# Research, discourses and democracy. Innovating the social science-policy nexus

Georgios Papanagnou

Management of Social Transformations

Policy Papers / 20

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# Summary

The paper aims to comment on the relations between social scientific research and policy with a view to making certain proposals towards the innovation of the social science policy nexus and to sketch out possible directions pertinent to the MOST Programme's development.

The social sciences owe part of their successful institutionalisation and growth to their promise of providing concrete solutions to social problems. Emulating the methods of the post-Newtonian natural sciences, the social sciences sought to provide objective, value free knowledge about the social realm, to make predictions and to establish discernible causal laws valid across different social contexts. In the second part of the twentieth century this has led to the institutionalisation of an instrumentalist, quantitative and neo-positivist social science that is supposed to aid policy makers take crucial decisions.

Nevertheless, instrumental social science has not managed to establish any statistical, causal laws, valid across contexts. In addition, the social sciences have had trouble providing solutions to pressing social, economic and political problems.

Standard responses to this conundrum put the emphasis on the limited rationality of policy makers, the wider, long-term influence that social research can have, or finally the preconceived ideas and biases of both policy makers and researchers. Nonetheless, what such approaches seem to share is a belief in the separation between policy/politics and analysis/research; and the notion that there can be solutions to social problems. Thus, they see nothing essentially wrong with the kind of social research that we conduct.

However, the paper argues that this logic to a great extent perpetuates the fact/value distinction which has characterised neo-positivism. It also seems to take for granted the technocratic and instrumental character of established social research. Thus, if we are to make significant steps towards the innovation of the research policy nexus, especially with a view to challenging technocracy and promoting democratization, we need to

employ a different understanding of the social realm and of what it means to do social research.

Taking its cue from the argumentative, discursive turn in policy analysis, the paper argues in favour of a linguistic/discursive understanding of social reality. Accordingly, policy discourses do not just describe reality but also help constitute it. Thus, politics should be understood as a conflict of different visions with both cognitive and normative elements. Hence, it becomes evident that analysis and politics cannot be so readily distinguished.

Understanding politics from a discursive point of view, however, implies, to a significant degree, opting for a different epistemology in social scientific research. It calls for redirecting social scientific research toward post-positivist, hermeneutic methods. This also involves a greater emphasis on the study of the local and the particular (case studies). Redressing the balance between case study work and aggregate analysis should be a priority for the scientific community.

Fostering the democratization of policy and decision making is a goal that modern societies should aspire to. Post-positivist social scientific work has a crucial role to play in this endeavour. Just as positivism underlies the dominant technical orientation in policy analysis, so post-positivism points to a participatory project. Participation, in effect, means that clusters of populations, or stakeholders, have a say in initiatives that affect them. The role of the analyst in participatory action research however cannot remain the same. The point is not to stand apart from a social domain in order to impose solutions upon it, but to intervene in the social domain in a way that facilitates awareness and dialogue. It is in this sense that knowledge is co-produced, as the authorship of the knowledge does not reside solely with the experts, but also with the stakeholders, who participate in the deliberation.

# Foreword

Launched in 1994, the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme, which is located in the Social and Human Sciences Sector of UNESCO, was designed to steer reflection and action in the vast field of social transformations. Its original mandate established a commitment to the promotion of research that was comparative, international, interdisciplinary and policy-relevant, via the development of three thematic fields – Multi-cultural societies, Urban development and governance, and Coping locally and regionally with Globalisation. Now, in its Second Phase (2004-2013), the Programme has been reoriented, both thematically and in its modalities of operation.

The current focus is on building efficient bridges between social scientific knowledge, public policies and action. A project which for us involves going beyond established "Evidence based" approaches that more often than not adopt an almost casual attitude towards the **interpenetration of processes between the realms of policies and knowledge**. Here we take knowledge to have a more universal dimension. We consider knowledge produced within universities and academia, as well as that produced by non-academic actors (for instance, within non-governmental organizations and civil society at large). At the same time we recognize that the making of public policies involves both governmental and non-governmental agents. Thus, the conception of public policy-making in this second phase of MOST presupposes some complex political dynamics, including issues relating to:

- recognition of identities (those social subjects and demands that are included in the policy-formulation agenda),
- participation of actors (those actors who are invited to take an active part in the decision-making process),
- taking into account the nature of norms (the different kinds of policy norms dealing with universality and/or particularity, general objectives and/or focused results), and

- co-responsibility in implementation (the monopoly of the State in public action versus pluralistic and participatory approaches in public service provision and public-private partnerships).

The theoretical and methodological reflection on the linkages connecting research and policy is integral to the MOST Programme's rationale. The aim of the venture is to make explicit the nature of the links between social science research and policy-making, in developed as well as developing countries. In other words, the MOST Secretariat is working to establish critical analysis on what the world knows about the theoretical and institutional underpinnings of both knowledge production and its uptake by policy-makers. The MOST Policy Paper N°20 by Georgios Papanagnou is a sign of our commitment to the analysis of the research-policy links as a socio-political and epistemic construct, specifying its main assumptions, discursive dimensions and the ideals involved.

Presently, this activity concentrates on four goals:

1. To determine an efficient methodology for social science research to be optimally inserted in policy-making processes
2. To capitalize, promote and diffuse our knowledge and understanding among the three main categories of actors: social science researchers, policy makers/senior advisers and members of civil society
3. To define the institutional and scientific niche that will be further developed by the MOST Programme on the links between research and policy
4. To make recommendations for internal and external stakeholders.

