

Comment on Review Essay Public Policy Guidebooks by Eleanor D. Glor¹

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One general criticism frequently voiced by both historians and citizens regarding this past century of government would be the overwhelming and overwhelmingly damaging influence of ideology. I would not bet the farm on their conclusions. However, the various “isms” have done horrendous damage in their most extreme forms everywhere they have found a home. War and cold war weariness continue to lurk in the memories of far too many citizens representing far too many generations to forget that lesson.

Anecdotally in chatter and academically in print, ideology has cloaked a multitude of sins. What tends to be forgotten is that in some forms encompassing belief systems have accomplished some manifestly worthy goals maintaining faith and solidarity in situations so dire that social collapse was a real risk. Certainly, the great depression and the second world war could have delivered far worse outcomes than what resulted. The end of the cold war was more sudden than expected, but Armageddon would likely have been a bad alternative.

These two books *A Modern Guide to Public Policy* and *Theories of the Policy Process* are, if it’s not too simplistic to say, about what ostensibly replaced ideology, namely policy. Policy as an alternative to theoretical politics has been an undercurrent of small “p” populism for some time. If pragmatism particularly the American kind did not by definition eschew ideological roots it too would be disparaged for its apolitical political agenda. The author of the Review Essay this piece of writing critiques explains that not all policy is tainted with a covert non-objective objective, “...when it is based on a logical explanation linking causes and consequences and able to be empirically tested” (Glor, 2021).

The proof of the pudding remains in the eating nonetheless, and as the review essay notes, there is an identifiable politics of policy which has grown more prominent with the passing decades. The author has also observed the tendency to increase the ratio of policy driven initiatives to ongoing ideological programs. This trend began to be noticeable in the early 1970’s around the time when western countries began preferencing neo-liberal frameworks over social democratic safety nets in dead earnest.

Government policy in our times is generally equated with a swing to the right. This holds true even for moderate left wing and centre-left administrations. Calling the changes that have ensued ideologically neutral, praising the upfront benefits to citizens rather than mentioning the substantial downside of the opening up of private sector opportunities and subsequent loss of citizen ownership in the common endowment is truly misleading. Overall, public-private partnerships in our lifetime conceal a euphemism for public fleecing plus private swindling. Calling the new exploitive “deals” policy moves rather than abandonment of responsibility is not

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only dishonourable, but also a form of camouflage. Policy disguises the betrayal of the public trust in the eyes of an electorate which sees only fewer taxes to pay or service charges to carry.

Much new employment for clever middlemen like lobbyists, pollsters, designers, dismantlers and their ilk is generated by assuming the policy mantle. Johnny-on-the-spot entrepreneurs are able to get rich on the handover while politicians benefit when their election campaign funds are enriched by donations from the beneficiaries of new policy orders. Nothing about old ideological conflicts need be mentioned. Tranquility reigns as awkward costs are deferred. The author of the review essay seems to be rankled by the disappearance of political scientists and the runway they used to enjoy as they argued for social justice or due process. That may be a self-serving complaint from the perspective of once comfortably tenured academics, but it is a trend that exposes unwary students to risks: accountability to the electorate as a focus is diminished or more accurately, buried.

We might assume that the right-wing field day has been facilitated by another aspect of the shift to policy as a given good. Because the permanent public service is no longer shielded from a creeping politicization of its undertakings, because after all, policy is labeled as neutral, defences against attacks on the public good can not be adequately parried. Likewise, privatization of key public policy components tends to filter out observations that might reveal functional or fiscal incompetence on the part of contractors who may have an incentive to cut corners in the interest of “saving the taxpayer” extra cost burdens.

Surprisingly, there’s little reference in this paper and perhaps in either book to the influential role played by public relations in the elevation of policy as a product of a management process versus partisan dialogue. Working through mass or social media the social environment is sculpted by messaging and modeling. As needs vary, or appear to, policy comes under scrutiny as do the products or processes developed to facilitate policy implementation. We are all aware of these sources that drive policy change. The function is cyclic moving faster than ideological shifts which respond to different drivers in any case. Consider for example, how insurance grew out of the interplay between environmental conditions and public policy interventions.

The changes wrought by the transition from ideological backdrop to policy installation is reflective of developing expectations people have of governance. During earlier hierarchical more prescriptive regimes, the idea of policy as a service rather than a dictated restriction would have at best been an afterthought. Sometimes certain absurdities creep in when the policy making body fails to realize how distinct the two policy models are from one another.

