P238 / The Politics of Public Policy: Governing in Critical Perspective

Topic : Politics, Institutions and Political Regimes

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

Second Chair : Frank Fischer (Humboldt University in Berlin)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel proposes to discuss the complex relationship between policy and politics and to highlight the important contribution of Frank Fischer, who challenged the dominant idea that policy analysis, even that which claims rationality and apolitical objectivity is and remains a political activity. Following Habermas' analysis of "science and technology as ideology," this perspective challenges the positivist theories of policy analysis, including those of the policy process, to offer a better understanding of the art and craft of governing people and society.

Coming back to the origins of the discipline, Lasswell was one of the first authors to clearly distinguish policy from politics. He explained how "the word 'policy' is commonly used to designate the most important choices made (…) [and] is free of many of the undesirable connotations clustered about the word political" (Lasswell, 1951, p. 5), and he proposed to clearly distinguish "policy sciences" from "what is studied by political science, the term in common use for academic teachers and writers about government" (p. 4). This intention to distinguish the two concepts was largely developed during this period. Dahl and Lindblom, in their book Politics, Economics and Welfare (1953), highlighted how "reform depends not upon our choice among mythical grand alternatives but largely upon choice among particular social techniques" (p. 6). This distinction between policy and politics was particularly influential in the development of policy studies and policy analysis. It echoes two main but different conceptualizations of the relationship between policy and politics.

The first understanding is grounded in an ontological distinction between politics and public policies. It posits a fundamental difference in nature between the political system (politics) and the public policy system (policies). The second understanding shifts from an ontological to an epistemological distinction. It maintains the autonomy of the political system but does not consider public policies as inherently apolitical; rather, they are susceptible to politicization. Since the publication of The Argumentative Turn and specifically the work of Frank Fischer, the critical perspective has rejected both the ontological separation of systems and the epistemological distinction between political and non-political objects. Instead, it posits that public policies are ontologically political. From this perspective, the very processes of designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies are political activities. Authors such as Maarten Hajer (1995), Carol Bacchi (2009), and Fischer and Forester (1993) argue that policy processes are inherently normative, contested, and power-laden. Policy design is not a neutral act of problem-solving but a political process involving the imposition of certain values, priorities, and worldviews over others. Drawing on Habermas's work on "science and technology as ideology," Fischer highlights that this claim to neutrality is essentially a political manipulation strategy used by experts to impose their positions.

The aim of this panel is to discuss this political dimension of policy and to better understand the consequences of this perspective for the study of the policy process. A "public policy" is not simply "what the government chooses to do," to follow Thomas Dye, but is first and foremost the way government defines the society it wants to intervene in, shapes legitimate discourse, defines the problems it wants to consider and solve, structures the social categories it wants to recognize, distributes values, distinguishes what behavior is "normal" and must be encouraged from what is not and must be sanctioned, identifies the "representative" actors it wants to negotiate with and on what terms, domesticates behavior, and designs the promising future it wants to build.

Public policy is both what government acts for and how it acts to shape this division of society (the domain), reduce uncertainty, distribute social roles, structure human and non-human behaviors, identify beneficiaries (winners) and culprits (losers), and design a future world order. It is also the way government defines itself as the entity capable of managing problems, establishing order, reducing uncertainty, acting on society, modifying its future, and legitimizing itself. In other words, policy is the way through which government exists, defines itself, and shapes its legitimacy. It is not the government as a substantial entity on one hand and what it does on the other; it is an entity that exists because it acts.

Conversely, public policy is also the way individuals construct and structure their own relationship with the

State and society. Policy is at once the way government seeks to domesticate human and non-human behavior and the way individuals structure their own agency within the constraints imposed by government. This relationship is never simply what government expected, nor is it nothing. It impacts behavior, but usually never as anticipated, provoking a permanent transaction between State and society.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel seeks to explore the multiple political dimensions of policy and welcome contribution to challenge the distinction between policy and politics and participate to one of the major contributions of the critical perspective in policy studies: understanding public policy as an inherently political concept.

Since the emergence of policy analysis and policy studies, many scholars have treated "policy" as fundamentally distinct from "politics," thereby justifying their academic contribution as the pursuit of optimal solutions to social problems. With the rise of critical perspectives since the 1990s, and Frank Fischer's work in particular, this distinction has been challenged. Arguing, analyzing, designing, and implementing public policy are always political activities, best understood through the lens of power, government, and domination.

The contribution have to explore how a "policy-as-politics" perspective is particularly suited to grasping contemporary challenges shaking today's societies: deep uncertainty, institutional disorder, the rise of populism, climate obstruction, and democratic erosion. It offers a timely reappraisal of what it means to govern through public policy.

The contribution can contribute to addresses one of the several key questions that are crucial for understanding contemporary governance.

- How do governments use public policy to construct the very problems they claim to solve?

- How the formulation of public policy need to be considered as political definition with winner and looser, unequal distribution of values and legitimization of the government ?

- How public policy can be considered as the ordering relationship between State and Society ?

- How do technical instruments and expert knowledge serve to political choices and power relations?

- How can citizens and marginalized groups contest dominant policy frameworks and reclaim the political nature of decisions that affect their lives?

- And how does the depoliticization of policy contribute to democratic disenchantment, populist backlash, and the erosion of public trust in institutions?

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By engaging with these questions, the contribution can be theoretical, methodological and/or also empirical.