

# POLICY WORK AS A REFORM PROJECT

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**Summary** One aspect of the modernization of liberal government in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was an increased attention to policy, both as a concept for interrogating government, and as the basis for organizing work within government, leading to the development of 'policy analysis' as a decision tool. This paper reviews the development of specialised forms of 'policy work' in liberal western political systems in order to establish what can be learned by other sorts of polity, and in particular, the transitional states of Eastern Europe. It discusses the multiple and overlapping accounts of policy that are in use, and the implications that these have for the nature of policy work. It points out that policy work takes place in multiple locations where a diversity of rationales may apply, and discusses the implications of this analysis for the place of policy work in the modernization of government.

**Keywords** policy work, policy analysis, policy workers, modernization of government

## **Policy work as a reform project**

To the outside observer, the work of governing in the 'transition states' of Eastern Europe, and particularly in the former Yugoslavia, seems to be defined by trajectories of change: from the former federal state to a constellation of unitary states (with the attendant uncertainties about identity and statehood), from a planned society and economy to a basically liberal one, and the uncertainty of the emerging relationship with the EU. 'Policy', both as a construct for interrogating the process of governing, and as a form of work for those trying

to have an impact on this process, would seem to be a significant part of the reform process. In this context, it is worth recalling that the 'policy project' in its Western liberal origins was also a reform project, and reviewing the experience of the liberal democracies with this project to see what lessons can be learned, not only in the European transition states, but in all the states for whom agencies such as the World Bank are promoting a paradigm of authoritative linear instrumental action as the central heuristic in the understanding and practice of government.

### The policy project

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'policy' became established as a leading concept in the understanding and practice of government, first in the English-speaking world, later more widely. This phenomenon, which could be tagged 'the policy project', is commonly traced back to the appeal of Harold Lasswell (1951) for a 'policy science' which would be interdisciplinary, problem-focused and explicitly normative. Lasswell's call showed a new confidence in the US about the problem-solving ability of government, reflecting the great expansion of the federal government during the second world war and the place of the university-educated stratum in this process. It was seen as a counter both to the inertia of bureaucracy and the opportunistic patronage of politicians. The policy project saw the new practitioners of 'policy science' as professionals 'advising the Prince' – giving objective and impartial advice to the political leaders, and focusing attention on the outcome of governmental activity rather than the process.

This gave rise to the development of new skills and new locations in which to exercise them. Initially the skills were from economics and operations research, exemplified by the contribution of the RAND Institute. In time, political science made a greater contribution (Radin 2000), but it was assumed that students were well-grounded in economics (e.g. Weimer and Vining 2004). The graduate schools in public policy which began to emerge trained their students in 'policy analysis', which was a methodology for identifying and systematically comparing (by reference to goals, inputs and outcomes) options for ad-

ressing a known policy problem. This analysis was the basis of 'advice' to the decision-maker. This intellectual development was paralleled by the emergence of policy units and policy analyst positions in a range of public organizations in the US, so that by 2000 Radin could report on the 'coming of age' of policy analysis as a profession, though it was not always clear to what extent the activities in which these policy workers were engaged resembled the detached 'policy analysis' in which they had been trained (Radin 2000).

But although the policy focus had been institutionalized in this way, there remained many questions. One was whether the Prince was listening. There was a growing volume of anecdotal (and, increasingly, written) evidence that political leaders might agree to commission policy analysis, but not follow the advice it contained. Weiss (1982) recognized that analysis was only one of the spurs to action in government, and leaders took other factors into account. Moreover, policy often did not seem to result from explicit choice by leaders, but flowed in an impersonal way from organizational structures and practices. While researchers recognized this, they tended to continue to feel that action in government should be driven by expert assessment. Howard, for instance, concluded –

...the principal barrier to better decision making in Australian social policy is not the ignorance of bureaucrats in relation to the policy cycle model, but the reluctance of political leaders to employ the expertise of unelected officials in an open and systematic investigation of policy issues. (Howard 2005: 12)

Underlying the qualifications which scholars like Weiss raised to this confidence in policy analysis was a recognition that the policy process was a multi-player game, with a range of participants, agendas and values, who were likely to recognize different sorts of problems, accord them differing levels of importance, and evaluate possible responses in different ways. Moreover, it was a continuing process, in which the actions of participants reflected their previous experience, but also their perceptions of likely future scenarios ('the shadow of the future'). In this perspective, policy was not so much a choice by an authority figure as the outcome of continuing contested interaction among a number of interested parties. In this interaction, policy analysis may or may not be significant, but in any case was likely to be used by the contending parties as 'duelling swords' to advance their respective cases rather than as a scientific way of settling disputes (Radin 2000). And outcomes were, in any case, provisional and ambiguous, markers in a continuing process rather than determinations which concluded the debate (Schaffer 1977: 148).

