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Public Policy Beyond the Headlines

GIANDOMENICO MAJONE

European University Institute, Florence

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GIANDOMENICO MAJONE

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European University Institute
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Italy

PUBLIC POLICY BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Giandomenico Majone

European University Institute, Florence, Italy[1].

Policy analysts know that it is impossible to study policy-making without taking into consideration the role of the media in influencing public opinion, shaping issues, setting the public agenda, diffusing ideas and facilitating communication within policy communities. Empirical studies have shown that the public's attention to policy issues follows rather closely media coverage of those issues. According to other studies, media attention to an issue affects also the attention of policymakers, partly because politicians follow mass media like other people, and partly because media affect their constituents.

However, this acknowledgement of the importance of the media in the policy process is not free from critical overtones. A frequent criticism concerns the press's tendency to cover a story prominently for a short period of time and then turn to the next story, diluting its impact and perhaps confusing the public. It is also alleged that in their reporting journalists often fail to distinguish between important and trivial issues, between crucial and marginal policy changes. Again, one often has the impression that even journalists specialising in issues like the environment, consumer protection or health policy tend to mix up what is desirable and what is feasible.

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Even if these criticisms are not always justified, they do point to a serious gap in the professional training of journalists. It is unlikely that a literary or musical critic could write for an important newspaper without having first acquired considerable knowledge in the relevant artistic field. But I doubt that many journalists who cover policy issues have an adequate training in policy analysis. This training is obviously lacking in many countries of Europe where the academic study of public policy is still in its infancy. But even where policy studies are reasonably well developed, no serious effort has been made to show how scholarly research can contribute to a more perceptive coverage of policy developments.

The main thesis of this paper is not that journalists should become policy analysts, but that they should learn enough about the discipline to be able to actively contribute to the process of criticism and appraisal of public policies so essential to democratic politics. The relation of the academic policy researcher to the journalist should be similar to that of the literary scholar to the "public critic" whose task, according to Northrop Frye, is to exemplify how a man of taste uses and evaluates literature, and thus to show how literature is to be absorbed into society. The analogy is less far-fetched than it might seem at first: as I have shown elsewhere (Majone, 1989), policy analysis should be thought of as the rhetoric of policy-making.

The Missing Link: Policy Criticism

During the last three or four decades the study of policy-making has made significant, some would say spectacular, advances along several fronts: techniques of analysis, general theories, case studies and policy histories and, last but certainly not least, academic teaching and professional training. Yet, despite this

impressive progress, one crucial link is still missing in the chain form policy initiation to public appraisal of policy outcomes. This missing link is policy criticism in the sense of Frye's "public criticism".

As the author of Anatomy of Criticism has so powerfully argued, criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence from the art it deals with. The critic is not a parasite or artist manqué, but the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition. A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalises the arts and loses its cultural memory (Frye, 1957: 3-8).

Similarly, we could say, a citizenry that does not cultivate policy criticisms, or reduces it to a mere calculation of personal benefits and costs, brutalises the democratic process and loses its political memory. In fact, critical debate is so much at the heart of democratic politics and policy that democracy has been called a system of government by discussion. Political parties, the electorate, the legislature, the executive, the courts, the media, interest groups and independent experts, all engage in a continuous process of debate and mutual persuasion. Public discussion mobilises the knowledge, experience and interest of many people, while focussing their attention on a limited range of issues. Each participant is encouraged to adjust his view of reality, and even to change his values, as a result of the process of debate and persuasion. In this way, critical discussion can produce results that are beyond the capabilities of authoritarian or technocratic methods of policy-making.

However, the extraordinary potential of public debate can be realised only if citizens are well informed and if their critical skills have been honed by practice and example. Because of the

increasing complexity of policy-making these two conditions, and especially the latter, are not easily satisfied. Statisticians, economists, sociologists and other policy analysts lay down their materials outside the portals of the forum of public debate, but the average citizen is unable to distil sound criteria of evaluation from the growing mass of data and information. It is the task of the policy critic to use the materials assembled by the specialists to make public policy intelligible and thus accessible to lay evaluation.

