

## Problematizing policy: culture, modernity and government

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As promised in the title, in this paper I want to problematize 'policy'. You could perhaps say 'deconstruct' if you want, but I don't want to lay claim to any of the theoretical baggage that comes with that word.

In other words, I want to stand back from the word, and look at 'policy' - as a notion, as a practice, and as a very significant part of the world in which we live today - as if it were at least a *little* ethnographically strange. The constraints of time, plus the fact that I am outside my own intellectual comfort zone, in territory where I am not at home, means that I will only be able to do this superficially. Even so, perhaps something can be said that will contribute to a critical discussion about the issues that are on our agenda today and tomorrow, because welfare (in all of the nuanced shades of meaning of the word) is, in the modern world, a matter of policy (in all of the nuanced shades of meaning of that word).

Perhaps the first thing that should be said, by way of introduction, is that I don't think that there is anything specifically anthropological about the approach that I am adopting. There is a long tradition within sociology, for example - strikingly reiterated in the early 1990s by no less a person than Zygmunt Bauman (1990) - which has always understood that one of sociology's basic jobs is to defamiliarize the familiar. And that is what I hope to do, even if only in a tentative way.

That aside, there are good reasons to be somewhat sceptical about newly discovered 'anthologies of this or that', which suggests that there is something very specific that one can call a peculiarly anthropological point of view, which will shed new light on whichever 'this or that' is at stake. Not least, one runs the combined risks of being seen to re-invent the wheel, and closing down rather than opening up critical inquiry. I think that, on balance, I prefer interdisciplinarity.

Apropos which, I don't think that there is much, if anything, that is strikingly novel about what I am going to say today. At best, I think that I'm probably putting old wine into a recycled bottle.

The final thing to say, before moving on to the argument, is that I am not specifically concerned with welfare or even with social policy more generally. I am, rather, interested in policy, and policy-making, as a generic institution of modern governmentality, in the Foucauldian sense of the intellectual technology of power and its exercise. So what I have to say, if it has any merit should, therefore, be applicable across a wide spectrum of activities and concerns, whether in the public or private sectors.

### What is policy?

In one sense, we all know what 'policy' is. We recognise policies when we see or hear them or encounter them in action. If nothing else they are often called this, that, or the other *policy*. Just so we should be in no doubt.

There is a completely understandable tendency for policy analysts - and, indeed, other social scientists - to take for granted what 'policy' is (and that we *know* what policy is). On the one hand, working within a 'normal science' community, everybody pretty much knows what everyone else is talking about; on the other hand, working in an applied context, necessarily close to government, business, NGOs or social movements, heads are down and dealing with specifics and details.

There are, however, some interesting discussions of the nature of policy around, which don't take the notion for granted. These are often in introductory textbooks, those opportunities for a bit of ground-clearing and reflection which are insufficiently acknowledged as potential sites of serious intellectual work (and which can be *extremely* useful when one is thinking about topics outside one's own patch).

Before looking at basic texts, however, I want to start with to start with a view of policy that locates it in a basic framework of human cognition and decision-making. This comes from a relatively early collection of essays problematising policy and the policy process:

'Various labels are applied to decisions and actions we take, depending in general on the breadth of their implications. If they are trivial and repetitive and demand little cogitation, they may be called routine actions. If they are

more complex, have wider ramifications, and demand more thought, we may refer to them as tactical decisions. For those which have the widest ramifications and the longest time perspective, and which generally require the most information and contemplation, we tend to reserve the word *policy*.' (Bauer 1968: 1-2).

Routine, tactics, policy: Bauer goes on to describe policy, further, as 'parameter-shaping acts'. It's a matter of perceived complexity and importance.

