

Commentary

(Expanding) the role of geography in public policy

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the United Kingdom of a political rhetoric of ‘evidence-based policy’. Under New Labour, this concept of evidence-based policy—‘what matters is what works’—is seen as essential to modern government:

“The government expects more of policy-makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy-making and better focus on policies that will deliver long term goals” (Cabinet Office, 1999).

It is an agenda that has involved engagement with both policy formation and policy practice (delivery and performance). All this has inevitably sharpened the government’s and policymakers’ perceptions of social science. As part of this ongoing dialogue, the Labour government has called for a closer engagement between academic researchers and policymakers, and for social scientists to play a more prominent role in informing government as to which policies work and which sorts of policy interventions are likely to be more successful than others:

“Social science should be at the heart of policy-making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social science community—we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what policy initiatives are likely to be most effective, and we need better ways of ensuring that those who need such information can get it quickly and easily” (David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, speech to ESRC Annual Conference, 2000).

Furthermore, the government has been highly critical of social science researchers for not being sufficiently interested in undertaking policy-relevant research, for being too preoccupied with the novel and the exotic at the expense of ‘big’ real-world problems:

“Social science researchers address issues other than those which are central and directly relevant to the political and policy debate... [and] fail to take into account the reality of many people’s lives... some of the most gifted and creative researchers seem to have turned away from policy-related issues, preferring to work on questions of little interest outside the research community” (David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, speech to ESRC Annual Conference, 2000).

However, according to William Solesbury, at the Economic and Social Research Council’s UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, this charge is not supported by the evidence. He detects a distinct utilitarian turn in research towards social and economic priorities, a trend encouraged and assisted by the shift towards an instrumental view of research by such charitable funding bodies as the Rowntree Foundation, Leverhulme Trust, and Nuffield Foundation, as well as the ESRC itself (Solesbury, 2001). Researchers, he argues, have perforce responded to these changed funding priorities. He detects a change in their mood, a wish not simply to observe and theorise about society, but also to engage with it, a more pragmatic stance on matters of theory or method, and a greater self-confidence in their role. This claim is made in fairly general terms, as referring to social science as a whole. However, his examples are taken from economics, health studies, criminology, and planning. Geography does not elicit a mention.

It is this lack of geography's profile in the 'new' social science focus on policy-relevant research that has sparked off a debate within the discipline about why it seems not to be 'punching its weight' in policy research and influence, and whether it should and could become more policy oriented and politically engaged (see, for example, Henry et al, 2001; Markusen, 1999; 2001; Martin, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Massey, 2000; Pacione, 1999; Peck, 1999; Pollard et al, 2000). It is tempting to view the current debate as a rerun of the discussion in the early 1970s. But the context and implications this time round are very different: the previous debate was mainly an internal one about relevance, but the issue now is one of ensuring geography is not left behind, does not lose out to other social science disciplines, in contributing to policy research and discourse.

Of course, such a deliberation will involve confronting contentious questions about the relationship between the theory and practice of geographical research and its potential policy relevance. Whilst we acknowledge the existence of a diversity of perspectives within contemporary geographical research, we believe that it is possible to engage in constructive dialogue regarding the role of geography and public policy. On the one hand, we need to have a clearer understanding of what we mean by policy-relevant research and how geographical knowledge might enhance debates about the formation and implementation of public policy. On the other hand, we need to explore the ways in which internal and external factors influence how geography and geographers engage with other social scientists, government, and policymakers: is it the case that geographers are not doing *enough* policy research relative to other social scientists? If so, why? Or is it a function of the *nature* of our research, that we are too parochial and internally focused?

