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## Policy Analysis in the Good Society

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### Introduction

In the past decade, academicians and (later) politicians have adopted the concept of a “good society” almost as if they invented—or at least patented—it. Drawing upon the analogous ideas of social capitalism (Coleman, 1980) and decrying “bowling alone” (Putnam, 1995; 2000) as if it were a clarion (and, to some, unquestioned) call, people have looked to a number of academic venues for a viable response to that charge. Indeed, a few noted Americans have become so disenchanted by the “civil society” rhetoric that, of late, they have been arguing specifically *against* the concept. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas recently was quoted as saying (in an address to the American Enterprise Institute) that there was an “overemphasis of civility . . . [and that] civility cannot be the governing principle of citizenship or leadership.”

One pivotal problem in the realization of a good society is that while the concept is certainly enticing, its realization is fraught with many of the problems that beset contemporary society. Society has too many “correct” answers addressing the issues and benefits of the good society, determined largely as a function of the proposing group, and, invariably, these ideas stand in opposition to one another. While the goals may be apodictic, the means are anything but. Let us therefore propose one particular means—the utility of policy analysis in the good society and especially the use of “participatory policy analysis”—by making four points: first, the problem as we view it; second, rather explicitly, what goals we choose to pursue; third, from what discipline or manner of thinking our resolutions are emanating; and, fourth, how we propose they can best be obtained. In order:

- The overweening problem lies with a general lack of community within the American body politic, one in which the citizens have repeatedly voiced their distance from their governments (Nye, 1997), which indicates a generalized lack of concern in politics, a sense that they are over-

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whelmed with where their society seems to be headed, and little faith that the government can provide the necessary guideposts. Conjoined with the lack of community is a strong sense that capitalism rather than democracy has become *the* prevailing American ethic (Dahl, 1999). The debacle of the 2000 presidential election did little to ameliorate these sentiments.

- The policy sciences were initially conceived as a means of improving the quality of information provided to government; moreover, they were specifically focused on the democratic ethos. In Lasswell’s words (1951, p. 15), the policy sciences were “directed towards knowledge to improve the practice of democracy.” Yet they stand in danger of becoming “the policy sciences of tyranny” (Drzyek, 1989, p. 98). Drzyek, in this case, was referring to the increased governmental roles of an unelected and unrepresentative bureaucracy; since then, the meaning of the expression has been modified to include legislators who appear to be more attuned to special interest groups than individual citizens.

- One of the many concerns emerging out of this distancing from democracy is the perception that the academy is doing little to resolve these problems and, in the case of public policy analysis, perhaps even disciplinarily exacerbating them. The policy sciences and policy analysts are primarily seen as the defenders of a status quo, rather than advocates for a change (see deLeon, 1997; Yanow, 1997).
- Finally, we consider ways in which the policy sciences can contribute directly to what communitarian scholars have coined the “good society.” While the United States is surely not entrapped in a “bad society,” numerous scholars, ranging, e.g., from Etzioni (1988; 1993) to Bok (1997) to Ehrenhalt (1995), have made it clear that the “good society” in the United States is still a work in progress, with goals—while admirable—that have yet to be achieved (see Wolff, 1998).

## The Problem

The United States seems hoisted on a domestic petard. On the one hand, Americans have repeatedly voiced their concern with the practice of government (see deLeon, 1997; Nye, 1997); Kevin Phillips (1994) reported a decline from a positive answer to the question “How much of the time can you trust the government?” from 76 percent in 1964 to 19 percent in 1994. On a more sanguine hand, more than three-quarters of those surveyed express optimism over their immediate community (see Pew, 2001). Furthermore, Americans have a long and honored history of volunteer activities, generally focused on their immediate community (anonymous, 2001). What the United States appears to have is something akin to an administrative “identity crisis.” That is, its citizens appear to hold less confidence in representative government than they do in their ability to govern themselves.

