The politicality of problem structuring.

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0. Introduction.

Starting from insights in problem structuring by Hoppe (2011) and Turnbull & Hoppe (2018), this paper addresses the workshop proposers' questions 2 (different actors and power relations in problem structuring) and 3 (impacts on solution strategies). For the workshop, its intention is to facilitate a reflexive and comparative discussion on cross-paper issues.

The first section sets out the basic principles and concepts of problem structuring theory. Problem-structuring impacts on policy *action* by way of two intertwined, entangled and mutually dependent sub-processes: (1) in probing or puzzling, problem-structuring moves between higher and lower problematicity; and (2) in instigation or powering, problem-structuring reduces or enlarges the political distance between actors. From a depoliticized or epistemized vantage point, problem structuring is about probing or puzzling for a shared perception and appreciation of reality. From a political vantage point, problem structuring is about instigation and powering for sufficient political cooperation or support (not necessarily: agreement) to decide on one course for collective action.

Section two briefly explores how these basic insights work out in problem-structuring in the different functions of the policy process (Dunn, 2018), resp. agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation and evaluation. Also, attention will focus on which (types of) actors or policy workers are involved, in political or depoliticized ways, in the different functions of problem structuring (problem sensing/gestation, problem exploration/categorization, problem diagnosis/ decomposition, problem definition/political choice).

A normative concluding section is devoted to the crucial role of modes of problem-structuring for sustainable governance and democratic and right-of-law based politics.

1. Basics about problem processing as problem structuring.

There is something weird and enigmatic about the term 'wicked problems'. All methodology handbooks in the social sciences prefer, if not prescribe, the use of neutral, descriptive terms when defining a concept. From this perspective, the emergence and recent overwhelming popularity of the concept of 'wicked problems' is an enigma. Rittel and Webber (1973) 'discovered' that urban planning problems compared to problems of engineering or architecture had different properties - they were not 'tame' or solvable but 'wicked' or unsolvable, also in the moral sense of the word: 'malignant', 'evil', 'aggressive'. Far from descriptive and neutral, they chose a cognitivist and moral way of describing these problems (Haidt, 2013): if, from a cognitive vantage point, problems were merely resolved (contained within acceptable limits), dissolved (redefined or lowered in priority) or absolved (temporarily settled, but accepted as never going away), they were, from a moral perspective, just 'bad' or 'wicked' (Mitroff and Silver, 2010:38-39). Yet, they were not speaking of persistent ineliminable horrors like famines, the arms race, gendered violence, nuclear self annihilation, poverty, totalitarian regimes, endemic torture practices, mass murders and religious wars. They were simply comparing problems in the social world to

problems in mathematics or engineering, Rittel & Webber (1973, pp. 161–167) summed up the properties inherent in 'wicked problems' in a definition with ten propositions:

Proposition 1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
Proposition 2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
Proposition 3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.
Proposition 4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
Proposition 5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and error,every attempt counts significantly.
Proposition 6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or exhaustively desirable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
Proposition 7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
Proposition 8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
Proposition 9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
Proposition 10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

In 'discovering' 'wicked problems' Rittel and Webber overlooked that such problems had been recognized already in systems thinking, business administration, political science and public administration, and the policy sciences. These different perspectives had demonstrated important socio-cognitive and non-moral aspects of 'wicked problems: problematicity, and politicality. In earlier work the authors have proposed a way of conceptualizing activities dealing with public (policy) problems which reaches across the socio-cognitive, relational and political aspects all at once. Hoppe summarized this approach as 'the governance of problems' (2010, 2011); Turnbull as 'the questioning theory of policy practice (2013). These two approaches are clearly complementary.

At its most general philosophical and ontological level, human beings are not primarily 'homo cogitans' but 'homo respondens' (Hoppe, 2010), continuously engaged in practices of questioning and answering about Self, Other and World, in different spheres and domains of their existence on this planet. The questioning/answering practices generate continual and ever-changing notions and beliefs and expectations of what is normal and what remains problematic. When things are considered normal, the questioning temporarily peters out and the answer(s) gel in codified knowledge, strong habits and institutionalized rules and standards of conduct. But new events and surprises never fail to reignite the questioning and all the seemingly solid answers may turn 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000) when re-problematized. In this problematological perspective (Meier, 1995; Turnbull, 2014) human existence is the ceaseless oscillation between strong and weak answers to the questions and problems posed to human beings by being thrown into life on this earth. The questioning-answering pattern is a 'social fractal' that repeats itself on any scale of human communication and action – individuals, families, personal networks, villages, networks, urban areas, small and large organizations, professional, issue, national, international and even global networks.

