

Policy Analysis in Italy – A Remark

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This paper has three aims:

1. to emphasize the importance of the mechanisms for the 'institutionalization of expertise' to understand the actual functioning of political and administrative systems
2. to outline the actual degree of institutional recognition of policy analysis and evaluation (PA & E) in Italy, in a comparative perspective
3. to identify the causes and effects of the substantial absence of this discipline among the analytical 'tools of government' in our country.

The arguments shown here are based on a research that has analyzed the functions and influence of the agencies created to provide governments and parliaments with the technical knowledge to accomplish their tasks. More precisely, the survey focuses on the quali-quantitative comparison of three national cases: United States, United Kingdom, and Italy, which have been investigated at the level of both central government and infranational government, namely the US states, Scotland, and the Italian regions.

The study of the legislatures has been concluded (Regonini, 2012a, 2012b) while the research on technical structures at the service of the executives in the same three countries is still in progress. The results so far confirm the same findings.

1

Four disciplinary approaches

The first task of our research has been to trace the process of institutionalization of expertise (Johnson et al, 1995), through the analysis of the competencies recognized as usable knowledge (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979) in the public decisions. Based on the evidence gathered, four disciplinary approaches deserve special attention, namely

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1. 'law'
2. 'budget'
3. 'management'
4. 'policy'.

Their relevance is confirmed both from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective.

From a diachronic viewpoint, this 'quadrilateral of institutionalised expertise' is the outcome of complex dynamics arising from the main Western societies.

1. A historical overview of the interaction between the development of the modern state and the institutionalization of these disciplines must primarily be related to the development of public law in its various aspects. Indeed, the first qualification given to the post-absolutist state is 'rule of law', i.e. the state must abide by the principle of legality (Hayek, 1978; O'Donnell, 2004). In this project, we will refer to this competence framework as 'law'.

2. The second analytic perspective is public finance, broadly intended as public economics, accounting and budgeting ... From a historical point of view, the separation of the Treasury from the king's coffers, and the taxing and spending limits imposed on the government were fundamental objectives of the democratic revolutions, in particular in the United Kingdom, France, North America. The removal of discretion in public money management required new institutions and new expertise in order to guarantee the accuracy of public accounting practices (Webber & Wildavsky, 1986; Hopwood & Miller, 1994). In this project these aspects will be referred to as 'budget'.

3. Since the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century, the emergence of bureaucratic organizations in Europe and the United States based upon specialization, fairness and merit promotion marks a significant benchmark in the history of institutions following the emergence of the administrative state (Lynn, 2006). The versatility of the term 'management' – referring to either a function, or those people carrying out that function, or the expertise to make the function more effective – is a sign of the complex interaction between the institution building process and the knowledge building process.

4. The emergence of the policy-oriented, or output (Peters, 2011), or problem solving (Briggs, 2008) democracy, is a more gradual process. In certain ways, all the public institutions have always had the role of policy makers, at least to meet the community's basic needs, such as defense and public hygiene. Executives and legislatures - for instance ministries and parliamentary committees - are traditionally organized into policy areas. However, what has changed in the last two decades is that these institutions have explicitly recognized policy analysis and evaluation as tools to assess the value of their decisions (Wittrock et al., 1991). In this context, the term 'policy' is not just a generic synonym to government intervention in a field, 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do' as

Dye stated (1987: 1), but it refers to the explicit responsibility to produce useful knowledge to solve socially relevant problems (Dror, 1971).

The formal recognition of the PA&E as a fourth discipline for framing public decisions is confirmed not only by the rough diachronic reconstruction put forward in the last paragraph, but also by a synchronic analysis of the expertise recommended and endorsed by international organizations, such as the World Bank (1992), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1995), International Monetary Fund (1997).

Their guidelines to good governance (Kaufmann et al., 2005; Van Kersbergen et al, 2004, OECD 2009) prescribe the development of non-majoritarian institutions with the task of ex-ante advising and ex-post assessment of the decisions competing to governments and parliaments. Their function is to ensure:

- the compliance with the rule of law
- a strict audit of any public expenditure
- a continuous assessment of the management performances
- the evaluation of public policies, their outcomes, their impact.

