Deborah Stone’s *Policy Paradox: A Critical Review*

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Deborah Stone’s *Policy Paradox* is a much-needed resource in the field of public policy. Unlike many traditional texts, Stone presents issues of policy-making in a realistic light, diverging away from the overly simplistic rational theory approach. Explicitly demonstrating why this approach is erroneous, Stone uses each chapter to illustrate how real-life politics are inextricably entwined with policymaking. Furthermore, she uses examples drawn from current events to support her argument that the rational model alone cannot explain policy analysis.

First, Stone tackles the issue of political reasoning. She asserts that many analysts use the market model to examine policy problems. According to the rational model, a good policy analysis begins with problem definition, brainstorming solutions, evaluating the alternatives, choosing the best option, and implementing that choice. Stone, however, argues that the polis is not compatible in comparison with the market, and thus the rational theory approach is incorrect. As proof, she points to the "struggle of ideas" which is the "essence of policy making in political communities." According to Stone, rather than a rational process, policy making is a "constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideals that guide the way people behave" (Stone 11).

Stone begins her critique of the rational approach by addressing the complexity of problem definition (Part II). She asserts that problem definition is not an objective and neutral evaluation that can be applied to politics. Instead, behind every policy issue "lurks a contest over conflicting, though equally, plausible, conceptions of the same abstract goal or value" (Stone 12). Using the examples of equity, efficiency, security, and liberty, *Policy Paradox* shows that problem definition is not a cut-and-dried process, but is determined by parties with a vested interest in presenting the problem in a certain light. By using various examples from previous policy decisions, Stone clearly demonstrates that policy results from biased (although not necessarily negatively biased) opinions.

In Part II of *Policy Paradox*, each chapter ends with the question, is there a trade-off between goals? In each case there are arguments for a trade-off, yet Stone presents evidence that there are reasonable compromises and solutions which allow both goals to be achieved. These sections foster critical reasoning, since readers are forced to see the validity of both sides of an argument, precisely the point that Stone wants to make.

In Part III, Stone moves on to the ways in which policy issues are presented. She contends that there are multiple ways in which issues are constructed, making it impossible for an objective analysis. She uses five different examples (symbols, numbers, causes, interests, and decisions) of how information can be portrayed in order to foster support for a particular policy. Again, Stone is very effective in arguing that the rational
model approach does not work, pointing out that every policy benefits and punishes someone, regardless of intent. In effect, there can be no "best" policy outcome, since maximum total welfare can only be determined by creating categories, which inherently advantage some and disadvantage others.

While Part III is very impressive in presenting Stone’s argument, it would be more beneficial to discuss causes of policy making at the beginning of the book. It is not until Chapter 9 that Policy Paradox explains why policy making occurs at all. Stone’s subsequent analysis of mobilization comes too late in the argument, decreasing its persuasiveness. For how can the reader fully grasp the complexity of defining policy goals without first understanding the reason and conditions behind public and private support for policy change?

A related problem comes with explaining collective action. Stone gives a fairly lengthy critique of Mancur Olson’s Logic of Collective Action, pointing out its inaccuracies in comparing the market model with the polis, basically invalidating it as an explanation of public participation in the policy making process. This accomplished, she proceeds on, illustrating the difference between concentrated and diffused benefits (Chapter 9). The error is obvious; she lacks an explanation for mobilization. She can define its characteristics (diffused vs. concentrated costs), but does not incorporate a theory of motivation into the text. The reader is left wondering how collective action occurs. Since Stone has made a strong case that rational theory does not work, the reader must ask, how does mobilization occur? How (and why) does the public get involved in particular issues and not others? The description of costs/benefits simply is not enough.

In Part IV of Policy Paradox, Stone discusses temporary resolutions of conflict. Beginning with the notion that all policy strives to change people’s behavior, she reviews inducements, rules, persuasion, rights, and powers as methods for instigating these changes. She further argues that policy making can be seen as a constantly contested battle for boundaries. Her contention is particularly persuasive here, and the reader arrives at the conclusion of Policy Paradox with a definite sense that rational theory approach is invalid.

Unfortunately, Stone does not back her argument up with a definite alternative to the rational method. Instead, she restates her purpose, which is to expose the complications of policy analysis and provide readers with an awareness of rational methods weaknesses. But she goes no further. This is the most fundamental weakness of the text. While, in effect, destroying the model of rational theory, she does not provide another concept to take its place. Readers are forced to draw their own conclusions. Implicit within the text is the idea that policy makers manipulate (not necessarily maliciously) information in order to garner support. This occurs through the use of symbols, numbers, categorization, etc. The policy alternative with the most support (gained by persuasion, inducements, rules, rights, and power) is the one chosen for implementation. Unlike the rational theory model, policy making is fuzzy and constantly subject to changing views and opinions. This theory, however, is never explicitly clarified in the conclusion, leaving the reader with a feeling of incompleteness.
At the end of each chapter is a summary box, which quickly reviews the major concepts previously discussed. These features are an invaluable asset to the text, ensuring the data is absorbed. Using a summary box in the conclusion to elucidate Stone’s theory would have been extremely advantageous. It would allow the reader to finish the book with a feeling of comprehension and tie up several loose ends. Unfortunately, this aspect is lacking in *Policy Paradox*, and this otherwise powerful text loses its effectiveness.

This is not to say that *Policy Paradox* is not useful for critiquing the rational method theory. In fact, Stone presents a compelling argument, complete with examples and illustrations. But taken alone, this text is incomplete and should not be used alone. For introductory policy analysis, a variety of sources are needed. Stone’s main contribution is showing the weakness of the rational theory approach. But there is much more to policy analysis. The conceptual models of incrementalism, elite theory, group theory, game theory, public choice theory, and systems theory are either brushed over with surprising briefness or not discussed at all. In addition, alternative interpretations of bounded or limited rationalism are not given their due credit. For this reason, other introductory texts are necessary for a broader perspective on policy analysis. Stone’s work is important, but not sufficient. Students of policy analysis would do well to incorporate *Policy Paradox* into the curriculum, but must always remember that (even according to Stone) policy making is a fuzzy thing, subject to much interpretation.