To be useful in policy studies, this grounding anthropological-philosophical view must be grafted on the way policy workers go about their business or day-to-day practices in the domain of speaking, communicating and acting together about collective or political problems. Referring to historical etymological analyses in the Anglosphere, the word 'policy' emerged as designating actions by governors, leaders or other action-initiating actors who govern, i.e. use political, state and/or governmental powers to start and organize collective action (Hoppe, 2019). Most political actions or practices aim at *'policy' as an answer to questions of collective action*. Specifically ,as an answer to questions about collective action,

a policy is "a (1) commitment to (2) a designated goal or course of action, (3) made authoritatively on behalf of a given entity or collectivity, and (4) accompanied by guidelines for its accomplishment" (Orren and Skowronek, 2017: 27). In the scientific literature, 'policy' is a fuzzy and politically contested concept that embraces at least five root metaphors or meanings that may pop up in different configurations in different contexts (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018: 3-5; 475): policy as governmental choice or decision (ad 1 and 3 in Orren & Skowronek's definition), as ordering through documentation (ad 3), as practice(s) and as body of expertise (both ad 4). As pinnacle of modernist thinking about governing, policy intimates well-deliberated problem solving (ad 2 and 4). At least since the beginnings of the 20th century it is phenomenologically warranted to see 'politics' as 'political struggle over policies' in any of these five meanings. We return to the politics – policy relationship later at the end of this section.

In its most general sense, problems are about questions concerning a gap, divide or rift between Is and Ought and answers – not or not yet: 'solutions' – on how to bridge or narrow this divergence. From an epistemological point of view, problems are hybrids because in the conceptual container of 'problem' they assemble and connect what should be kept separate: perceptions and images of what Is (or was in the past or will be in the future) from judgments on what Ought to be, ideally or in the future. To trigger (collective) action, problems need processing through mental effort by and communicative action between humans. Problems and thus policy problems, therefore, are always socio-cognitive constructions. Problems are not 'objects' or 'things' or properties inherent to 'states of the world'. They are judgments about situations by human beings – in politics and public policymaking, they are political judgments by political actors and policy workers. And, explicitly or implicitly, such judgments in problem processing are (collective) action-oriented, suggesting proper ways to act in response to a problematic situation.

In launching the idea of a policy science(s), as distinct from political science or public administration, Lasswell (1951) chose, not power (as in political science) or organizations and institutions (like in public administration), but (public) *problems as the pivotal and organizing concept* for this (then) innovative disciplinary field. Obviously, Lasswell shared Lindblom's insight that policy workers are less moved by the goals they aspire to than the problems they want to move away from (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). He posited seven 'decisional functions' as comprising the set of mental operations humans deploy in dealing with problems: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. Later scholars stylized (and misinterpreted, see Dunn, 2018) these functions in all kinds of variants and elaborations of a policy cycle or stages theory of the policy process. In so doing, Lasswell and his successors took a *cognitivist turn*, which equates public policymaking to problem solving on behalf of a collective (Turnbull, 2018). Although Rittel and Webber were urban planners, from a policy science perspective they firmly stood in this cognitivist tradition.

In public administration and organization studies, Simon (1973) had discussed the difference between 'ill-' and 'well-structured problems'. He proposed that for 'well-structured problems', it was possible to find a fail-safe problem-solution coupling, or a coupling of means and goals that for all practical purposes eliminates the problem once and for all. Solving the problem becomes doing an 'exercise', like in math. Moreover, Simon showed that such 'exercises' usually are not the result of 'eureka'-moments of a brilliant scientist or engineer. Rather, they come about through long-term social processes of ever refined problem decomposition and constraint sequencing by professionals and practitioners. Simon claimed that most problems are ill-structured – or 'wicked' – and the so-called 'well-structured' ones are already processed ill-structured ones, turned into quasi-exercises.

Problem processing, in Simon's view, is about problem structuring: bringing (partial) answers-as-constraints to bear on both aspects (the Is and the Ought) of the problem. The importance of Simon's distinction is that it alerts us to the variable *problematicity* of answers – i.e. the degree to which answers remain weak or problematic, their 'problematicalness' - as possible 'solutions' to problems. Well-structured problems, in the course of time, are transformed to learnable and teachable 'exercises' with zero or very low problematicity (Meyer, 2017: 83, 88; Turnbull, 2006). This means that the original problem or question is as good as suppressed and almost vanishes from consciousness; only the strong answer is highlighted and is supposed to put closure on any further questioning. High problematicity means that the answer or proposed solution is weak or partial, an invitation to revisit the original question or open it up to new ones.

