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THE IMPLEMENTATION GAME

1. INTRODUCTION

Ladislav Cerych and Paul Sabatier must be feeling ambivalent about this event. It is good that we should refresh ourselves about the classics in our field, and honour those who produce them. At the same time, they will know better than most that a great deal of water has flowed under the bridges since they produced their book (Cerych and Sabatier 1986); indeed, Paul Sabatier in particular takes a leading role in implementation studies in political science more generally, and his development of the advocacy coalition framework (1998) is one of the more important contributions to political science of the last decade. It is also several generations on from the formulations offered in the original work of 1986.

2. AN APPRECIATION OF CERYCH AND SABATIER, AND SOME RESERVATIONS

Let me first acknowledge the importance of the original work. It opened up an important agenda, even if, in doing so, its perspectives now seem rather limited in that it did construe reform as largely a top-down process. It provided us with a generous range of case studies of examples of higher education developments that fed our knowledge of the present and future range of structures and provision.

My reservations about the tradition which they exemplified can be summed up as follows:

a) The preliminary chapters assumed that the most important changes were created and seen through by the most important people. Let me quote (p. 10):

> Parliaments have the legal authority to strongly affect the implementation process by stipulating clear and consistent policy goals, assigning implementation to sympathetic institutions, giving sympathetic officials sufficient sanctions and inducements to convince recalcitrants to alter their behaviour, providing sufficient financial resources and so on.

Not only Cerych and Sabatier but Martin Rein's excellent essay (1983), too, took it for granted that policy begins or is greatly modified in parliaments or through legislation. This has not been the case in the UK or, I suspect, in Australasia or probably other countries, too. They all provide

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strong examples of top-down changes, but emanating from the executive rather than parliament.

In this kind of account, too, the whole sequence of policy generation is depicted as much more visible and in the public domain than I think it has been. They assume a clarity and determination to create policies that are not always there. There is often quite a casual drift into policies.

b) They assume that it is possible to enumerate factors or variables associated with success in implementation. But for the most part these do not seem to work. For example, the clear statement of goals is one of the declared factors. But these occlude complexity not only of values but also of the role of interests.

c) A self-imposed limitation occurs in Cerych and Sabatier, which was intended "to apply policy implementation analysis to higher education by looking closely at deliberate and planned change in higher education" (p. 4). But they explicitly did not include reforms dealing with the curriculum and with management and decision-making structures. Nor did they look at the role of non-deliberated and unplanned change, mainly created from the academic base of the system, which historically we have regarded as the main source of change in higher education.

d) They used as examples cases that were concerned mainly with changes in structure and provision. In this they shared the limitations of most of the higher education research of their time which took a long time to understand that the true indicators of change must include the substantive content of higher education, that is, the work and values of academics. This linkage has been made since, and, I would modestly claim, informed quite a deal of the work that our small group of colleagues attempted in the 1980s and perhaps more directly in our multi-national study of England, Norway and Sweden (Boys et al. 1988; Kogan et al. 2000).

e) They remark that the success or failure of goals depends on the amount of system change envisaged and their internal clarity and consistency. They accept that ambiguity and conflict are unavoidable and that a precise goal does not always secure success. Therefore look for an 'acceptable mix of outcomes', 'an acceptability space'. So far so good. But are they right to assume that big changes are more difficult, or that ambiguity does not pay off? In the 1990s we had a new political climate which gave confidence to politicians about their ability to change the world. Certainly, British ministers, and some Norwegian and Swedish ones, were able to create seismic changes without consultation and very quickly. These were daring actors forging forward even when the context offered no particular excuse or rationale for what they were doing.

Our authors were daring in producing middle range propositions. (This is a procedure about which I have doubts to which I will return.) They were:

1. Far-reaching changes work only if they aim at one or a few functional areas of the system. Our recent histories demonstrate this to be untrue. We have experienced enormous and wide-scale changes which seem to stick.
2. It is easier to change or create a new institution rather than a whole system. Again, this is empirically not a robust conclusion. In Austria, Greece, Norway and the Netherlands, for example, binary systems have been created and new statuses created wholesale.
3. Reforms projecting a low degree of change are often unsuccessful because they do not galvanise sufficient energy to overcome inertia. Well, OK.

A further part of the study attempts to clarify an adequate causal theory or set of assumptions about means and ends. This chimes in with the current concerns of some of our colleagues that implementation theory should prove useful to policy makers, an ambition that I do not share, on roughly the grounds of John Maynard Keynes' observation that "Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence are usually the slaves of some defunct economist". They (Cerych and Sabatier 1986: 15) wrote:

> If goals are to be realised, it is important that causal links be understood and officials responsible for implementing the programme have jurisdiction over sufficient critical linkages to make possible the attainment of objectives. Only when these two conditions have been met can the basic decision establishing the reform be said to 'incorporate' a valid causal theory.

