Book Review

Bardach, Eugene, and Eric M. Patashnik. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective.* (2011), Paperback, 224 p.

Political scientists Eugene Bardach and Eric Patashnik's "a practical guide for policy analysis: eightfold path to more effective problem-solving" has attained the status of a classic in the public policy literature, and become the premier guide for policy practitioners since its first publication in 2011. The book is a culmination of years of accumulated policy design and implementation experience that the authors conjoin to provide real-life examples and case studies, underscoring the various trajectories and contours that an instrument takes before it blossoms to germinate into a hatchable policy. The authors have used their policy experiences to identify repeating patterns of activities to develop a widely acknowledged taxonomy of the policy-making process.

They have organised the often disparate, scattered and isolated activities to develop a chef's recipe comprising actions for the practitioner to arrive at desirable policy outcomes, and meaningful and objective conclusions. Their thesis that policy analysis can be understood as a series of structured and sequential activities that are part of a logical framework has developed into a separately identifiable ideological position and become a divisive and polarising subject, leading to the rapid mainstreaming of it, and its antithesis (policy making is unstructured and non-sequential), within the policy discourse. This school of thought is challenged by scholars who postulate that the policy environment is more complex than what Bardach and Patashnik assume, and model it to be and therefore, requires a more nuanced way of looking at the entwined and interconnected web of structures, networks, institutional processes, actors, and a multitude of interactions and interests that shape their behaviour.

The principal question that emerges out of this background is whether a structure-sequence lens to understand the mechanics and processes that underlie policy analysis can stand the test of relevance and robustness in addressing the challenge posed by complex and non-linear systems? Scholars who challenge the notion of a 'Bardachian' linear system, are divided between those that suggest that there is structure without sequence, and those that suggest that both structure and sequence create policy images divorced from real-world policy situations. The authors use the Buddhist 'eightfold path' trope to represent their eight distinct steps for conducting policy analysis which include 'problem identification', 'assemble the evidence', 'construct the alternatives', 'select criteria', 'project outcomes', 'confront the trade-offs', and 'decide and tell your story'.

They offer an extension to this path by proposing the ninth step which is to repeat in the same sequence the first eight. Bardach and Patashnik explain in detail what activities and sub-activities will be performed, and the critical questions that will be addressed by

the policy analyst at each of these steps. They begin by defining what 'problem identification' is, and the theoretical and conceptual questions that surround the identification and framing of the policy issue. A perceptive distinction that Bardach and Patashnik make is between private troubles and public problems. Private troubles impact political people and bureaucrats in policy positions who foresee political gains from elevating private troubles to the status of pubic problems.

These troubles are problems peculiar to their group, political party or electorate, highlighting that such motivations to identify problems could become potential pathways for market failures. The authors use this as the basis to raise incisive questions like 'what is the evaluative framework or lens through which a problem is viewed and considered to be a public problem?' and propose that in order to capture fully the dimensions of a problem, it's important to think in terms of excess or deficit and recognise the part of the problem identification that suffers from 'issue rhetoric' which is ideologically aligned and dependent on the opinion and perspective of the group or person defining the issue. It's important that the policymaker makes accommodations for the issue rhetoric when trying to position the problem within the larger policy agenda. They refer to this instance as 'modelling the system in which the problem is placed' by using the nomenclatural creativity and inventiveness that is also otherwise a hallmark of their writing style and found elsewhere in this text.

There is pervasive emphasis on the criticality of evidence not just as a vital second step of the eightfold path, but generally across other steps too. This inclination is met with a contradiction that develops when the authors mix their unquestioning reverence for empirics with 'guesstimates' (estimates based on guesswork). They tend to overstep in their love for gathering evidence to start promoting guesstimates that can often be questioned for their frailty and categorisation as credible substitutes of real evidence. The concern that one can then raise is whether such emphasising of evidence could lead to oversimplification, whimsicality and formulation of alternatives with ad-hocism, instead of objectivity, as a goal. Or perhaps, one can also argue that guesstimating a policy analyst's way out of a 'lack of data' situation is expressive of a disregard of evidence in cases where empirics are hard to establish. In other cases when the evidence is available, the authors question whether the new policy that emerges from a policy change will produce better outcomes than the one before and call it the 'value of evidence'. This is the supra-existential question that has engaged the policy scholars in discourses that both yielded, and did not yield answers.

While evidence is essential as a tool to construct alternatives, the authors point to situations where alternatives are so narrowly separated that it becomes difficult to make a clear policy choice. None of the closely competing alternatives seem to emerge as a clear winner. Interestingly, while the authors implicitly express a disregard for the complexity of the real-world when they propose a logical and sequential framework for policy analysis, they suggest that one can only accommodate the interests of so many of the policy actors given the heterogeneity of the real world, which leads them to trade-off between different policy designs (design trade-offs).

The other themes that emerge quite strongly out of this book, and the advanced steps of the eightfold path include an argument about wider acceptability of the criteria that will be used for evaluation. The authors suggest that it is important to create political

acceptability for the evaluative criteria which, it appears, they propose to avoid possible disagreements and controversy over the methodology that will be used to assess outcomes. When the authors use the term 'projecting outcomes', they seem to imply that the analyst is able to put its finger on certain metrics and indicators for measurement, and evaluates the utility of a policy in context of those standards.

They identify efficiency as one such metric that can be, and is widely used as an end goal. However, they also believe that efficiency has an elitist ring to it, implying that a domineering focus on efficiency could divert from seemingly pedestrian, but socially robust and vital concerns like equity and participation. They use this value judgement to also question the methods that can be used to determine the level of efficiency that will have to be added to the system to merit and justify some level of spending.

In conclusion, the book provides a vivid and pragmatic perspective on policy analysis. It can be used as an implementable toolkit by the practitioner to organise and model a policy problem within systems that are less disorderly, but in many ways, identical to the real-world.

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