Variable problematicity explains why Rittel and Webber can claim that here is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem, that they have no stopping rule, are not true-or-false, have no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution, and choice of explanation determines choice of solution. Hoppe (2010) has shown that is useful to specify *two aspects of problematicity*. One aspect regards the Is-part of the problem: there may be high or low degrees of certainty on relevant and available knowledge among people participating in processing a problem. Another aspect regards the Ought-part: there may be high or low agreement on norms, values, interests between people processing a problem. Synthesizing these two aspects of problematicity, one may distinguish between four ideal-typical types of problems (Hoppe, 2010:16, 73-75):
- fully structured problems (SP), with both high knowledge certainty and high norm agreement;
- fully unstructured problems (UP), with low or no knowledge certainty and high, conflicted and divisive disagreements on norms, etc.;
- moderately structured problems (MSP-uncertainty) with normative agreement but considerable uncertainty about knowledge, policy instruments and side effects; and
- moderately structured problems (MSP-ambivalence) with high knowledge and instrument certainty but continued value conflicts or paralyzing ambivalence.

The relational dimension of theories of problem structuring can be found implicitly present in previous work, even if it was not explicitly articulated in the way we have done it here. Most prominent, in business administration and systems thinking, Ackoff (1974) had noticed the occurrence of *'messes'*, in which no single problem can be singled out apart from its relation to a set of other problems of which it is part itself. What we call the climate problem these days, a 'super-wicked' problem (Lazarus, 2009), clearly is such a 'mess': however much you try to slice up the problem in sub-problems (sea level rise, global warming, CO_2 reduction, mitigation, adaptation, etcetera) the web of interdependencies remains undeniable. Another example would be the idea of 'sustainable development' as possible answer to the public's anxieties about undesirable trends of modernity, globalization, and fast technology change. Sustainable development as a problem is decomposed in the UN's formulation of sustainable development goals (SDG). Yet, policy design for SDGs remains a 'mess' which, at best, can be split in two 'messes' or 'nests' of sub-problems that nevertheless keep affecting each other (Sarkki, 2020: 10):

"The economic coalition capitalises… on No poverty (SDG 1), Zero hunger (SDG 2), Good health and well-being (SDG 3), Decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and Industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9). On the contrary, the environmental coalition sees that the earth system …prioritises Responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), Climate action (SDG 13), Life below water (SDG 14) and Life on Land (SDG 15)."

Even though he doesn't explicitly say so, Ackoff's concept of 'mess' brings out the relational character of problems. Rittel and Webber emphasize the problematicity of some problems

as 'wicked' because they are 'messy', i.e. 'solving' one problem affects all others in the 'mess': "Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem."

In political science, conceptualizing problems as any type of frustration in goal achievement, Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963:54-55) had also implicitly noted this relational character of problems when they spoke of problems in politics and administration as typically 'synthetic'. But they immediately add that this 'syntheticness' is implied because for people engaged in processing (public) problems "having a problem" immediately means a political claim on others, "on how they ought to think about our situation and how they ought to act" (Krieger, 1981:39-43). It is a claim on recognition and blame, and frequently an instigation for help and support in one's efforts for goal achievement: "'The problem' is in fact a cluster of interlocked problems with interdependent solutions. … a reconstruction of the problems of individuals and groups who are meeting frustration in pursuing their goals. …the problem is no longer a simple situation in which a goal is thwarted but an extremely complex adjustment-of-interests situation." The *politicality* of problems makes problem processing never-ending or continuous, and simultaneously highly flexible or unstable from one moment to the next. As Rittel and Webber say: "Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and error, every attempt counts significantly; and "every wicked problem is essentially unique."

Building upon the work of Lindblom (1990), Heclo (1974) and Wildavsky (1979), we posit that problem processing as problem structuring occurs as an inextricably intertwined, entangled dual-mode process of problem interrogation and relational negotiation. High or low problematicity on knowledge and normativity may be a cognitive process of *probing* (Lindblom, 1990) and/or *puzzling* (Heclo, 1974); but it is simultaneously a political process of *instigation* (De Jouvenel, 1963) and/or *powering* (Heclo, 1974). The cognitive process is well defined by Dunn (2007:6): "…the self-conscious search, analysis and evaluation of competing problem representations and problem framings, with a view to their possible *integration* and definition." A temporarily stable problem structure results from a cognitive process of judgment. The political process is captured in a description by Hisschemöller and Hoppe (2001): "…the political activity to produce information on divergent views of what the problem is about, with a view to a politically plausible *choice* of authoritative problem definition." The authoritative choice character of instigation and powering posits that a (temporarily) stable problem structure is not (only) a conclusion from a process of judgment, but as well or even more so from a process of political will formation. The distinction is important, because power, political will formation and decision making - as putting an end to cogitation and deliberation ('de-cidere') - is missing in most theorizing about problem processing and problem structuring. As mentioned above, the scholarly literature is strongly biased in favor of a cognitivist approach. Instigation and powering and participating result in political distances between policy actors. Such distances are created either through the tolerant politics of partisan adjustment, serial strategic analysis (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963) and compromise building through the negotiation of political distances (Snellen, 1984); or through the strong, 'raw' power politics of one-sided decision making, and forceful or even violent action (Schmitt, 1996).

