# T08P05 / Foundational Works in Public Policy Studies: Harold D. Lasswell

**Topic :** T08 / POLICY DISCOURSE AND CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

**Chair :** Eve Seguin (Université du Québec à Montréal )

**Second Chair :** Nick Turnbull (University of Manchester)

**Third Chair :** Guy Lachapelle (Concordia University)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Harold D. Lasswell is a founding scholar of public policy studies. The programme of *policy sciences* he developed in the 1940s and 1950s is widely regarded as the founding act of the field. The seven-stage policy process he conceptualized in 1956 subsequently led to a number of models, with the five-stage policy cycle still in use today in spite of successive waves of criticism. His lifelong commitment to interdisciplinarity has become a major concern in contemporary political science. And recently, his work even found echoes in unexpected quarters such as Science & Technology Studies.

However, Lasswell's work has influenced quite different trajectories in policy studies and the legacy of his thought is unclear. On the one hand, it is analytical in important respects, for example in the stages model of the policy process and the scientific conception of problem solving in public policymaking. But on the other hand, critical policy analysts have drawn on Lasswell's concern for human values and his origins in American pragmatist philosophy to build upon his ideas to develop a more process-oriented, interpretive vision of policymaking that is opposed to positivist and analytical frameworks in policy theory.

Given these alternative uses of Lasswell's thought, and set in the larger context of the retreat from government to governance, this is a good time to evaluate the work of this founding scholar in order to determine the relevance of his ideas and to reflect upon the trajectory of the policy sciences.

The aim of the panel is to revisit Lasswell in order to deepen our understanding of his work and testify to its enduring influence, even for those who seek to distance themselves from his approach(es). More specifically, our goals are to:

- Situate his work in the historical context of pragmatism and behavioralism in the United States.
- Re-examine or critically re-evaluate his key works and studies.
- Assess which aspects of his work remain relevant for the study of contemporary political phenomena.
- Further develop his ideas for the theory and practice of public policy, for instance the use of the hard sciences in policy analysis, the problem orientation, and the divide between academia and policy practice.
- Apply his categories and insights in studies in many subfields of political science such as public policy studies, policy sciences, political power, political communication and propaganda, political psychology, and political theory.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

We are seeking presenters for a panel on Harold D. Lasswell.

Papers are welcome that situate Lasswell's work in the historical context of pragmatism and behavioralism in the United States; re-examine or critically re-evaluate his key works and studies; assess which aspects of his work remain relevant for the study of contemporary political phenomena; further develop his ideas for the theory and practice of public policy, for instance the use of the hard sciences in policy analysis, the "problem orientation", and the divide between academia and policy practice; or apply his categories and insights in studies in many subfields of political science such as public policy studies, policy sciences, political power, political communication and propaganda, political psychology, and political theory.

Paper proposals that do not fit neatly in any of the above goals are also welcome and will be given proper consideration.

# T08P05 / Foundational Works in Public Policy Studies: Harold D. Lasswell

**Chair :** Eve Seguin (Université du Québec à Montréal )

**Second Chair :** Nick Turnbull (University of Manchester)

**Third Chair :** Guy Lachapelle (Concordia University)

## Session 1Foundational works in public policy studies: Harold D. Lasswell

Friday, June 28th 08:00 to 10:00 (MB 2.265 )

### Discussants

Eve Seguin (Université du Québec à Montréal )

Nick Turnbull (University of Manchester)

### Harold Lasswell's Forgotten Lesson in Political Science

Eve Seguin (Université du Québec à Montréal )

Policy sciences are often interpreted as a programme intended to include all relevant sciences – natural, social and psychological – in the policy process in order to help decision-makers come up with empirically justified courses of action in the whole range of policy areas. For instance, nuclear physicists should be involved in decisions regarding atomic weapons and nuclear warfare. Thus, most commentators pin down Lasswell as a positivist scholar and technocratically-minded actor. However, this assessment has been challenged lately, some scholars arguing that a bridge can be built between the policy sciences and critical policy studies (Torgerson, 2015, 2018).

