Problematising policy: culture, modernity and government

Richard Jenkins
Department of Sociological Studies
University of Sheffield

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As promised in the title, in this paper I propose to problematise the notion of ‘policy’. What this proposal might actually entail may not, however, be immediately obvious. I could, perhaps – and just as easily – have said that I want to deconstruct policy; at least then many people would have been comfortable in believing that they knew what to expect. However, since I don’t want to claim to any of the post-structuralist and post-modern theoretical baggage – or, indeed, long since abandoned left luggage – that the word ‘deconstruction’ necessarily drags along behind it, that isn’t an option.

So, what do I mean when I talk about problematising policy? It’s really fairly simple: I want to stand back 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 anthropologically strange. As if it were somewhat exotic and mysterious, to be interrogated rather than taken for granted as a feature of my life – whether as a citizen or a social scientist – that everybody in some senses understands.

To talk about anthropological strange-ness does not, however, imply that there is necessarily anything specifically anthropological about what I am going to do. There is a long tradition within sociology, for example – beginning with Alfred Schutz and Harold Garfinkel, and strikingly reiterated more recently by no less a
person than Zygmunt Bauman (1990: 15) – which has always understood that one of sociology’s key epistemological tactics and analytical objectives is the defamiliarisation of the familiar. This is what I hope to do, even if only in a tentative and superficial way.

That aside, there are, anyway, other good reasons not to emphasise the anthropological in this context. We should be at least a little sceptical about newly discovered ‘anthropologies of this or that’, in this case ‘the anthropology of policy’ (e.g. Shore and Wright 1997). This minor disciplinary imperialism – and opportunism – presumes that there is something very distinctive that one can call a peculiarly anthropological point of view, and that it will shed new and better light on whichever ‘this or that’ is at stake. Not only is this arguably immodest, and therefore unwise, but if we go down this road we risk neglecting the hard-won insights of generations of scholars who have toiled before us in this particular vineyard (and in the process being seen naively to re-invent the wheel), encouraging intellectual balkanisation, and closing down rather than opening up critical inquiry. On balance, I prefer interdisciplinarity, within the open intellectual terrain of what I have elsewhere described as ‘generic sociology’ (Jenkins 2002: 15-38). And, apropos the vineyard, there is little, if anything, that is strikingly novel about what I am going to say here. 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 policy 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. This means that 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, as alluded to above, in our everyday lives we all know what ‘policy’ is. We recognise policies when we see or hear them, hear other talking about 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 to take for granted that we know what policy is. On the one hand, working within a ‘normal science’ intellectual community, the assumption is that everybody pretty much knows what everyone else is talking about. On the other hand, working in an applied context, necessarily close to government, corporations, NGOs or social movements, heads are down and people are dealing with specifics and details. If we are to get on with the everyday business of either sphere then fundamental conceptual discussion is unlikely to be useful or welcome.

This tacit consensus may be understandable, but it doesn’t help us to clarify our thinking. Fortunately, not everyone takes the conceptual foundations for granted, and it is possible to find interesting and sophisticated discussions of the nature of policy. That these are often to be found in introductory textbooks is a timely reminder that work of this kind, which offers unusual opportunities for a bit of ground-clearing and reflection, is insufficiently acknowledged as a potential site of serious intellectual work. Introductory texts can certainly be extremely useful when one is, as I am here, thinking about topics outside one’s own patch.

Before looking at some introductory policy studies texts, however, I want to start with an even more basic view of policy, which locates it within a model 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).

So we have here a cognitive and practical hierarchy, from routine to tactics to policy. From the habitual, axiomatic procedures and assumptions of everyday time, to a deeper forward look that shades into historical time. Bauer goes on to describe policy as ‘parameter-shaping acts’: policy creates the frames of meaning within which everyday life happens. So, in this context, the definition of ‘policy’ is a matter of perceived complexity and significance.

Turning now to one of the classic big guns of British social policy analysis, Richard Titmuss is also concerned with fairly basic matters, and with 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, even cynical, age than the optimistic decades of post-war welfare reforms to which Titmuss contributed so much, we might want to
dissent from the definitional centrality of change – after all, a policy may be
designed to preserve a conservative or reactionary status quo – but the rest is clear
enough: policy is a matter of means and ends and the relationship between them.
Despite his commitment to change, Titmuss’s could be described as a strikingly
simple, almost apolitical definition.