Turning to one of the classic big guns of British social policy analysis, Richard Titmuss is also concerned with fairly basic matters, and decision-making. He defined generic policy as:

'the principles that govern action directed towards given ends. The concept denotes action about means as well as ends and it, therefore, implies change...[it] is only meaningful if we...believe that we can effect change in some form or another.' (1974: 23-4)

Today, in a more sceptical, age than the optimistic decades of post-war welfare reforms to which Titmuss contributed so much, one might want to dissent from the definitional centrality of change - after all a policy might be designed to preserve a status quo - but the rest is clear enough: policy is a matter of means and ends and the relationship between them. Despite that commitment to change, Titmuss's could be described as a strikingly simple, almost apolitical definition.

By contrast, Colebatch (2002: 8-10) develops something a more complex. For him, the notion of policy emerges out of three core assumptions about the human world: *instrumentality* (that all organisations are goal-oriented), *hierarchy* (that government is 'top-down'), and *coherence* (that everything fits together into a system). Given these axiomatic principles, policy is about *order*, *authority* and *expertise*:

- Policy is about creating order, avoiding 'arbitrary and capricious' decision-making, and constraining possible courses of action.
- Policy depends upon legitimate authority, even if only delegated and indirect.
- Policy depends upon expertise, 'expert knowledge' to quote Giddens (1990: 83-92), which is one of the reasons why it is usually specialised and devoted to distinct fields or issues.

One last excursion into the textbooks will be sufficient. Michael Hill's standard introduction for undergraduates makes the following additional points about the complexities of policy (1997: 6-10):

- Policy may be difficult to pin down as a specific phenomenon: it is very broad ranging, may be implicit rather than explicit, and is embedded in multi-stranded ongoing processes and many different contexts.
- Policy entails more than just discourse, it's about courses of action.
- Policy is about networks of decision-making over time, and is not fixed but changing.
- Policy is as much a matter of non-decisions as decisions, about silences as well as statements.
- Policy may be at least as much about producing an appearance of coherence and order, as actual coherence and order; simply 'having a policy' may be the most important thing.

Finally, Hill also notes that policy may also be worked out in the unintended cumulative consequence of actions. In this sense outcomes at street-level (to quote Lipsky 1980) are as much a part of the policy process as explicit policy-making and delivery 'higher up' within the organisation. Policy may also emerge as an *ex post facto* rationalisation of emergent trends and practices.

It is too much to say that all of these definitions and observations agree with each other, but they do converge on a number of core propositions about policy:

- Policy is about attempting to shape and steer orderly courses of action in situations of complexity.
- Policy is about the relationships between means and ends.
- Policy is a process and, as such, ongoing.
- Policy formulation and implementation are implicated in each other.
- Policy is about absences as well as presences.
- Policy may be implicit as well as explicit.
- Policy appeals to trust based on knowledge claims and expertise.
- Policy appeals to trust based on legitimate political authority.
- The policy process is definitively an organisational practice.
- The policy process is embedded in and not distinct from other aspects of organisational life.

### Policy and politics

A strong implication of all that has been said so far is that 'whatever it is that we call policy' takes in a range of institutional forms and practices, in a range of contexts, and in a range of shapes. Policy is certainly not, for example, an organisational practice that confined to the state.

It is in fact because of the centrality of policy to government, and its consequences for every day life, that even public policy cannot be said to be confined to or contained within the organisations of government. Public policy is as much embedded in civil society (the media, political parties, NGOs, interest groups, think tanks, academics, business interests and lobbyists, and so on) as it is in the state.

Which brings me to the relationship between policy and politics. English and Dutch are - apparently (Therborn 2001: 19) - the only European languages to distinguish between politics [*politiek*] and policy [*beleid*]. He seems to approve of the distinction. Politics, according to Therborn, is about deciding the nature of the governmental game, its objectives and its rules (or, put another way, how things should be run and who should run them). Policy however, is about how to achieve objectives within the

rules and nature of the political game: 'Politics, then, precedes and wraps up policy' (*ibid.*).

I am not sure that Therborn's position is right, however. Using his own metaphor of the game, policy processes are part of the nature and rules of the modern political game. Politics depends on policy as one of its chief instruments, while policy formulation and implementation are, for their part, deeply politicised. The policy process - almost by definition - is a matter of negotiation: compromise, imposition, deal-making and arm-twisting may all have their place. Nor is the temporal relationship, first politics, then policy: the feedback loops are not that easy to disentangle.