The MOST Policy Papers present some of the findings of this endeavour in English, French and/or Spanish. In addition, MOST has a new UNESCO publication series: Research & Policy with sound volumes on social sciences and policy-making.

Germán Solinís

# Explain and Predict: Problem Solving Science

1 The social sciences today seem to be thriving. From the number of university students, to that of professional researchers and academics; from the profusion of scientific publications (books, journals, policy briefs) to the extent of the subjects covered, the social sciences are very much a vital part of modern societies' quest for knowledge and self improvement. Since their birth and institutionalisation in the 19th century, the social sciences have managed to become a reliable and respected source of knowledge about the social realm (see Wittrock 1989 and Gagnon 1989).

Arguably, the main reason behind their institutional success and growth in popularity has been their promise for socially useful knowledge. Following on the successes of the natural sciences, especially in the post-Newtonian revolution, the social sciences aimed to produce robust knowledge about society, akin to natural laws. Thus, social research strove to attain scientific status by emulating the methods and ambition of the natural sciences, especially classical physics. Taking society as their object, social scientists embarked on a quest for reliable and verifiable knowledge, which could be used to direct action.

This move towards scientification has been exemplified by the dominance of **positivism** in social inquiry. For positivists social phenomena are supposed to be the expression of natural laws as much as natural phenomena are. This view goes back to Comte's ideal of a science for society and to the work done by the Vienna Circle and the school of logical positivism. For logical positivists the only kind of knowledge that can be

entertained by science is empirical statements about "things in the world", along with the analytical statements of logic and mathematics (Fischer 2003: 118). According to the doctrine of logical positivism (or empiricism) reality exists as an objective phenomenon and is driven by laws of cause and effect that can be discovered through empirical testing of hypotheses and deductive statements. This kind of inquiry has to be objective and value-free in order to produce generalizable laws. Empirically observed facts are supposed to be the building blocks of science.

Positivism is equally based on the regularity **theory of causality**, which actually treats the process as a correlation of different events. The idea traces its origins to the work of Hume, who argued that there are three conditions of causality: constant conjunction, contiguity and antecedence. To illustrate the point Hume offered the classic example of the billiard table: one billiard ball striking another, thus causing it to move. In this view (Hume's "regularity" theory) external stimuli account for certain types of behaviour (Van Langenhove 2007: 123).

Of course, the doctrine of logical positivism has long fallen out of fashion and today the term positivism is used largely as an abuse, but in reality positivism remains widespread. To begin with, **rational choice theory** still is the dominant paradigm in micro-economics, while it also plays a significant role in political science and increasingly in sociology. Equally, one need only look at the articles published in most of the prestigious journals of economics, politics, policy science and psychology to understand that mainstream research is underlined by a strong positivist ethos. Moreover, positivism, or neopositivism, actually informs most thinking in governmental agencies, or international organizations.[1] Although few would describe themselves as positivists in the traditional sense, many of positivism's tenets are well embedded in research practices and decision processes, a point well documented by Morçöl (2002).

Thus, it is not a misrepresentation, or an exaggeration, to say that present day empiricist/neo-positivist approaches (including Popper's theory of falsification) do embrace the pursuit of empirical regularities and the establishment of (quasi-)objective causal relations as a basis for explaining

1 It is an oft repeated complaint, in governmental agencies and international organizations alike, that perfectly sound research was sidetracked because of political pressures or motives.

and predicting social phenomena. In general, for empiricist/neopositivist social science explanation is only valid as a way to generalization and prediction. Hence, the emphasis on studying aggregates of events and not particular cases (Van Langenhove 2007: 153). On the whole, in the neopositivist enterprise causation is thought of as a statistical relation between independent events that take place under varying conditions and circumstances. Hence, current social scientific research attempts via a systematic statistical exploitation of a multitude of empirically gathered data to establish causation (mostly in the form of correlations) between certain independent variables and the dependent variable. Overall, neopositivism emphasizes empirical research designs, the use of sampling techniques and data gathering procedures, the quantitative measurement of outcomes and the development of causal models with predictive power (Dryzek 1982).

# II. Positivist policy research

2 Following World War II the social sciences witnessed a meteoric rise in their status and importance. The 1950s and the 1960s were a time of great social engineering, when policy makers and the larger public were convinced that a concentrated scientific effort could alleviate industrialised societies from many ills (poverty, public health, education, economic growth, racial and even class conflict). If advanced societies could put a man on the moon, then one could reasonably expect that social science could solve the “problem of the ghetto”, or such was the prevalent reasoning (Flyvbjerg 2006). University social science departments flourished and other organizations like think tanks and research foundations (e.g. the RAND foundation in the USA) emerged to feed a growing demand for social knowledge. The conviction, both in the western and the eastern hemispheres, was that social science could and should be of direct use to government in determining and achieving its social policy objectives (Nutley et al. 2008: 10).

To a large extent the growth in importance of the social sciences solidified a nascent division within the social scientific community, which still persists to this day. On the one hand, there is an academic social scientific community, which occupies itself with basic research that does not necessarily have any apparent policy relevance. On the contrary, many members of this community consciously avoid having to deal with the expectations and motives of the world of policy. They see such pressures as a corrupting force on pure scientific research. On the other hand, the second community, usually employed by think tanks, NGOs or governmental organisations, compares its work to that done by engineers.