A further anxiety about the assumptions of the policy project was that it seemed to assume that the object of policy is clear and unambiguous – that there are problems which need to be addressed – whereas both researchers and practitioners recognised that defining what is a problem, why it is a problem, and what is an appropriate response, is an integral part of policy formation. Schattschneider (1960) pointed to the way that some issues were 'organised in' to the policy sphere and others were 'organised out'. Crenson (1971) argued that whether air pollution was regarded as

a problem depended on the underlying power structures in the city. In a broader perspective, Hecl (1974) argued that policy development was an exercise in 'collective puzzling', involving the generation of a shared body of knowledge and evaluative norms, so that 'environment policy' (for instance) was not simply 'what the government decides to do about the environment' or even 'what emerges from the interaction among significant stakeholders', but also reflects the generation of a way of understanding the world and evaluating social practice, the recognition of sources of expertise and standing, and the development and validation of technologies of governing. Policy is not simply about decision and negotiation; it is also about social construction.

#### **What does this mean for policy work?**

This broadening perspective on the nature of the policy process has sat uneasily with the assumption of the policy project that what is needed is a better-informed comparison of options as the basis for official choice, and that policy work consists of doing systematic analysis and presenting the findings to decision-makers. Radin (2000) in the US and Adams (2005) in Australia have noted the unease that policy practitioners feel at the 'disjunction' between the methodology of systematic choice in which they have been trained and the nature of the activities in which they are engaged. While they were trained to see themselves as independent technical experts, they work for an organization and are expected to be part of the team. They become specialists in particular policy areas, and are often identified with (and become advocates for)

particular responses to policy questions. Rather than 'advising the Prince', they find themselves engaged in negotiations with policy workers from other institutions, trying to devise a mutually acceptable outcome; they are concerned less with data and analysis than with meetings and papers (Noordegraaf 2000). Their academic training offers clear prescriptions for action, but it is far from clear that these will be regarded as 'good advice' by the consumers of their work (Hoppe and Jeliazkova 2006).

While the simple instrumental conception of policy has been challenged by the 'argumentative turn' in policy analysis (Fischer and Forester 1993, Dryzek 1990, Hajer 1995, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Fischer 2003), there has been less attention to the implication of this critique for practitioners in the state bureaucracy. There tends to be more interests in protestors than in the 'maintenance workers' of the established institutions. (The work of writers like Patsy Healy and John Forester with town planners is a distinguished exception.) As Frank Fischer points out 'many of positivism's basic tenets are still embedded in both our research practices and institutional decision processes' (Fischer 2003b: 210). As Clemons and McBeth (2001) put it, while academics may accept intellectually these critiques of the instrumentalist model, as consultants (i.e. practitioners), they will have to conform to the expectations of their clients: define the problem, identify options, and recommend a course of action. Some academic writers argue that in any case, the graduating student will soon acquire her own experiential knowledge and ground her practice in that knowledge, rather than the precepts of the text (e.g. Althaus, Bridgman and Davis 2007).

But for the practitioners, this is a practical and often urgent question. Should we have policy analysts and policy branches, what sort of work should they do, and what sort of people do we need to do it? Here, there is not a standard answer even in the liberal western polities. The UK policy workers described by Page and Jenkins (2005) look more like the former Administrative Class of the UK Civil Service than like the products of a North American master's program, and policy workers in Australia often have no formal training in policy. One person working in a policy position in an education department commented that she was –

...right in the midst of curriculum, and I guess you'd call it policy ... It hardly seemed like policy because you were so busy just trying to shape some ideas about curriculum standards and outcomes and indicators of success ... that ... the policy notions, I never really felt that I had a grip, or any kind of clear input into shaping that. It was more like you were so busy being a little worker ... (Gill and Colebatch 2006: 250)

But getting a practical answer on the sorts of skills needed for policy work calls for clarification of the conceptual tools we are using. How do we understand the policy process, and how would specialist policy workers contribute to it?

