not as products of the
42 activity of individuals.

43 Interpretivists do not necessarily deny the existence of institutions, fields, power/
44 knowledge, or discourses. They recognize that there are patterns in contingent
45 human activity, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong about calling these patterns

1 'institutions' or 'discourses'. The issue is whether these patterns explain anything.
2 Even when constructivists and poststructuralists acknowledge the importance of
3 ideas and agency, they are still tempted to ascribe explanatory power to institutions
4 and discourses. They thus drift towards reification and determinism. They begin
5 to reject humanist and historicist explanations for formal ones. Their explanations
6 appeal to the alleged logic of institutions or the internal relations among the signs
7 of a discourse.

8 The interpretive approach thus favours aggregate concepts that clearly reflect
9 a humanist and historicist perspective. They conceive of individuals not as the
10 passive supports of institutions or discourses but as agents who can modify inher-
11 ited norms and languages for reasons of their own. Equally, interpretivists conceive
12 of agency as inherently situated. Agency always occurs against a particular histori-
13 cal background that influences it (for example Daddow 2011). Interpretivists thus
14 explain actions and practices by reference to traditions and dilemmas. A tradition
15 captures the historical inheritance against the background of which individuals act.
16 A dilemma captures the way people are capable of modifying this inheritance to
17 incorporate novel experiences or ideas.

18 Appeals to tradition are the counterpart of situated agency. People are not auto-
19 nomous, so their agency is always situated against an inherited web of beliefs
20 and practices. Their beliefs and actions draw on an inherited tradition. The idea
21 of a tradition captures the social context in which individuals both exercise their
22 reason and act. Here, traditions are defined as a set of understandings someone
23 receives during socialisation. So conceived, tradition is unavoidable only as a start-
24 ing point, not as something that determines later performances. Later performances
25 are products of creative, situated agency in the setting of tradition. It is therefore
26 important to be cautious about representing tradition as an unavoidable presence in
27 everything people do and, in so doing, underplay the role for situated agency. In
28 particular, it should not be implied that tradition is constitutive of the beliefs people
29 later come to hold or the actions they come to perform. Instead, tradition should be
30 seen mainly as a first influence on people. The content of the tradition will appear in
31 their later actions, only if their situated agency has not led them to change it, and
32 every part of it is in principle open to such change.

33 **The Traditions of British Foreign Policy**

34 Domestic politics in Britain has been influenced by a number of different political,
35 cultural, and social scientific traditions, and foreign policy is no different. The most
36 discussed political traditions are the conservative, whig, liberal and socialist ones, all
37 of which contend in British foreign policy (Hall 2012). The conservative tradition
38 emphasises the need for scepticism and prudence in international affairs, arguing
39 that the cautious pursuit of state interests is the preferable strategy (Hall and Rengger
40 2005). The whig tradition is equally suspicious of moralism, but is more confident in
41 the ability of British diplomacy effectively to influence international relations,
42 opening a space for ethical considerations to shape British policy (Hall 2006,
43 117–123). By contrast, liberals and socialists privilege internationalist themes. The
44 liberal tradition calls for a foreign policy driven by an unflinching devotion to cos-
45 mopolitan ethics, economic freedom, strong international law and the institutions to
46

1 enforce it, and the extension of liberal democratic forms of government. Socialists
2 share the cosmopolitanism and internationalism of liberals, but depart from them
3 on the virtues of free markets and liberal—as opposed to social—democracy. They
4 profess faith in international institutions, but often lament their apparent inad-
5 equacy when dealing with international issues of socialist concern.

6
7 These political traditions have evolved and changed over time as their inheritors
8 have responded to various dilemmas. Moreover, it has rarely been the case that one
9 tradition alone has shaped a government's foreign policy. Rather, as the New
10 Labour governments demonstrated so well after 1997, the making and conduct of
11 foreign policy is normally shaped by the interaction of different traditions. Under
12 New Labour, inheritors of a more liberal socialism such as Tony Blair vied with
13 social democrats such as Robin Cook, as well as with the whiggish (and occasionally
14 conservative) denizens of the FCO, the wider Civil Service and the military. To
15 varying degrees, they sought to appropriate aspects of those traditions that they
16 saw as useful in particular circumstances, or indeed to redefine what they thought
17 was old-fashioned or inappropriate. Blair's blending of a Gladstonian concern with
18 human rights with a more contemporary account of the transformations wrought
19 to international relations by globalization well illustrates this mode of renegotiating
20 traditions in response to new ideas.