2

The Anglo-American influence

The processes whereby these four disciplines have gained an institutional role follow specific patterns in every country. But the international diffusion of the English terms used to identify the last two paradigms (management, policy) shows how much this process has been deeply influenced by the Anglo-American model. In fact, the emergence of policy paradigm in the contemporary governmentality (Foucault, 1991) is mainly rooted on the American political and institutional context. Since the 80s, the United Kingdom has adopted this 'ontology' to organize, intervene in, and account for public decisions.

In fact the American and British political institutions, although they are so different for powers, electoral mechanisms, party systems, internal operating rules, historical heritage, are good examples of the use of this kind of knowledge, with its set of rules, its standards and methods.

Of course this does not imply that in these countries the real application of this approach has always been effective, useful, capable of producing the intended results. It is just to recognize the genealogy of this kind of knowledge.

Both in the US and in the UK, the crucial phases in the institutionalization of the policy paradigm have been accompanied by a strong demand for collaboration and support for the corresponding epistemic community. Following the 1993 *National Performance Review* in the US, a project was launched to develop 'a formal discipline of program design (...)'.
3

This project would be funded through the National Science Foundation. External participants in this effort should include established sources of relevant expertise such as the National Academy of Public Administration, the Brookings Institution, universities, and other public policy analysis organizations' (National Performance Review, 1993).

At the beginning of the last decade, in order to guarantee an adequate contribution from the so called 'government analytical professions', the *Government Social Research Service* (GSR) was established in the UK as a network of social researchers within and without government whose aim was to

- 'provide government with objective, reliable, relevant and timely social research
- support the development, implementation, review and evaluation of policy and delivery
- ensure policy debate is informed by the best research evidence and thinking from the social sciences'¹.

3

Italy: the missing paradigm

In Romance-speaking countries, the institutional acknowledgement of the policy paradigm has been slower and more difficult.

The Italian case is particularly interesting because it has remained largely impervious to these processes of disciplinary diversification. The very low degree of institutionalization of the policy sciences in Italy is even more impressive since France, with the Constitutional Law passed on July 23rd 2008, redefined the role of its Parliament as follows: 'the Parliament shall pass statutes. It shall monitor the action of the Government. It shall assess public policies' (art. 24, par. 1²).

Many factors work against the use of policy analysis and evaluation in the institutions of our country. Most of them are related to the particular relationship between politics and policy in Italy.

First, it must be mentioned a linguistic factor: the Italian language has a single word - 'politica' - to mean both: 'politics' and 'policy'. This fact makes it very difficult to recognize the autonomy of the technical skills required for policy analysis and evaluation. So the first meaning - politics - clearly overpowers the second - policy. The mere fact of calling public policies with terms such 'measures', 'interventions', 'reforms' implies that the release of these choices from a disciplinary anchor - because there is no such a thing as a 'science of interventions', or an 'international journal of comparative measures' - delivers

¹ <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr>

² <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp>

them entirely to the responsibility of the political actors.

Other factors to consider are:

- a political culture marked by ideological conflicts, which leaves little room for problem solving and pragmatism;
- an inefficient bureaucracy, without the autonomy and the prestige of the French or German administrations (to name two examples from the Continent).

As a result of all these elements, the presence of non-partisan expertise in institutions is very poor:

- the spoil system is pervasive
- state agencies operating on a non-majoritarian logic are rare
- the data available to researchers and public are sparse, uneven, difficult to reuse.

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to identify only in the dominance of politics the unique cause of the poor institutionalization of policy analysis and evaluation in Italy.

An equally important factor is the firmness through which the epistemic communities gathered around the paradigms of 'law' and 'budget' defend their conquered areas in research agencies of the legislative and the executive, overseeing the boundaries of their 'professional jurisdictions' (Abbott 1988).

Moreover, their disciplinary approaches can rely on a system of enforcement that has in the Administrative Courts and in the Court of Accounts the undisputed masters to judge the correctness of public decisions.