It was to explore these and related questions that the Regional Economy and Society research cluster at the University of Cambridge Department of Geography hosted a one-day workshop in April on the theme "(Expanding) the Role of Geography in Public Policy". Some twenty-five economic and social geographers were invited from around the United Kingdom to contribute short presentations and to participate in open and critical dialogue on the current state of policy research in human geography, and to exchange views as to where we should go from here. Discussion was organised around three main substantive sessions, chosen to mirror the dominant research interests of the Cambridge cluster, namely: (1) the geographical foundations of economic competitiveness; (2) how the new economy is reshaping geographies of work, welfare, and social exclusion; and (3) how public service reform is informing the geographical agenda. The presenters drew on a diverse range of case studies from their own ongoing research projects to illustrate the key issues that geographers face in engaging in policy-relevant research. These case studies ranged across a diverse set of policy issues, including building institutional capacity in less favoured regions and urban areas, the local ecology of the UK money-lending industry, geographies of the New Deal for labour, the impacts of information and communications technologies on social inclusion, and the geographical implications of health service reforms. Four overriding themes emerged as dominant from the workshop debates and serve to unite these diverse case studies.

First, the workshop participants unanimously agreed that there is a clear role for geography and geographers in policymaking, given that the fundamental processes which determine national wealth creation, employment, and social welfare are *always* mediated in and often constituted at the local level, and are invariably highly spatially uneven. Notably, John Mohan and Peter Sunley highlighted the very real 'place effects' which constrain the efficacy of national employment and welfare policies, often sustaining locally specific policy outcomes that go against intended national policy outcomes. Whereas the dominant policy discourse emphasises that

‘what matters is what works’ (Davies et al, 2000), geographers force the recognition of ‘local’ counterfactuals: what does *not* work in particular places, and *why* that is so. As a corollary, a critical spatial lens becomes essential for formulating more realistic and effective policies that work ‘on the ground’.

Second, the workshop participants were highly critical of dominant arguments which characterise geographers in a broad-brush way as simply not punching their weight in economic and social policymaking circles. Many such critiquers make reference only to the lack of impact on *national* policy audience, and often sideline excellent geographical research that has had a significant impact on policymaking and policy issues at the *local* scale. Steve Fothergill’s work with Britain’s local coalfield communities, along with that of Mike Taylor on building regional growth coalitions in the West Midlands, were both presented at the workshop, and are excellent cases in point. Clearly, however, this is not to argue for some parochial exclusionary research focus on one’s own backyard, but to emphasise a crucial area of policy research that is often overlooked in assessing geography’s standing in the policy realm.

The third dominant theme in the workshop debates centred on the methodological limits to geographers’ profile in certain policy arenas. A common assumption is that policymakers prefer extensive quantitative analyses over the qualitative case studies that have proliferated within the discipline over the last decade (indeed often at the expense of the former). However, the experiences of the workshop participants suggest that this assumption is misplaced. Policymakers *were* found to be receptive to in-depth empirical qualitative case studies, provided that these are rigorous, grounded critically in broader theoretical debates, and seek to identify what can be learned from ‘local knowledges’ that is of relevance to wider policy issues. That is, it is not a problem with *what* we are doing (case studies) but with *how* we are going about it. Further, as Paul Plummer argued forcefully, qualitative and quantitative approaches are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they work best in pragmatic combination, given the multifaceted nature of the complex geographical phenomena in which we are interested (Hamnett, 2003; Johnston et al, 2003).

Fourth, however, members of the workshop cautioned against assuming a simple linear relationship between increased academic understanding and the diffusion of that new knowledge into the policy arena (for example, through the publication process). Nick Henry and Ian Gordon illustrated this fundamental point with respect to their own work on ‘Motorsport Valley’ and the ‘urban problem’, respectively. Indeed, the former has become a lucrative cluster brand with its own devoted office in the Department of Trade and Industry, as much in response to serendipitous exogenous factors, than to rigorous academic research and extensive publication alone. Significantly, the types of publication that *are* better suited to diffusing new research to policy actors (research reports, applied journals, etc) are typically not the ones highly rewarded within the discipline for Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) purposes and personal promotion. This aspect of academic geographical enquiry is worrying.

