
AMERICAN POLITICS

Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy.

By Elizabeth Popp Berman.

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What does it mean to think like a political scientist? That was the question I kept asking myself as I read Elizabeth Popp Berman's excellent *Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in US Public Policy*. As the title implies, Berman is interested less in the specific models or methods used by economists than in the "style of thinking" they brought to Washington, D.C., amid the rapid government expansion of the 1960s and 1970s. She wants to uncover the assumptions, ideas, and operating procedures of this style, explain how it gained preeminence, and assess its effects. She also wants to argue that this increasingly hegemonic way of thinking, though largely involving people sympathetic to the use of government to address public problems, was ultimately harmful to that project.

We now take for granted that economists rule the policy roost. But it was not always so. Berman reminds us that historians, sociologists, legal academics, and, yes, political scientists once had greater sway than they do today. Moreover, the traditions of economics that prevailed prior to the 1970s were distinct from those to come. The biggest programs of the 1930s and 1960s reflected earlier economic ideas about social insurance and the need to tame corporate power, not the micro-focused arguments about incentives and efficiency soon to prevail.

What changed? The smartest of the many smart analytic moves that Popp makes is to focus not on the familiar roster of conservative economic thinkers, but on economists who were broadly progovernment in orientation. Rationalizers, not revolutionaries, these experts and institution builders believed their mandate was to make big government work better. To them, "better" meant more efficiently, with more careful weighing of costs and benefits and greater attention to the potential role for markets—and, crucially, to the potential role for economists in designing and evaluating policy.

Indeed, the best part of Berman's account explains how skyrocketing government spending after 1965 underwrote the economists' rise. Nonprofit research organizations like RAND and the Urban Institute were supercharged by federal contracts. Policy schools emerged not only to attract the dollars flowing out of Washington, but also to train the technocrats pouring in. The beneficiaries were a new breed of economists. Micro-oriented, they

were steeped in systems analysis and Industrial Organization theory, not older institutionalist approaches, nor (for the most part) macroeconomics. In time, they established beachheads in the executive branch and, to a lesser extent, Congress, where the Congressional Budget Office (created in 1974 to counter the executive's fiscal expertise) brought an economics-inspired perspective to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Drawing on an impressive amount of original archival research, Berman ably examines the consequences of this shift across a wide range of policy areas, from antitrust enforcement to social and health policy to environmental regulation. The economists argued that antitrust policy should be focused on consumer welfare as measured by prices, not the political power of mega-corporations or the risks they posed to small businesses or local communities. They pressed for cost-benefit analysis, controlled-trial evaluations, and policy approaches that used markets, even if highly regulated, rather than "command-and-control" directives. They disdained the language of rights, which they believed denied the reality of trade-offs. Above all, these new players enshrined efficiency (variously defined) as the acid test of policy success—a standard increasingly taken for granted, even when it clashed with the spirit, and sometimes the plain language, of the laws they sought to rationalize.

Conservatives were an important part of these developments, of course. But Berman emphasizes that much of the action happened to their left. Indeed, she makes a strong case that Democrats, as advocates of active government, were more influenced by the economic style than Republicans were. In part, this was because Republicans invoked it strategically, inviting in the technocrats where they counseled restraint (as in antitrust) and shunning them where they did not (as in social policy). By contrast, Democrats—or at least Democrats in the broad middle of the spectrum—gradually took on board the economic style's assumptions. The result, according to Berman, was a party that came out of the gates with "an incrementalist, modestly ambitious vision of government, even as the country faced unprecedented challenges" (p. 3).

Berman's argument is not monocausal. She makes clear "[m]any factors contributed to the decline of the Democratic left, only some of which can be attributed to the economic style" (p. 221). Nonetheless, she tends to downplay the enormous constraints created by the shifting balance of power in Washington—particularly the rise of organized business and decline of organized labor. Similarly, her own account shows that in a number of areas (most notably, antitrust and environmental policy) a rightward shifting Republican Party and Supreme Court were driving the train, whatever Democrats did in the caboose. And for a scholar so admirably attentive to ways

in which big programs and their effects remade policy thinking, Berman gives scant attention to the ways in which they reshaped the bounds of the politically possible, too.