Given this condition, there is the possible emergence of a more *laissez-faire* style of government that would enable the civic “marketplace” to establish innovative and enthusiastic solutions to social problems and create institutions that serve the specific needs and concerns of their communities (Starobin, 1997). This instinct has an American lineage going back at least as far as the insightful Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in the early 1830s, “[I]t is by taking a share in legislation that the American learns to know the law; it is by governing that he becomes educated about the formalities of government” (de Tocqueville, 1956, p. 318). T. H. Green (1889) envisioned a “social union” that entailed a shift in thinking towards a logic of collective action and the development of an understanding of the individual’s place, responsibility, and importance in a collective social order. Green’s arguments naturally lead to the proposition that a citizen’s life is best realized on a community level (Simhony, 1993).

The problem, of course, is how this transformation is best accomplished, in light of the *anomie* of contemporary liberal democracy (see Sandel, 1996), the often-competing interest groups, and the sheer magnitude of the American polity (to mention only the most prominent obstacles). Even Benjamin Barber’s (1984) vaunted “strong democracy” would falter in the face of such hurdles. A direct democracy conducted in the widely diversified United States with its more than 280 million residents renders the Tocquevillian New England “town meeting” as little more than a romantic idealization, of scant more practicality than the legendary Shangri-La.

But such a pessimistic assessment does not lead inevitably to

despair, for there are a number of attractive options that have been explored. Jeffrey Berry and his colleagues (1993) analyzed how community self-rule in midsized American cities had met with success on a number of fronts. Moreover, the communitarian literature (see, e.g., Bellah *et al.*, 1991) approaches the vision of a “social union” in a number of positive ways, arguing that a defined sense of personal duty clearly augments a coherent and “civil” community. Let us therefore accept Arnold Kaufman’s key to the “good society,” when he coined the phrase “participatory democracy”: the “democracy of participation may have many beneficial consequences, but its main justifying function is and always has been . . . the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling, and action” (quoted in and seconded by Mansbridge, 2001, p. 13).

For public policy analysis, the real questions are “why” and “how.” The preceding discussion has argued the “why,” i.e., that there is a viable promise supporting the attainment of a “good society.” The question we should now turn to is “how” does one proceed to that goal of a good society. First, however, we need to review quickly the

respective roles of the American university and, in particular, the policy sciences and their contribution.

## A Disciplinary Approach

One of the accomplishments of the modern university is that it has generally shed its image as an “ivory tower.” More than half a century ago, Robert Lynd wrote a volume entitled *Knowledge for What?* in which he cautioned that “if the social scientist is too bent upon ‘waiting until all the data are in’ . . . the decisions will be made anyway—without him . . . by the ‘practical’ man and by the ‘hard-headed’ political chivvied by interest-pressure bloc” (Lynd, 1939, p. 9). In a very real sense, the academy responded directly to Lynd’s concerns and has, in many ways, become a bastion of applied research in areas ranging from medical ethics to organizational behaviors to computer sciences to public affairs.

However, the self-image of many academic disciplines towards applied purposes has been characteristically conflicted. Academicians have written scholarly books and articles aimed largely for their peers, larded with sophisticated and almost always abstract theory and larded with academic cant; these writings are widely perceived to be virtually the only currency toward acclaim in the university setting and, of course, tenure. Quite often, then, disciplines like economics and political science have

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focused on elegant theoretic structures that defy Lynd's entreaty. Economics is especially prone to these blinders (although behavioralism and rational choice theory in political science are hardly innocent of these charges), even when Alice Rivlin, in her presidential address to the American Economics Association, warned that "If a golden age of economists' self-confidence ever occurred, it is long since past," or, in an earlier and blunter warning, "Economists . . . in their usual fashion, have been short on realism and long on theory and prescription" (Rivlin, 1987 and 1984, pp. 1 and 19, respectively). Yet, for many academic economics departments, the division between tenure-garnering research and applied research has remained absolute.