The complexity of policy-making reflects the growing interdependence of policy fields that used to be treated almost in isolation from each other. Today, economic policy is closely linked to social policy, trade policy to foreign policy, environmental policy to industrial policy. The domestic policies of the member states of the European Community can no longer be understood without reference to Community policies. Increasing policy interdependence has led to a proliferation of hybrid labels like "foreign economic policy", and of analytic categories like "policy space". The latter denotes a set of policies that are so closely interrelated that it is not possible to make useful descriptions of or analytic statements about one of them without taking the other elements of the set into account.

Public policy is not only complex but also increasingly abstract. All the social and economic indicators which policymakers use to assess the magnitude of a problem or to detect changes in the problem, are the product of definition and convention. The usefulness of measures of inflation, production, education, health or crime depends entirely on a clear recognition of their conventional character. Such information can easily mislead the unwary citizen if it is not critically interpreted in relation to a specific context. In short, economic and social statistics cannot be treated in the same way we treat

"facts" or physical measurements obtained from a direct apprehension of some natural phenomenon. In Allan Coddington's apt phrase, one cannot, even with good eyesight, go out into the Treasury steps and observe the domestic level of economic activity. Rather "economic statistics are the result of the bureaucratic compounding of enormous quantities of fragmentary and even ambiguous pieces of information: the components are thrown up as a result (or even as a by-product) of the general administrative process of society, from tax-returns, sample surveys, censuses, and so on; the components are assembled and aggregated by teams of statisticians who have not themselves collected the information" (Coddington, 1969: 823).

Thus, to return to our metaphor of literary criticism, it is simply not true that (policy) criticism is artificial and untutored public taste (opinion) natural, as populists of all stripes would have it. Because it is complex and abstract, policy cannot be directly apprehended, but can only be understood and appraised with the help of a critical apparatus. To raise the standards of public debate is the peculiar responsibility of the policy critic. He is the essential link between the practical and theoretical activities related to policy-making, on the one hand, and public opinion on the other.

The Pattern of Policy

In order to evaluate policy competently, and make it intelligible to a broad audience, the policy critic must rely on materials provided by specialised research. In the remainder of this paper I shall attempt to give an idea of the problems investigated by policy researchers. Needless to say, my choice of topics is highly selective and idiosyncratic; I tend to emphasise counter.intuitive conclusions rather than results which seem to support the received view of the matter under discussion. Take,

for example, the traditional distinction of policy and administration. The policy/administration dichotomy was used in the past to support the doctrine that political leaders make policy while the task of administrators and experts is to find the appropriate means to implement it. The doctrine implies, among other things, that the problem of administration is, purely and simply, one of controlling discretion, since administrative discretion can be used as a cover for arbitrary behaviour that is unrelated to policy intentions. But how can one control discretion? Unless one is willing to assume that policies spring fully armed from the forehead of an omniscient policymaker, discretion is both inevitable and necessary. We require the impossible when we expect our bureaucrats to be at the same time literal executors and successful implementers of policy mandates (Majone and Wildavsky, 1979).

The problem of administrative discretion, so central to democratic accountability, appears in a new light once we realise that it is not the case that policy settles everything down to a certain point while administration deals with everything below that point. Policy and administration do not occupy two separate spheres of action but interact throughout the entire policy-making process.

One reason why it is difficult in practice to separate policy from administration is that legislative mandates are often so vague, ambiguous, or contradictory that there are no clear standards for administrators and experts to apply. Even when the statutes attempt to define goals with great precision, available technical and scientific knowledge may be insufficient to indicate ways that unambiguously achieve those goals. Because uncertainty is so pervasive in policy-making, the values of administrators and experts inevitably count a good deal. It follows that discretion can be controlled only by indirect means,

such as professional norms and peer review, which take those values into consideration.

Policy researchers usually break down the policy process into distinct stages which they analyse sequentially: agenda setting, problem formulation, comparison of alternatives, decision, implementation, evaluation. Such a breakdown is analytically useful but should not be taken literally, as shown by our discussion of the policy/administration dichotomy. In reality, policy-making is a seamless unity or, more precisely, a circular process and any attempt to segment it is to some extent artificial. For example, it seems intuitively obvious that implementation should follow, logically and chronologically, the policy decision.