Both processes, probing (or questioning) and instigation (or relational negotiation), lead to structuring, restructuring or destructuring problems. The two processes are intertwined and entangled because they feed on each other: clever policy ideas and proposals need the backing of political power for their realization in the world of action; political power needs at least some ideas and policy proposals for its own maintenance and continued domination. Despite this complementarity and mutual dependency, the *relationship between probing and instigation is asymmetrical* (Hoppe, 2010: 250-258). The 'dance partners' are not equal. The political tendency towards amassed and centralized power usually successfully exploits people's preoccupation with reputation management, group loyalties and the intellect's

tendency for complexity reduction and avoidance. Hence, problem structuring processes always have strong tendencies, almost like 'gravity', towards stabilizing and monopolizing structured problems: "It is almost impossible to exaggerate just how obsessed Western societies are with exercises and well-structured problems. We take it for granted that one doesn't really know something until one can reduce it to precise definitions and break it apart into supposedly independent problems" (Mitroff and Silvers, 2010, 41). In extreme but at present frequently occurring cases of populist and post-truth politics, this leads to spontaneously emerging or deliberately created wrong-problem problems (Hoppe, 2010:85-86) or serious mismatches between politically dominant problem definitions by powerholders or the government and alternative ones adhered to by other groups in society. Mitroff and Silvers (2010: 37-38) speak of "dirty rotten strategies" of deliberately "saying that a problem is well-structured when it is actually ill-structured." In our logic, we would say that problematicity has been repressed in the answer by strategic communication and power, rather than 'resolved' by controlled argumentative processes of rational analysis using scientific knowledge.

Because we see problems as social constructions, we reject the idea of 'wickedness' as a specific set of properties for a specific class of problems 'out there' in the 'real world'. We rather posit problem processing as continuous efforts at problem structuration; differently structured problems appear from the set of four potential types of problem structure as temporal and context-related phenomena. The same cluster or 'mess' of problems may now appear as unstructured, later as structured, and mostly in-between as modes of moderately structured problems. Problems have at best a temporarily stable structure, for as long as a dominant group or network of policy workers defines it as such. But surprises and power shifts break open stable problem structures and turn 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000) or 'punctuate' anything (True et al., 1999) that looked solid. Instead of ontologized or essentialized problems with fixed properties, socio-cognitive constructions of *problem structures change and are scalable* along the dimensions of problematicity, from structured to unstructured, and of politicality, from zero to very high distance. Provocatively, we could say that in our view we have 'normalized' the so-called 'wicked' problems: every thoroughly questioned and examined problematic situation may appear or becomes 'wicked', absent plausible cognitive procedures of problematicity reduction and legitimate political procedures for distance reduction.

One more important insight from the theory of problem structuring still needs mention. This is Skocpol's (1992:58) insight that "as politics creates policy, policies also remake politics". Schneider and Ingram (1997: 6) express the same idea: "…policy designs are a product of their historical context, but they also create a subsequent context with its own form of politics from which the next round of public policy will ensue." As problem structures stabilize over time, the political and organizational task environments for policy workers institutionalize in more or less stable *issue networks and their policy politics*: If policymaking is the intertwined combination of cogitation and interaction (Wildavsky, 1979) then policy politics is the combination of types of cognitive processes and styles of interaction characteristic for problem processing in an issue domain or policy subsystem (Hoppe, 2010: 121). Hoppe (2010, 130-143) has hypothesized that the four types of problem structure correlate with four types of issue networks and their type of policy politics:

- structured problems (SP) correspond to closed, institutionalized networks, where normal regulatory policy rules, implemented by professional communities;
- unstructured problems (UP) correspond to open, agonistic, emerging or decaying policy arenas characterized by leadership-driven populist politics, agonistic participation, conflict management and, at best, some haphazard variety/selection type of learning;

- moderately structured problems (MSP-uncertainty) with goal consensus but uncertainty on knowledge and policy instrument effectiveness have negotiation-driven advocacy coalition politics and/or problem-driven search processes;
- moderately structured problems (MSP-ambivalence) with divisive and conflicted ethical dilemmas correspond to designed but unstable issue networks characterized by efforts to create a transformative discourse coalition, and accommodation and conflict management strategies

