

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

INTELLECTUALS AND THE POLITICS OF POLICY RESEARCH

Mala Singh

This presentation deals with the question of intellectuals working in the area of policy research on behalf of certain sections of the liberation movement. I start with a brief glance at the notions of *policy* and *intellectuals* and then suggest how policy research should and should not be viewed within the context of transition in this country. I then go on to examine some of the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the issue of intellectuals engaged in policy research. My analysis seeks to link three issues, namely,

- how intellectuals and their institutions are affecting and being affected by policy initiatives.
- what the implications are for the democratic process in the country.
- which social interests are or could be advanced by policy research.

'Policy' has its root in the Greek word *politeia*. It refers to a framework or plan devised to address some social need, problem or demand. It encompasses, on the one hand, the values and principles underlying political, organisational and institutional choices, and on the other, the investigation, research and strategic planning required to operationalise those choices. Given the increasing complexity of social systems and the demands of legitimisation, policymakers and decisionmakers seek data, analyses and researched options for more effective or persuasive governance. For this purpose, they either train their own cadre of policy researchers or draw in relatively independent sources of expertise. Policy positions could be described as lying at the intersection of power, knowledge and social need.

Some of the key actors and constituencies in the policy arena would be :

- the *client* in the form of a government, political party, social agency or any interest group.
- the *researcher* in the form of the individual 'expert' or a research institution, network or agency.
- the *funder* in the form of a government, the private sector, philanthropic foundation, etc.
- the *beneficiary* in the form of the 'public' or the citizenry (or fractions of them) viewed as passive object and consumer or as active participant in the shaping of policy.

Also important for consideration are the policy structures and mechanisms, both institutionalised and ad hoc, in and through which policy preparation takes place e.g. commissions, think tanks, task forces, policy and planning committees, advisory councils, etc. Such structures often influence policy outcomes through their character, especially with regard to the measure and nature of the interaction they allow among the different participants in the policy process.

The direct and indirect relationships obtaining between and among these players in the policy process raise a number of questions that have a bearing on the construction of democratic institutions and processes. Some of the most central of these concern the link between policy and the vested interests of clients, researchers and funders; the autonomy and accountability of researchers and research institutions; and the extent, modes and mechanisms of beneficiary participation in policy generation or evaluation; Within the present context of political transition in South Africa, a number of ambiguities surround the issue of policy work. Some of the most decisive of these concern the changing identities and interests of the client/s, shifts in the conceptualisation of the beneficiary and its role in the policy process, the relationship between policy research and continuing mass struggle, the tension between the demands of urgent and efficient policy preparation and the slow, messy and unpredictable ways of the democratic process, the entry of new funding interests, the role and responsibilities of established research communities on the new policy terrain and the necessity to engender a more representative research community.

Intellectuals as researchers constitute one agency within the policy generation process. There is no single unambiguous definition of intellectuals because there is no single unambiguous role played by them. In the domain of power, they have been critics as well as advisers to those in power and, sometimes, themselves wielders of power. Within the context of the division between mental and manual labour, their activity has been to articulate, interpret, evaluate and disseminate ideas, concepts, theories and symbols. Through their work they serve, in crude and subtle ways, a variety of interests, not excluding their own. Race, class, gender and ideology are crucial determining factors in how this stratum is constituted and socially located.

Intellectuals have been as much drawn to powerful elites as to the 'wretched of the earth' (Kolakowski, 1986 : 165), a fact well demonstrated by their activity in this country where they have served both in the legitimation and the de-legitimation of existing forms of domination. In the present conjuncture, intellectuals are beginning to play an important role in translating the programmatic ideals and hopes of the liberation movement into policy options. In being able to wield 'the power of the spoken and written word' (Schumpeter in de Huszar, 1960 : 70), they are in a powerfully privileged position to generate new discourses about the shape and direction of reconstruction and transformation. Against the backdrop of the urgent needs of transition politics, progressive intellectuals may be set to play an enlarged political role especially in the area of policy work, a development not without its own problems and contradictions with respect to the search for democratic modes of social reconstruction.

South Africa has become an arena of contestation for the restructuring of policy agendas among contending groups seeking to establish a new hegemonic order. The current phase of negotiation politics and the prospects of a different political order have triggered off several initiatives directed towards the investigation and formulation of new policy options to replace the exhausted and de-legitimated policies associated with apartheid. Whether in the area of the economy, housing, education, health, the land question, taxation, local government, etc., the present government,

oppositional groupings, the private sector and the organisations of civil society are all preparing for the restructuring of the policy agenda. What is the appropriate way to conceptualise policy research within this context so that it could contribute most effectively to broad-based social transformation?

