UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC POLICY: THEORIES AND ISSUES

Paul Cairney

GLOBAL TOBACCO CONTROL: POWER, POLICY, GOVERNANCE AND TRANSFER

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Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 284 pp., £57.50 (hb), ISBN: 9780230200043

After all these years, public policy specialists are still grappling with an ‘understanding’ of public policy. Cairney’s single-authored book brings multiple theoretical perspectives to bear on this enterprise: ‘We study theories of public policy because we want to ask why particular decisions are made, but recognize that there are many different answers…’ (p. 20). It straddles the spectrum from parsimonious rational choice theory to the polar opposite intricacies of complexity theory.

We are taken over familiar terrain: public policy definitions, policy typologies, and the policy cycle. The scene is then set for the conceptual and theoretical overview that provides the main rationale for this text. This begins with an exploration of the elusiveness of power, a concept pervading modern theories of public policy. Next to be dealt with is the problematic concept of institutions, enveloping not just constitutional structures but also norms and rules (formal and informal) that underpin behavioural patterns and recurring relationships.

Then Cairney revisits the classic discussion on bounded rationality and incrementalism, highlighting its continuing resonance as ‘one of the most significant public policy debates in the post-war period’ (p. 100). He reformulates the ongoing controversy about whether policy is structurally determined and policy behaviour systemically induced as the ‘structure–agency mix’.

The author then proceeds to dissect rational choice theory, inextricably linked as it is with methodological individualism, including risks that institutional solutions to collective action problems may prove more dysfunctional than the original problem. Cairney provides a sympathetic treatment of rational choice theory because it poses uncomfortable questions about important issues in public life.

The chapter on ‘multi-level governance’ is equally illuminating, denoting not only shifts of power to levels of government (supra-national and sub-national) other than the central state, but also dispersal of influence from governmental to non-governmental actors. It provides an entry point into the policy network literature as well as that on inter-governmental relations. So, we delve into the compelling debate about the ‘hollowing out’ of the national state and its contemporary ‘steering’ capacity. This is followed by an examination of punctuated equilibrium theory which connects the ongoing theme of policy continuity and change with policy venues. Policies are stable for long periods, but selectively subject to radical change. Much depends on whether they can be contained within tightly drawn policy communities, or are alternatively driven into looser issue networks and the macro-political arena. Some policy demands do ‘catch fire’ politically, elucidation of which requires that attention be given to agenda-setting,
problem definition, and issue (re)framing. Cairney impressively explores the interplay between ideas, interests, and power, reflected in the explanatory power of multiple streams analysis.

Finally and seamlessly, consideration is given to the transfer of ideas – policy importation and exportation – along with a ‘family’ of related concepts, notably lesson-drawing, policy diffusion, and policy convergence. A variety of channels exist through which such policy transfer can take place should conditions prove favourable.

One of the characteristics giving analytical cohesion to this book is the way it teases out transcendent issues. That includes whether theoretical approaches originating in one political system (often the USA) are readily transferable to other settings. According to the author, if theories are suitably adapted they can be applied across different institutional arrangements. Another issue that repeatedly surfaces is the methodological problems presented in operationalizing theoretical frameworks.

The ‘bottom line’ for Cairney revolves around theoretical complementarity or contradic-toriness. Possibilities for synthesis have superficial plausibility, given that theories touch upon similar themes. However, they often proceed from different assumptions; they do not all relate to the same unit of analysis (micro-individual behaviour versus institutionalized norms versus socioeconomic structures); there are methodological (deductive logic versus inductive empiricism) and epistemological (scientific rigour versus constructed interpretation) variations. In other words, it is the problem of incommensurables. The middle ground ultimately occupied is very much in the Allisonian tradition, combining insights from different theories as part of a ‘multiple lenses approach’, thereby shedding light on various aspects of the same policy issue. Sensitivity towards the respective utility of those theories when applied to a given set of circumstances is vital.

Another virtue of this book is the accessibility it brings to challenging subject matter, lucidly marshalling a broad sweep of theoretical material. This prompts the question whether the study of public policy has moved on qualitatively from the input of an earlier generation. In the UK context, texts that come to mind are those emanating from W.I. Jenkins, Burch and Wood, Hogwood and Gunn, all published in the late 1970s/early 1980s, or indeed Brian Smith’s seminal contribution on power and rationality in policy making published in 1976. One view indeed is that public policy analysis has ended up in a cul-de-sac, even casting doubt on its future as a separate sub-discipline (Hughes 2012).

