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Putting the 'Policy' back into Social Policy

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This paper argues that the study of social policy can be enriched by a greater focus on the dynamics of the policy process itself. Such a focus needs to transcend the usual descriptive accounts of institutions and implementation methods. The paper draws on a range of theoretical approaches that illuminate the shaping and delivery of policy, from classic theories of power and the state to analyses of the micro-dynamics of the policy–action relationship. The paper explores the contribution of recent developments in governance theory, and assesses contemporary debates about the 'modernisation' of the policy process and the focus on evaluating 'what works' in social policy.

Social policy has tended to place much stronger emphasis on the 'social' rather than the 'policy' elements of its name. This is not altogether surprising given the historical roots of the discipline in social administration and its close links with sociology. But a renewed interest in the policy process is currently emerging from two rather different sources. First is the study of the impact of the policies and practices of 'new' Labour – specifically its emphasis on tying policy to evidence of 'what works', its aspiration of making policy making more 'joined up' and 'inclusive', and, above all, its emphasis on 'delivery, delivery, delivery'. Second is the development of theoretical approaches that highlight issues of power and control in the process of governance within and beyond the nation state. These developments highlight the need to go beyond the study of the *content* of social policies to embrace the study of the *processes* through which policies are made and enacted.

Descriptions of the institutions of the state and its administrative processes are legion, but not particularly helpful. For more theoretical illumination it is necessary to turn to a range of different literatures. In this review article I begin by exploring the different ways in which the literature has conceptualised the relationship between policy and implementation – a concern very close to the heart of the current government. I then explore the policy process in the context of theories of power and the state. Recent literature has seen a shift from 'grand theories' (pluralism, elitism, marxism) towards theories of governance. These offer a more de-centered view of the state and analyse the policy process as a complex series of interactions and relationships across different tiers of government and institutional sites. A third section explores what might be learned from case studies of specific policy areas, while the final section focuses on contemporary debates about 'modernising' the policy process and evaluating 'what works'.

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Understanding the policy process: the debate with rational theory

Policy discourse is dominated by the assumption that the policy process is rational and linear. The belief that policies are shaped and implemented in a systematic way, and that the policy process can be understood as a series of 'stages' from agenda setting and initiation through to implementation and evaluation, has been a dominant feature of policy analysis despite an extensive critique of such assumptions in much of the policy literature. Indeed the literature can be viewed in terms of an ongoing debate with rational theory. Those who view policy as a rational, linear process (sometimes called 'top–down' theorists) tend to focus on explaining the factors that get in the way of a policy delivering its intended outcomes. Hogwood and Gunn (1984), for example, highlight the difficulties that arise from the devolution of responsibilities for implementation to administrators and managers, difficulties that may distort policy goals or block their implementation. An analytical separation between policy and implementation underpins the structure of most texts that follow a rational, sequential approach, with implementation receiving scant attention as the final – and least significant – stage.

Against this can be set the work of analysts such as Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993) who view policy as an incremental, iterative process in which policies are shaped and reshaped in line with local pressures and circumstances, and Barrett and Fudge (1981) who theorise the relationship between policy and implementation as an *interactive* process. Such work is in a very different tradition from much of the mainstream policy literature for several reasons. First, the study of implementation is viewed as an integral part of the policy process rather than a final 'stage' subject to formal administrative processes. Second, it acknowledges the ambiguity of many areas of public and social policy – objectives may not be precise, and different objectives may be in conflict. Third, it focuses on policy as a multi-dimensional, multi-organisational field of interaction – what Barrett and Fudge term a 'policy–action continuum'. This in turn is influenced by the structural framework in which policy is enacted, and the way in which perceptions of that framework are formed. Fourth, it highlights issues of power and dependence within the policy–action continuum: emphasis is placed on issues of interests, motivations and behaviours (as in Lipsky's now famous exploration of the role of 'street level bureaucrats' in the implementation process (Lipsky, 1980)).