21
22 As we shall see, the post-Cold War period saw extensive renegotiations of this kind.
23 For most of the past century, the whig tradition has been dominant in British
24 foreign policy making, held dear by British diplomats in particular. In the 1990s,
25 however, the rise of new ways of thinking about and practising governance began
26 to challenge the whig ascendancy and erode the claim that government was best
27 practised by a bureaucratic elite claiming exclusive expertise over their domain.
28 Whiggism was transformed from a narrative of rule to one of resistance. So too was
29 conservatism, which had returned to British foreign policy in a particularly desic-
30 cated form during Douglas Hurd's tenure at the FCO (1989–95). The Balkan wars
31 and humanitarian emergencies elsewhere in the world posed multiple dilemmas for
32 the adherents of a tradition that appeared out-dated in the contemporary world,
33 and they struggled to respond effectively as liberals and socialists quickly adapted to
34 the new circumstances (Hall and Rengger 2005).

35
36 These political traditions are cross-cut with other prominent cultural traditions. The
37 three most obvious cultural traditions are: Atlanticism, pro-Europeanism, and
38 pro-Commonwealth ideas—traditions that may occur alongside the beliefs of all
39 four political traditions. Where the Atlanticists prefer Britain to lean towards
40 the United States, the pro-Europeans wish for deeper commitment to the EU. The
41 pro-Commonwealth tradition, which calls for British foreign policy to take more
42 seriously its ties to former imperial possessions and dominions, attracts far fewer
43 adherents today than it did in the 1950s and 1960s, but resurfaces periodically,
44 especially among conservatives (Hague 2011). As with the political traditions,
45 inheritors of these sets of beliefs vary when it comes to their views on particular
46 issues. Atlanticists, for example, may conceive their proper role—and the proper
47 role for Britain—as standing 'shoulder-to-shoulder' with the United States or as
48 constructive critics (Dunne 2004). Similarly, Europeanists may argue that the
49 preferable strategy is accepting the unpalatable even if it runs counter to short-term

1 interests or they may contend that Europe is better served by British-led opposition
2 to certain initiatives in Brussels (Daddow 2004).

3 Finally, there are also those traditions that are derive from social scientific work on
4 international relations and which practitioners inherit either directly (normally
5 in higher education) or indirectly (from think-tanks, NGOs or the media). The
6 major social scientific traditions are realism, internationalism, various kinds of
7 Marxism and post-Marxism, and feminism. These traditions too may be detected in
8 the thought of particular individuals involved with the formulation and implemen-
9 tation of British foreign policy. They underpin and inform a series of more technical
10 aspects of policy making, what we call 'rationalities'. These rationalities are taken
11 up and utilised by practitioners when faced by dilemmas that conventional
12 approaches seem to be unable to solve. The use of networks rather than traditional
13 bureaucracies for resource allocation and service delivery offers one example of a
14 rationality.

16 **Interpreting British Foreign Policy**

17 The articles in this special issue examine aspects of British foreign policy in the
18 post-Cold War period and assess the merits of the interpretive approach. Not all of
19 them agree wholeheartedly that the interpretive approach is the best way forward,
20 but they all engage with what it offers students of international relations. They all
21 focus on the beliefs of policy actors, locating them against the background of
22 different traditions and dilemmas.

23 The first three articles—by Judi Atkins, Jamie Gaskarth and Oliver Daddow—
24 examine the evolution of key traditions in the beliefs of policymakers. Judi
25 Atkins' opening article examines New Labour's renegotiation of elements of
26 the social democratic tradition in response to the perceived demands of globali-
27 zation. She argues that New Labour drew upon interdependence theory, neo-
28 communitarianism and democratic peace theory to re-cast social democratic
29 internationalism to confront a series of new dilemmas. While this renegotiation was
30 contested, it helps to explain the apparent contradictions in Tony Blair's foreign
31 policy.

32 Jamie Gaskarth's focus is also on the beliefs and perceptions of policymakers and
33 the ways in which these are modified in response to new dilemmas. His article
34 draws upon extensive interviews with ten ministers charged with responsibility for
35 foreign policy between 1977 and 2010. His concern is how the interviewees them-
36 selves conceived the traditions they believed shaped British foreign policy during
37 that period, how they drew upon the resources they offered to confront ethical
38 dilemmas and how they re-shaped those traditions as a consequence. In particular,
39 his article points to the persistence of the 'whig' tradition, despite the rise of the
40 kind of new thinking Atkins describes.