Social scientists thus deliver knowledge, upon instruction or demand by established authorities, which can produce tangible solutions to various social problems. If the proposed solutions fail, it is because the research was wrong. New research – this time more solid – needs to be conducted. (Van Langenhove 2007: 219).

In the post WW II atmosphere, the **engineering model** of social science began to play a prominent role in policy development. The point was to provide technocratic expertise in order to facilitate the work of decision makers and public administration. Following the tenets of positivism the research results were mostly the outcome of rigorous statistical/quantitative analyses. The objective was to speak "truth to power" and to maintain the value neutrality of the social sciences. On the whole, the technocratic policy advisory science aimed to produce generalizable knowledge that could both solve problems and predict future developments.

Characteristically, in the USA this led to the emergence of the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS), a decision allocation process that was established in the Deaprtment of Defense in 1961 and eventually extended by President Lyndon Johnson to other parts of the federal government. PPBS had its roots in microecomonic theory, quantitative decision making theory, and it used techniques like cost effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis, programme budgeting and systems analysis. (Radin 2000: 14). Analogous techniques were later imported by many western European countries. The whole process intensified in the 1970s and 1980s (Yang 2007).

The relatively recent call for **Evidence Based Policies** – as opposed to opinion based – follows the same path. EBP has been defined as an approach that "helps people make well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation" (Davies quoted in Nutley et al. 2008: 13). Despite this rather broad (if not trivial) definition, however, EBP is closely associated with the positivist aspiration of providing government with the "true" facts and thus solutions to problems. This is supposed to take place either via robust, predominantly empirical, quantitative and extensive research or via systematic reviews of again, mostly experimental and quantitative studies aimed at assessing policy interventions. In the words of one of EBP's chief political promoters:

> *We are not interested in worthless correlations based on small samples from which it is impossible to draw generalisable conclusions. We welcome studies which combine large scale, quantitative information on effect sizes which allow us to generalise, with in-depth case studies which provide insights into how processes work. (David Blunkett, quoted in Parsons 2007: 546).*

Thus, policy analysis, according to the technocratic logic, aims to translate complex social issues to technical matters of administration and rational planning that are to be elucidated by the work of the analyst. The acquisition of data and their statistical exploitation (these days aided by sophisticated software) plus the application of some of the aforementioned decision techniques are supposed to hold the key to efficient policy making. Underlying this vision of social science is a particular conceptualisation of policy and decision making process, which Stone has called the "rational decision" model.

The **rational decision model** portrays a policy problem as a choice facing a political actor. The policy maker, or the organisation, must make a certain choice in order to attain a specific result. "The actor then goes through a sequence of mental operations to arrive at a decision:

1. Defining goals
2. Imaging alternative means for attaining them
3. Evaluating the consequences of taking each course of action and
4. Choosing the alternative most likely to attain the goal" (Stone 2002: 233).

In other words, the picture portrayed here is that of an instrumental process that involves the direct application of research to policy decisions. At macro policy level, research would then be used to develop and choose between particular policy options (Nutley et al. 2008: 34). As Stone notes, the policy analyst acts as a hero who provides a simple decision rule, a criterion of "maximizing something good" (Stone 2002: 242). This model emanates from the positivist vision of control and prediction. If the analyst searches hard enough and she collects a plethora of relevant data (facts) then she will be able to come to a sound research input that will lead to the solution of the problem at hand.

# III. Cracks in the Picture and Some Possible Responses

3 The fact however remains that despite the fifty or so years of robust policy analysis, and the growth in the capacity of the social scientists to manipulate in complex ways social data, social science has yet to produce any generalisable body of knowledge. The establishment of statistical, causal correlations has not allowed for the formulation of social laws, valid across contexts, and neither has it allowed for the proposition of predictive causal statements. On the contrary, the profusion of statistical analysis has produced an immense wealth of knowledge with, however, often conflicting claims, conclusions and, more often than not, policy implications. In addition, the social sciences have had trouble providing solutions to the pressing social, economic and political problems facing modern societies (deLeon 1988; Baumol 1991). On the whole, instrumental social science seems to have encountered insurmountable – and for some unexpected – difficulties in its mission to ameliorate social conditions. From the mistreatment of minorities, to welfare reform, the reduction of poverty, the improvement of education and international cooperation, social scientific advice has not had an enormous amount of direct impact on policy effectiveness. This apparent failure has shaken both the belief in the scientificity of social science and in its relevance for policy. Accusations against the scientific status and utility of social science are abundant.

One way out of this conundrum – if one is to avoid the conclusion that social science is completely devoid of any scientific utility – is to come to terms with the fact that policy actors are less than rational. Characteristically,

Herbert Simon developed a model of the policy process premised on the notions of "bounded rationality" and "satisficing". According to him, decision makers are not able to go through all the possible options and to calculate all the benefits and costs. Guided by cultural norms and values, institutional habits and reflexes, and often hindered by institutional inertia, they end up focusing on options that seem more comfortable and which also seem to promote their interests or those of their organisation (Stone 2001: 5).