It is a pity that despite such developments implementation has continued to be neglected as a valid field of empirical study within the policy literature. This neglect can be linked to the dominance in the 1980s and 1990s of managerialist approaches (redolent of the language of goals, targets, standards, hierarchies of objectives, culture change, etc.) which revert to an emphasis on top–down models of implementation. However the dynamics of the policy–action relationship have been a central concern in some studies of the delivery of UK health policy (Pettigrew, Ferlie and McKee, 1992) and of a wider range of public services (Ferlie *et al.*, 1996). The 1992 study highlights the significance of the *context and process* of policy development and implementation, and argues that an overemphasis on the content of policy in isolation from context and process can lead to a lack of capacity to translate policy into action. Ferlie *et al.'s* (1996) study picks up this theme but also explores the roles of non-elected bodies and the public service professions in more depth. In both texts the relationship between policy and implementation is viewed as iterative and reciprocal.

The policy literature touched on in this section is highly selective: for a more detailed

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review readers might want to browse Parsons (1995). But studies from other disciplines can bring new theoretical perspectives to enliven what might be viewed as a relatively sterile set of debates between bottom–up and top–down, rational and incremental theorists. For example Cooper (1998) draws on cultural geography, socio-legal studies and Foucauldian political theory to examine a number of policy disputes between different tiers and spheres of government, each with its distinctive claim to power and legitimacy. Studies of what happens at the boundaries of political and legal authority can tell us as much – if not more – about social policy as it is enacted across multiple sites and processes, than do idealised models of the policy process. Other literatures focus on the question of what is to be considered the proper domain of *public* policy making, and what is deemed to belong to the 'private' sphere of individuals, families and communities (see for example Pateman, 1983; Barnes and Prior, 2000).

Power, policy and the state

The study of policy is underpinned by conflicting theories of power and the state. Pluralist, elitist and Marxist perspectives, plus their variants (neo-pluralism, neo-Marxist, etc.) are most lucidly explicated in the classic texts *The Policy Process in the Modern Capitalist State* (Ham and Hill, 1984, 1993) and *The Policy Process in the Modern State* (Hill, 1997). But as Hill reminds us, grand theories are of limited value in explaining the micro-politics of the policy process, and the 1997 text offers a range of frameworks (corporatism, institutional theory, public choice theory, policy network theory) to help analyse the complexities of the field.

The classic theories of pluralism and Marxism and their variants have tended to be sidelined in recent years by a rather different set of theoretical concerns – how to understand the policy process in the context of a fragmented state and a dispersed array of institutions involved in both shaping and delivering policy. Much policy making takes place not through formal institutions but through informal networks characterised by relationships of interdependence. Key texts on such policy networks and policy communities include Jordan and Richardson (1987), Marsh (1998), and Smith (1993). The 'black box' of the state is also being opened up as writers explore the patterns of influence between different groups of actors and across different tiers and spheres of governance (local, regional, national and transnational). Several texts argue that the power of the state to govern has been challenged by the forces of globalisation and the flow of power both upwards to transnational policy regimes and downwards to regional and sub-regional tiers of governance (Rittberger and Mayer, 1993; Rhodes, 1997; Pierre, 2000; Pierre and Peters, 2000). At the same time, it is argued, the New Public Management agenda has produced an institutional fragmentation leading to an increasing emphasis on network-based patterns of coordination ('joined up government' and 'partnership working'), with the state attempting to control events through influencing and 'enabling' strategies rather than through hierarchy. These forces operate in local tiers of government as well as in nation states (Stoker, 1999, 2000).

In *Modernising Governance: New Labour, Policy and Society* (2001) I review the governance literature, and the accompanying post-structuralist theories of 'governmentality', in more detail, and critique some of the theoretical assumptions on which they are based. The idea of the policy process not as something that governments 'do' but as a complex set of interactions across a dispersed field of power is becoming increasingly

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significant in the context of what Kooiman (1993) terms the complexity, dynamics and diversity of contemporary society. This has relevance to the practicalities of policy making and delivery as well as to theories of the policy process. Governments in the UK and beyond are attempting to grapple with complex issues such as social exclusion, child poverty, homelessness and ill health, all cross-cutting problems that elude traditional, hierarchy bound and rationalistic policy. An approach is required that differs radically from that developed in the context of the relative certainties of policy making in the post-war welfare state.