Now, it is true that the original decision shapes the implementation process by defining the arena in which the process takes place, the identity and role of the principal actors, the range of permissible tools of action, and of course by supplying resources. But it is also true that implementation shapes and often modifies the policy. This is because many constraints remain hidden in the planning stage and are discovered only in the implementation stage. Moreover, feasibility conditions keep changing over time: old constraints disappear or are overcome (for example, through learning), while new ones emerge. The solution space undergoes continuous transformations, shrinking in one direction, expanding in another. Consequently, the implementer's left hand must be probing constantly the feasibility boundary, while his right hand tries to assemble the various programme components. This sort of ad hoc, trial-and-error searching for a possible solution is a far cry from the deliberate procedures suggested by the planning-and-control models of the management experts.

In the final analysis, to study policy implementation is to study the evolution of policy ideas. The more general an idea ad the more adaptable it is to a range of circumstances, the more likely it is to be realised in some form, but the less likely it is to emerge as intended in practice. The more restricted the idea, and the more it is constrained, the more likely it is to emerge as predicted, but the less likely it is to have a significant impact. At one extreme we have the ideal type of the perfectly preformed policy idea; it only requires execution, and the only problems it raises are those of control. At the other extreme, the policy idea is only an expression of basic principles or aspirations, a matter for philosophical reflection and political debate. In between, where we live, is a set of more or less developed potentialities embedded in pieces of legislation , court decisions, and bureaucratic plans. This land of potentiality is the territory of implementation analysis (Majone and Wildavsky, 1979:190).

Norm Setting

Let us move back to the early stages of the policy process: agenda setting and problem formulation. Students of agenda setting try to understand not only why the agenda -- that is, the list of problems to which policy actors are paying serious attention -- is composed as it is at any given time, but how and why it changes over time (Kingdon, 1984).

The intuitive answer to the first question seems to be that policy-makers must attempt to solve the most urgent problems of the day if they want to remain in office. But as we already pointed out, intuition is not always a reliable guide in policy analysis. Certainly, some problems -- extremely high inflation, natural calamities, war -- force their way into the public agenda. However, objective conditions are seldom so compelling

and unambiguous that they set the agenda or determine timing and direction of policy innovations. For example, in the 1950s the issue of poverty in America was a minor one in public consciousness. In the 1960s, with little change in the distribution of income, it became a significant part of public policies (Gusfield, 1981).

What had changed were attitudes and views on poverty, and beliefs in the capacity of government to find solutions to social problems. As Charles Murray writes, "[t]he emergence of the structural view of the poverty problem was unexpected and rapid. At the beginning of 1962, no one was talking about poverty; by the end of 1963 it was the hottest domestic policy topic other than civil rights. But it was not just "poverty" that was being talked about. "Structural poverty" was now the issue" (Murray, 1984:27).

Hence it is problem recognition, rather than the mere existence of "problems", which is essential to agenda setting. The agreement to regard a social condition as an issue for public debate and collective action, rather than "the way things are", presupposes a preliminary agreement about norms or standards of what is morally and politically acceptable. A policy problem is a condition that does not meet some standards: poverty is not a problem for a society which believes that the poor are always with us, or that they get precisely what they deserve (Anderson, 1979).

The common view that public policy is primarily concerned with setting goals and finding the means to achieve the defined goals, obscures the crucial importance of problem recognition. But as our examples suggest, the most significant function of policy-making is setting the norms that determine when certain conditions are to be regarded as policy problems. In this sense,

norm setting is more basic than goal setting. The emphasis on goal setting derives from the instrumental conception of rationality as goal-directed behaviour. According to this conception, rational policy analysis cannot begin until the relevant values have been stipulated either by an authoritative policymaker or through the aggregation of citizen preferences in the political process.