We need to start by recognizing that policy is concerned with giving an account of practice: how it is understood and validated. Moreover, as we have seen, there is more than one account in use. The dominant account of policy sees it in terms of official decisions aimed at producing known outcomes: we can call this 'authoritative choice'

(see Colebatch 2006). But as we noted, practitioners as well as academics recognize another account, one of policy as a continuing interplay between a range of more or less organized participants, with distinct agendas, diverse interpretations of the problem and varying proposals for responding to it; this is an account of policy as 'structured interaction'. And underlying this negotiation between interested parties (and making it possible) is a process of 'collective puzzling': the framing of concerns, the argumentation about causality and responsibility, the recognition of expertise, and the coalescence about appropriate practice; this generates an account of policy as a process of 'social construction'. And all these accounts are in use in the framing and validating of practice: the development of policy is likely to involve the generation of a shared framework of ideas (social construction), negotiation among stakeholders (structured interaction) and official announcements (authoritative choice). Policy workers are likely to find themselves operating in more than one account at different times, or even at the same time. The question for policy workers, then, is how to understand and manage the use of these different accounts in the construction and validation of policy.

The 'authoritative choice' framework gives them an 'official statement' of their work: policy workers prepare advice to guide the policy choices made by the government. This presentation directs the policy workers' attention to the formal procedures of government: announcing decisions, making laws, approving budgets, etc. These procedures are often invoked to explain and justify commencing, maintaining, changing or ceasing particular sorts of activity, and

when they are, documents need to be prepared. These documents commonly follow the rhetorical format of problem-solving: define the nature and extent of the problem, identify alternative ways of responding to it, estimate their cost and impact, identify the views of relevant stakeholders and recommend a course of action. Or they may be concerned with defining normal practice: regulations, protocols, guidelines, etc. Policy workers are likely to find themselves drafting such documents and seeking approval for them – keeping the wheels of 'authoritative choice' turning.

But these processes are not simply an interchange between the policy analyst and a single entity called 'the government'. Commonly, there will be a number of voices being heard, even if they are all within government (which is unlikely), and policy documents will need to be approved by different organizations or an inter-organisational body – the 'meetings and papers' that Noordergraaf noted – in which case there is likely to be negotiation among the participants to construct a text which will meet with general approval. In other words, policy workers will be engaged in 'structured interaction' with other participants, inside and outside of government – often, other policy workers (Radin 2000) – and a key element in policy work is creating and sustaining the capacity for concerted action among a diversity of players.

As this interaction is stabilised over time and becomes routinised – i.e., more structured – it is recognised, perhaps even labeled; in Australia, commentators identified one such pattern of interaction as 'the Industrial Relations Club' – meaning the cluster of union officials, employer groups, arbitrators, civil servants and specialist journalists through

which industrial conflict was managed. Academic analysts recognised the tendency for stable networks to form in policy domains, and identified 'policy communities' (Richardson and Jordan 1979), 'issue networks' (Heclo 1978), 'policy networks' (Van Waarden 1992) and 'sub-governments' (Coleman and Skogstad 1990); Haas (1992), stressing the extent to which the grouping was held together by a shared way of seeing the problem, talked about it as an 'epistemic community'; others talked about 'discourse coalitions' (Fischer and Forester 1993). The new popularity of the term 'governance' often expresses a belief in the importance of negotiation and concerted action among governmental and non-governmental bodies (see Stoker 1998).

These terms have been widely accepted, but they are essentially metaphors and the empirical existence and significance of these groupings is fluid and contestable. New Public Management, which in the 1980s and 1990s became a dominant rhetoric in the public sectors of the English-speaking countries, was in many ways a reaction to these 'policy collectivities', arguing that rather than negotiating comfortable agreements with stakeholders, governments should instigate competitive relationships among them. And their existence depended on the willingness of potentially-dominant groups to participate; Hendriks (2002) describes a case in which an attempt to develop a shared understanding among stakeholders on a policy issue stalled when the dominant group withdraw, preferring to rely on its traditional ability to lobby ministers.

In any case, the 'relevant others' for any policy area are likely to be widely spread and to include international participants. Increasingly, the norms

of practice and evaluation within which policy is developed – 'what should we be concerned about, and what should we be trying to do about it?' – are being framed through discourse across national boundaries, often by international organizations. The most obvious example is of course the EU, which is directly and specifically involved in member and applicant states, and has a significant impact on policy thinking beyond these countries, but there is also a great deal of policy framing and regulating done by bodies such as the World Trade Organization and even the World Health Organization. Nor is it limited to international bodies: for instance, US concerns about security on airliners may demand the release of passenger information which conflict with domestic policy norms on privacy, generating a problem for the policy worker. And beyond the formal regulating, there is a growing mesh of surveillance of national governments by bodies such as the UNDP, the World Bank, and the OECD through 'governance indicators' – a 'global panopticon', as Pal and Buduru (2008) put it.