Learning from experience: case studies of the policy process

So far I have been concerned mostly with theories of the policy process. What might be learned from historical or comparative case studies of policy in action? Levin (1997) presents a number of case studies of social policy during the Thatcher years, including the reform of education and housing, the 'poll tax' saga, the reform of social security, the annual spending round and the impact of Social Charter in the UK. While these examples belong to a particular era and can be viewed as having little relevance for today's (supposedly) more consensual style of policy making, the author's approach to the analysis has a continued value. He uses the case study method as a vehicle for teaching about the policy process, with the aim of equipping students to observe, marshal evidence and draw conclusions, interrogating the data through four different conceptual frameworks. However the author avoids drawing any general conclusions from the case study data, reminding us of the importance of the specific contexts of different policy areas. As a result the reader may be left little wiser about the value of using theory to illuminate and understand descriptive material.

The comparative study of the impact of different policy styles and approaches is a relatively recent development, but one to be welcomed. Bovens, t'Hart and Peters's *Success and Failure in Public Governance: A Comparative Analysis* (2001) presents the results of an ambitious research study of cases from different nations across multiple policy fields. It takes us beyond what is sometimes a narrow concern with the policy process to the wider issues of governance in complex and differentiated societies. Programmatic and political performance is compared systematically both across countries and across sectors. Policy style is viewed as an important variable in explaining how far policies result in either programmatic success or failure and political success or failure. One of the main conclusions is the importance of building cooperative and collaborative structures within the public sector, and between the public and private sectors, to enhance the probability of policy success. They also suggest that, in the case of health:

> policy making by detailed blueprint (is) no longer feasible... policy making by bright idea, by the swift promulgation of a core set of ideas combined with an invitation to relevant actors to participate in the implementation of these ideas through experiments, seems to be a more promising road. (Bovens, t'Hart and Peters, 2001: 616)

This comment raises important issues of democracy and accountability in the policy process: it is not at all clear whose 'bright idea' we are talking about here, nor how the new patterns of governance involving multiple actors might relate to the formal channels of accountability. It also takes us to the heart of the tensions in Labour's policy style as it

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seeks on the one hand to enable and support policy innovation while on the other attempts to exert strong control through a highly centralised approach based on a panoply of performance indicators, standards, targets, inspection and audit regimes.

Models for the future?

For Labour, policy effectiveness in the fields of health, education and other public services is inextricably tied to its political legitimacy. This has led to a new interest in policy delivery expressed in terms of a pragmatic concern with 'what works', and a concern to modernise the policy process itself. The Labour government of 1997 set out to reform the policy processes as a key element of its modernisation agenda (Newman, 2001). The *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999a) set out the aim of ensuring that policy making was approached in a more joined up and strategic way, drawing a range of stakeholders into partnership to develop a more integrated approach to complex policy problems. Particular interest was shown in the idea of developing an approach that could tackle 'cross cutting' policy agendas, an issue discussed in a number of key publications in the mid/late 1990s (Wicks, 1994, in a Fabian discussion paper; Perri 6, 1998; Perri 6 *et al.*, 1999, in a series of Demos papers; Richards *et al.*, 1999 in a research report for DETR). Such issues are of critical importance in the social policy field. The problems of child poverty, poor health, the provision of social care for older people and disabled people, urban decay and so on are all deeply interdependent, and solutions cannot be viewed as the province of any single department or tier of government. Some government papers of the period also emphasised the need to involve those delivering policy on the ground, and, unusually, those on whom policy was likely to impact, in the process of policy development (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998)

The White Paper was followed up by a more detailed set of proposals in *Professional Policy Making in the Twenty First Century* (Cabinet Office, 1999b). The paper set out eight core features of the 'professional' approach: that policy making should be forward looking, outward looking, innovative and creative, using evidence, joined up, evaluating, reviewing, and learning lessons. Further refinements to these proposals are elaborated in *Better Policy-Making* (Centre for Management and Policy Studies (2001), see www.cmps.gov.uk) and *Modern Policymaking: Ensuring Policies Deliver Value for Money* (National Audit Office, 2001, at *www.nao.gov.uk)*. The CMPS document includes case studies of policy innovations, with contact details for those seeking more information, while the NAO report includes examples of good practice in policy design. Other relevant government documents on modernising the policy process deal with policy analysis and modelling (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000a) and joined up government (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000b).