From a somewhat different perspective, others have argued that the failure of social science to directly influence policy is due to the fact that research has a wider social influence and not solely an instrumental one – as Weiss (1977) has maintained with her **enlightenment model**. According to this argument, social scientific research, academic or otherwise, has a gradual impact over policy, which can take place over the course of many years or decades. Social science serves both to solve problems and to discuss social issues from a more critical perspective. One of its main functions is to problematise current opinions and conditions and to help policy makers and the wider public, via the stimulation of a wider societal debate, to reflect upon current practices. In this view, the publication of scientific results and the continuous efforts towards more knowledge will slowly permeate society, thus, leading to changes in opinions or practices. Indeed social science, from economics to gender and migration studies, seems to have influenced indirectly and gradually the attitudes of both policy makers and the public. Such evidence indicates that to an extent there is an enlightenment role played by social science.

Finally, there are theories that focus on the policy process itself and stress its chaotic character, which impedes any rational outcomes. For example, Cohen, March and Olsen, with their "**garbage can**" **model** (1972), emphasize opportunism, time constraints and limitation on research and portray policymaking as confused and fragmented rather than orderly and sequential. In this model, decisions are made as if decision-makers reach into a garbage can, drawing a problem with one hand and a solution with the other, and then joining the two together. Existing proposals (for example, old or rejected submissions) can be passed off as solutions to new problems. (Stone 2001).

Nevertheless, there are problems with all the aforementioned models. To begin with, the "bounded rationality" argument seems to understand policy failure, more or less, as having to do with the rational capacity of the policy makers. While it is true to say that policy makers, as actors in general, do not exhibit the computational capacities and access to information purported to them by classic micro-economic theory (and rational choice analysis), the notion of satisficing and bounded rationality seems to perpetuate the standard division between policy analysis/social science and policy making/politics. Social scientists have access to knowledge and policy makers are in positions of power; results are ignored because of deficiencies in rationality. Thus, one can either never expect efficient solutions to social problems, which might be true but for reasons other than limits to rationality, or one can propose institutional measures for bridging the gap between the two communities.[2] Similarly, the "garbage can" model, despite its emphasis on the non-rational and on the way that rationalizations are constructed at a later stage by relevant actors as means of justification, also, to a significant degree, repeats the division between analysis/research and politics.

Concerning the **enlightenment model**, one should note that it shares with the instrumental/engineering model the assumption that a linear transfer of scientific results between experts and decision makers is possible. With time, and with the correct institutional mechanisms between scientists and policy makers, the more rational opinions will prevail. In addition, what this vision also implies is a belief in the rationality and capacity of social science to discover the "truth".

One can likewise argue that the same weaknesses are exhibited by some conceptions of the impact of research on policy, which attempt to combine the instrumental positivist account with more intrepretivist and constructivist visions. According to this logic, presented for example by Nutley et al. (2008), research will be interpreted and reconstructed – alongside other forms of knowledge – in the process of its use. Thus, policy makers are not empty vessels, and problems do not have predetermined solutions, but policy makers will interpret scientific results in particular

2 The image of the two communities has a long pedigree in the research use literature and has informed the greater part of the studies, mostly quantitative, done on the field. (Caplan 1979).

ways according to their cultural and ideological background. (Nutley et al. 2008: 304-305). Research does not only exist to solve problems, but also to produce critical reflection, to problematise social phenomena and thus to lead to different approaches. The whole process involves a dialogue between the researchers and the users of knowledge and involves interpretation, on both sides, on which data correspond best to specific problems and conditions. Again, the emphasis here is on the quality of the links between the two interacting communities.

What all the above models, to some degree, entail is a belief in the power of research to offer objective knowledge, conceived in terms of a distinction between facts and values. In addition, they all seem to approach the issue via the metaphor of the gap between research and policy, thus, calling for the building of bridges.[3] In essence, what they seem to suggest is that the problem does not reside with the kind of social scientific inquiry undertaken – and its epistemological and ontological presuppositions – or with the expectation that the research process and results will, or should, at some point provide solutions to problems. From this viewpoint, the problem seems to lie with the contextual links between two different communities and with the need to recognize that the policy process and policy makers are far from rational. Better interaction and close cooperation between the two camps and research which is more policy conscious, will allow for the removal of some biases and misunderstandings; ultimately leading towards policy efficiency.

However, we argue that this logic, while offering certain valid insights, is essentially misguided. To begin with, epistemologically, the belief that social science can provide foolproof answers to social problems is a fallacy. Giddens's double hermeneutic attests exactly to the fact that social science cannot remain in a positivist detachment from its subject-

3 These are also shared by other approaches like the network theories. Fischer notes: "Whereas policy network theorists largely understand experts to exercise power by virtue of their possession of or access to information, discourse theorists understand experts to be part of a larger power knowledge relationship who have, as such, the ability to constitute, control and legitimize the very issues that we take to be the subjects of deliberation. Rather than understanding power and discourse to be properties of particular actors, which assumes that knowledge and interests are distinct, expert ideas and discourses can themselves be powerful entities. Network theorists perpetuate the fact value distinction between causal knowledge and normative beliefs, but discourse analysts hold them together by looking at the ways experts frame and interpret information" (Fischer 2003: 45).

matter: “The concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The ‘findings’ of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe” (Giddens 1987: 20). Thus, it is not an accident that positivist social science has largely failed in its mission to find solutions to social problems.