In fact, these values are neither given nor constant, but often are themselves a function of the policy-making process they are supposed to guide. Thus, many of the problems that a democratic government is expected to consider today, from sex discrimination to insurance against sickness and unemployment, were not regarded as policy problems a century or so ago. And for the long-established policy concerns, like the relief of extreme poverty, the norms have radically changed. Yet the process that has modified the norms is the same historical process that those norms have guided (Vickers, 1965).

Far from waiting passively for the stipulation of public values to be served, policy analysts and academic scholars are often deeply involved in the norm-setting process. For example, the policy innovation represented by pollution control laws with clear goals and timetables to achieve them (such as the American 1970 Clean Air Act and the 1972 Federal Water Pollution Control Act) was significantly influenced by the theory of "agency capture" proposed by political scientists and economists more than a decade earlier. These scholars believed that vague statutory language had led to the capture of the regulatory agencies by business. The growth of broadly delegated authority and increased bureaucratic discretion had corrupted liberalism into a system of competition among interest groups and reduced the power of the electorate. The proposed remedy was statutes that have clear goals, set fixed deadlines for achieving them,

and empower citizen groups to take slow-moving agencies to courts. As political scientist Marver Bernstein argued, statutes of this character institutionalise the sentiments of the citizens originally mobilised for the purpose of setting the agenda and passing the legislation. Armed with strict legal authority, a regulatory agency is less likely to decline and perform inadequately, even if its activities no longer command general interest or attention (Bernstein, 1955; Lowi, 1969).

The ideas of Bernstein, Lowi , and other scholars were incorporated in influential textbooks and were eventually adopted by the U.S. Congress in the popularised version provided by members of the Ralph Nader organisation (Marcus, 1980). The result was a radical resetting of norms relating to environmental and health protection. Judged by the new norms, the traditional regulatory structure -- based on informal negotiation with industry, weak enforcement by state agencies, and a large measure of administrative discretion -- suddenly appeared inadequate and prone to corruption. A major shift from decentralised regulation and voluntary compliance toward regulation at the national level by means of legally enforceable environmental standards was the legislative response to the new norms.

Assessing Feasibility

Focussing attention on a problematic condition and setting the norms to evaluate that condition and the facts relevant to it are only the initial stages in the process of public deliberation. The purpose of the next stage of deliberation is to fashion mutual understandings about the boundaries of the possible in public policy. Here too policy analysis can play a crucial role, first by identifying the relevant constraints and then by devising methods for removing or taking advantage of them when possible.

The conventional wisdom about the role of knowledge and analysis in the policy process has been aptly summarised as follows: "A problem exists; information or understanding is needed to generate a solution to the problem or to select among alternative solutions; research provides the missing knowledge; the decisionmakers then reach a solution" (Weiss, 1977: 533). However, the relationship between knowledge and policy is much more subtle and indirect. Knowledge, especially theoretical knowledge, plays mainly a negative or critical role in practical affairs: it tells the practitioner what cannot, rather than what can, be done. Scientific theories do not tell engineers how to achieve particular goals, for example; rather, they show why certain goals are impossible in principle. The second law of thermodynamics shows the impossibility of constructing an engine that will operate with 100 percent efficiency. Similarly, the possibility of a perpetual motion machine, which has fired the imagination of so many visionaries and cranks in the past, is ruled out by the law of conservation of energy.

Entire branches of physics are based on very general impossibility principles or "postulates of impotence", and it has been argued that all physical science and perhaps all natural science could some day be derived from a small number of such postulates. "A postulate of impotence", Sir Edmund Whittaker writes, "is not the direct result of an experiment, or any finite number of experiments; it does not mention any measurement, or any numerical relation or analytical equation; it is the assertion of a conviction that all attempts to do a certain thing, however made, are bound to fail" (Whittaker, 1958: 69).

A postulate of impotence codifies a great deal of practical experience in which something has been attempted by many routes and all of them have resulted in failure. The postulate supposes that this failure is due to something inherently impossible and

thus saves us from wasting time on impossibilities like the perpetual motion machine.