41 In his article, Oliver Daddow also takes the longer view, exploring the reformation
42 of Euroscepticism at the hands of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Rather than
43 seeing Euroscepticism as a 'structuring' discourse, as some do, Daddow argues that
44 Blair came to share many of the same beliefs as Thatcher espoused in the latter part
45 of her Prime Ministership.

1 Ian Hall's article turns from traditions to rationalities. The reform of the Foreign
2 and Commonwealth Office (FCO) until New Labour is often thought to be driven
3 by ideology, especially socialist hostility to perceived conservatism. Hall tells a more
4 complex story, arguing that the reform process was driven by a number of different
5 sets of beliefs, including demands from within the FCO itself for greater openness
6 and accountability both to its own staff and to external stakeholders. These various
7 demands were met by the introduction of new rationalities drawn especially from
8 'new public management' (NPM) and network theories, as well as from social
9 scientific ideas concerning the relationship between identity and policy-making.

10 The last four articles deal with particular dilemmas in recent British foreign
11 policy: humanitarian intervention, militant Islamist terrorism, Turkey's member-
12 ship negotiations with the EU, and the challenge posed to the nuclear order by Iran.
13 David McCourt argues that neither the advent of an 'ethical foreign policy' nor the
14 beliefs and mind-set of Tony Blair are sufficient to explain the shift towards a more
15 interventionist foreign policy in the late 1990s. Instead, he argues that a revival and
16 renegotiation of the Atlanticist tradition in New Labour best explains the decision
17 taken to push for intervention in Kosovo in 1998–99 and the abandonment of
18 earlier realist approaches to the break-up of Yugoslavia.

19 In his article, Steven Kettell seeks to fuse elements of interpretivism and postmod-
20 ern approaches to examine the discourse used by New Labour—and by Tony
21 Blair in particular—to try to legitimate British involvement in the 'War on Terror'.
22 Kettell's focus is the emergence, use and destabilisation of what he calls 'discursive
23 strategies'—how they develop in response to dilemmas and how they are utilised by
24 political actors to justify political actions.

25 In his account of the treatment by the British press of the question of Turkish
26 accession to the EU, Ryan Philips turns from the foreign policy making elite to
27 the role played by media. He argues that the election of the Islamist Justice and
28 Development Party (AKP) in 2007 prompted a significant renegotiation of inherited
29 beliefs about the possibility of Turkish EU membership, as earlier, positive views
30 were replaced by more sceptical attitudes.

31 In the last article, Chris Kitchen and Rhiannon Vickers return to the tensions
32 between New Labour's internationalist inheritance and the new dilemmas they
33 faced. They argue that Iran posed a significant challenge to the pursuit of an
34 internationalist foreign policy, confronting successive New Labour governments
35 with problems not easily resolved by internationalist means. Their article tracks
36 the twists and turns of British policy on Iran's nuclear program, showing how policy
37 initiatives were formulated, implemented and tested in practice, as core beliefs in
38 the minds of policymakers about how international relations ought to work were
39 subjected to the pressures of events.

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3
4 **Note**

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7
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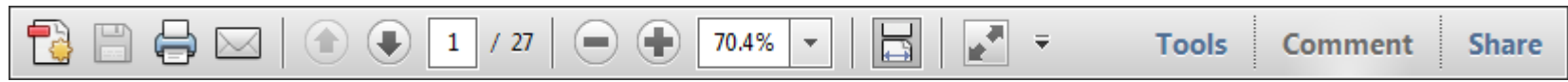
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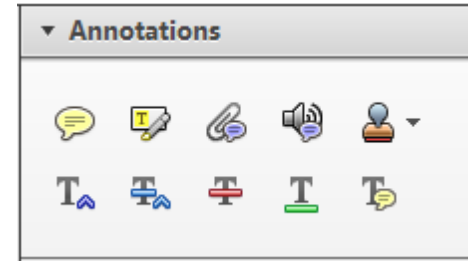
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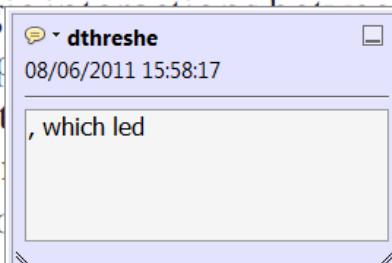


