Piketty writes that his approach "differs from approaches sometimes characterized as 'Marxist', according to which the state of the economic forces and relations of production determines a society's ideological 'superstructure' in an almost mechanical fashion" and that his most striking conclusion to emerge from his historical approach is that "Inequality is neither economic nor technological; it is ideological and political" (p.7). Yet Marx was surely right that modes of production determine class relations and economic inequality. The world's three richest people – according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, together 'worth' nearly half a trillion dollars – are the founders of techno-giants Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook. While inequality is certainly ideological and political, it is also economic and technological.

Notwithstanding, this is, overall, a remarkable book – in some respects an encyclopaedia on inequality; in parts original and thought-provoking; sometimes rather disjointed and hard to follow; certainly not introductory reading for students. Perhaps it tries to do too much. But ambition and a broad view should be academic virtues, not vices.

Piketty starts with a bold declaration: "Every human society must justify its inequalities: unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse" (p.1). Not everyone has given inequality such priority. Concern with inequality is one among many political goals – maximizing military power, preserving privilege, enhancing economic growth, preserving peace, and many more – which may or may not include social justice. It is not clear that those with power in many of the world's most unequal societies spend much time justifying their inequalities – in their eyes, might is right. Piketty is a confident global social democrat, who believes in liberty, equality and fraternity. His latest book can only advance his aspirations.

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Stephen Muers (2020), *Culture and Values at the Heart of Policy Making: An Insider's Guide*, Bristol: Policy Press, £21.99, pp. 186, hbk.
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This book is an attempt by a former civil servant to explain how policy is impeded by the culture of the institutions that are supposed to put the policy into practice. Stephen Muers has held positions in the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Energy and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. He describes himself as a 'policy maker'. The impression he gives of policy is very much of a top-down process, where central government produces initiatives and programmes, and other people, for whatever reason, fail to deliver them. Muers writes: "I saw senior civil servants and ministers responsible for failed projects and misguided policies . . . the way in which cultural norms and value-based actions play out in the political system acts to undermine much of the machinery of accountability we have built." At the outset, the culture he seems to be concerned with is the culture of the institutions that implement the decisions, mainly evident in the street-level bureaucracy of front line workers. But very shortly, the discussion moves on to political culture – the attitudes and beliefs of the electorate – and what central government policy can do to shape those views and secure compliance. He returns to an organisational focus briefly in Chapter 10, and there his focus is not how to work with the grain, but how to build different kinds of organisation.

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There are problems with the book's treatment of theoretical ideas, and some large gaps. The idea of 'policy' itself is deeply problematic, but that's not considered here. In a book that is supposed to be about culture and values, there could be a great deal said about culture, organisational culture, and the public service ethos or service ideologies: there isn't. Nor, regrettably, is there discussion of the cultural context – the actors that play a part in shaping political ideas and values, the role of the media or the legal framework. Some other subjects are mentioned and rapidly dismissed. Participatory democracy doesn't start and finish with participatory budgeting. There is a wide range of different forms of accountability beyond voting. There's a lot more to deliberative democracy than citizens' assemblies, and given what Muers is hoping to say about the relationship of political decision-making to democratic practice, it's to the book's detriment that he doesn't engage with the idea.

On the core argument, it's a truism of the field that there can be no such thing as perfect implementation. Everything that happens is changed by its context and the process it goes through to be 'operationalised' or realised. Muers recognises the influence of street-level bureaucracy, but that's only a small part of this. There's nothing here on multi-level governance, veto points, Weberian bureaucracy, the professions, the New Public Management, commissioning, service coordination or co-production.

It would be reasonable, in a book by a practitioner, to look for particular insights gleaned from specific experience. Most of the references to the author's engagement with policy come in short snippets. It may be possible to extract some meaning from the examples, but most are not clearly about culture or values, and it will be up to the reader to invest them with meaning. I can recognise, for example, the picture of officials hiding files from a new IT system – Muers' example is from immigration, but I've seen the same thing in benefits administration. It's not necessarily because the officials are set in their ways, or avoiding their responsibilities, but because keeping hold of the files has been the only way to make the system work. A fuller example comes from the Child Support Agency, where Muers was in a team charged with review of the entire system, "from the policy framework to the delivery approach". Child Support was beyond the capacity of any agency to deliver: a process that depended on knowing the household composition, income, liabilities and domestic arrangements of two households. There were just too many moving parts. Muers could see that the system was complex, but what he draws from that is that more flexibility is needed at the sharp end – not that policy makers should have asked administrators and stakeholders what was feasible in the first place.

Muers gives as much weight to the preparation of political communications as to process or practice. There is a chapter on making policy as a way of giving a 'message', and more generally a questionable assumption that if governments have an impact on culture and values, they ought to be able to shape that culture in the way that they choose. But these things can't certainly be done from the top down, and the effects may be unpredictable. Sometimes culture, organisational behaviour and administrative practice are already ahead of central government; sometimes they pull in a different direction entirely. Sometimes, and rather too often, policy-makers don't have a clear grasp of what the process of implementation entails. There may well be times when the institutional culture gets in the way; but perhaps the failures of policy might have something to do with the competence of the decision makers, who think that they only have to say that something must be so for it to happen. Governments need to rein back on the communiques, directions and commands, and start listening.

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