In this respect physical impossibilities are not very different from generalisations in the social sciences like the "law" of supply and demand, the maxim that no one can fully control the behaviour of a large organisation, or the principle that the larger an organisation becomes, the weaker is the control over its activities exercised by those at the top. The obviousness of these generalisations does not reduce their significance; and although, like the postulates of impotence in physics, they cannot be proved, to disregard them would be courting disaster.

Unfortunately, in politics the tendency to equate the desirable with the feasible is both more common and more difficult to correct than in science and technology. Rent control is a classic example. Although the objective of controlling rents is to protect the consumer from the skyrocketing increases in rents that accompany a housing shortage, the long-run effect is to make almost everyone worse off by discouraging the construction of rental apartments and the upkeep of the existing stock, while encouraging the abandonment of old housing units or their conversion into office space in order to escape controls. These consequences have been known for some time, yet a number of cities that had abandoned rent control during the 1950s began to reinstitute this measure with the inflation of the 1970s.

Failure to appreciate the pervasiveness of constraints also accounts for the common tendency to see power everywhere and to explain policy outcomes exclusively as the result of the deliberate actions of powerful individuals and groups. Actually, policymakers are often less powerful and decisive than they are assumed to be. But even to understand the strength of a truly

powerful policymaker one must begin by marking out the limits upon his specific powers.

The American presidency is certainly one of the most powerful institutions in the world. Yet, as Richard Neustadt writes, "the President's advantages are checked by the advantages of other. Continuing relationships will pull in both directions. These are relationships of mutual dependence. A President depends upon the men he would persuade; he has to reckon with his need or fear of them. They too will possess status, or authority, or both, else they would be of little use to him. Their vantage points confront his own; their power tempers his" (Neustadt, 1963:44).

In assessing the power of a policymaker, many other limits must also be taken into consideration: prior policies and institutional inertia; inadequate, outdated, or biased information; the plans of other policymakers and the resistance of one's own bureaucracy; vested interests and the demands and aspirations of different social groups; limits on the span of control and on the available time and resources; authority leakage and loss of legitimacy; foreign commitments and international pressures. While most of these constraints will not be so tight as to allow the policymaker no leeway they are of sufficient significance that ignoring them will cause serious and sometimes disastrous consequences (Majone, 1989).

In some cases constraints are not ignored but are incorrectly gauged. For example, in debates about social policy public opinion is often divided over questions of feasibility, with conservatives overstating and progressives underestimating the constraints on collective action. An important part of the job of policy analysts and critics, therefore, is to improve the quality of public deliberation by helping policymakers and the general public avoid both reckless underestimation and harsh

overstatement of the limitations on the possible in public policy. A competent feasibility assessment of a new policy proposal must identify the major actual or potential constraints (including political and administrative ones), evaluate their significance for different implementation strategies, separate real constraints from fictitious obstacles, and estimate the costs and benefits of those constraints that are not absolutely fixed.

The latter task is particularly important since the analyst's job is not only to calculate optimal solutions within given constraints, but also to push out the boundaries of the possible. Doing this requires both objective analysis and persuasion. What is possible within given constraints often depends on what the political system considers fair or acceptable. Hence many policy constraints can be eased only by changing values, attitudes, and cognitive beliefs. Here the work of the policy critic is at least as important as that of the analyst. When assessing policy feasibility it is not always easy to distinguish between immovable constraints and those that can be relaxed by changing attitudes and values, or by devoting sufficient resources to the task. Unlike physical impossibilities, policy feasibility is not an objective property but depends on such factors as time, resources, skill, motivation, and imagination. For example, in the short run technology, institutions, organisational capabilities, manpower, and (in the very short run) even administrative routines and procedures must be taken as given. With sufficient time and motivation, however, technological and institutional obstacles can be removed, laws revised, capacities increased, procedures changed, and new skills changed.

Finally, it would be wrong to think of constraints only as limits on one's power and freedom of choice. By skillful and imaginative analysis, it is often possible to take advantage of

them. In fact, learning depends to a large extent on the intelligent exploitation of constraints. Because a world free of constraints would be totally chaotic (quite literally, anything could happen), organisms can learn and adapt only to the extent that their environment is constrained; once a constraint has been recognised they can usually take advantage of this knowledge.

