P295 / Public Policy and Dramaturgy

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

Chair : Philippe Zittoun (ENTPE - LAET - University of Lyon)

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Third Chair : Jennifer Dodge (Rockefeller College, University at Albany)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The aim of the panel is to discuss the way they use dramaturgy to grasp public policy and the policy process and to explain what dramaturgy allows them to understand about policy making that other approaches miss.

Policy scholars have long drawn on dramaturgy to understand public policy and the policy process. However, the way they understand policy as a drama and deploy dramaturgical concepts like narrative or plot to policy analysis are very different. For some, drama is a metaphor that helps describe political life and policy process as staged. For others it is a method for analyzing rhetoric, symbols and emotions in political and policy speech. Dramaturgy can serve as an interpretive lens on how citizens narrate their encounters with authority, or a way to identity the dynamics of moral outrage, or a practice of intervention that uses theatre to transform who gets to decide.

This inspiration began early, with Kenneth Burke, who analyzed the vote on a law proposal as an “act” and studied the rhetorical strategies used by members of parliament to persuade others (Burke 1975). Cobb and Elder used dramaturgical metaphors to describe agenda-setting as a staged drama (Cobb and Elder 1972) . Merelman explored the “dramatic nature of ideology,” while Edelman famously evoked the “political spectacle” (Merelman 1969; Edelman 1985) . Joseph Gusfield analyzed the policy process through a dramaturgical lens, identifying two levels of social life: one in which society is spoken about and defined, and another consisting of social activities (Gusfield 1981, 18) . The success of dramaturgical metaphors continued to shape policy studies after the 1980s. Notably, Martijn Hajer (2005) used dramaturgy to analyze policy processes as “sequences of staged performances of conflict and conflict resolution.”

In recent years, it is fascinating to see how dramaturgical elements are used in so many different approaches to policy studies. We find it in the positivist perspectives that focus attention on the definition of the problem or with the recent development of the Narrative Policy Framework, and also in the constructivist and interpretative perspectives where attention to discourse and narrative is always central. Rather than opposing these perspectives, it is interesting to highlight that the way they use dramaturgy corresponds more or less to two different traditions of the dramaturgy in the social sciences.

The first tradition views public policy as a drama expressed through the stories it conveys and the frames it produces, which affect a broader audience, the public. Klapp (2017, 1962) suggested that policy can be read as a theatrical monologue, with dramaturgy helping us to interpret “heroes, villains, and fools.” Edelman developed this idea, showing how politicians construct problems to justify solutions and legitimize themselves as “incredible leaders” (Edelman 1988). For Gusfield, policy discourse appears as a fictional or illusory narrative in which society is presented as definable, predictable, and under government control (Gusfield 1989) . Following Goffman, public policy is thus understood through its capacity to frame meaning for its audience. These perspectives inspired important concepts such as Deborah Stone’s “causal stories,” Emery Roe’s “narratives,” Frank Fischer’s *Framing Public Policy* , Maarten Hajer’s “policy drama” and Zittoun’s “policy statement (Fischer 2003; Stone 1989; Hajer and Oomen 2025; Zittoun 2014; Kuenzler et al. 2025) .” The narrative policy framework also belongs to this tradition, with its structured approach to exploring narrative form through categories and plots (Jones and McBeth 2010). From this perspective, public policy is seen as a drama/story/narrative that not only defines the society where problems are solved and order restored, but also legitimizes certain actors or coalitions that intervene to ‘solve’ the problem.

The second tradition considers the policy process itself as a performance, analyzing policymakers as actors playing roles, and their interactions as a succession of staged scenes. Inspired by Goffman’s analysis of everyday life and Durkheim’s notion of ritual, this approach emphasizes the role as a “pre-established model of action developed during a performance,” and the “social façade” as a “collective representation” of the role—even when individuals distance themselves from it (Goffman 1990). From this micro-perspective, policymaking can be studied as a plurality of scenes in which actors display their skills and adapt their roles to different contexts. While Goffman did not study policy processes directly, he examined meetings and conferences, highlighting their performative dimensions (Goffman 1981) . Other scholars have tied these ideas more directly to political and policy analysis. For example, Edelman (1998) depicted politicians as

actors performing a spectacle, Alexander (2010) applied dramaturgy to presidential elections, Hajer (2005) analyzed “deliberative dramaturgy,” where the process sets its own rules, and Hendriks et al. (2016) emphasized the role of media in shaping political performance. This tradition ties in with the recent work on rituals, ritualistic visual narratives and the vast array of studies on emotions and policy processes (Baele and Balzacq 2022; Durnová 2019; Pierce 2021; Salgó 2017).

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite different policy scholars coming from different perspectives to discuss the way they use dramaturgy to grasp public policy and the policy process and to explain what dramaturgy allows them to understand about policy making that other approaches miss. We welcome theoretical, empirical or methodological papers to answer to the following questions: What concepts do they use from dramaturgy and how do they define them? Beyond the concepts inspired by dramaturgy, how do they use the knowledge about drama to better grasp the discourses and the performance of the multiples actors involved in the policy process? Is dramaturgy a form of knowledge, a metaphor, a method or a lens and how do they epistemologically justify using this perspective? We therefore invite each contribution to show what becomes visible only through a dramaturgical lens, and what would be lost without it.

In this panel, we engage authors to discuss five dimensions associated with dramaturgy and their application to public policy:

· **Scripting**: How do authors define dramaturgical concepts like "script", "story", "narrative", "drama", "plot", and how do they use dramaturgical knowledge to analyze public policy as a structure organized into scenes and acts? What makes a sequence of events a plot rather than a mere succession of events or activities, and what work do peripeteia, reversal and denouement do in a policy process? Does the ordering of scenes explain something that a causal chain does not — a scene that cannot occur until another has made it practicable?

· **Acting**: How do authors define "actor", "player", "character", "role", "agent", "agency", and how do these concepts help grasp the attitudes, behaviors and emotions of the individual and collective actors involved in the story? What room for maneuver does an actor have with respect to the role, and where does role distance come from? How do role-taking and role-making articulate, and can a collective entity like a government be an actor, or only a character?

· **Staging**: How do authors define "stage", "setting", "frontstage", "backstage", "venue", and how do these concepts help understand the complexity of the policy process and its multiple arenas? What counts as access to the backstage, and does a retrospective account of a closed meeting give us its fabrication or only its later reconstruction? Is the backstage the hidden reverse of the performance, or the very site where the frontstage is built?

· **Performing**: How do authors define "performance", "enactment", "staging" as an act, and how does this perspective illuminate the distance between script, role and performance? How does a performance succeed, fail, or produce unintended consequences its author did not seek? What holds the rhetorical and the performative together, and what happens when they come apart when what is said and what is enacted are decoupled?

· **Audiences and uptake**: How do authors define "audience", "public", "spectator", and how is an audience constituted rather than merely addressed? A drama seeks to forge its public, while the public's uptake gives the drama its force. However, uptake can also be withheld, deflected or turned down. Does disjointed uptake represent an audience refusing the role a policy drama assigns it, the counter-performance that breaks a script, the performance taken up by publics who never witnessed it, an accident at the margin of the analysis, or the point at which the political character of a performance becomes legible?