One could argue that progress can be noted in what Cairney calls ‘the modern policy process’. Yet his depiction of this contemporary policy process is at a disappointedly high level of generality. It is characterized as fragmented, variable, and unpredictable, operating in increasingly crowded and multi-level arenas, with ‘complexity’ and ‘messiness’ becoming more pronounced. The book’s conclusion describes ‘a shift from the centralization of power within government towards power diffusion, or from the “clubby days” of post-war policy making towards a more open and competitive group-government process’ (p. 265).

Two difficulties arise. To place the emphasis on the complexity of the policy process has become something of a cliché. More fundamentally, a paradox has to be explained if the process has really become ‘more open and competitive’. How is this to be reconciled with an underlying trend towards greater economic inequality and post-war social mobility going into reverse in countries such as the UK, with policy outcomes that are consequently less rather than more equitable? I suspect that the current generation of students will find Cairney-type process-based texts a little frustrating because of their lack of engagement with such outcomes.
A distinct danger for the UK’s academic public policy community – here comparing less favourably with the USA – is this territory being largely surrendered to think tanks and independent policy institutes. It is not just concern about the social opportunities agenda, but also future economic sustainability, with the UK now seen in some quarters as a ‘de-developing’ economy. At least in his empirical applications of theory Cairney tries to make some retrospective sense of the financial, economic, and fiscal crises of the last five years, though even then it tends to relate predominantly to the first of those components – the banking crisis.

The second book, co-authored by Cairney with US collaborators, does directly engage with a substantive policy issue, tobacco control. *Global Tobacco Control* addresses policy responses to a public health problem and the power of the transnational tobacco companies. The insights derived from public policy theories relate specifically to (shifts in) institutional responsibility; agenda-setting and prioritization of problems; balances of power within policy networks (public health groups contesting tobacco company dominance); impact of the broader socioeconomic policy environment; and changing ideas and beliefs (including the effect of scientific knowledge thereupon). They are used to explain variations in the scope and tempo of policy change, methodically applied through comparative case studies.

The UK is one of the most proactive tobacco control states, having previously been something of a laggard. As for the USA, it is *a* but not *the* worldwide policy leader. Curiously, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are examined in a chapter alongside Japan. The rationale appears to be the contrast between the latter as a laggard and the comprehensive tobacco control regimes of the former.

In European countries there is the additional policy impetus provided by the European Union (whether seen through the prism of inter-governmentalism or supra-nationalism). EU directives and recommendations have been a powerful force for policy diffusion and convergence, notably in the case of accession/candidate countries. The book’s final case study focuses on the World Health Organization, which plays a pivotal role in institutionalizing transnational norms and in establishing a semblance of global governance.

Drawing upon the five factors that form the explanatory spine of the book, the conclusion highlights the importance not only of policy transfer but again also of multi-level governance. In so doing it cautions against ascribing too much significance to formal institutions. The broader ‘new institutionalist’ conception provides more explanatory traction, accommodating not only participation of non-governmental actors, but also institutionalized norms and the ideational structures shaping those norms. And with policy change and receptivity to policy transfer a function of complex interactions between the causal factors considered in the book, adapted versions of three policy theories are judged to be especially fit for purpose: multiple streams analysis; punctuated equilibrium theory (pinpointing when policy trajectory takes a new direction); and the advocacy coalition framework (changes in the relative fortunes of competing policy coalitions).

On the surface, at least in advanced economies and democracies, we appear to be witnessing a paradigmatic policy change from tobacco promotion to tobacco restriction. In the words of the authors, it is a story of ‘cumulative, major change . . . that would have been considered wildly improbable in the 1950s’ (p. 235). We are dealing with nothing less than the social ‘denormalization’ of a mass consumer product. But before getting too carried away, there is the long time-frame involved in securing change since the initial health scares of the 1950s, with much recourse to ineffective policy instruments along the
way. Even now, restrictions continue to proceed only at a slow pace in many (developing) countries.

Compared to the policy book discussed above, this book displays a similar theoretical rigour and comprehensive level of referencing. With much made of the process of policy transfer, wouldn’t it be fascinating though to explore *transferable lessons* for the prospects of trajectory change in the even more fundamental policy problems/challenges confronting us identified earlier in this review. But our powers of analytical hindsight are much more finely honed than those of foresight!

**REFERENCE**

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