In a different yet related fashion, this paper will argue, first, that components of the policy sciences programme were somehow revolutionary with respect to political science. In claiming that political scientists should master the knowledge of natural science and engineering, assess its meaning and implications, and foresee its potential consequences for society, Lasswell was implicitly stating that *science is a legitimate object of political science*. Second, like his contemporary Hannah Arendt (Seguin, 2019a), Lasswell was a visionary who fully understood that science and engineering were the driving political forces of modern societies. Third, political scientists have unfortunately forgotten these crucial insights and have failed to integrate science as an object of study. Lasswell's views were materialized decades later by the interdisciplinary field known as Science & Technology Studies (STS), in which political scientists are underrepresented. This has regrettable consequences. For instance, prominent STS scholars have recently produced formalizations of the political process that unwittingly repeat Lasswell's stage model and its many avatars (Seguin, 2015, 2019b). Fourth, STS is a critical field of inquiry and several STS scholars have been involved in institutional political experiments, providing "radical" advice to political decision-makers. In other words, it is they, not political scientists, who have implemented the policy sciences programme.

To substantiate the above claims, I will focus on two of Lasswell's papers: his APSA presidential address (Lasswell, 1956) and his piece on space exploration (Lasswell, 1958).

References

Lasswell, Harold (1958) "Men in Space", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 72(4): 180-194

Lasswell, Harold (1956) "The Political Science of Science: An Inquiry into the Possible Reconciliation of Mastery and Freedom", *American Political Science Review* 50(4): 961-979

Seguin, Eve (2019a) "Hannah Arendt's Political Theory of Science. From Cosmos to Power", in Gratton, Peter & Sari, Yasemin (eds) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, forthcoming

Seguin, Eve (2019b) "Bruno Latour's Backward Trajectory. From the Politicity of Science to its Political

Insignificance", in preparation

Seguin, Eve (2015) "Why Are Exoplanets Political? Pragmatism and the Politicity of Science in Bruno Latour's Work", *Revue française de science politique* 65(2): 279-302

Torgerson, Douglas (2018) "Lasswell in the Looking Glass: A 'Mirror' for Critical Policy Studies", *Critical Policy Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2018.1512877

Torgerson, Douglas (2015) "Harold D. Lasswell and Critical Policy Studies: The Threats and Temptations of Power", pp. 27-46 in Fisher, Frank et al. (eds) *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing

## Symbols of the Policy Sciences: Reframing Lasswell's Framework

Doug Torgerson (Trent University, Canada)

Harold D. Lasswell was centrally concerned with the interpretation and deployment of symbols. They conveyed diverse kinds of meaning: whether the precise denotations of operational definitions, or less exacting denotations, or rigorous conceptualizations, or diffuse connotations, or multiple meanings, or – indeed – an inescapable ambiguity or instability of meaning. Symbols could bind together and strengthen the fabric of a social order, or they could unsettle and loosen the hold of socially prevalent symbols. Lasswell's advancement of the 'policy sciences,' in particular, constitutes the deployment of a particular symbol – the very name 'policy sciences' – that frames his explicit framework for inquiry, shaping the way the symbols constituting it are understood. The significance of interpreting symbols for Lasswell can especially be seen in regard to that 'science' – of which he had extensive knowledge in both theory and practice – that is actually vital to his conception of the policy sciences: namely, psychoanalysis. Indeed, the role of 'insight' in the emancipatory logic of psychoanalysis is, for him, necessary if the policy sciences are to be a rational endeavor with a capacity to enhance the rationality of the policy process.

Examining Lasswell's conception and deployment of symbols, this paper will probe both his framing of the 'policy sciences' framework and the symbolic character of the framework itself. Following an interrogation of 'policy sciences,' the overarching name that frames the framework, the focus will turn to the framework's four main components – social process, decision process, intellectual tasks, and goals – together with the framework's three guiding principles: contextuality, problem orientation, and diversity of method. In both naming the 'policy sciences' as its framing symbol and in developing the elements of his framework, Lasswell was – despite such expectations as the symbol 'science' might suggest – attuned not only to precise denotation and rigorous conceptualization, but also to the larger range of ways in which symbols convey meaning. Attention to the kinds of 'symbol practice' (to use Lasswell's term) that are discernable in his own framework will put us in a position to question whether his framework exhibits features that might test and unsettle the framing produced by the name 'policy sciences.' The prospect of testing and unsettling the framework's framing is, as we will see, already present in his key principle of contextuality – such that it does make sense to speak, as was once suggested, of 'critical policy science.' Furthermore, with a focus on symbol practices in Lasswell's framework, together with his aspirations for it, we come to the point where we can ask this: whether the apparent antagonism between the 'policy sciences' and the symbol practices traditionally characterizing political theory is not an opposition that needs to be reconsidered and, indeed, overcome. Does Lasswell's framework, given its symbolic content and guiding ambitions, not implicitly call out to be reframed?