Furthermore, another related deficiency of the standard approaches to the social science-policy nexus is the separation between politics and analysis. In this sense social science remains to some extent apolitical, or in any case the possibility that it is above political manipulation and debate needs to be preserved as a last resort. Results may be reconstructed and interpreted and might be given certain political meanings, but in essence they remain facts. However, this distinction between facts and value, which has characterized the whole enterprise of positivism, is exactly the source of the problem.[4] We need to recognize that politics and analysis are intermeshed, they are two sides of the same coin. To do so however, we need to approach the policy process from a different perspective. And importantly we also need a different conceptualization of what it means to do social scientific research.

Finally, what the insistence on the fact and value distinction (and thus on politics vs. analysis) and on empiricism and prediction implicitly call for is the preservation of the technocratic character of social science. If knowledge is about finding the right data, and producing statistical correlations or causal generalizations, then in essence we require the analyst to maintain a certain distance from her object – i.e. from the social sphere that she analyzes and purports to explain. In reality, then, the dialogue for policy involves an interaction between two enlightened communities. On the one hand, we find those with access to knowledge and on the other those responsible for increasing social well-being. To the extent that citizens are part of this equation, it is usually as voters or as remote opinion givers.

However, in this policy paper we argue that modern societies should be more concerned with democratising policy making. Extending the

4 Even if to an extent analytically it makes sense to speak of a distinction between facts and values it is the importance attributed to that distinction by those who practice applied research, which is the source of the problem.

sphere of policy deliberation and decision making can have multiple beneficial effects (discussed later in this paper). Additionally, wider public engagement in the reflection over values and choices seems to accord well with late modernity's quest for ever increased individual self-fulfilment (Giddens 1991). Nonetheless, successful and meaningful **participation** requires a different role for the policy analyst (and by extension for the policy maker), a different kind of social science, and new innovative, reflexive institutional spaces. Analysing these matters shall occupy us in the remainder of this paper.

# IV. Policy, analysis and discourse: re-imagining the policy process

4 Aiming to account for the inability of applied research to solve social problems, theorists began in the early 1980s to offer alternative conceptualisations of social science in policy and of politics in general (Hoppe 1999). Later on, the trend largely gave rise to what is now known as the post-positivist, argumentative (or discursive) turn in policy analysis (Forester and Fischer 1993). Attempting here to highlight some of the deficiencies involved in the received instrumental understanding of the research policy nexus, and to trace possible alternatives, we shall explore some of the arguments made by a wide current of thinkers associated with the **post-positivist perspective** (see Fischer 2003, Van Langenhove 2007, Flyvbjerg 2001, Torgerson 1995, Glynos and Howarth 2007, Stone 2002, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

To begin with, we argue that if we are to expand the limits of democracy in policy making we need to employ a different ontological perspective. What is required is an ontology far removed from the one that informs standard empiricist approaches i.e. a world of social objects which follow more or less determined causal paths, and which by extension predispose, if not determine, the behaviour of social agents. A world in which data can speak against the validity of theories, and rigorous testing can lead to the adoption of efficient policies (for such a view see Duflo and Takavarasha 2010).

In the search for such an ontological perspective we shall draw heavily on the work of Laclau (2005) and Stone (2002).[5] *Grosso modo*, we shall be making an argument in favour of the open ended and constructed character of political institutions, policies, identities and interests. All these may at a given moment appear sedimented and, thus, as given but that is only because people in general, and analysts in particular, do not question the founding acts of their institution (Laclau 2005). Furthermore, we argue that it is the discursive political enunciations made by key social agents which hold the key to the constitution of the social realm and, thus, to the setting up of institutions and the choice of policies. One of the main tenets of **discursive theories** is that political discourses do not just describe social objects and reality in general. On the contrary, they construct it. They set limits to the possible, constitute identities, boundaries, and permissible pathways. They prescribe normative visions, promote certain (often vague) ideals and then set out in more detail the paths towards attaining these ideals. "Categories are human mental constructs in a world that has only continua. They are intellectual boundaries we put on the world in order to help us apprehend it and live in an orderly way. The point, evidently, is not that there is no reality apart from social meanings, but that we can know reality only by categorizing it, naming it and giving it meaning" (Stone 2002: 378; for an elaboration on this ontological perspective see Howarth 2000).

Politics, in this light, involves a conflict of political discourses. Proclaiming certain ideals and goals as just, presupposes the demarcation of antagonistic social groups and by extension the creation of coalitions. It presupposes the identification of "friends" and "enemies", of thaumaturgic policy solutions and the castigation of failed past choices. Overall, according to post-positivist discursive approaches the construction of identities (as transient an exercise this might be), requires the identification of political "enemies". Thus, peaceful conflict is in essence constitutive of the political realm (Laclau 2005: 70, 78).

5 The similarities in the approaches of the two authors, especially in terms of their understanding of politics are striking. On the other hand, we rely on their work because they allow us to make the case for a post-positivist argument. Needless to say that many other analysts have made relative arguments and thus the choice of the two is somewhat arbitrary and in no sense definitive.

Making choices and setting up boundaries and identities, however, presupposes reasoned analysis – at least in modern societies. Effectively, in order to be cognitively convincing, political discourse has to appear rational and as the outcome of prior careful reflection. On the other hand, reasoned analysis is by definition political. It always involves choices to include some things and exclude others, and to view the world in a particular way, despite the profusion of cognitive and normative visions (Stone 2002: 378). Thus, the point is not simply that analysis or research is sometimes used in partisan fashion of for political purposes. Policy analysis is political argument and vice versa (Stone 2002: 378). Hence, this paper challenges the dichotomy of analysis and politics. Instead, it calls for understanding politics and analysis as being part of the same process.