4

Severe consequences

The effects of this kind of knowledge provision are relevant.

- The organization of public interventions lacks any consistent articulation based on policies, programs, projects.
- Public decisions take only the narrow forms of laws and appropriations.
- For a researcher or a citizen, it is impossible to find an explicit definition of:
 - o what is the problem
 - o which theory stays behind the intervention
 - o what results are to be achieved in which timeframe
 - o what evidence will be considered to assess their success.

Under these conditions, some of the hallmarks of good governance cannot be applied.

1. It is impossible to learn from the mistakes and past experiences, because the failure assessment criteria are based on inadequate parameters. If you do not know

- the problem which government intervention would face
- the expected results
- the indicators to measure them

monitoring and ex post evaluation are precluded.

If every law is a story on its own, the only criterion to evaluate it is its degree of compliance.

If any expense is just an output of the state budget, the only criterion to evaluate it is the dynamics of the amount of it.

There are some timid exceptions to this rule at the regional level, thanks to a project that aims to include precise evaluation clauses into the most relevant laws. Lombardy is one of the regions with extensive experience in this attempt. But it is a drop in the ocean.

2. Our political system knows only one type of accountability: electoral, or vertical, or majoritarian accountability.

- voters express their preferences
- who gets the majority, is in office for a predetermined period of time
- at the end of the term they return to voters and ask for their approval.

During the term, whenever the political or economic backdrop to the election program change, whenever policy promises fail or grows to be inadequate, government decisions become opaque and unverifiable.

In fact, our institutional system does not provide for 'horizontal' (O'Donnell 2003) - not electoral - accountability, based on an effective exercise of legislative oversight through the parliament watchdogs. And there is no independent technical agency to account for the administrative performances.

When problems become dramatic and political routines prove to be impotent, we resort to 'technical governments' as a method for supplying missing skills to our institutions.

3. In this situation, even the exercise of civic participation and what is often called 'social accountability' is really very difficult. When public decisions only take the form of twisted pieces of legislation or arcane budget rules, it is very hard for citizens and for the old and new media to bear the costs of information required to understand the causes and effects of government choices, to assess them and to submit alternative proposals.

An overload on the other disciplines

The last remark concerns the effect that the absence of the 'policy' paradigm produces on other disciplines, which are already recognized as governmental sciences.

The fact that our fourth analytical perspective is missing charges the others with tasks that end up altering the nature of the conceptual and methodological resources that they possess, reducing their impact.

If we consider the 'law' approach, its unconscious application as a substitute for the fourth paradigm leads to an hypertrophic use of the legal logic, with paradoxical effects. The hopes of attaining deregulation and simplification through legal instruments remember Baron Munchausen who tried to rise from the pond by being held by his hair.

Considering the 'budget' approach - the strengthening of which no one can reasonably criticize, given the past and present of the Italian public finances - the absence of the fourth paradigm involves a huge difficulty in identifying the costs actually unproductive and in selecting the expenditures that are, instead, real social investment in the medium and long term.

If the 'policy' paradigm is not available, it is difficult to overcome the logic of linear cuts, with all the subsequent negative effects in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and equity of public action. And objectives such as growth and development are likely to become mythical words, when the scarcity of resources would require a surgical precision in the design of intervention projects.

At the beginning of the paragraph, with reference to the Italian case we discussed only one missing paradigm, that of policy, thereby crediting the successful institutionalization of the 'management' approach. In fact, this recognition is only in its infancy, and there is strong pressure towards its assimilation within the logic of 'law' and/or 'budget'. And this is another problem, because the development of the two last disciplines offering an autonomous interpretations of what is happening in the public sector is closely interconnected (Lynn 2006, Talbot 2010).

Certainly, terms like 'program', 'performance', 'output', 'outcome' refer to concepts and parameters which are different when talking about management or policy. But it is also true that, if one disciplinary approach does not display its own analytical tools, the other will be affected, because 'organizational design and policy analysis are part of the same governmental process' (Wildavsky, 1992: 232).

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