The familiar phenomenon of friction is a good example of how a constraint may turn out to be, at least in some respects, a blessing in disguise. To mechanical engineers friction represents a pervasive and costly limitation. At the same time, friction is highly desirable in certain circumstances. Without it the wheels of a car would skid instead of rotating; we could not walk with ordinary shoes, but would need suction pads to cling to the floor; and knots would be ineffective since it is friction between the interlocking parts of the knot that hold it together. For a similar example from the world of public policy, consider the constraints imposed on industry by environmental and health regulation. Regulatory restrictions have undoubtedly increased production costs in the short run and may have caused the loss of jobs in some marginal firms. However, some countries have taken advantage of environmental constraints and developed a new industry exporting pollution-control technologies and equipment. In the United States the threat of a ban on the use of chlorofluorocarbons in nonessential aerosol applications, combined with strong consumer pressure, has stimulated product innovation. The inventor of the first workable aerosol valve was able to present his device just one day after the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration proposed their ban in May 1977!

To conclude, policy feasibility may be analysed from two different but complementary perspectives. On the one hand, overly ambitious goals must be tested against constraints since trying

to do something inherently impossible is always a corrupting enterprise, as political philosopher Michael Oakshott once observed. On the other hand, short-run constraints should not become convenient excuses for passively accepting the status quo. As I have suggested above, in many cases the boundary of the possible in public policy can be pushed out by devising methods of relaxing constraints or learning how to use them creatively.

Conceptual Innovation and Policy Change

Probably the most difficult problem facing the student of policy-making is explaining the dynamics of policy development. Political scientists have traditionally explained policy change as the result of shifts in the configuration of dominant interests, or of changes in economics or technology. However, more recent studies dealing with such important examples as the adoption of Keynesian policies in Europe and in America in the 1940s and 1950s, the monetarist and supply-side counter-revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of environmentalism and consumerism, and the diffusion of the deregulation and privatisation movements, generally reject monocausal explanations and suggest instead that an adequate model of policy change must also include conceptual innovations and ideological change.

This new literature reflects a growing realisation that what used to be called the superstructure has a considerable autonomy with respect to shifting constellations of power and interests in society. The evidence suggests that the influence of special interests has been often overrated and that the "image of the state as a kind of billiard ball, pushed around by competing interest groups" (Hall, 1986:17) is grossly inaccurate. According to the older theories of "regulatory capture", for example, interest groups influence the outcome of the regulatory process by providing financial and other support to utility-maximising

politicians and regulators. Yet, from a series of case studies of American regulatory agencies James Wilson concludes that "only by the most extraordinary theoretical contortions can one explain the Auto Safety Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act ... or most environmental protection laws by reference to the economic stakes involved" (Wilson, 1980:372).

Similarly, in none of the cases of deregulation studied by Derthick and Quirk did the regulated industries decide that regulation was no longer in their interest; nor was the defeat of the regulated industries brought about primarily by other well-organised groups that stood to gain from reform. Instead, these authors argue that the regulatory reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s would never have occurred without the sustained intellectual critique of previous regulatory policies developed by economists in the preceding decade (Derthick and Quirk, 1985). According to another scholar, the process of deregulation of long-distance telecommunications" was dominated by changing ideology, not changing technology. It was ideas, not things, that urged on the actors at critical points in the contests over telecommunications policy and AT&T's organisation" (Temin, 1987:7).

It would be equally difficult to assign a significant role to interest-group pressures in the privatisation movement in Great Britain. The fundamental redirection of public policy effected by the Thatcher government since 1979 has been explicitly based on a mix of Austrian and neo-classical market theories, and on libertarian values (Helm, 1989).

The significance of ideas in policy change can surprise only the advocates of a clumsy realism which holds that ideas only reflect interests or legitimise power. In fact, the capacity of policymakers to respond to incessant change in economic

conditions, political climate, and societal values, depends crucially on the availability of a rich pool of theories and ideas. The existing stock of ideas shapes their response to events by defining the conceptual alternatives from among which they choose. On what conditions will the production of new ideas be intense or slow, or more intense in one policy area than in another? Why are some proposals accepted while others are rejected or ignored? In short, how is conceptual innovation linked to policy development?