Thus, instead of understanding politics as struggle over finite resources and as a conflict of well defined, material interests, we argue that it could make more sense to consider it as involving a conflict among different normative visions and ways of ordering the social. This ideational struggle involves opposing visions of justice, equality, fairness, and development. In effect, political discourses, which bring together certain key ideas and ideals in attempt to provide a vision for society (in the form of ideologies), portray different future outcomes. They have different notions of who is affected, who gains and who loses, who is responsible for decisions, what duties and obligations each citizen has, and above all who the "enemy" is. Hence, when people discuss policy solutions, they do not simply describe a reality, they at the same time project their own visions onto that reality in an attempt to bring about a desired outcome. In addition, these very projections are often designed to attract support, to forge alliances and to break others (Stone 2002: 34); although this can also take place unintentionally.[6] That is why, more often than not, policy goals and guiding principles remain fuzzy. Whilst attempting to represent the social, that is to say to purport to have the solution for society's ills, political visions are forced to appeal to the greatest number possible (Laclau 2005: 70). Thus, they are overextended categories of meaning. Hence, it seems to be the case that political life advances exactly because of the often vague character of lofty ideals and policy solutions (Laclau 2005: 70-71).

6 I am indebted to Doug Torgerson for drawing my attention to this point.

Nonetheless, this interaction between discourses and the formation of coalitions is never ending. Discourses speak about the similarities and the differences between social groups (Laclau 2005: 70), about what unites some groups of people and divides them from others in the struggle over certain goals. In this light, political discourses are constructed via chains of equivalences, which are measured against certain political adversaries (Laclau 2005). Once certain discourses gain prevalence and dominate the political field, then certain categorizations and policy solutions become sedimented. However, these configurations are transient. Political visions are always challenged. Hence, the fleeting character of policy solutions. It appears then that we can never reasonably expect social problems to be solved in the way that we build bridges in order to join two neighbouring towns or countries. Solutions to social problems have more to do with the prevalence of certain ideals and policy ideas. Once these encounter difficulties in their capacity to explain events and/or to provide the public with a sense of purpose and identity, then they cede their place to other discursive enunciations/visions. Policy solutions are temporary truces in a constant struggle over ideals; they are the passing discursive constructions of a reality always in motion.

From this point of view, the emphasis of the engineering model of social research on **statistics** and rigid causal sequences as a mode of explanation is problematic. One can reasonably argue like Stone that statistics, "have become the predominant form of identifying causal relationships and thus of identifying agents and factors of control" because they are a great means for attributing authority to one's claim (Stone 2002: 172). To count something also involves identifying an entity with clear boundaries, and helps create a community (Stone 2002: 172-74). Creating statistical categories in policy analysis allows people to identify themselves with certain goals and choices. It essentially fosters consent. On the whole, the employment of statistics promotes the idea that conflicts and social problems have concrete solutions. If we can measure and divide a phenomenon, then in all probability we can, through a cautious arithmetical manipulation, come to a sufficient solution.

The same, more or less, can be said about **causal relations**. Again Stone makes the point that such stories are not so much about identifying "true" causal sequences, as they are about giving strategic visions over

some issues and, thus, making the differences between political choices clear (Stone 2002: 197). Moreover, causal narratives could also prove to be useful as means of challenging or protecting existing social orders. Causal theories and stories can legitimise certain actors as responsible for "fixing" a problem. They can also forge new political alliances among people by identifying the links tying them together. (Stone 2002: 204).

Of course, this does not necessarily mean that social scientific inquiry need discard causal analysis altogether. Rather the point made here is that we need to reflect further on the status of causality, so as to escape the problems characteristic of neo-positivism (For more on this subject see Yee 1996, Laffey and Weldes 1997, Glynos and Howarth 2007).

On the whole, one way of overcoming the inadequacies and contradictions of the received understanding of research policy nexus, is to emphasize the socially constructed nature of institutions and identities. Placing the emphasis on the effects of language, and by extension discourse, allows us to understand politics as a struggle over norms and ideas. In this struggle the political argumentation involves both cognitive and normative elements. Thus, the discourse of the expert cannot so readily be distinguished from that of the policy maker.

# V. Redirecting social scientific research

5 Understanding politics from a discursive point of view, however, implies, to a significant degree, opting for a different epistemology in social scientific research. It calls for redirecting social scientific research toward post-positivist, hermeneutic, interpretive methods.

As Van Langenhove notes "considering hermeneutics as a research model for the social sciences basically means that persons and societies are treated as though they are texts, the meanings of which have to be discovered" (Van Langenhove 2007: 78). Drawing its origins in the work of Dilthey, who argued for the clear distinction between the sciences of the mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the natural sciences, hermeneutics in essence aims to reconstruct the meanings of actions and the intentions of actors. In contrast to the natural sciences, or positivist social science, that wish to study the world as an object (from the outside), hermeneutics attempts to study the social from the inside – i.e. through an understanding of the actors' experiences and intentions. Positivist social science, employing the methods of the natural sciences (epistemological naturalism), attempts to find objective, causal factors that lead to the production of phenomena (independent, dependent variables). On the contrary, hermeneutics attempts to express the contingency of social phenomena, and thus the freedom of choice of agents, via offering explanations that centre on the mental schemata and intentions of the social agents, and on the interpretations they make of their environments.