Not only has the structured interaction been pushed 'upwards and outwards' to the international level, it has also been pushed 'downwards' by attempts to incorporate unorganized voices in policy discussion – usually described as 'public consultation'. This is described in a range of overlapping ways: as democratic involvement, as a way of improving policy, or as a way of managing actual or potential opposition (Davis 1996). The technologies that have been developed to enable consultation include public inquiries (see Holland 2006, Degeling, Baume and Jones 1993), opinion surveys, public meetings, experiments with web-based involvement, and

staged events like citizen juries and policy 'summit meetings' (Smith and Wales 2000, Nathan *et al.* 2005). The growing popularity of these measures may reflect the declining trust in government, and in particular, the diminished ability of elected legislators to reflect and lead public opinion. But it also reflects the increased ability of 'non-officials' to make their voice heard through the internet, as seen in movements such as GetUp (Australia) and MoveOn (US). So a significant part of the policy worker's task has come to focus on the relationships through which policy is accomplished, whether with other parts of government, with established organized interests, or with the less-organised voices outside the official camp – 'the public'.

But as we have noted, an important element of policy development is the way that issues are defined, knowledge is recognised and practices come to be perceived as appropriate – the 'social construction' of policy – and here, the link between the way in which this happens, the activities of policy workers, and the intentions of 'the government' are much less clear. For instance, a major policy innovation in recent years has been the development of international policy norms on climate change (see Colebatch 2009, ch. 7, Garnaut 2008). This move did not begin with 'the government' noticing a problem and seeking advice from its policy workers. This was an issue which took shape over a long period of time, largely driven by scientists and environmental activists, and for the most part, governments were very reluctant to act. But over time, the issue attracted more public attention, scientists developed international linkages which became increasingly institutionalised and official, and acti-

vists tried to change public opinion by drawing attention to the climate consequences of everyday practices, re-framing the question in terms of the moral obligations of ordinary people. The official practices of government (like rating domestic appliances for energy consumption) were drawn along with this movement rather than driving it; policy development was not simply a concern of government.

The social construction of a policy question is not simply about recognising an issue, but also about framing why it is a policy matter, what the concerns are and what is an appropriate response. For instance, in many of the countries of the industrial West, organized child care, and the part of public authority in organizing and paying for it, has become a significant policy issue. But the different voices that were active over this question saw it in quite different ways. For some feminists, it was about the reconstruction of gender relation, challenging the assumption that women who have children should spend all their time looking after them. For some economists, the issue was labour market efficiency: providing child care would enable mothers to resume their positions in the labour market. For some social policy analysts, the issue was socialization: organized care would expand the social world of the young child, and he/she would learn how to develop relationships with other children outside the family. For others, the issue was education: child care was seen as the preliminary to school attendance (centres were often called 'pre-schools'), where the child would learn skills such as reading, and be socialized into the practices of the school. There were, in other words, different narratives about the policy issue (see Roe

1994). And there was also, in a sense, an 'absent narrative' or 'policy silence' (Yanow 1996) about the practices and assumptions of the workplace. When Kaiser Steel was building ships for the US Navy during the second world war and employing large numbers of women to do this, it provided child care centres at each shipyard, and included the cost of these centres in the contract price of the ships (Tuttle 1995). By the 1970s, this had been forgotten, and employers could assume that the care of their workers' children was the responsibility of the workers (and perhaps the government), and was not a concern of the employer. These ambiguities could be accommodated in building a coalition of support for child care policy – a process labelled by Bertanffy 'equifinal agreement' (see Donnellon *et al.* 1986): we can agree on what to do but not on why we're doing it – but underlay disputes over the hours in which care would be provided, the activity that would take place, and the sort of staff that would be needed: the social construction of the policy did not end with the acceptance of 'child care' as a policy concern, so policy workers were likely to be engaged in the 'detail work' of the process itself.

We can see here the way that the different accounts come together in making up policy work. It is not simply that policy issues are socially constructed, but that they may be constructed in different ways by different participants. Managing the structured interaction between the players calls for addressing the social construction of the issue and searching for an interpretation which is congruent with the different perspective. The link between authoritative choice and social construction is more problematic: some governments

see advertising as the means for leaders to shape the social construction of practice. In Australia, for instance, substantial amounts have been spent on advertising campaigns aimed at changing the perception of such practices as drink-driving and domestic violence; it is hard to judge their impact, and some would argue that their significance lies more in their contribution to public discourse and the de-legitimization of these practices than their immediate impact on the incidence of these practices. Perhaps more significant have been forms of official support for advocacy groups who are aligned with the preferred construction. But while the government can influence the social construction of policy issues, its impact on people's perceptions and attitudes is likely to be quite limited. The most significant policy work may be being done by experts, commentators and agitators, as we saw with the example of climate change.