This can be pictured as follows:

PROBLEMATICITY	POLITICALITY	POLICY POLITICS
Structured problems	Zero or low political distances	Rule and professional communities
Moderately structured, conflicted uncertainty but value agreement	Low to medium political distances	Stable advocacy coalition subsystems; negotiation and search
Moderately structured, no or low uncertainty but conflicted and divisive normative ambivalence	Medium to high political distances	Unstable issue networks, accommodation or conflict management
Unstructured ('wicked') problems	High and very high political distances	Unstable political arenas, 'follow the leader' and/ or ad-hoc experimental learning

2. Which (types of) policy workers influence problem structuring, when and how?

This paper's purpose is to explore problem structuring's political nature. In essence, this means answering the research question: Who participates, *as policy worker or analyst or as instigator*, when, why and with what influence in the governance of problems of a political system or a specific policy issue network or subsystem? (Hoppe, 2010) Policy action should 'make sense', i.e. policy as an answer should be an adequate response to a situation which is seen as problematic. But a shared understanding of what is problematic and what might be done about it is not a given: in modern hyper-pluralistic societies a policy problem is the temporary result of ongoing "coping with intractable controversies" (Schön and Rein, 1994). The policy problem is constructed and maintained in the face of a wide diversity of framings of the problem (Schön, 1983: 40; Hoppe, 2010: 59ff). And this is a continuous process of 'problematisation': what 'the problem' is, is never finished business, it remains a 'work in progress' forever (Colebatch and Hoppe, 2018:272); "a continuous process of stage setting, whereby the participation of certain actors and the exclusion of others as well as the place of certain lines of argument and of certain moves are contested and legitimized, essentially as *appropriate* for the drama in question" (Dery, 2018: 377).

This policy-scientific way of looking at problematization differs from the political-science way. Political science looks at the early formative stages of the political process to detect which political issues are selected for active governmental consideration, i.e. which of the myriads of problematic situations drawing attention in public opinion and public debates in civil society and the media are picked up by political parties and interest groups to be moved, in manageable 'chunks' or formats, to parliamentary debates and, finally, the policy and decision agenda of the government (Schattschneider, 1990; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994).

Dery (2018:278) correctly points out that putting an issue on the governmental agenda is not the same as authoritatively defining that problem. In political science, problem structuring does not stand on its own as a separate question; it is just part of another major problem: agenda setting as understanding the politics of issue selection. As issues arise only if something is at issue, and there is no issue if you cannot spark a public into existence (Marres, 2016), issue selection always is political in the sense of manipulating problem frames to achieve higher agenda status, increase chances for mobilizing public support or opposition (Stone, 1988) and future coalitions. Understandably, this is the overriding knowledge interest for election campaign managers and all others who advocate a particular political cause or stance. But it is quite different from the question by a policy analyst: once an issue has been recognized as meriting attention and placed on the decision agenda of a department or the cabinet, which from the many ways to think about the issue in question is the most appropriate one for effective, efficient governing action?

Dery (1984) emphatically states that the policy analyst searches, creates and examines *opportunities for improvement*. The policy analyst's question is not to politically imitate and express the wave of anger and fury of the #Metoo movement; it is how to translate this anger and fury into well-deliberated government steered policies and programs that result in measurably less sexual harassment. The policy analyst's task is to tame ethos (principles) and pathos (emotions, experiences) by logos (well-deliberated policy programs) (De Bruyn, 2019). That is why after the rough and only politics-dominated problem framing in agenda setting, during policy formulation the problem structuring process continues and results in a more deliberated, authoritative choice of problem definition (Hoppe et al, 1995; Hoppe, 2017; Hoppe, 2022). This authoritative choice, by the way, is not the result of policy analysis alone. Probing and deliberation are asymmetrically entangled with instigation and powering, not as in a chain, but as in a cable (Dery, 2018: 392). It means that those with governmental power will choose from the analytically plausible problem definitions the one that is closest to the one they politically wish and claim to 'solve' (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 1996).

That is why during implementation policy designs frequently harden into doctrines; and organizations involved become the rock solid, immovable bureaucratic answers to yesterdays' problems, resisting new questions and policy change. Nevertheless, during implementation and evaluation as well, choice of problem definition may prove to be less authoritative than intended (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1981). Top-down governance may be encroached and replaced, partially or entirely, by bottom-up policy actions (Hill and Hupe, 2022). Implementation practices and practitioners may overturn policy doctrine and veer into the direction of alternative problem definitions discussed and debated in new rounds of politics and policymaking. What happened in the past – an authoritative problem choice, institutionalization of an implementation infrastructure, monitoring and evaluating policy outputs and outcomes – creates a new 'baseline' for reconsidering older problems and contemplating new issues (Dery, 2018: 387).