By contrast, Colebatch (2002: 8-10) has recently developed something a
little more complex and nuanced. For him, the notion of policy emerges out of
three axiomatic characteristics of the modern human world:

• *instrumentality* (the assumption that all organisations are goal-oriented);
• *hierarchy* (the assumption that government works in a ‘top-down’ fashion);
and
• *coherence* (the assumption that everything fits together into some kind of
  system).

Given these axioms, 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 it is only delegated and
  indirect.
• Policy is based upon expertise - ‘expert knowledge’ to use Giddens’
  formulation (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 should 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 thus not fixed but changeable.
- 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 in any given social setting or field.
- Policy may emerge as an *ex post facto* rationalisation of emergent trends and practices.

With respect to the last point above, Hill further notes that policy may 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’ the organisational food chain.

It would be much too much to say that all of these definitions and observations agree with each other. They do, however, converge on a number of core propositions that, taken together, begin to offer a fairly comprehensive ideal typical model of policy:
• Policy is about attempting to shape and steer orderly courses of action, not least in situations of complexity and uncertainty.
• Policy is about specifying ends and means, and the relationships between competing ends and means.
• Policy is best regarded as a process, and as such it is ongoing and open-ended.
• The policy process is definitively an organisational practice.
• The policy process is embedded in and not distinct from other aspects of organisational life.
• Policy appeals to, and is intended to foster, trust based on knowledge claims and expertise.
• Policy appeals to, and is intended to foster, trust based on legitimate political authority.
• Policy formulation and implementation are inextricably implicated in each other, rather than distinct processes along a unidirectional time line.
• Policy is about absences as well as presences, about what is not said as much as what is said.
• Policy may be implicit as well as explicit.

Policy and politics
A strong implication of the discussion so far is that ‘whatever it is that we call policy’ encompasses a range of institutional forms and practices, in a range of contexts. Policy is certainly not, for example, an organisational practice that is confined to the state and its delegates. What’s more, precisely because of the centrality of policy to government, and because of its massive consequences for
everyday life, even *public* policy cannot accurately be described as confined to, or contained within, the organisational ambit of the state. Public policy is as much embedded in civil society – the media, political parties, NGOs, interest groups, think tanks, academics, business interests, lobbyists, and so on – as it is in the state.

Which, conveniently, brings me to the relationship between policy and politics. English and Dutch are, according to Therborn (2001: 19), the only European languages to distinguish between politics [*politiek*] and policy [*beleid*]. Therborn seems to approve of this distinction: politics, according to him, 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, he sees as a matter of how to achieve objectives within the rules and nature of the political game: ‘Politics, then, precedes and wraps up policy’ (*ibid*).

As implied in the brief mention of the relationship between formulation and implementation in the previous section, I don’t think that Therborn’s argument holds much water. In the first place, to draw on his own metaphor of ‘the game’, policy processes are irretrievably part of the nature and rules of the modern political game: they are simultaneously ends and means, objective and plan. 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 sequence *first* politics, *then* policy: the relationship between them is, rather, a matter of feedback loops that may not be that easy to disentangle in practice.

What’s more, this apparently objective distinction between politics and policy is actually likely to be deeply political in its own right. 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, of
course, be its entire political point). Thus the policy process is deeply implicated in the modern exercise of rational authority, and its legitimation (Weber 1978: 215-226). The policy process 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 device that allows an organisation or actor to be *seen* to do something, while perhaps doing something else or effectively nothing at all, has a long history. This can perhaps best be described as the art of ‘symbolic politics’ (e.g. Solomos 1988). All of which suggests that we should, perhaps, look a little more closely and sceptically at the distinction between ends and means. Means are often ends in their own right, as in the case of symbolic politics. Nor is the qualitative nature of an ‘end’ given simply in its specification; it is, rather, typically bound up with the proposed manner of its achievement.

So, whether we are talking about huge organisations or small, in the public or the private sectors, the complete implication in each other of politics and policy seems to be an inescapable conclusion (and, to be fair, the rest of the Therborn paper that I have just referred to would seem to bear this out, in the EU context). Something similar can probably be said about the law as a means of social control, and about bureaucracy as a form of organising human activity. Our understanding of them cannot easily be separated from how we understand either the policy process or politics.

**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 to those who
make them and, in principle at least, to those about whom they are made; policies should be able to be sold to those who may have to carry them out and even – once again in principle at least – 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 a matter of values and/or ideology (depending on your preferred 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 processes often create or disseminate 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, on the one hand, and may call into being new or modified meaningful practices, codes and categories, on the other. 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, and policy can be made in all sorts of places. It also begins to suggest an interesting, and perhaps insufficiently recognised, avenue of further inquiry. Policy processes contribute 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).