Although they concede that not everything can be foreseen so it is important that policy makers correct as they go along, it means that they have to have secure knowledge that certain measures will secure change. I think this is a hopeless task. We know that coercion often works, and that pouring large sums of money into projects will cause changes at a certain, surface, level of reality. Whether they are then instantiated is another question. So much depends on the changes that are sought. Take two examples. A £100m attempt to embed enterprise into higher education curriculum in the UK had no effects. The insistence on quality assurance in teaching and learning had major effects but some of them, for example, in the restructuring of power within institutions were unexpected (Henkel 2000). It succeeded because it became a public process with penalties.

In both cases, these initiatives attempted to enter the entrails, the private life, of higher education. In each case, success has to be defined, and the impact analysis has to be multi-value and multi-perspective. Some of us would hate systems in which benchmarking and outcome measures, and the enterprise culture, were successful. But even by governmental instrumental criteria it will take decades to know whether value systems and practices have changed permanently and in the full range of subjects and institutions.

More fundamentally, this predictive ambition faces the objections put up by Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963) in attempts to play god, to create general welfare functions. Muddling through and disjointed incrementalism may not be good enough but something like them may be the best we can hope for.

3. WHERE THE ARGUMENT NOW STANDS

I have perhaps spent too long in criticising this pioneering work, but only do so because so much of it could plausibly return as relevant and, indeed, in one respect, its emphasis on the power of central institutions has proved to be more right than the revisionists'. To bring us up to where we now are, we have to take note of a strong political science literature on the subject and of scholarship which goes well beyond the field of higher education. It would be tiresome, and perhaps unnecessary in view of the excellent NIFU (Norwegian Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education) survey (Gornitzka, Kyvik and Stensaker 2002) to do more than refer to only a small sample of the literature. The analysis of relevant literature provided by our three Norwegian colleagues is itself a substantive contribution to the debate.

Martin Rein's early but formative essay on implementation (1983), Sabatier's recent work on advocacy coalitions (1998), the many versions of new institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996), Paul Trowler's recent essay (2002) on the policy staircase and David Dill's recent critique (2003) of it give us plenty to work on. We also have more empirical treatments of national policy developments by the three teams in the Anglo–Norwegian–Swedish national and comparative studies that provide something of a contrast to the abstractions of the theorists.

In its simplest terms, these works all emphasise the non-linear nature of both policy making and implementation and the extent to which they might move through phases where different interest groups exercise key roles. Martin Rein (1983: 114–115), for example:

> posit(s) a … view about implementation … that emphasizes the interrelationship between the process and the product rather than the roles of the different actors who dominate in a competitive field. Policy and administration … are continuously co-mingled. Purposes are redefined at each stage of the implementation process … This continuity enables the contending views held by different interest groups to be worked out at each stage on the policy-practice continuum. Interest groups responsible for the development of policy may differ quite substantially from those that enter the process at the stage of implementation … Implementation is interpreted as an expression of an accommodation to institutional realities. The imperatives in the law are redefined to take account of the problems faced in practice.

Other accounts, too, for the most part emphasise complexity, evolution, mutual adaptation and a learning interactive and negotiative process. Sabatier's latest work (e.g. updated version 1998) advances the role of advocacy coalition frameworks. This looks for alternatives to the staged heuristic and a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up models. The process involves actors at several levels who might operate through advocacy coalitions which share beliefs and activities. In this there are differentiations between levels. There are the deep core of belief systems, policy core beliefs and policy-oriented learning. Coalitions' principal glue are the core beliefs. There is resistance to changing them and they need strong evidence before admitting change. Many types of groups are involved in advocacy coalitions. The advocacy coalition field has two causal drives: core values and external perturbations.

This is a creative and sustained contribution to the argument. Not all of it is brand new. My criticism of it is applied to all of the principal theories within this

arena: it seeks generalisations that simply do not apply through all the cases one could contemplate.

Trowler (2002) also deals with the procession of the implementation process. In countering the rational-purposive account of policy making and implementation he notes that there is only a limited distinction between them and that policy is made as it is put into practice. He offers us the implementation staircase where the roles different groups play at different times in influencing higher education policies can be located.[1] The substance of public policies is frequently transformed as policies descend from 'the staircase from adoption to implementation' and this helps to explain, as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) first suggested, why the outcomes of public policy frequently fail to achieve their goals. Trowler (2002) argues for a fuller understanding of university environments, disciplinary cultures and the nature of academic organisation as input to policy design in higher education. These processes are not much studied and so, he thinks, not helpful to policy makers. They are indeed plainly part of the deep context which may trigger change. But I repeat that usefulness to policy makers, other than adding to their deeper wisdom and sensitivity to contextual issues, is not likely to directly emerge.