The reality of policy making continues to fall far short of the recommendations set out in these documents – the barriers to 'joined up government' or an 'inclusive policy process', for example, remain significant. The Labour government remains trapped in the tension between being forward looking (taking a long-term perspective on how best to deliver sustainable outcomes) and delivering short-term outputs that satisfy its electoral pledges on health and education. However the themes highlighted in these proposed reforms represent important shifts in the discourses and practices of government, and are having significant repercussions on the ways in which social policy problems are framed and solutions sought. They also inform an increased emphasis on the monitoring of

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policy delivery and the evaluation of policy outputs and outcomes against 'value for money' criteria and in an effort to direct resources towards 'what works'.

What counts is what works: evidence based policy and policy evaluation

What Works? Evidence Based Policy and Practice in Public Services (Davies, Nutley and Smith, 2000) sets out the case for an evidence-based approach that targets resources to support practices likely to be effective, and considers the role of evidence in specific policy areas – health, education, criminal justice, social care, welfare, housing, transport and urban renewal. The text provides an invaluable source that can enable students and practitioners to assess (and perhaps challenge) the value of research evidence, and to explore the ways in which evidence actually comes to influence policy and practice. In a key chapter Nutley and Webb emphasise the problems of linking an evidence-based approach to a centralised, rational model of policy in which evidence is used to legitimate a single set of solutions to what may be complex and differentiated sets of problems. They set out an alternative model that corresponds more closely with an incremental approach, where adjustments to policy are made in the light of learning emerging during the implementation process. They also raise the critical question of differential access to research evidence and to the networks that shape policy decisions.

The Labour government has devoted considerable attention to policy evaluation in their search for 'what works'. There are a number of fascinating studies of the growth of the 'evaluative state', most notably perhaps Power's *The Audit Explosion* (1994) and *The Audit Society* (1997). In the same tradition, Henkel's *Government, Evaluation and Change* (1991) analyses the shift from professional forms of evaluation to more managerial modes, enshrined in institutions such as the Audit Commission, the Social Services Inspectorate and the Health Advisory Service. She distinguishes between the emerging political emphasis on measurement-based evaluation through such institutions and the move away from positivism in evaluation theory (see, for example, recent articles in Sage's journal *Evaluation*). The search for approaches that combine rigorous methodologies with an acknowledgement of the power and value dynamics involved in the delivery and evaluation of social programs continues. Pawson and Tilley's *Realistic Evaluation* (1997) emphasises the need to explore the theories held by policy makers about how the programme concerned will yield benefits, and to understanding the contexts into which the policy is being introduced. Sullivan, Barnes and Matka (2002) offer an example of the way in which the 'theory of change' methodology has underpinned the evaluation of one programme introduced under Labour. The reintroduction of theory into the world of measurement, audit and quasi-scientific rational approaches to policy delivery and policy evaluation is a welcome development, though one that remains on the margins of official discourse.

Conclusion

Hill (1997) dismisses the idea of developing a formal science of policy making, with prescriptions and techniques to aid decision making or to close the gap between policy and implementation, and reminds us that policy making is essentially a political process.

But the centrality of the discourses of modernisation, evidence and evaluation have led to the further entrenchment of rational, quasi-scientific, professionalised conceptions

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of the policy processes. Such conceptions may lead students of social policy, and even writers of social policy texts, to assume that policy intent is equivalent to policy outcomes. But it is not possible to 'read' the substance of social policies from the contents of White Papers, the manifestos of politicians, the guidance flowing from government departments, nor even the allocations of budgets across different programmes. A concern with the dynamics of policy process itself, set in the context of contemporary theories of governance, power and the state, is essential for those seeking to analyse and understand what is going on in social policy.

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