What's more, the technocratic illusion of 'rational' policy, somehow above the fray of sectional interests and ideologies, while it's certainly powerful, is just that, an illusion (which may be its whole *political* point). Policy is closely related to planning in this respect, although the latter may claim even more strongly that it is a technical or managerial discipline rather than a political practice.

Finally, policy as a means of being seen to do something, while perhaps doing something else or effectively nothing at all, has a long history, and can best be described as the art of 'symbolic politics' (e.g. Solomos 1988).

This argument suggests that we should, perhaps, look a little more closely at the distinction between means and ends. Means are often ends in their own right, as in the case of symbolic politics. Nor is the nature of an 'end' given simply by the act of being specified; it is, rather, frequently bound up with how the manner of its achievement.

So, whether we are talking about the nation-state or a more modest organisation, the public or the private sector, the complete implication in each other of politics and policy seems to me to be an inescapable conclusion (and, to be fair, the rest of the Therborn paper that I have referred to would seem to bear this out, in the EU context).

In so far as they are all definitively politicised, the same can probably be said about the relationship between policy and the law as a means of social control, and bureaucracy as a form of organisation. They are not separate from policy or from politics either.

## Changing meanings

Meaning is at the heart of whatever it is that we call culture. Politics and policy - not to mention planning, the law, and bureaucracy - these are all in one way or another in the business of the production and reproduction of meanings. Policy has ideally to make sense, if nothing else; decisions should be meaningful; policies should be able to be sold to those who may have to operationalise them, and even - sometimes - to those whose lives are affected by them. So meaning is important.

But there's more to it than that. All of the authors whose definitions of policy I have referred to so far agree that policy is also about values and/or ideology (depending on your choice of terms). If we accept a working definition of ideology as bodies of knowledge that make claims about how the world is and about how it ought to be (Jenkins 1997: 84), then all policy is probably, by definition, ideological.

In this sense policy is often about creating or disseminating new meanings, whether these be moral values, specifications of legitimate or illegitimate action, categories of individuals or collectivities, estimations of the relative value of resources, and so on.

So policy, of whatever sort, constitutes and is constituted by meaningful practices, codes and categories. It may not be too much to say that, in the modern world, policy processes are among the most important vehicles and instruments - along, perhaps, with formal socialisation and mass communications - for the production and reproduction of the collective meanings which frame and imbue everyday life.

This is not intended to imply a definitively top-down model - there is also resistance, policy can be made in all sorts of places - but it does begin to suggest an interesting, and perhaps insufficiently recognised, contribution to the imagining of collectivities, of whatever size or character. This is said, of course, with acknowledgement to Benedict Anderson (1983), and in the belief that although collectivities are imagined they are not imaginary (Jenkins 2004). Policy, and not just social policy incidentally, contributes to whatever it is that we call 'the social' (Lewis, Gewirtz and Clarke 2000).

Nor has what policy means been a constant. The notion of policy itself has been constituted and reconstituted over time. Some of the word's history may be interesting at this point. For the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary offers us a survey of its historical uses, as follows.

- *From the late 1300s onwards (now obsolete)*: an organised or established system of government, a constitution, or a state.
- *From the late 1300s onwards (now obsolete)*: government, administration, the conduct of public affairs.
- *From the early 1400s onwards*: political wisdom, skill, statecraft, diplomacy (in a negative sense, political cunning).
- *From the 1400s onwards*: prudent or expedient conduct or action in general, wisdom and shrewdness (in a negative sense, craftiness and cunning).
- *From the 1400s onwards (now obsolete)*: a contrivance, device, crafty stratagem or trick.
- *From the mid 1400 onwards*: a course of action adopted by a government, party, ruler, politician or their representative; any course of action adopted as advantageous or expedient.