### **What are the lessons for policy workers?**

Perhaps the first lesson for the advocates or practitioners of policy work as a specialist part of government is that it cannot be reduced to a single methodology, particularly one expressed in a North American text on 'policy analysis'. There are some tasks which relate to official decision-making. There are others which have to do with managing the diversity of participants, agendas and interpretations in relation to particular policy areas. And there are others which are concerned with the broad framework of shared understanding within which policy issues are recognised and appropriate responses identified. Specialist policy workers will be involved in these tasks in different ways, and they



are likely to find that they are not the only ones involved.

One possible response is to see different sorts of policy skills being called for in different situations (see Hoppe and Jeliaskova 2006, also Kingdon's [1984] identification of the 'policy entrepreneur' role). In this perspective, policy work is a team game, and calls for a range of skills and personal styles, and the capacity to manage them appropriately. One could also say that this demonstrates the need for policy workers to be aware of the limitations of any one approach, and to show flexibility in their approach. Tenbenschel (2006) argues that there are different sorts of relevant knowledge, and that skilful policy work depends on being able to mobilise the right sort of knowledge at the appropriate time.

The implication here is that policy work is concerned with negotiating across a range of understandings, and constructing a basis for concerted action among participants who are not so much coming together to address a common problem, but being thrown into contact because their different activities all touch on some area which has become the subject of policy attention. The policy worker not only needs to be aware of the differences among these participants and their agendas, but also to recognize the existence of other, less organized, interests, who may not be at the table – perhaps because they are less organized.

This suggests, too, that writing documents – analyses, discussion papers, policy advice – is important, but not simply because it informs the mind of the decision-maker to whom it is addressed, but even more because the production of these documents generates a process

of interaction among the participants which is not only aimed at framing the document but at paving the way for its acceptance. 'The words are so neutral', said one of Howard's informants. 'It's not about consultation: it's about commitment' (Howard 2005). The collective construction of policy outcomes not only taps different sorts of knowledge; it recognizes the standing of the participants and generates a degree of acceptance of the outcome: we didn't get all we wanted, but we were consulted.

Finally, this suggests that policy workers need a tolerance for ambiguity – a recognition that conflict and inconsistency may be an inherent part of the governmental process, rather than something which correct analysis can eliminate. They may find this difficult in a world where clarity, transparency and instrumental rationality have such a dominant place in the sacred discourse of public life. But while policy work may make it easier to manage the conflicts of our collective life and the sentiments associated with them, it cannot eliminate them.

### **In conclusion**

We might hope that policy workers in the transitional polities of eastern Europe might be able to learn from the experience of the liberal West, and might not have to start with attempts to develop and disseminate a technology of choice grounded in microeconomics, and only after several decades discover that policy work is less about calculation and more concerned with 'making sense together' (Hoppe 1999). But this calls for the development of modes of discourse and locations where the process of governing can be scrutinized and cri-

tiqued, and the participants can become acquainted with the diversity of perspectives in play, and, over time, develop the language and the trust which would make possible a meaningful shared narrative about governing – i.e., to develop

policy. And this (as Weber remarked in comparable circumstances) will require ‘a strong, slow boring of hard boards [demanding] both passion and perspective’ (Gerth and Mills 1958: 128). The task is to sustain the process.

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## Rad na javnim politikama kao reformski projekt

**SAŽETAK** Jedan aspekt modernizacije liberalne vladavine potkraj 20. stoljeća bio je pridavanje veće pozornosti javnim politikama, i kao pojmu za ispitivanje vlade i kao temelju za organiziranje posla unutar vlade, što je dovelo do razvoja "analize javnih politika" kao sredstva odlučivanja. U ovom se radu razmatra razvoj specijaliziranih oblika "rada na javnim politikama" u liberalnim zapadnim političkim sustavima kako bi se utvrdilo što se može naučiti od drugih oblika državnog uređenja, osobito od tranzicijskih država Istočne Europe. Razmatraju se brojna i preklapajuća tumačenja javnih politika te posljedice tih tumačenja na prirodu rada na javnim politikama. Ističe se da se rad na javnim politikama zbiva na mnoštvu mjesta na kojima se možda primjenjuje niz različitih načela, te se razmatraju implikacije te analize za položaj rada na javnim politikama u modernizaciji vlasti.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI** rad na javnim politikama, *policy*-analiza, ljudi koji rade na javnim politikama, modernizacija vlasti