The pursuit of research and the development of research capacity within oppositional circles has become part of the political struggle to seize the policy initiative. Although the focus of such research is tied to the reconstructive needs of the country, it is still a feature of oppositional politics insofar as it is part of the continuing struggle to empower the disenfranchised and their organisations within a negotiations phase. In equipping the forces of resistance with data, analyses, comparative perspectives, modelling, policy scenarios, etc., intellectuals are both continuing a critique of the existing regime and facilitating the development of a new hegemony. Universities, research institutions, journals and magazines, the media, public discussion forums will all be at stake as elements of the new ideological infrastructure needed to build and consolidate such a hegemony. However, despite the seductive promise of the negotiations moment, policy research as part of a reconstructive mind set has to be located within the ambit of a state apparatus whose power to kill, maim, impoverish and control has not been successfully blocked by the liberation movement. This gives to policy work a dimension not usually associated with the conventional production of public policy within a legitimate political order. Such a dimension has to straddle continuing resistance with reconstructive preparation - a reality that therefore imposes more complex obligations on all participants in the pursuit of new policy directions.

I would like to suggest that there are three ways not to view policy research at the present time. It is not to be regarded as a premature activity that must await the seizure of state power. This position underutilises the new political spaces now available through not arming itself also with researched policy options. Policy work is not to be viewed as an activity connected solely with the reconstructive moment rather than with the oppositional. This position underestimates the role of mass struggle in the shaping of reconstruction. And, finally, policy research is not to be seen as an activity that can be pursued as a technical exercise about means rather than ends and in isolation from other political moves. This position simply mystifies the link between ideological preference and policy production through assuming that there is already some measure of national consensus about the social values and goals underlying the policy process. On the other hand, policy research activities as a complex phenomenon of the current political landscape must encompass the following three vital dimensions - the continuing struggle for a political order that does not marginalise majority needs and interests, reconstructive planning for the future, and the facilitation of widespread popular participation in policy decision-making as part of the general pursuit of democratised decisionmaking. These three dimensions have different kinds of implications for policy researchers.

There may be a strong tendency for intellectuals, especially those located within universities and research contexts, to address themselves primarily to the reconstructive dimension since their training and expertise fit most closely into its planning

needs. This is also the area where the concerns of scholarship, disciplinary rigour and professionalism enter most into the picture, especially for career intellectuals. However, political and ethical issues central to democracy can be addressed substantively only through a consideration of the other two dimensions. In this regard, two key concerns need to be addressed. The first pertains to the question of input into policy agendas and policy formulations by mass based organisations and constituencies. Since this issue has been the subject of other debates at this symposium, I will not elaborate on it any further except to underscore the necessity for ongoing consideration of the mechanisms and processes to facilitate such input. The second issue, which has a more direct bearing on the role and responsibilities of intellectuals, concerns the facilitation of access to policy information, debates, and proposals. The dissemination, in accessible forms and forums, of policy discussions will be crucial to a deepening of the democratic process insofar as it could ensure that such knowledge does not remain the 'property' of political decisionmakers and experts.

Intellectuals located at universities who are presently engaged in policy research could urge these institutions to play a central role in availing access to policy debate as part of a broader project of using their infrastructure to democratise public access to knowledge. This could be done, for example, through building a policy education component into the various policy research and training units that are being set up at many universities. A strong commitment to policy education could undercut criticisms that policy preparation is taking place in the interaction between political and intellectual elites, that, in the growing gap between oppositional leadership and the masses, intellectuals, among others, are inserting themselves in ways threatening to the requirements of an encompassing democratic ethos, and that policy issues, on account of their complexity, are being removed from the public domain to the domain of expertise.

In his introductory remarks yesterday, Mike Morris referred to the fact that the resistance period had fostered research but privileged activism. We may be confronting the reverse scenario at present. Preparation for reconstruction may be privileging research (and researchers!) in the face of a retreating mass activism. Clearly, activism has to be conceptualised anew in order to be effective in the present conjuncture but it cannot be theorised off the political agenda without dangerous political repercussions. An activism around policy issues - informed by policy research and strengthened by policy education - could be crucial to the installation of an acceptable political order. This is a point to which the best research (and researchers) cannot, on their own, bring us.

A further point which needs to be raised concerns the issue of the social and political forces and interests which policy research and researchers might serve. One way of representing the present conjuncture would be to argue that a variety of mass based social forces in the form of the liberation movement are utilising all available means, including research, to effect social transformation. However, since February 2 1990, notions like 'the liberation movement', 'the people' and 'the struggle' have lost whatever rhetorical unity and homogeneity they may have possessed before. The

'liberation movement' is now a collection of political organisations and tendencies that have chosen different political options with different interests at stake. Since research production and utilisation is neither a neutral nor a technical issue, researchers will not be able to avoid working within networks of interests that may seek to appropriate research for self-serving purposes. How are policy researchers to negotiate the complexities of and tensions between what represents national interests and a variety of special interests like the advancement of party politics or the facilitation of elite formation?