New institutionalism presents some of the more sophisticated versions of policy formation and is already a whopping industry, brilliantly summarised for us by Hall and Taylor (1996). In Lane's (1987) new institutionalist approach, the factors are physical and demographic structure, historical development, development of personal networks and temporal structure. A perspective is that change is possible as long as the institutional core is not threatened.

Theories of institutionalism are contended between academic traditions; between historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism. The first group saw the institutional organisation of the polity or the political economy as the principal factor structuring collective behaviour. Institutions provide moral or cognitive templates for interpretation or action. The historical institutionalists acknowledge the asymmetries of power that institutions help to structure as well as the importance of social and economic contexts to the role that institutions play.

The rational choice institutionalists see politics as:

> A series of collective action dilemmas … An actor's behaviour is likely to be driven, not by impersonal historical forces, but by a strategic calculus [which] will be deeply affected by the actor's expectations about how others are likely to behave as well. Institutions structure such interactions (Hall and Taylor 1996: 945).

The sociological institutionalists argue that:

> Many institutional forms and procedures should be seen as culturally specific practices … so as to include not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates that provide 'the frames of meaning' guiding human actions (Hall and Taylor 1996: 947).

This range of studies could be criticised in terms of NIFU's point that although it provides several potential frames for denoting the origins and roles of institutions it does not add to our knowledge of internal governmental processes, and this at a time when central authorities are more proactive. The institutionalists do not meet that

challenge at the empirical level but, between them, present a range of conceptual choices within which closer grained empirical work might be framed. I think, however, that the Norwegians underestimate some work that is relevant to our quest, such as the US work on the nature of policy makers in general (e.g. Linder 1981; Caplan 1977) and some of our own recent work in our three country study. We tried (Kogan and Henkel 1983; Kogan et al. 2000) to depict the ways in which the nature of governments affects their commissioning and use of the results of research, and in doing so did reflect on the internal nature of government and how they dealt with the knowledge they created. We (Bleiklie, Høstaker and Vabø 2000; Kogan and Hanney 2000) have also tried to describe the ways in which different groups affect the genesis and outcomes of higher education policies, in three different countries. Bleiklie (2000) suggests that the design of the reforms actually adopted was influenced by the different nature of the policy networks in the three countries. In the UK we tested the extent to which three groups of influencers – the academic elites, the coopted elites and the institutional leaders – affected policy and showed that they were less important than heroic ministers. This could be compared with a similar scrutiny of elites in Norway and an assessment of the ways that successive waves of reform were handled (Bleiklie, Høstaker and Vabø 2000).

But NIFU is right to suggest that there are few thorough studies that analyse and follow through a given policy through the implementation process and identify factors that stimulate or hinder the policy initiatives taken. Whether such studies will produce knowledge about cause and effects I have already doubted. I am also doubtful about Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) advocacy of an adequate causal theory of relationships between ends and means in a reform process for the possibility of goal attainment.

4. ELABORATING FURTHER

What can we piece together from all this? I have implied considerable reservations about much of the general scholarly work that has gone in parallel with mainly empirical attempts in the field of higher education. Before expressing them, let me acknowledge that Cerych and Sabatier were unusual in attempting to theorise on the basis of empirical studies. However, let me make my reservations explicit about theories of implementation in general.

We look at these theories with respect but then have to ask the naïve question: Do they apply to the cases we know? We must try to generalise but attempts to create generalised implementation theories in such a culturally saturated area as higher education are likely to fail because national policy-making and implementation systems are different from each other. This lesson is being learned the hard way by the Bolognaists who are seeking to impose uniformities on many countries. Moreover, higher education policy making is not only country specific but also sub-sector specific. Reform of the curriculum is likely to enter wholly different power and value terrains from those of, say, student financing.

In reaching generalisations, we have to take account of the points from which policies started. The origins of a policy give many clues not only on substantive

content but what interests might be lined up for or against it, Martin Rein's point. It is like a yacht race. The starting point largely determines the finish. One could generalise for example that where the state historically had been least obtrusive – again as in the UK and Australasia – the 'reforms' have been most drastic; they had further to go. Historical contexts are all important. Political dynamics have changed. Our authors were reflecting on a period when politicians felt they had to be negotiative and gradualist if they were not to fall outside the democratic and Fabian conventions of the time. We work now within a different political landscape. The three country study exemplifies enormous shifts in ministerial styles and ambitions from the 1970s.