I recall being told once that the agency governing cross border travel (perhaps in an effort to appear more service oriented) was keen to write about its function as a scrutinizer of travellers and their baggage as if it were a service to the individuals lining up for inspection. Agency managers considered writing up the unwelcome intervention as a clause in their mission statement. If you’ve ever enjoyed the privilege of having your bags probed for contraband what are the odds that you recall the experience with pleasure? Did you regard the time consuming maybe stressful process as a personal service provided by a policy, you were privileged to pay for? Yet that was how the whole business was framed. Policing in general has some serious catch up to do around public attitudes towards its professional model.

Between both authoritarian ideological frameworks, where the priority is control, and a policy focus that primarily seeks public service improvement, definitions distinguishing the two have become muddled in the minds of many public servants as well as anxious citizens. The transition from ideology to policy as a program foundation is incomplete in both the minds of authorities as well as the managers of systems attempting to straddle the changeover. Scholars and committed adherents sometimes pine for the good old days when regulatory proposals were unmistakably ideological in intent. This nostalgia for past certainty continues across the political spectrum throughout the electorate but is most marked at its extremities.

In the not too distant past some legislators, confronted with a sharply divided citizenry, used the idea of proposing laws which were not ideologically divisive to escape partisan gridlock when entrenched factions confronted each other in or out of legislatures. We still see this often enough on “safe” issues. Partisanship will not be squelched for long leading to new wedge issue causes that invade previously untouchable social issues like hate crimes, climate change, stereotyping, religious expression or voting rights. The problems with this new kind of regulation are several: such restrictions are often very hard to enforce, they are hot button questions for specific communities, they lead citizens to wonder what else will be verboten next and they really invade portions of disputed public behaviour that begs for less rigid intervention.

One thing, whether within the realm of ideology or policy which politics and policy have in common, is that almost any proposed intervention is shooting at a moving target. Yesterday’s issues might have succumbed to yesterday’s ideological politics just as former customs might have attracted sufficient attention to bring majorities to the banner of policy specific programs that would soon be dismissed as irrelevant as time moved along.

When was the last time anyone was tempted to spit on a streetcar? I’ll bet it was after the spittoons were removed from public transportation and chewing tobacco went out of style. Some customs, habits or belief systems just fade away including how we look at governance options. Political science departments have been replaced by policy departments in some universities, but we may live to see those decisions reversed or find that “policy” can no longer be discussed intelligently without bringing in algorithms and advanced statistics to reshape everything again.

The Review Essay also makes pertinent observations about the underpinnings of policy research. One of the most disturbing of these addresses the issue of withdrawal of funding. Many granting bodies no longer support the ongoing professional development of public servants and scholars, by not underwriting purchase of professional journals and paid conference attendance which are essential expenditures if their work is to illuminate how theory unfolds in practice.

Political Science is not the only discipline to suffer from this form of austerity. The humanities and other social sciences likewise face researcher-practitioner communications barriers impeding development and coordination. Spending shortfalls of this kind definitely do have roots in right wing ideas as many of the best-known politicians on the right are on record as regarding even the existence of the social sciences as superfluous.

British Prime minister Margaret Thatcher in a frequently quoted remark declared society did not really exist. Before that, in 1970 in what became a manifesto for neoliberalism Milton Friedman’s famous article in which he declared that “the social responsibility of business is to

increase its profits” was published in the New York Times, of all places. Even then as a young reader I saw this as a bold and important statement. Shocking, but bold. In what became known as the Friedman doctrine the hard-nosed economist claimed in the same essay that only to the shareholders and not to the public nor society did a company have a responsibility.

To summarise, my reading of this review essay and my examination of the inferences it draws from the books reviewed, is partly a result of a global shift to a policy-oriented framework away from the political arenas where the action is largely driven by idealized aspirations seldom realized in modern pressure cooker political environments. In a democracy it is laudable to serve citizens by solving problems through sometimes innovative policies that may contrast strikingly with the shopworn playbooks derived from dated and disputed ideologies.

That approach can also be naïve. Governments need reasoned strategies based on credible, evidence-based theories to hold their plans and responses together. We need not exclude innovation, nor must all initiatives be slavishly consistent. If background deliberation is not thoughtful and shared among practitioners, scholars and wonks, we have only the media to resort to for interpretation. That may be where we are now. Sadly, that will not serve us well.

About the Author:

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