There is a set of other very specific, although less common, meanings - of policy as a noun - relating to insurance, gambling and social control. I am not going to discuss those here, although I am sure some entertainment, and even some enlightenment, might be had from them.

Arguably all of the meanings of policy that I have summarised find at least an echo - and often more than that - in the word's modern uses: government, action, prudence, strategy, even a degree of deceit. No less to the point, however, is the fact that the last meaning described - any course of action adopted as advantageous or expedient, particularly with respect to politics - has been the dominant meaning of policy since the 1800s.

In the twentieth century, as worked out through notions such as policy document, policy-maker and policy-making, that dominant notion of policy acquired

increasingly powerful overtones of science, social science, and rationality. This has to do with the more general expansion of science as a frame of reference during this period, but it also has a great deal to do with the intimate relationship between trust and expertise that became increasingly important in politics.

### **Culture and modernity**

Future-oriented courses of action are always uncertain. While policy-making is always intentional and has intentions, what is intended may or may not happen, in fact, and the unintended consequences are always lurking in the wings. However, the role of policy in the creation, under conditions of complexity and spatial extension, of acceptable *representations* of present and future action, rather than definite and reliable guides to actual action is certainly important. Policy, in other words, may belong most definitively to the realm of the collective imagination: the domain of symbolic politics. This is also the domain of culture.

There is, furthermore, another reason to doubt whether policy should be viewed as a good guide to what actually happens. In setting forth a public statement of what should be done, and how, policy as a formal instrument of governance actually creates frameworks that create possibilities for the informal discretion and subversion that is necessary if modern social life is to be possible at all. Informality without a formal framework makes no sense (Jenkins 2004: 179-83). Formal policy, together with the law, bureaucracy and planning, creates that informal space at the same time as it attempts to constrain it.

Finally, I want to suggest that everything that I have talked about today adds up to an argument that policy and policy making, as ways of doing things, are fundamental features of the rational pursuit of efficiency and iron-caged bureaucratisation of the world that Weber believed were definitive of modernity (Hill 1993: 103-152), an insight that was subsequently developed in other directions by Foucault (Watson 2000).

Policy is thus to be seen a definitive discourse and practice of modernity, albeit one that has largely been neglected by recent social theorists of modernity. It is fundamental to the organisational charters of the state and other organisations,

contributing in important ways to their self-image and their identity in the eyes of their crucial audiences.

### Researching policy

Without wanting to break my own commandment and appear to create an anthropology of policy - or indeed of welfare - what's the relevance of this discussion of policy and the policy process for anthropologists, who still typically undertake short to medium-term participatory research with people who live, work or interact together in relatively compact settings? I think that there are a number of implications for what anthropologists do.

The most important is that *we should never treat policy as just part of the backdrop, merely as the frame within which the interesting stuff happens*. The policy process is utterly amenable to ethnographic investigation. A number of overlapping and converging points follow from this:

- Policy is a process of representation, and of the production and reproduction of meaning; this can be investigated locally, as can the articulation between national and local representations and frameworks of meaning .
- Policy is, at least in large part, a matter of the relationship between doctrine and representations and courses of action. Participant observation ethnography is a good approach to understanding the relationship between what people say and what they do.
- Given that national or supra-local policy processes resonate at local level - they are generally meant to, anyway - very often national policy means the creation of local policy, a process which can be investigated at first hand and in face-to-face detail.
- It isn't just policy implementation that ethnography gives us access to; formulation and implementation are thoroughly implicated in each other.
- Policy processes are, even if only in small ways, worked out during interaction: through interpretation, resource allocation, evasion, subversion, and so on. This can all be researched ethnographically.

- Policy may be tacit as well as explicit, or an emergent outcome rather than a intentional goal. Ethnography is perhaps the best method we have for studying the tacit and the emergent.
- Finally, there is along established tradition of micro-studies of political behaviour by anthropologists. There is no reason why we shouldn't study the policy process in the same way, and every reason why we should.

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