### The Policy Sciences

The policy sciences were initially conceived by Harold Lasswell (1951) and others as a means to improve the quality of information to governments, as a means of improving the governmental decision process (see deLeon, 1988). They were designed to be problem oriented, multidisciplinary, and explicitly normative (i.e., explicitly considering values) in their approach. Yet early on, the policy sciences were "captured" by many of the heavily quantitative disciplines, which sought to bring the putatively "proven powers" of the natural sciences to the social sciences. So it was not unusual to find systems analysis, operations research, and quantitative modeling providing the early impetus to policy research, its proponents encouraged by their widely acclaimed successes from the Second World War. They were succeeded by welfare economists with their particular "answer" to policy questions, typically framed in terms of cost-benefit analysis. As Etzioni (1988) and others have pointed out, however, their influence on public-policy makers has largely been ancillary, because, in their orientation towards strictly "objective" analysis (e.g., Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978), they tended to overlook (because they could not openly include) the normative bases of politics.

Worse yet, there is a widespread implication that the policy sciences, while widely accepted, have become instruments protecting the *status quo*, that their "research, insofar as it exercises independent influences on opinions about complex social questions, tends over time to be profoundly conservative in its impact" (Aaron, 1987, p. 2). As traditionally practiced, the policy sciences have been unable to effect a shift in the structure or process of governance, because they were widely perceived to have been co-opted by government offices, programs, and priorities.

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On the more positive side, there has been tremendous growth in the policy analytic community, in terms of both supply and demand. On the supply side, hardly a major university does not now have a program to train incipient policy analysts, with a large number of schools also offering a doctoral degree. On the demand side, there is hardly a federal agency that does not have an analytic (or evaluative) section as part of its organization; increasingly, similar offices are appearing on the state and local levels. So while there is the knowledge that public policy analysts are populating the bureaucracies, the issue must be posed: How are public policy analysts different in any substantive or normative way than other administrators? More to the point, are they collectively doing anything to ameliorate the seeming schism between the governed and the governing?

### Participatory Policy Analysis

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of this tension within some parts of the policy analysis community. In response, drawing in part on the writings of the Frankfurt School (see, most notably, Habermas, 1975 and 1996), policy scientists have move to a "postmodernized" policy analysis (Danziger, 1995) and, more operationally, to a "participatory policy analysis" (Durning, 1993). The impetus of the movement (which, to be fair, hardly represents a consensus; Lynn, 1999) is the observation that citizens perceived their opinions were no longer important when new programs were devised or revised, and that they were largely being excluded from the governing process. As a result, not only were they distancing themselves from government (that is, they viewed policy as being imposed upon them, all the while, apparently, for them) but also it was clear that the programs being produced without their voice were nowhere near as successful as could otherwise be the case (deLeon, 1992).

The participatory policy analysis case is relatively straightforward: Citizens deserve a greater say in their governance, based upon the knowledge that they are best able to articulate their special "needs." Given this voice as a basis for action, government can be more informed and responsive (or, in many cases, more limited), thus promoting a more involved, engaged, and, in many perceptions, (see Barber, 1984, and Mansfield, 2001), a better citizenry. The result would be an enhanced (maybe even a good) society.

This was much the same logic that led earlier theorists (e.g., from de Tocqueville, 1956, to Dewey, 1927) to argue that people deserved a great role in their communities. The latter has been at least partially addressed by the American propensity for

volunteers. The participatory policy analysts, however, lacked an appropriate vehicle that could encompass the size, diversity of perspectives, and complexity of contemporary American society. The Port Huron Proclamation (which famously demanded “More Power to the People”) issued by the Students for a Democratic Society in 1962 floundered on much the same rock. Simply realizing this dilemma, however, does not suggest that the argument is vacuous, or that the relationship between greater participation and policy analysis is an oxymoron. As we shall see, there have been a number of promising activities in this populist vein.

