

Understanding Policy Change as a Discursive Problem

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ABSTRACT *In understanding policy change, classical approaches generally treat public policy as an object which can be studied directly and whose change can be measured objectively. In this article, we will show how this objectification process involves difficult to surmount epistemological problem because objectification, in the classical approaches, involves the researcher in the use of normative analytical techniques which usually distort the object, i.e. public policy, beyond recognition. To avoid such a distortion, it is proposed that analysts should focus not on an “objective” notion of change, but on a “subjective”, “discursive” one; on the way participants define policy and identify change in the construction and de-construction of “policy statements”. Not yet well developed and still relatively heterogeneous, discursive approaches to policy analysis attempt to reintegrate the subject, in this case the participant, into the heart of the analysis of policy dynamics. Their idea is not to separate the subject and the object, i.e. the actors and the policy, but to consider discourse as an ontological link between both. The question of change as such does not disappear but is recomposed. The production of a discourse of both change and its causes is considered as a fundamental activity for actors trying to influence other actors in order to transform public policies.*

Introduction

How is it possible to grasp and analyze policy change? How can we define it and establish its limits? How can we connect it to a set of causes? And what are the kinds of hypotheses a researcher should formulate to better understand these phenomena? This double work of the researcher, both normative and causal, underscores the difficulties we face when we analyze change: we need both the definition of a frame to grasp change and structure analysis as well as to conduct the analysis itself.

Many researchers objectify public policy as a prelude to examining its dynamics. In other words, the researcher tries to eliminate the subjective appreciations formulated by the participants who directly define what public policy is in the process of making (and altering) it. This attempt at objectification implies that the researcher can have special access to the essence of policies and objects and directly establish whether or not they have changed. Objectification involves reducing

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ISSN 1387-6988 Print/1572-5448 Online/09/010065-18

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DOI: 10.1080/13876980802648235

policies to some category of “facts” – such as instruments, laws, ideas, or institutions – that can be observed independently from participants.

But observing these different elements is not enough to resolve the methodological issues involved in the assessment of policy change. Every year, new laws are voted in, devices are modified and budgets are amended. To get around this difficulty of permanent and plentiful change, researchers try to measure the extent of change and distinguish between “small” and “large” changes. Partly inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s works on scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1983), they are forced to mobilize a non-objective “normative” frame which allows them to discern qualitative variations in policy “objects”. In most approaches, “large” change becomes a rather rare and specific phenomenon. The normal flux of policy is termed “incremental” (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993) or “secondary” changes (Sabatier 1999) and its marginal nature is assumed to be limited by “path dependent” evolutionary processes (Pierson 2000). The rare works which identify and analyze more significant changes tend to confine them to particular moments or short periods of time (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

To this first normative element, a second one – not of the same nature – is added: identifying causal factors and relationships. Once again, this work is particularly difficult because it is not only a question of determining a temporal succession of phenomena but also showing that there is a connection between the two phases or states of a phenomenon. This connection, the only thing capable of transforming a coincidence into causality, leads automatically to a series of complex epistemological and methodological issues. This connection must establish a beginning point for change which serves as an anchorage point allowing us to distinguish alterations which precede and succeed it. The researcher then tries to isolate the endogenous causes of change (peculiar to the system and to public policies) from the exogenous ones (external events derived from “social”, “economical”, “environmental” or “political” systems). But the attempt to objectively identify these causes is always confronted with the contingent, non-reproducible and specific character of the policy event under observation. Overcoming these idiosyncrasies requires the use of generalities and abstractions, producing a de-contextualized theory of change which is intended to be applicable to other empirical situations, but which must be re-adjusted – sometimes significantly and sometimes marginally – to take into account the specifics of other case situations. As Merton (1951) argued in the case of “big sociological theories”, the problem with these, even when presented as middle range, is that most of the time they cannot be easily adapted to other empirical cases and oblige researchers to distort them to fit a new context or, worse, to permanently modify them each time a new case is examined.

This raises several interesting issues in the effort to answer the question “why haven’t policy researchers produced a viable theory of change”? The answer may well be that the very analytical devices they mobilize to identify and explain change deform the object they observe so that the absence or existence of change may simply be an optical effect caused by the method employed. In other words, the identification of change may involve such a twisting of reality that it ineluctably leads to a dead end as soon as researchers attempt to generalize their results.

Many researchers, in fact, appear to have recognized these issues and to have abandoned any effort at objectifying policies. Charles O. Jones and John Kingdon (Jones 1984, Kingdon 1995), for instance, have showed that the distinction should be