To pose such questions is to suggest that policy development may be analysed as the outcome of a dual process of conceptual innovation and of selection by political actors from the pool of available policy variants. The political arena is the locus of selection, while the locus of conceptual innovation may be called the policy community (Majone, 1989). A policy community is composed of people who share an active interest in a certain policy or set of related policies: policy planners, analysts, professionals, academics, interest-group experts and media specialists. The members of a policy community represent different interests, hold different values, and pursue different goals, but they all contribute to policy development by generating and debating new ideas and proposals.

Other writers have used different labels to express similar concepts. Hugh Heclo, for example, speaks of "issue networks" rather than policy communities. Like a policy community, an issue network is a shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect of public policy. More than mere technical experts, network people are policy activists who know each other through the issues. As Heclo observes, it is increasingly through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated, and alternative options worked out. In this way, the issue network (or policy

community) ties together what would otherwise be the contradictory tendencies of, on the one hand, more widespread organisational participation in public policy and, on the other, more narrow technocratic specialisation in complex modern policies (Heclo, 1978: 103-104).

Although some members of a policy community or issue network may also be political actors, the two roles are distinct. A voter choosing in a referendum or a policymaker choosing among different options does not contribute to conceptual innovation; rather, he acts a s a mechanism for selecting from the pool of available variants. The whole political process, in fact, may be thought of as a large selection mechanism that picks out for acceptance those of the competing policy ideas which in some sense best meet the demands of the political environment.

The effectiveness of the selection procedure will depend crucially on the rate and quality of conceptual innovation. Without a continuous stream of new proposals selection will have nothing to work on. In turn, the effectiveness of new ideas depends on political and institutional factors. For example, until recently critics of social security policies in the United States and Europe lacked a disciplinary and organisational base through which access to the relevant political arena could be secured. Economists writing on social security issues before the 1960s either were outside the mainstream of their discipline or their interest was really directed at different, broader issues -- Keynesian economists, for instance, who thought of social security primarily as an instrument of fiscal policy. Social security experts and their political supporters could easily disregard criticisms from individual experts who lacked widespread professional support (Derthick, 1979). All this has changed with the recurrent financial crises of the social security systems in recent years. These crises, and a changing

climate of opinion about the proper role of government in the economy, have stimulated a much more sustained intellectual effort by economists and other analysts to develop more or less radical proposals to reform the present system.

As this example shows, lack of access to the appropriate forum may, by itself, be a serious obstacle to the proper consideration of new policy ideas. Systematic development and evaluation of new proposals is impossible without organised opportunities for critical debate. The policy community must be sufficiently open so that truly novel variants may emerge. At the same time, selection can be effective only where the community is not too open. If each and every proposal were taken seriously, the burden for the selection mechanisms would soon become unbearable, leading to a breakdown of evaluative criteria. Only some of the theoretically conceivable proposals can become active topics of debate and policy innovation at any given time. A new idea must be judged not by its intellectual merit alone, but by inquiring how it might contribute to the ongoing debate. This is one of the important tasks of the policy critic.

Policy Evaluation

The debate through which criteria of evaluation and standards of accountability are established is an essential part of the process of policy development. Analysts have contributed to this debate in a number of ways, but especially through the new subdiscipline of evaluation research. This is a large and expanding area of policy analysis devoted to collecting, testing, and interpreting information about the implementation and effectiveness of existing policies and public programmes. The purpose is to discover who benefits and who loses from a given policy, whether the policy is accomplishing what was intended, and if not, how it can be improved or discontinued.

Many professional evaluators seem to assume that these are purely empirical determinations, involving neither value choices nor personal opinions. In fact, values and opinions count a great deal in evaluation not only because of the ambiguity of the outcomes of practice -- the difficulty of assigning specific causes to particular effects, of measuring outputs and assessing unintended consequences, of distinguishing between flawed conceptions and failures of implementation -- but even more because of inescapable disagreements about the kind of evaluative standards that are meaningful, fair, or politically acceptable in a given situation.