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standard framework for the analysis of microeconomics. Nevertheless, it also led to the emergence of a new paradigm of strategic behaviour. The number of competitors in the industry is that the structure of the industry is a key component of the main components of the industry. At the micro level, are exogenous variables important works on entry by Shiraz (M henceforth) we open the 'black b



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there is no room for extra profits and the number of competitors are zero and the number of competitors (net) values are not determined by the number of competitors. Blanchard and ~~Kiyotaki~~ (1987), perfect competition in general equilibrium. The effects of aggregate demand and supply in the classical framework assuming monopoly power. An exogenous number of firms

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standard framework for the analysis of microeconomics. Nevertheless, it also led to the emergence of a new paradigm of strategic behaviour. The number of competitors in the industry is that the structure of the sector is a key component of the main components of the industry. At the micro level, are exogenous variables important works on entry by Shiraz (M henceforth) we open the 'black b



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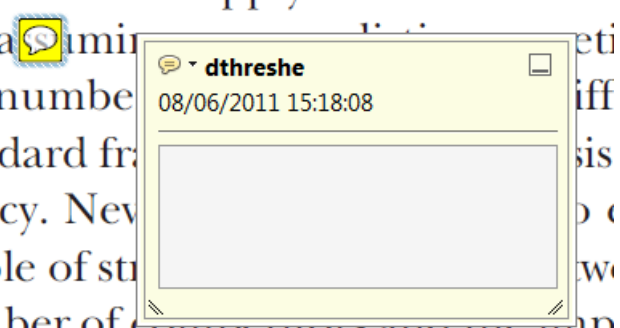


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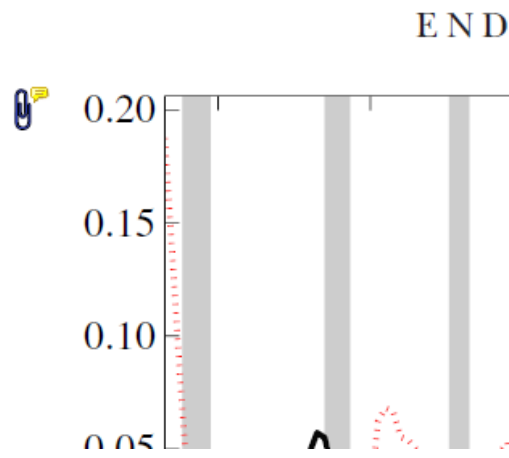
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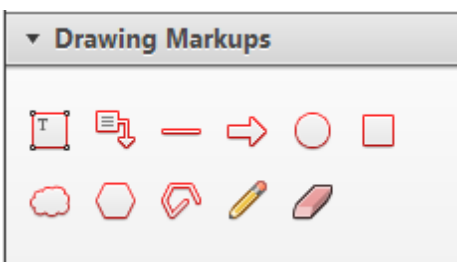
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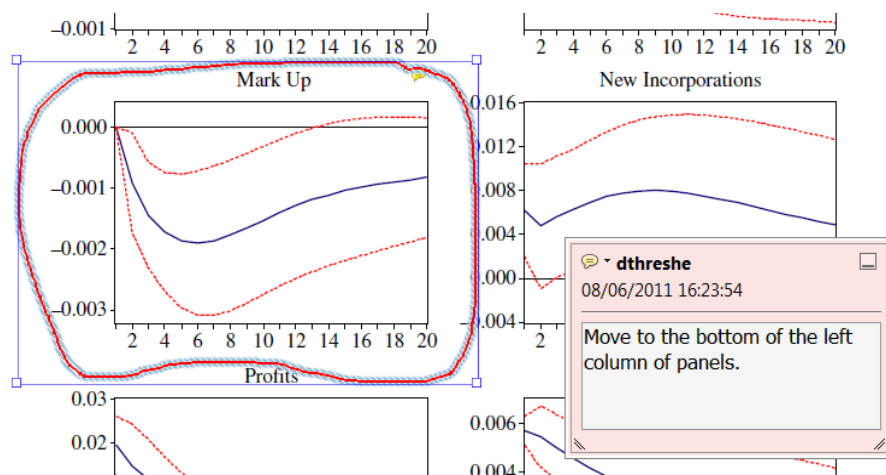


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