What exactly happens during problem structuring, both from a probing and an instigation viewpoint? The way problems as socio-cognitive constructions come about is an extremely complex, fuzzy matrix or maze of simultaneous event streams in which questioning humans through long-winding iterations of new questions and partial, frequently erroneous, strong and weak answers find meaning and direction for (collective) action. The details of such intricate question-answer processes at the individual level remain largely in the dark, even for neuroscientists and psychologists. Yet, a few general insights form empirical work in this area at the cognitive level are plausible. First, psychologists tend to agreement on problem processing and arriving at (moral) judgments as a dual-mode process between 'fast' and 'slow' thinking (Kahneman, 2011). Fast intuitions describe the "seeing-that", automatic and uncomplicated judgments we make continuously in our everyday lives. Slow strategic thinking is the controlled process of "reasoning-why" that, usually but not always, provides

us with the elaborate post-hoc argumentative justification of our judgments: "…intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (Haidth, 2013). Second, in the process or journey of problem construction, from the vague experience of some discomfort to a clear idea about the gap between Is and Ought, *problem finding is as important as problem solving* or hitting on solutions. In Wildavsky's memorable words: policy analysis is crafting problems worth solving and learning from experience what we would prefer (Wildavsky,1979).

The jury is still out on whether this dual-mode process of intuitive problem finding and more reasoned problem solving is sequential or parallel. Our guess is that it is a densely hybrid series or 'garbage can'-like process (March and Olsen, 1976: 24-38) of rapidly changing interrogative functions or contexts where politically imposed time constraints 'produce' closure, in the sense of a (forced) political choice of problem definition (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 1996). After all, the motivational and cognitive process ought to be brought to closure - a cut-off point or de-cision enabling a switch from symbol processing (like in policy design and formulation) to real collective action or policy implementation. In our experience, Cowan's distinctions between the interrogative functions in problem finding and problem solving are usable for policy studies (Cowan, 1986; applied in Hoppe, 2017; Turnbull & Hoppe, 2018).

First comes the function of *problem sensing and problem gestation*. Situations are experienced as 'problematic' because they are undesirable somehow, even when we have only intuitive, emotion- and unease-driven notions of why we dislike them or a hodgepodge of anecdotes and impressions to describe that 'situation'. Questions about what is 'undesirable' and what the 'situation' really is like, get partial and weak answers. In problem sensing, political and policy actors who appeal to emotions, analogies and unverified, 'beer-mat' stories dominate. Problem sensing easily lends itself to sometimes irresponsible instigation. It is the favorite terrain for public opinion pollsters, campaign strategists, journalists, internet and media 'influencers' and quite a few populist politicians. It easily trumps more thoughtful probing. But probing also occurs by investigative journalists, citizen science activists and sensitizing scientists (like Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* or Donella Meadows in *Limits to Growth*). Usually, it takes time for more articulate and cogent ideas about the problematic gap to develop.

In that sense there is a gestation period before the problem processing journey can move to the other function: *problem categorization and exploration*. In this interrogative context questions gain in focus and partial and weak answers to questions about desirability and the situation get stronger. The norms and values at stake in desirability judgments and events and the facts of the situation are mapped more precisely by applying more specific operational norms and descriptive categories. This functional context is the favorite playground of policy workers in the problem stream (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2014). NGO's, well organized citizen associations, government- or corporation-sponsored think tanks, commercial consultants and professional or scientific communities devoted to monitoring specific social, economic or cultural trends, and even disgruntled policy implementors (organizers, fixers, street-level bureaucrats) may delve into specific policy issues of particular interest to them; and come up with thorough studies, 'muckraking' journalism, 'black books' or attention-grabbing campaigns. The first policy entrepreneurs may try their luck in coupling solutions to problems or problems to solutions. And even some institutional entrepreneurs may try to steer emerging problem-solution couplings in the direction of their preferred political or organizational venues. Problems are framed and categorized, but only tentatively without necessarily having sufficient intellectual weight or political support for accepting and endorsing the standards used as basis for strong policy advocacy. In this way the problematic situation is explored from the perspective of more than one specific category. In that sense the answers to the problem get stronger and louder than

in problem sensing and gestation, but they remain partial and weak in the sense of exploratory and open.