With the danger of oversimplifying matters, we can equally claim that this opposition has further led to a methodological division: that between qualitative and quantitative methods and by extension between extensive

and intensive research designs (i.e. the fact that interpretivism focuses on lessons learned by the study of the particular, and positivism on law like generalizations produced via the study of aggregates) (Sadovnik 2007: 417-427). Characteristically, in the "intensive research design an individual is selected as representing a typical member of a group unknown as of yet ... The class which is the extension of the 'type' is not determined before the study begins but constructed during the course of it" (Van Langenhove 2007). The intensive design allows an investigator to explore and expose in detail what it means to be a member of a specific class. Even though there is the risk that the group chosen as a representative "type" may be too small to strictly be generalizable to a larger population, the risk is worth taking because of the insights that intensive investigation generates. Expanding on the importance and scientific status of case study research at this point would only add a not entirely necessary and rather lengthy diversion. Therefore suffice to say that the interested reader would find a stimulating introduction to the debate and a rather convincing defence of case study work in the work of Flyvbjerg (2001: 66-87).

It is, hence, more than clear that interpretive social scientific research is well positioned to study a social reality that is discursively constructed. One cannot study discursive structures that alter when they are re-interpreted by people as if they were objective, external facts. One has to study particular cases, particular contingent constellations of political events, in order to understand how it was possible for these kind of events to come about.

This does not go to say that the quantitative methods are useless. The point is not so much against the method *per se*, as it is against the assumptions that support the causal, statistical/empiricist enterprise. That is to say, the assumption that the study of aggregates and the formulation of statistical correlations can lead to explanatory and predictive generalizations valid across contexts. Redressing the balance between case study work and aggregate analysis should in our opinion be a priority for the scientific community, especially in view of making policy analysis and policy making more democratic.

# VI. Bringing in the public: Towards democratic policies

6 Democratizing policy making has to be a priority for modern liberal societies. Fostering public **participation** in policy and decision making can have multiple beneficial effects. To begin with, democratically debated, decided and eventually implemented policies will be more efficient as they respond better to the demands and needs of concerned stakeholders. Furthermore, democratic policies will also be more legitimate as they will no longer be the outcome of decisions taken by isolated technocratic and political elites. Consequently, they will reinvigorate the public's interest for politics, as the gap between them and the political world would appear to be narrowing. In the current climate of political disaffection and abstention this would indeed be a significant achievement. In addition, democratically deliberated policies will make for more informed and educated, and altogether more confident citizens, thus, improving the quality of democracy itself. On the whole, if we accept the view that active participation and control over the policy process are ends in themselves, integral to human freedom, then promoting socially robust policy making processes gains a moral rationale (Contogeorgis 2008, see also Cornwall and Gaventa 2001 for a view that premises citizenship on active policy participation).

Post-positivist social scientific work has a crucial role to play in this endeavour. In the words of Torgerson: "Just as positivism underlies the dominant technical orientation in policy analysis, so the post-positivist orientation now points to a participatory project" (1986: 241). Participation, in effect, means that clusters of populations, or stakeholders, have a say in

initiatives that affect them. Participatory methods is a generic term which describes approaches that actively involve a range of stakeholders: citizens, NGO representatives, policy makers and/or experts. (Van Langenhove 2007: 248). Participatory research is fundamentally grounded in the idea that people can help choose how they live their lives (Fischer 2003: 215). Examples of citizens' participation, especially in North America and Western Europe are numerous. Citizen juries (Crosby 1995), scenario workshops (Andersen and Jaeger 1999), focus groups, national issue conventions (Fishkin 1996) and consensus conferences (Joss and Durant 1995) – all of these bring citizens together to assess complex policy issues (Schneider and Ingram 2007: 329, see also Thompson 2007 for a South African experience and Cornwall and Schattan Coelho 2007 for various examples from developing countries). When experts are present, their principal role is to supply information and answer questions as the citizens deem necessary. (Fischer 2003: 210). Such experiments have shown that citizens are capable of comprehending complex issues when these are stripped of technical jargon. Thus citizens regain trust into democratic institutions and find their involvement in the process of deliberation a rewarding experience (Hill 1992, Grönlund et al. 2010).

Furthermore, participatory action research can engage individuals or publics in a process of learning and self reflection, which ultimately can lead to a change of practices, or to collectively agreed, informed choices about values and policy solutions (Sadovnik 2007: 421). It follows, however, that the role of the analyst in participatory action research cannot remain the same. The point is not to stand apart from a social domain in order to impose solutions upon it, but is to intervene in the social domain in a way that facilitates awareness and dialogue. The basic role of the analyst is to enhance the development of a learning process, so that the stakeholders understand the problems of relevance to them, pose corresponding questions and trace possible answers. It is in this sense that knowledge is co-produced, as the authorship of the knowledge does not reside solely with the experts, but also with the whole gamut of stakeholders, who come to participate in the deliberation. This approach to social inquiry inescapably involves a form of social relationships, so politics and values are always present. However, that is the case with any form of social inquiry. The politics and values advanced through the particular

form of social relationships involved in this kind of inquiry are explicitly democratic. The purpose after all is to organise a social deliberation about politics and choices in a way that promotes democratization. That is not to say that politics and values are more involved in this type of inquiry than in others, only that in others – for example, those that are positivist and technocratic – politics and values are less immediately evident because they are obscured by a misleading image of neutrality[7].