## A rhetorical reinvention of Lasswell's seven stages of the decision process

Nick Turnbull (University of Manchester)

Robert Hoppe (University of Twente)

Lasswell's seven stage model of decision-making exerted a powerful influence on public policy studies. It established a framework for theorizing decision-making and informed subsequent theories of the policy process. This paper reconsiders Lasswell's theory to reinvent it on new terms, producing a new meta-theoretical framework of decision and the policy process. We explain how Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of questioning underpins Lasswell's model and show how Dewey's theory of partial answers is not reflected in the decision theory. By overturning this indifference to partial answers, the seven stages of Lasswell's model can be divided into two distinct Orders, one of Questioning (intelligence, promotion, prescription) and the other of actions that constitutes (partial) Answering (invocation, application, appraisal, termination). The first three functions of the Order of Questioning are transposed into a relational framework based in argumentation (ethos, logos, pathos), in which different policy actors conduct inquiry in the context

of a relational distance between one another. This negotiation of distance is a political process than continues throughout the decision/policy process, thereby integrating concepts of partisan mutual adjustment and advocacy coalitions into the stages model. The four functions of the Order of Answering correspond to the four logical operators of rhetoric and argumentation practice, equivalence (=), modification (+), addition (+/-) and negation (-). Combined, the rhetorico-argumentative classification shows the comprehensive rationality of Lasswell's choice of seven stages. The interchange between the two orders proceeds via a non-linear 'circuit' model (as posed by Dunn), representing an autopoietic logic in which progress is established at the micro-level by the question-answer dynamic, and at the macro-level by the interchange between the two Orders. Finally, the ordinal properties of the four-part rhetorical meta-framework enable decision makers to generate a narrative of progress in a post-hoc rhetorical redescription, or 'front-stage' account for a public audience.

### How to make political science more scientific? Between multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity research

Guy Lachapelle (Concordia University)

In his 1956 presidential address to colleagues at the American Political Science Association, Harold D. Lasswell stated: "Political science is the policy science, par excellence." What did he mean? In fact, he invited political scientists to review their analytical models, to learn from the experience of other disciplines in order to solve the social and international problems of the post-war period. American political science has certainly taken over by seeking to focus its research on citizens, to transform societies into a place of experimentation, and to find solutions to the ills afflicting American society in the early 1960s.

First of all above the War against Poverty programs, the idea of ??introducing a New Jersey Income Experiment, the James Coleman report published in 1966 on the inequalities in the education system of American school system or the report on how to solve the problem of violence in the United States were all part of this new concept about experimenting societies. Political science was then invested with an objective: to improve the quality of life of the citizens and to make not only the American society but all societies more democratic, more egalitarian. In parallel, new research methods appeared, often borrowed from the natural sciences. For example, the evaluation of policies and programs has become central to the analysis with the introduction of new modes of budgetary and government management (the PPBS, Zero-based budgeting, etc.). My research question is simply the following: Where are we today today 60 years after Lasswell's speech? Does political science help decision makers make the right decisions? Has it become a real science to better understand change?

### Rediscovering Pragmatism as the Origin of the Policy Sciences

William Dunn (University of Pittsburgh)

In his last book on the subject, Harold Lasswell described the policy sciences as "a contemporary adaptation of the general approach to public policy recommended by John Dewey and other pragmatists." Here, Lasswell was not only giving credit to James, Peirce, Dewey, and pragmatists at the University of Chicago, but calling for the rediscovery of pragmatism as the origin of the policy sciences.

The policy sciences are in part a continuation of a tradition of policy-relevant social science research that began at the outset of the nineteenth century. It is a misconception, however, that social science research in the nineteenth century—for example, the Polizeywissenshaften--determined what became the policy sciences in the next. This paper examines the origins of the policy sciences in the School of Pragmatism at the University of Chicago in the period 1915–1938. Lasswell, with Abraham Kaplan and Myres S. Mc Dougal, was the principal creator of the policy sciences. Characteristics of the policy sciences include orientations that are normative, policy-relevant, contextual, and multidisciplinary. These orientations originate in pragmatist principles of the unity of knowledge and action and functionalist explanations of action by reference to values.