**Changing meanings of policy**

The meaning of ‘policy’ has not been fixed and constant. The very notion 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 strategem 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.

In addition, there is a set of other very specific, although much 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 – other than to say that each invokes, whether implicitly or explicitly, the attempt to minimise or mitigate uncertainty.

Arguably all of these historical meanings of policy find at least an echo – and often much more than that – in the word’s modern uses: government, orderly 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 the word 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 modern politics.

**Culture and modernity**

Future-oriented courses of action are always uncertain. While policy-making is always intentional and has its intentions, what is intended may or may not happen, and the unintended consequences of actions are always lurking in the wings as major, even sometimes determinate, influences on events (Merton 1957: 19-84). So, there are always – and by definition – limits to the effectiveness of policy in producing its stated outcomes and to its reliability as a definite guide to ‘what is to be done’ (let alone what is, or has been, done). However, the role of policy in the creation, under conditions of complexity, uncertainty and spatial extension, of acceptable or good-enough *representations* of past, present and future 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 also another reason to doubt whether policy should be viewed as a good guide to what actually happens. In publishing a public statement of what should be done, and how, policy as a formal instrument of governance actually creates the conditions that encourage the informal discretion and subversion that may well be necessary if modern social life is to work at all. To put this in another way, informality is not a relic of a non-bureaucratic way of life. Rather, the reverse is true: formality generates informality, and informality without a formal framework makes no sense (Jenkins 2004: 179-83). Thus formal policy, together with the law, bureaucracy and planning, creates informal unregulated spaces at the same time as it attempts to constrain them. The policy process sows the seeds of its own subversion (creating in the process, of course, a need to make further policy).

Finally, I want to suggest that everything that I have talked about in this paper 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 the iron-caged bureaucratisation of the world that Weber believed to be definitive of modernity (Hill 1993: 103-152), an insight that was subsequently developed in other directions by Foucault (Watson 2000). Whether or not modernity is actually as constrained and constraining as either of these perspectives would have us believe is, in detail, a discussion for another place and time. Suffice it to say here that, for reasons which have already been summarised, the policy process is uncertain in its outcomes, limited in its vision, partial in its scope, as inefficient as one might expect of any organisational process, and to some extent self-defeating: it is neither iron cage nor panopticon.
It is, however, a definitive discourse and practice of modernity. What is no less interesting is that its policy processes constitute a definitive aspect of modernity that has largely been neglected by recent social theorists. Policy is arguably the most fundamental intellectual technology to the organisational charters of the modern state and other organisations, contributing in important ways to how they operate, to their self-image, and to their identity in the eyes of their crucial audiences. No less than capitalism or industrialism, bureaucracy or science, the policy process is right at the centre of modernity.

**Anthropologists researching policy**

There cannot be an anthropologist working anywhere in the world today whose informants do not live in an institutional environment that is imbued through and through with policy processes. What’s more, anthropologists have increasingly been working in fields and on topics that are, in whatever senses, ‘policy-related’. This is a research trend that is only likely to grow in the future. Without wanting to break my own commandment and appear to encourage the creation of something called ‘the anthropology of policy’ – because what I am in fact suggesting is that all anthropology, no less than all sociology, should be thoroughly mindful of policy and policy processes – it is better that research of this kind should be done from a position of more rather than less conceptual clarity. That this is also more generally important, if only to remedy a current neglect, can be seen from three relatively recent texts on political anthropology, none of which pays any attention to policy processes (Gledhill 1994; Lewellen 1992; Vincent 1990).

So, 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? The most important implication is that *anthropologists – or*
indeed any other ethnographic researchers – should never treat policy as just part of the backdrop, merely as the frame within which the really interesting stuff happens. To do so will lead to interesting questions and issues being overlooked, and a lop-sided view of human experience in the modern world.

Beyond this, the policy process itself 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; these representations and this process can be investigated locally, as can the articulation between national and local representations and frameworks of meaning.
- Policy processes are, at least in large part, a matter of the relationship between doctrine and representations, on the one hand, and courses of action, on the other. 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 an ethnographic approach gives us access to; policy formulation and implementation are thoroughly implicated in each other, and should be treated as such.
- 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 an intentional goal. Ethnography is perhaps the best method we have for studying the tacit and the emergent.

• Finally, there is a long 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.

To sum up, we live in a modern world shaped by policy and policy processes. So do our informants, whether they are the few remaining hunter-gatherers or millionaire executives. Policy processes are not an optional extra, in our lives or theirs. And, if we are to do justice to those lives, they are not an optional extra for anthropology.
References