So where do we go from here? Clearly, not all geographical research has to be policy orientated, and there was general agreement that policy relevance should not be used as some “crude overarching test of what geographers should and should not do” (Peck, 1999, page 131). At the same time, how do we ensure that geography as a discipline and, more importantly, geographical concerns such as spatial unevenness, are not sidelined in public policy? It seems that three crucial factors in our approach to policy are under our control: pedagogy, methodology and epistemology, and dissemination. First, in training and socialising future generations of undergraduate geographers we need to encourage students to be more aware of policy issues through our teaching, writing, and research. Geographers already introduce their students to

critical debates and issues, but could do more to link those concerns to policy issues and debates. Likewise we need to encourage PhD students to explore critical policy issues and to engage in the construction and/or critique of public policy. Second, there is a continued need for rigorous high-quality geographical research in which methodologies and epistemologies are elaborated in depth (essential for replication of studies in other areas) and in which the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined in multimethod approaches.

Finally, researchers concerned with expanding geography's role in public policy also face a fundamental choice with regard to *how* we enter the policy arena, with whom we work once there, and whom we want to influence. In this context, Linda McDowell argued that it is helpful to distinguish between *policy-driven* and *policy-relevant* research. The former is more instrumental, targeted work on specific government policies. The latter type of work receives less attention but is equally important, encompassing as it does engagement with policy through a critique of public policy and support of alternative social organisations such as trade unions, the unemployed, environmental groups, and the like, as well as work for critical think tanks, such as the Economic Policy Institute or Progressive Policy Institute in the USA, and Catalyst and the Institute for Public Policy Research in the United Kingdom. For example, Ann Markusen's academic work on the military industrial complex in the USA (Markusen and Yudken, 1992; Markusen et al, 1991) was accompanied by a decade of work supporting peace groups and giving public talks on the issue of defence conversion across the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. If we were to tally up the number of geographers working to shape public policy through supporting such *alternative* institutions and voices, whether local or national (and indeed international) as well as those working directly for policy makers, geographers might be seen to be contributing more to policy debates than is often credited.

Nevertheless, as geographers we cannot indulge in complacency over our level of involvement in policy research and debate. Several concrete actions that could increase our role and influence were raised at the workshop. One is for us to engage in more policy-oriented community outreach on social issues and problems. Expanding our analyses of 'big' economic and social policy questions, on the one hand, and undertaking much more analysis of and political interest in our own local and regional socioeconomies, on the other, would both give geographers increased legitimacy and a position from which to speak out more forcefully on policy issues. Another is to redress the shift away in recent years from detailed empirical work, and to pay much more attention to methodological questions of rigour and the quality of the evidence presented. Yet another is to publicise better our policy-oriented work. In this context, major geographic institutions, such as the RGS/IBG and the AAG, could provide important support and voice to help promote geographical work on public policy, for example, by giving workshops on working with the media, actively encouraging high-profile policy research, coordinating press briefings, and so on. Perhaps more fundamentally, good-quality policy-oriented research needs to be rewarded within the academic community. Change is required to the existing incentives system in universities to reward, or at least not disadvantage, policy-oriented geographical work. At present most geographers have little incentive to engage in policy research unless personal commitment and activism draw them to a policy-oriented topic. The criteria for academic promotion should be made more inclusive of policy-oriented research and community outreach. The RAE, by which department research quality is judged in the United Kingdom, should give greater weight and recognition to good policy work, giving it the same standing as good 'pure' academic research (there are some indications that this may happen to a limited extent in the next RAE). And as part of

this, policy-oriented and applied journals should be given a higher standing in the assessment exercise.

One thing seems clear: that there remains much to do to turn the recent partial revival of interest in policy research within the discipline into a full-blown paradigm shift. At the same time, it is important that the methodological elements of a 'policy turn' do not run ahead of a deeper *epistemological* and *ontological* engagement with the types of knowledge our geographical methods produce, for whom we produce it, and for what ultimate purpose. Fundamentally, the various strands of this debate cannot (and should not) proceed in isolation from each other, given the many diverse and competing knowledge claims that surround the role of geography in public policy. As such, the workshop participants all endorsed a follow-up meeting in Cambridge to keep the conversation going (compare Barnes, 1996) and to explore further the interface between public policy and geographical ways of knowing. It is also our aim to bring together those geographers *internationally* who share our commitment to contribute to policy analysis and discourse and, hopefully in the process, thereby reactivate a wider debate in the discipline.

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