Participatory research or policy analysis however need not automatically translate to participatory decision making (deLeon 1990: 38). "Reduced to its starkest form, participatory policy analysis would involve extensive open hearings involving a broad range of concerned citizens… These hearings would be structured to prompt individuals, interest groups, and agency contributions to policy formulation". The rationale implied here is that of efficiency and not of democratization. The goal is to have a relatively firm grasp of the stakeholders' needs, so as to avoid a waste of effort and resources when designing and implementing policies (deLeon 1990: 35). Participatory research in this light exists to inform, while the actual decision is made by the decision makers themselves. (deLeon 1990: 38). Hence, ultimately, if we are indeed to make policy making more open and democratic, we need to envisage the establishment of innovative institutions, which would involve not only a co-production of knowledge but also co-decision (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). In other words, participation has to lead to binding decisions. This might be far from being feasible in most cases today but in our view improving democracy can only be achieved on such a basis.

Participatory analysis and policy making is not a panacea. It will not put an end to social problems, or necessarily lead to social consensus. Problems will remain and so will political arguments and conflicts. In addition, there are a number of issues that can negatively affect the quality or the credibility of participatory policy making. These are issues concerning control over the process of deliberation and representation, the extent of popular inclusion and the identity of the stakeholders invited, the timing of the process and the time devoted to it, the amount of information gathered and its exploitation, as well as the choice of the topic

7 Again I would like to thank Professor Doug Torgerson for this point. And for the elaboration.

itself. All of these issues need to be addressed by those who wish to follow the participatory path. Nevertheless, the benefits of this path, we believe, far outweigh the challenges and the potential lacunas. Popularising and democratising policy making can significantly improve the life experiences of many people, breathe new life into the civic ideal and thus improve the quality of democracy.

# VII. UNESCO and the MOST Programme: Building the reflexive nexus

7 UNESCO, and in particular the MOST programme, are in a unique position – as an international knowledge broker and coordinator of practice and research relevant to social development – to play a significant role, not only in the promotion of participatory research and policies, but also in the renovation of social scientific practice. By launching and organising with success the International Forum on the Social Sciences – Policy Nexus (Argentina, Uruguay 2006), the MOST programme did indeed make a significant step towards creating institutions that facilitate interaction among stakeholders, researchers and policy makers. However, this work needs to go further. Innovating the social science – policy nexus involves more than the establishment of international fora, which bring together distinguished members of the scientific, political and associational communities.

In order to be able to contribute towards the innovation of the social science policy nexus, UNESCO and the MOST Programme need first to address three separate issues.

- Firstly, there is the question of **relevance**. Not in the traditional sense of whether the research priorities of social scientists, and the topics studied by them, address the anxieties and needs of politicians. But rather in the epistemological and methodological senses. Remote, technocratic and positivist social science

cannot be of direct relevance for social development or democratization; and when it is indeed relevant its import is significantly reduced. Social scientific research will manage to establish itself as relevant only after it moves towards a linguistic understanding of social reality and towards adopting a post-positivist methodological inquiry. That is to say only after it embraces public participation.

- Secondly, there is the question of **level**. International fora are useful for advancing the establishment of shared languages and common terms of reference. However, change towards social development remains a distinctive national affair and this despite the profound influence and work done by international governmental organizations or NGOs. Thus, what we call the reflexive nexus needs to be built if not at the local level, then at least at the national. Evidently, one could convincingly argue that in spaces like the European Union we would have to consider the regional dimension of development. Having said that however, we have to admit that the European Union is rather the exception than the rule for the time being.
- The third issue concerns the **participants** themselves. True participatory policy making requires real popular participation. Even when the knowledge produced or the decisions reached during these deliberations are not binding, the people affected by the choices made ought to be consulted and have the chance to state their opinions. The participation of civil society representatives though many times desirable cannot substitute for popular engagement. We cannot equate citizen action and NGO action. We need to recognize that NGOs can act as intermediaries fostering participatory forms of policy formation, but cannot be considered as acting for civil society. On the whole, the reflexive nexus needs to be structured around the co-production of knowledge by all three relevant stakeholders: decision makers, experts/analysts and the various publics.

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## Management of Social Transformations (MOST)

### Policy is the priority

While it still promotes international, comparative and policy-relevant research on contemporary social transformations, MOST is now emphasizing the research and policy interface as its major *raison d'être*. Tackling the sustainability of social transformations is the programme's main task, which implies action at normative, analytical and strategic/political levels. It must concentrate on research of direct use to policy makers and groups involved in advocacy.

MOST's emphasis is thus on establishing and interconnecting international policy networks with renowned social science researchers to facilitate the use of social science research in policy-making. This means bringing together basic research with those entrusted with policy formulation in governments, institutions, actors and in UNESCO itself.

### Tools for policy-making

The Policy Papers, dedicated to social transformations and based on policy-relevant research results of work carried out by MOST and by other sections of the Social and Human Sciences Sector (SHS), are intended for policy makers, advocacy groups, business and media.

SHS is seeking new ways of distributing knowledge to target groups, such as ministers of social development, advocacy groups, UNESCO National Commissions and local authorities. It has launched a tool for online knowledge management and meta-networking for decision-making and strategy. This knowledge repository will use innovative and refined search tools to facilitate access and intelligibility of complex research data for all potential users.

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