A third function moves the question-answer process towards unambiguous *problem diagnosis and decomposition* in supposedly solvable sub-problems. Now the 'usual suspects' of political and policy action in the 'solution stream' (Kingdon, 1995, Zahariadis, 2014)) openly enter the arena. In probing, expert government officials and experts from well-respected think tanks or advisory bodies start advocating strong problem-solution couplings. Ministers and high-level civil servants start announcing and preparing specific policy documents for well-defined policy issues. The prominent probing activities are complemented by the instigation work of spin-doctors, speech writers and behind-the-scenes policy and institutional entrepreneurs. In the previous stages the problematic situation was disentangled in a series of clear gaps; now one or more of these gaps or sub-problems are further analyzed to demonstrate they are potentially solvable or 'bridgeable' by choosing the 'correct' policy instruments and 'operational' objectives. Questions about norms and values now get stronger answers, preferably by ethicists and legal experts, even if they are compromises backed by different political influences. Questions about the situation and policy instruments remain contested even though experts from different professions (economists, public administration scientists, engineers, social workers, etc.) try to impose their preferred solutions.

The process is brough to (temporary) closure by *choice of problem definition,* persuasively showing that all or some sub-problems have doable, effective and efficient solutions. Or merely politically imposing a partial or symbolic solution, perhaps playing for more time when the political climate has 'ripened'. It is important to stress the choice- or decisional character of this interrogative function. To shift from cognition and judgment (probing) or appeal and inspiration (instigation) to action, requires the implicit or explicit performance of an act of will or decision. In this way a problem of (collective) action or policy problem gets an *authoritatively deliberated and willed policy* as an answer: a (1) commitment to (2) a designated goal or course of action, (3) made authoritatively on behalf of a given entity or collectivity, and (4) accompanied by guidelines for its accomplishment" (Orren and Skowronek, 2017).

We are now able to propose a method of answering the question, "Which (types of) policy workers influence the problem structuring process of a political regime or issue network when and how?" The method we propose is through the construction of a heuristic matrix of 'search fields', i.e. conceptually suggested 'fields' where the politics of problem structuring may be potentially observed and studied. The horizontal axis is conceptualized, as explained above, as the four functions or interrogative contexts of mental operations during problem processing as problem structuring (Cowan, 1986): (1) problem sensing and gestation, (2) problem exploration and categorization, (3) problem decomposition and diagnosing, and (4) problem definition and political choice. Above we have also explained why it would be wrong to limit problem structuring, like in political science, to the stage of agenda setting. Problem structuring may go on and cover all sub-processes or functions of the policy process: (1) agenda setting, (2) policy design and formulation, (3) policy adoption through decision making, (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation. Remember that all these functions may occur in the cognitivist-analytic guise of probing/puzzling or the socio-politicized dress of instigation/powering.

Using this matrix, 5 x 4 x 2 = 40 theoretically possible search fields are identified, to be empirically observed, explored and studied. On each of these search fields different types of policy workers may influence the problem structuring process. This was also hypothetically discussed as we set out Cowan's model of problem structuring functions or interrogative contexts. There are many ways of categorizing policy workers and no exhaustive list is

pretended here.[1] We basically follow and elaborate on Kingdon's (1995) idea to distinguish between policy workers that are most visible (6 types) and less or invisible (7 types) to the public or electorate.

Visible participants (6 types):

(Minister) President and Cabinet members

prominent Members of Parliament

(Supreme) Court judges

high-level civil servants

peak organization leaders/spokespersons

media pundits

Less or invisible participants (7 types):

mid-level civil servants as policy analysts

policy and/or institutional entrepreneurs, metagovernors

think-tank/consultancy-based policy advisors or specialists (data collection, analysis, modelling)

implementors (organizers, 'fixers', street-level bureaucrats)

evaluators, inspectors

speech writers, spin-doctors, public opinion pollsters, (election) campaign strategists

written and social media editors, journalists, prominent bloggers and 'influencers'

POLICY PROCESS FUNCTIONS		POBLEM STRUCTURING FUNCTIONS		
	Sensing/gestation	Categorization/exploration	Diagnosis/decomposition	Authoritative choice
agenda setting	XXXX	XXXX	X	
formulation/design		XXXX	XXX	X
adoption/ decision making			XXXX	XXXX
implementation	XX	XX	XXXX	
evaluation		XX	XXX	

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[1] One obvious alternative to differentiating to policy worker type would have been the multilevel institutional logic of local – regional – national – international – supranational/global governance institutions.

POLICY WORKERS				
visible	X	XX	XXXX	XXXX
less/invisible	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	

Legenda: the number of X's indicates a rough estimate of relative influence on problem structuring.