### Policy Analysis in a Good Society

The policy sciences were very consciously established as “the policy sciences of democracy.” It is easy to recognize that the participatory policy analysis orientation clearly relates to that normative condition. There are three obstacles to fulfilling the policy sciences of democracy: The first is a general willingness by citizens to participate; the second is educating citizens to the required tasks and responsibilities; and the third is a viable format.

The first obstacle represents a serious impediment. As noted above, throughout America’s history, there has been a repeated propensity to engage in volunteer activities. We have all heard stories, however, about community governance in condominiums and model cities, in which the seemingly endless haggling leads to no consensus and often no decision. In a culture that immediately recognizes the concept of opportunity costs, when combined with an inability to reach a decision, it was not surprising to find the necessary willingness wane. Still, when there is evidence that decisions can be reached and that the deliberations of citizens are valued (i.e., have an effect), there are numerous examples of successful participatory policy analysis (Kathlene and Martin, 1991; Crosby *et al.*, 1986).

There is, second, a matter of educating the citizens to the issues and their responsibilities. The importance of education is hardly a novel understanding. John Dewey (1927) talked about the role of public education as a prelude to participation in policy matters. For this reason, one again needs to stress that an educated public represents an irreplaceable “public good.” In addition, one needs to provide a certain amount of specific information on various defined topics in order to inform the citizen deliberations (Fishkin, 1995). While one might hope for an “objective” presentation of materials—well articulated, highly

informative, and basically inoffensive—this mixture is almost certainly beyond our expectations. Better, rather, to ask for a “balanced” presentation, in which all sides are heard, akin to an “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 1975 and 1996).

Finally, format becomes important. Dahl (1989) has proposed a “minipopulace”—a “citizens’ jury”—that could hear the “evidence,” debate the issues among themselves, and deliver an *advisory* opinion to the decision-making authority. These citizen juries could be empanelled in a system analogous to the present civil and criminal jury system; indeed, the analog is particularly pertinent given the complex issues that nowadays these juries must consider. It is important to note that their decisions would be advisory. To give them the prerogative of making authoritative decisions would undermine the value of a democratic system. Their role is purely to represent, not supplant the *demos*. Again, Crosby (1986) and Kathlene and Martin (1991) have demonstrated the value of this approach.

### Conclusion

While a participatory policy analysis sounds appealing, one needs to recognize that there are many hurdles to overcome (deLeon, 1997). Timeliness is one; there are surely situations in which time is critical and lengthy presentations and deliberations would be out of order. Representation might be another, although, to date, the American

court systems have had only minimal complaints over the composition of its juries, once the equity (inclusiveness) issue was addressed. Of somewhat lesser importance is that current academic policy programs have not taken upon themselves to design and implement a curriculum that would be necessary to produce this newer, more participatory policy analyst (deLeon and Steelman, 2001), that is, one trained to work alongside of and with the citizen-constituent. And, finally, it would be crucial for citizens to recognize that, in spite of all of the policy analysts’ specialized and technical expertise, they as citizens really do have an inherent right to express their opinions with the understanding that their voices will be heard and recognized.

This is not a brief that public opinion must be slavishly adhered to, in Lynn’s (1999, p. 421) words, “invulnerable to challenge and unavailable to verification.” But it is a brief for the cogency, the simple good common sense of the American public, one that should be heard and utilized. Once again, Dahl (1990, p. 26; Dahl’s emphases) puts it at its succinct best:

*If you believe, as I do, that on the whole ordinary people are more competent than anyone else to decide when and how much they shall intervene on decisions they feel are impor-*

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*tant to them*, then you will surely opt for political equality and democracy.

If one is to find a “policy analysis in the good society,” we propose that it will almost certainly resemble something very much akin to the practice of a participatory policy analysis, for no other analytic exercise listens so closely to its citizens, and no other methodology is more permissive of their desires to speak for, govern, and ultimately fulfill themselves.

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