Thus, professional evaluation tends to merge with the general process of criticism and appraisal of public policies to which all politically active members of a democratic community contribute in different but equally useful ways. Policies and policy instruments are constantly assessed, ex ante and ex post, from the diverse critical perspectives of legislators, judges, programme managers, implementing bureaucrats, interest groups, independent experts, the media, and private citizens. These perspectives are different both because evaluative criteria vary with the role and position of the evaluator and because different evaluators tend to focus their attention on different aspects of the policy-making process. General standards of performance like legality, legitimacy, economy, effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness to public needs are characteristically related to the distinct roles of judges, politicians, budget officers, public accountants, and consumers of public services or their political representatives. Moreover, some criteria, such as efficiency and effectiveness, apply primarily to the outputs or outcomes of public policy, other criteria (for instance, economy) apply to the inputs, and other still (legality, legitimacy) to the process that transforms inputs into outputs.

This multiplicity of evaluative standards and critical perspectives reflects the complexity of policy-making in a pluralistic society. Even professional evaluators now recognise that their work becomes relevant only in the broader context of competing criteria and evidence presented by various actors and interest groups. The new slogan is "multiple evaluation". This expression acknowledges the legitimacy of different criteria and perspectives, but also suggests the need to reach a level of understanding that is more than the sum of the separate evaluations.

The danger of pluralistic evaluation is that the conclusions of an evaluation done for use in a particular role are assumed to be equally relevant from the perspective of other roles with different evaluative criteria. Because roles and criteria are mismatched, the conclusions of the evaluation are almost inevitably found wanting. Examples of mismatched criteria abound. Many evaluations of public programmes have a narrow managerial focus, being concerned with goal achievement and administrative control rather than with the responsiveness of the programme to the divergent values of different individuals and groups. Such a narrow perspective neglects a more structural analysis of changes in societal values and of the ability of bureaucracy to adapt to such changes. In turn, programme managers often feel that the stress placed by many evaluation studies on effectiveness and efficiency is in conflict with such basic values as employee participation, personal development, and high morale. Others, for example health professionals, question how economic rationality should be balanced against professional standards.

Is there a cure for such common tendencies to confound evaluative roles or to mismatch criteria? Probably not. At a minimum, however, efforts to build a critical capacity for judging particular programmes or entire policies should

explicitly recognise that multiple roles exist, each with a legitimate claim to set evaluative criteria.

Another difficulty which experts and citizens alike must face is the inevitable conflict between crude but intuitively appealing criteria on the one hand, and more refined but also more controversial criteria on the other. This conflict may not have been so serious once. As Geoffrey Vickers (1965) has observed, there have been times in the not-so-distant past when popular expectations were relatively clear, realistic and verifiable - the maintenance of law and order, protection against foreign aggression, a stable currency, a stable level of taxation, relief of extreme poverty. Today we expect much more from our government, but we do not know precisely how <u>any</u> government could fulfill our expectations. At the same time, change has become so rapid that the past becomes an ever less reliable guide to the future. Thus, policy outcomes become increasingly elusive both because we are less certain about the limits of the possible in public policy and because we suspect that the most important results may not yet have had time to appear.

According to social psychologists, learning is the dominant form in which rationality exhibits itself in situations of great cognitive complexity. This suggests that the rationality of public policy-making depends more on improving the learning capacity of the various organs of public deliberation than on maximising achievement of particular goals. Policy critics can contribute to societal learning by refining the standards of appraisal and by encouraging a more sophisticated understanding of public policies than is possible from a single perspective. The need today is less to develop "objective" measures of outcomes -- the traditional aim of evaluation research -- than to facilitate a wide-ranging dialogue among advocates of different criteria. As we said at the beginning of this paper, diffusing

ideas and facilitating communication within policy communities and between them and the citizens is an essential function of the media.

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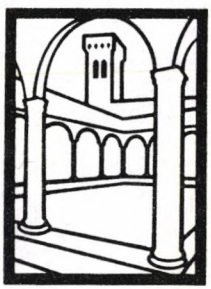

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