The distribution of policy worker types over the problem structuring functions per policy process function (or interrogative context) is, of course, speculative. It merely expresses our hunch that the less visible policy workers do more of intuition-driven problem structuring work, and the more visible ones get active during the more reason-driven functions. This resonates with the general impression that policy is more about problem solving and decision making than about problem finding and framing. Hoppe and Colebatch (2018:488-489) have argued that the account of policymaking as problematization looks less substantial than the authoritative choice and the structured interaction accounts because 'there is nothing to see here'. The authoritative choice account of policy action is built around the drama and rituals of very public figures and the structured interaction account around the less public, but still visible practices of the broad array of policy workers in their organizations and institutions. The problematization account focuses on the mentalities, moral undercurrents, tipping points in public attitude shifts ('Zeitgeist') that made the action necessary and valid. Problematization is about the genealogy of govern-mentalities (Foucault) and the ways they reveal themselves in the policymaking process. Once explicitly coped with as problems with variable problematicity and political distance, after an authoritative choice of problem definition, problematization gives way to processes of normalization, routinization and legitimation in the structured and institutionalized interaction between policy workers during policy implementation. The three primary accounts of the policy process – as authoritative choice, structured interaction, and problematization – work in conjunction. Policy draws on all of them, but in different ways at different times.

3. Politics and respect for ambiguity

Desperate about the erosion of his authority, Dutch Prime-Minster Rutte, in violation of codes for parliamentary speech, on 22 September 2011 allowed himself to exclaim, "Act normally yourself!" against MP Geert Wilders, the most prominent right-wing populist and cunning debater in the Dutch parliament. The heated verbal encounter illustrates well that our times are 'interesting' as the Chinese say. We live in an 'interregnum' in which the old is not yet dead and the new not yet born (Gramsci). Turnbull (2014) has argued that this is why problematization has become such a widespread political phenomenon. Normalization is under constant attack by left- or right-wing radical and populist politicians. They continuously launch attacks on the socio-political construction of facts by judging them incomplete, biased, misleading or even an outright set of lies; they similarly undermine values as incomplete, one-sided, wrong, or unjust in principle; they throw comparative links between Is-facts and Ought-values itself in doubt as illogical, irrelevant, non-plausible, nonsensical or hypocrite (Pomerantsev, 2019; Haidt, 2022).

The resistance against populist and post-truth politics is understandable. Having contributed, against the odds even in conditions of normal politics, to the delicate fabric of problem definitions accepted by a political majority, why should politicians be modest about their

achievement? Why not resist cheap and sordid but often effective efforts at deconstruction and reframing as wrong-headed, even malicious? Bringing about only temporarily stable problem definitions is a precondition for governing as problem-solving effort. Yet, there is a danger in hanging on at all costs to whatever problem definition consensus has been achieved. And there is more to it than the danger of hanging on to power for power's sake.

In setting out the notion of problem processing as problem structuring, Cowan introduced the notions of 'problem sensing' and 'problem gestation'. Trying to describe these notions, one could say that these are conditions where people cannot yet find the right words or concepts to clearly express their feeling of unease or discomfort with a problematic situation. Emotions, hunches, suspicions, feelings of inchoateness, hidden causalities and distrust of hidden actors run ahead of the resources of language, knowledge and judgment to generate sufficient clarity of understanding as a platform for more focused questioning, let alone answering. Problem gestation is a notion which suggests that problem sensing as wandering around a problematic situation without quite making sense of it, may take considerable amounts of time. It is under these conditions of lingering ambiguity and ambivalence that pressing forward impatiently to an authoritative problem definition for state action is politically dangerous. It leads to wrong-problem problems (Hoppe, 2010:85) or serious mismatches between the effectively dominant problem 'definition' and alternative problem frames alive among other groups in society. Frequently this is not an 'error' in the intellectual sense of the word. They occur due to what Flyvbjerg (1998:225-236) has called the political 'rationality of power'.

What is needed in such circumstances is respect for ambiguity and ambivalence. The idea is to keep "alive that which might otherwise be killed by the weight of authority or necessity"; and allow "to unsettle dimensions of the common life that have assumed a fixed character and to achieve a temporary settlement in areas where a common decision is needed but the resources of knowledge and (political, rh & nt) procedure are insufficient to resolve the issue" (Connally, 1989:141). In the right doses, problematization and normalization, problem finding and problem solving, taken together and in the right sequence, may account for the ways in which a society lives and gradually renews its values and visions of the good life. Understood as the conversion of moral dilemmas and controversies that cannot be solved, into problems that can be resolved, over and over again, a democratic politics of problem processing and structuring appears as the dominant way in which a We emerges and how in this We people learn how to live together peacefully (Dery, 2018). Through participation in this process, ideally, a 'phantom public' of citizens as spectators or bystanders could turn itself into communities of destiny with capacity for policy agency.

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