

Belief and Policy

When you apply for an NSF grant or for all manner of other grants and fellowships you are usually asked about the "policy implications" of your project. The presumption is that research is or can be a source of systematic theory and information upon which to base public policies. In this perspective, policy should follow from or be led by reasoned analysis of propositions based at least in part on empirical information. Of course, this can be criticized as a technocratic view of policy making. In the real world, policies more frequently seem to reflect disputes over values and beliefs in which protagonists cherry pick information to fit a case for this or that policy that they have already decided on. Lobbyists and interests rule. Be this as it may, at one time expert knowledge was presumed to play a vital role in making economic, social, and environmental policies. This appears to be less and less the case. It represents something of a crisis for many of us who still insist on the immediate "policy relevance" of our research.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a certain hubris reigned about formulating policies as "technical fixes" to this or that problem. Hitting just the right rate of money supply would fine-tune the economy and having all children attend pre-school would guarantee better achievement later on in school and ultimately reduce social inequality. Experts could engineer a better future without fundamentally changing social and political institutions and without pesky interference from the public or politicians. An "experimenting society" would match the best policy to whatever goal was set. While a relative consensus about goals existed, as it did in the U.S. down until the late 1960s and early 1970s, there wasn't much problem with the "policy implications" model. Since then, however, the entire connection between research and policy has been thrown into doubt. Who could say in all seriousness, for example, that recent U.S. economic and foreign policies bear any even distant relationship

to the best research emanating from the halls of American academe?

From one viewpoint, what has happened is a polarizing of politics (and, perhaps, the public) between essentially non-negotiable views of policy based in abstract principles rather than in pragmatic conceptions of what is and what is not desirable from a problem-solving point of view. Thus, a whole slew of serious policy areas – human influence on climate change, species preservation, energy systems, AIDS transmission and population policy, and the militarization of outer space – are now often hostage to abstract and competing claims about geological history, seats of freedom and democracy, when life begins, and the human "mission" on the earth. Absolute belief overwhelms a need for analysis. Certainly, the issue of the use of U.S. intelligence before the Iraq War and the lack of respect for compelling evidence of global warming give one pause. The anti-scientific global leadership of the U.S. in recent years is hardly a cause for celebration. But, as Tocqueville reported from his trip around America in the 1830s, Americans have long been given to casting practical questions in grandiloquent terms. Many academics have long been happy recruits to the culture wars.

From another perspective, many policy prescriptions today are not so much the result of polarization into abstract camps as of democratized or more open policy debates. Politics should be all about the clash of ideals and prescriptions rather than a technocratic exercise in depoliticizing everything for the sake of efficiency. People have different viewpoints about policy. These are not necessarily invariably ill-informed. For this approach to work, however, there must be real limits on the sort of demented rhetoric and political obscurantism that have characterized U.S. politics in recent years. My namesake when

Vice-President of the United States was an early instigator of this pathology at the behest of his President: name calling masquerading as political oratory. Desiring an echo from the media, not any sort of analysis, he excoriated journalists as the "nattering nabobs of negativity." Notwithstanding the natty alliteration, this is the politics of the bar. In his marvelously idiosyncratic book, *In Defence of Politics* (University of Chicago Press Edition, 1993), Bernard Crick requires his protagonists to accept the necessity for negotiation and strategic bargains, if only the better to fight again another day. Absent this, major league politics becomes impossible. Then the possibility of democracy dies too.

The role of the academic specialist within this conception of policy and belief is totally different from that of the technocratic expert fixing policies into place. First, it is about presenting evidence about consequences and alternatives so that others can be better informed when they or their representatives make policies. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, it is about challenging what goes for conventional wisdom when that seems to involve abuse of power and the manipulation of evidence at the behest of a currently dominant belief. The great American sociologist C. Wright Mills put this best: "The political calling of the intellectual [is in] the unmasking of lies which sustain irresponsible power." Writing for popular audiences is one way of doing this. Encouraging our analytically brightest students to pursue careers in public service is another. In a world of so many Brownies and Albertos there's still much work to do. ■



Agnew

John Agnew
jagnew@geog.ucla.edu