The recent literature on implementation adds up to a case for eclectic approaches. It is now obvious, and has been for a long time, that policy making does indeed go through several stages and emerges from several sources. I would widen them to include more explicitly the stage of *issue emergence* (Lowi 1972; Premfors 1980*)*. This is a stage when often inchoate and emerging needs and wants, and discontent with the present order of things, are beginning to emerge as an issue that will eventually be identified, contested and settled in the political arena. It is the stage most often missed by higher education analysts who may be too anxious to get to the point quickly. I am not at all sure that one could then go on to produce a list of generalisable factors affecting implementation.

To analyse issue emergence, one has to go back into the deeper history. Thus, in the case of the expansion of higher education in the UK, analysis would show that the schools were getting restless with a system that could not accommodate increased numbers of qualified school leavers. This would lead us back to the increased bourgeoisification of British society and enhanced democratisation of expectations during the Second World War.

Or if we take the democratisation of European universities involving the end of the chair systems and the enfranchisement of junior staff and students in decision making, we would have to trace the impacts of radical sociology of knowledge on academic authority, as well as deeper changes in the national political psyches.

Then we must ask whether reforms emerging from the political and social ether are beginning to gell and are likely to generate wider social and political support to the point where some temporary minister takes them up as a good opportunistic policy. We would then have to ask whether their internal content is likely to survive the many other contingent factors that will affect outcomes and implementation, such as the constituency to which it might appeal. So, for example, we would judge that expansion will appeal not only to a huge constituency but that it wins on its multiple value content; it supports equality, the economy and individual development. Other examples would have to appeal to a far narrower constituency and value system. Thus we get back to the framework-actor duality.

That leads us to distinguish between the underlying factors and the factors that trigger change. The triggering factors are of two kinds. First, they are rarely parliamentary action but political opportunism. More than most systems, higher education if left to itself seeks and probably needs stability and continuity rather than change and reform. Its primary aim will be to sustain academic values through the pursuit of knowledge and this requires exception from the pursuit of reformist

ambitions. Pursuing and disseminating knowledge are not easily performed under the glare of public policy activities. What are called reforms in higher education have derived more from public and social policy than from academic development.

The second kind of reform is that developing from changes in the knowledge landscape and affecting curricula and research agendas. Their impact will differ between that on existing elite institutions and new and more demotic institutions. Some changes are both social and academic; quality assurance is the obvious example, with its connotations of accountability but with its deep implications for academic work. I suggest that in such mixed cases it will be the politicians who insist on change, though institutional leaders soon recruited themselves to the QA banner but for managerial rather than academic reasons.

The more traditional top-down descriptions of policy making are not always wrong. For example, the insistence on formalised quality assurance came from politicians and not from the academy. Many of the so-called reforms of the last two decades were imposed without consultation or interaction with interest groups and straight from the heads of radical politicians. To canvass the field fully we need work on new styles of politicians and academic leadership and the power networks they create.

Attempts to show the impact of higher education policies have mainly concerned the impact on governmental and organisational structures, and on provision. Some of us did attempt to show how government-inspired policies affected the curriculum (Boys et al. 1988) and more recently we have the studies of the impacts on academic identities (Henkel 2000). Impact analysis is not easy. It requires a long time span and empirical access enabling many dimensions to be assessed. Moreover, impacts will be, to borrow Marton, Howell and Entwistle's terminology (1984), deep or shallow. Big bang changes, imposed by ministers, may do little to shift the basic essentialism of higher education's content and power structures. Small changes might have insidious effects.

So Cerych and Sabatier deserve high praise for opening up the field, for producing revealing and important case studies which, as the historians say, 'feed the mind' but do not add significantly to grand theory, although Clark Kerr, in his Foreword (p. xvi), thought that there would be a burst of new advance in the 1980s and that "when that time of renewed progress comes, this study … may seem not just an interesting record of times past but a useful guide to times future". Well I am not too sure that it contributed to either regional development or vocational and short-cycle education. And it is unlikely that it contributed to what now seems inevitable in the widening of access. But that would be true of most of what most of us do.

This may all cast doubt on the utility of theory. It may yield little predictive power. But if taken carefully, like curry sauces, it can illuminate the experiences uncovered by empirical work. Probably it is time for a wholesale review of where higher education studies stand and should stand as against the more highly esteemed theory drawn from the disciplines.

NOTES

[1] I thought (Kogan 1975) the metaphor of the staircase too rigid a descriptor of the relationship between one stage of policy making and another.

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