A great deal of progressive policy research is, at present, being conducted under the auspices of the ANC and COSATU, which clearly represent large social and political interests within the country. It is entirely within reason that there are equally large interests and constituencies not encompassed within the policy research frameworks as presently constituted. How can such interests be accommodated or addressed? Intellectuals engaged in policy research could seek to broaden the social base of policy concerns in a variety of ways - by transcending frameworks specified by commissioning clients (in this way demonstrating a measure of critical independence from the client), by acknowledging ideological choices in policy preparation, by recognising and engaging with opposing options and choices, and by an insistence on encompassing non-sectarian forums for policy debate. Alternatively, one could expect that progressive intellectuals will choose to ally with a variety of different social forces - some with groupings and interests which aspire to state power and others with interests within 'civil society'. The insertion of intellectuals along different points of struggle and transformation will be a useful safeguard against their large-scale absorption into legitimating functions on behalf of the emergent hegemonic order.

There are those who have argued that there is a fundamental disjuncture between the worlds of scholarship and policymaking. Brock (1987), for example, distinguishes between truth as the virtue and goal of scholarship and a focus on consequences as the concern of those involved in policy formation. Smith (1991) attempts to straddle the truth-consequences dichotomy posed by Brock by seeing truth as being not absent from the world of the policy expert but of existing in a qualified way in the form of a 'useful truth'. These distinctions may be somewhat academic since it is clear that ideological subjectivities and interests are as implicated in the constitution of 'truth' in the world of scholarship as they are in the world of public policy. It would be more useful to recognise that, within the policy process itself, different players may have different, contending versions of the 'truth', depending on their agenda of interests. Part of the intellectual and moral challenge facing intellectuals in the world of policy would be the attempt to disaggregate the different interests at stake in the policy process (including their own) and to identify that 'truth' which genuinely advances the interests of those most affected by the policies, especially those least able to influence the policy agenda. In this respect, intellectuals who attempt to link the 'truths' emerging from their own scholarly analyses with strong organisationally based imperatives pertaining to the interests of the mass population are likely to be on stronger ground in addressing the nature of 'truths'

and 'useful truths' within the policy process.

Policy research may end up serving narrow sectarian or elite groupings or it may advance broad national interests. Whether it does either of these does not depend solely on intellectuals since research is only one aspect that feeds into policymaking and intellectuals only one constituency exercising influence in that terrain. There is no doubt that intellectual work could be immensely valuable for the illumination of political choices. But the link between enlightened policy choice and social transformation will ultimately not depend on the quality or quantity of research or the force of the better argument. As pointed out by Max Weber (in Gouldner, 1975-6 : 3, n 2), it will be the material and ideal interests of people rather than ideas which will, in the final instance, govern their conduct. Expert knowledge may be only one aspect of the necessary conditions for a more rational politics. The sufficient conditions depend on the political relations between the state and its citizens and whether the available social, political and economic space is organised in such a way that the will of the citizens for a more rational and humane politics prevails. And to get to that point, mass political struggle for the deepening of democracy is as indispensable as expertise.

In addition to their political commitments, the desire to bring 'rationality' to political thinking and to offer a 'scientific' basis for social reform has, no doubt, motivated many intellectuals engaged in policy research. Debates in the social sciences over challenges to the notion of scientific objectivity have tempered, somewhat, the claims of intellectuals to bring an incontrovertible cognitive authority to the policy process. However, even a weaker thesis about the status of science and rationality allows intellectuals to want to contribute to wiser decisionmaking and governance on the basis of 'good theory and good data.' (Weiss in Lynn, 1978 : 25) Research may have great potential for rational social reform through breaking down obstructive institutions and dogmatic thinking as well as introducing innovative ideas and practices. It may seek to advance the public interest through expertise and professionalism. But, under the guise of scientific authority, intellectual judgements in policy matters should not result in the bypassing of the political process through the weakening or elimination of popular participation. The democratic process requires that the judgements of researchers be debated together with those of other policy actors rather than dominating or displacing them. In the final instance, it is sobering to take note of the sentiment in the following quotation : 'Research does not avoid fighting over policy ; it is a method of fighting.' (Weiss in Lynn, 1987 : 76)

REFERENCES

- Brock, D.W. (1987) 'Truth or Consequences : The Role of Philosophers in Policy-Making,' *Ethics*. Vol.94, no. 4.
- de Huzar, G.B. (ed.) (1960) *The Intellectuals*. (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press).
- Gouldner, A.W. (1975-6) 'Prologue to a Theory of Revolutionary Intellectuals,' *Texas* No. 26.
- Kolakowski, L. (1986) 'A Discussion on the Responsibility of Intellectuals', *Salmagundi*, no. 70-71.
- Lynn, L.E. (ed.) (1978) *Knowledge and Policy : The Uncertain Connection* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Science).
- Smith, J.A. (1991) *The Idea Brokers*. (New York: The Free Press).