In health care, for example, a huge part of the problem was simply that, after 1965, most Americans who didn't receive Medicare and Medicaid were covered by tax-subsidized private insurance. Economists were hardly of one mind about how to improve this patchwork framework, but more than a small share believed a universal public program would deliver better value per dollar. Nor were economists as a class averse to using the regulatory power of government to restrain costs; members of the discipline played a key role in pushing for price controls within Medicare. To be sure, the prescriptions advanced often reflected biases of the sort that Berman enumerates, especially a general preference for competition among insurance plans. But the biggest factor curtailing ambitions was the belief that frontally dislodging the existing system was a political nonstarter. This belief was reasonable—even policy thinkers like me who recommended using the public sector to insure the nonelderly (the so-called public option) recognized how difficult it would be to displace existing coverage—and it makes the limits of President Obama's narrowly enacted health plan more understandable.

Still, Berman's critique has bite. At the end of her book, she pinpoints the root problem—what she calls the economic style's "implicit theory of politics." Economic experts didn't just elevate certain aims, assumptions, and instruments. They internalized a conception of politics in which their job was to craft technical solutions and leave the messy world of politics to others. In practice, economics-oriented policymakers had to incorporate political judgments into their designs, and they did. But these judgments were usually unstated, often crude, and certainly never subject to the rigorous analysis valorized elsewhere. For those seeking to craft popular, effective, and sustainable policies, this was the worst of both worlds: technocrats simultaneously foreswearing political calculations and baking them into their policy designs. In the ugliest cases, elected leaders were left to "sell" policies that had little organized support or public resonance. More common but no less consequential, nobody in power who was struggling to use government for good was really doing careful thinking about how the policies they were seeking reflected and altered the power of citizens, movements, interest groups, and the state.

I would like to think that political science could do better, which is why Berman's book made me wonder what a *political* style of thinking might entail. We dearly need a policy mindset that takes seriously imbalances of power in the political economy, grapples with the challenge of building durable governing capacities, and focuses on the political as well as economic effects of public

policies. But for such an outlook to take root, more political scientists will need to engage with the substance of policy, with the feedback effects of policies not just on the public but also on organized groups and governing institutions, and with deeper questions about the forces driving policymaking than those at the center of the discipline today. For scholars who find inspiration in this aspiration, Berman's book is a timely and powerful reminder of why it matters.

Asian American Connective Action in the Age of Social Media: Civic Engagement, Contested Issues, and Emerging Identities. By James S. Lai. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022. 211p. \$104.50 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

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Asian Americans today are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States and, as such, are increasingly seen as a consequential electorate in American elections. While a growing number of scholars have sought to address how this important electorate will take shape in the coming years, James Lai's *Asian American Connective Action in the Age of Social Media* offers an informative, detailed portrait of the many complicated layers that characterize Asian American politics in the twenty-first century. Lai focuses on what is now the proverbial "elephant in the room" in the study of political participation: the use of social media to mobilize certain political messages. For Lai, social media can at the same time allow Asian Americans to exert political activism but also exacerbate political disfunction through the spread of misinformation and the production of online echo chambers. In this way, Lai addresses political action on social media head-on by covering ways in which Asian Americans can build productive political networks but also demonstrating how social media can mechanize conservative or nationalistic efforts.

In his analysis of social media activism, Lai offers a number of useful frameworks for approaching what he terms "connective action." First, Lai argues that we should consider the origination of the network. Social media networks can build organically through "crowd-led networks" or by existing organizational networks that use social media as a tool for mobilization (p. 41). Crowd-led networks drive the majority of the case studies covered in the book. As Lai explains, social media platforms have been particularly good at enabling individuals to connect with one another even without coordination by elites or organizations. In Asian America, the creation of language-based apps allows immigrant communities to share information with one another. Lai's first framework best conveys what makes social media activism so distinctive from other forms of political communication in that social media allows for the mobilization of grassroots