

Aaron Wildavsky

*the art and craft
of policy analysis*

REISSUED WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY B. GUY PETERS



The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis

“Even after half a century of reading public policy works, if I were to be limited to one professional book, it would be *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. Aaron Wildavsky, a founder of the field, was determined to teach its members to above all question ‘received’ wisdom. Criticism, while essential, is not enough, he counseled. Policy analysis must contribute to addressing problems. The mark of good public policy is whether today’s problems are less divisive and more soluble than those previously faced. At the end of the 1970s, after two tumultuous decades of revolutionary policies affecting civil rights, social welfare and the environment, Wildavsky was positive about the contribution of policy. Can we come to the same judgement today? This book can teach the reader how to do the analysis.”

—Helen Ingram, *Professor Emerita in Planning, Policy, and Design and Political Science, University of California, Irvine, USA*

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Reissued with a new introduction by B. Guy Peters

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For Gale Gordon
M. V.M.F.R.J.D.

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This book recites lessons I have learned from my teachers: the students, staff, and faculty at the Graduate School of Public Policy of the University of California at Berkeley. Two chapters have been coauthored with students at the school: David Good on “A Tax by Any Other Name,” and Bob Gamble, Presley Pang, Fritzie Reisner, and Glen Shor on “Coordination without a Coordinator.” Presley Pang used his incisive understanding to help me tease out the craft aspects of policy analysis. The chapter “Distribution of Urban Services” originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *Urban Outcomes: Schools, Streets, and Libraries*, with Frank S. Levy, and Arnold J. Meltsner, co-authors who are also colleagues. My collaborators on two other chapters—Jack Knott on “Jimmy Carters Theory of Governing,” and Bruce Wallen on “Opportunity Costs and Merit Wants”—were then students in the Political Science Department. No one knows enough about the broad sweep of public policy to do it alone and I have not tried.

Like everyone else I have benefitted by reading classics in the field—Yehezkel Dror *Public Policy Making Reexamined* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1968), Charles Hitch and Rowland McKean’s *The Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960 for the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California), E. S. Quade *Analysis for Military Decisions* (New York: Elsevier, 1970), Sir Geoffrey Vickers’ *The Art of Judgment: A Study of Policy Making* (New York: Basic Books, 1965). Critical commentary has proved invaluable. Robert Merton has provided the best (and toughest) comments it has ever been my good fortune to receive. Gordon Wasserman helped me cut out as well

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INTRODUCTION

B. Guy Peters

For me, and I think also for many other students of public policy, there are two seminal figures in this field of inquiry. One is Harold Lasswell, and the other is Aaron Wildavsky. It is therefore a great honor for me to be able to contribute this introduction to the new edition of *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*, and to have the opportunity to reflect on the role that this book, and Aaron's work more generally, has had on the development of public policy studies. While a great honor, this is also a great challenge. This one book contains numerous insights into policy and policymaking, and this is but one of a number of books and articles that, although published separately, amount to a more or less integrated conception of what policy is, and what policy should be.

The individual chapters in *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* represent something of the breadth of Aaron Wildavsky's contributions to the study of public policy. These chapters range from considerations of governing under President Jimmy Carter and the nature of American federalism to insights into the roles of planning and information systems in public policy. These chapters also include discussions of a range of specific policy issues such as health,¹ education and the environment. But perhaps most importantly these chapters are fundamentally asking question about

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how we should think about public policy and how governments (and citizens) can marshal resources to make and implement good policy.

Attempting to capture this rich array of ideas and insights in this one introductory essay is essentially impossible, and I am sure that I will not do justice to many of the ideas in the book. This necessary selectivity is almost certain to offend the many friends and students of this great *maven* in the field. To attempt to cover these essays, and the many other contributions made during his long career, I will put forward a series of propositions that to me help to characterize these essays. These ideas also can inform our contemporary thinking about public policy just as they did when this book was first published over 40 years ago, but unfortunately some of these ideas about policy appear to have been lost in contemporary political life.

I. POLICY ANALYSIS IS AN ART OR A CRAFT AS MUCH AS IT IS A SCIENCE

Much of our contemporary thinking about policy analysis, and about the social sciences more generally, characterizes these activities as science, and as a particular type of science. The discipline² tends to emphasize developing testable theories and having hard, quantitative analysis of the hypotheses derived from those theories. This style of policy analysis is dominant in many, if not most, schools of public policy in the United States and we are producing numerous well-trained policy analysts who can crunch numbers with great precision.³

That “scientific”, or at least technocratic, approach to policy analysis certainly has its merits and can provide very useful insights for policymakers, but if we read Aaron Wildavsky’s work on policy we can see that the quantitative aspects of social science are not all there is in policy. Public policy is about ideas as much or more than it is about equations. In Wildavsky’s version of policy analysis equations would be welcome—as indeed they were in his analysis of federal budgeting in the United States—but only if they were anchored in ideas, and particularly in ideas that were connected to, and feasible in, the real world of politics.

In some aspects of his work Wildavsky approaches a constructivist position on understanding policy (see Béland, 2009). That is, rather than being some objective reality policy is constructed through the interactions of actors and through developed a common framework for thinking about the policy issues. Thus, policy problems and the design of solution to those problems may not be objective but rather reflect the political and

social process through which they are defined and prepared for resolution. A good deal of politics and policymaking, therefore, is about how we conceptualize the problems confronting us.

The importance of ideas and the need to construct understandings of policy leads naturally on to the title of this book, and its principal focus—art and craft in policy analysis. This characterization of policy analysis can be related to a classic argument about decision-making in organizations. Perrow (1970; see also Thompson and Tuden, 1959) discussed decision-making in organizations as a craft when the outcomes of a process are uncertain although there may be relatively few exceptions in the inputs. While that definition is not as precisely on target for policymaking as we might like, it does point to the need for judgment on the part of the policymaker, and that this is not just a mechanical process of cranking out an answer to a predetermined problem.

II. POLICY ANALYSIS IS POLITICAL

While this point should be blindingly obvious, it is important to remember that public policy and policy analysis are inherently political. There is some tendency, as implied above, to make policy analysis technocratic and divorced from the push and pull of politics. While good information and good analysis is important for making good policy, all that analysis is useless if the proposals formulated are infeasible and cannot be adopted. Therefore, the successful analyst will have his or her feet firmly planted in the shifting sands of politics. Accepting the uncertainty and seeming irrationality of the political process is merely a necessity for policymakers and analysts.

Aaron Wildavsky never forgot that policymaking and implementation are political; rather he always put this fundamental point at the center of his thinking. That understanding of politics was not necessarily partisan, but may be organizational or even personal. For example, the budgetary process (see below) is very much about defending the interests of public organizations, and the individual actors involved also are attempting to maintain their own interests and the trust of their associates. Likewise, his classic study of implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1974) involved actors at all levels of government making decisions to protect their interests or perhaps simply to support or oppose a specific policy agenda.

The essay on planning and politics contained in this volume is an excellent explication of the role of politics, as opposed to more (presumably)

rational methods of policy analysis. This essay is not one of his more frequently cited contributions, but it describes rather well the contrast between “puzzling” and “powering” (Hecló, 1974; Hoppe, 2010) in policy analysis. This distinction reflects the difference between important forms of policymaking and policy analysis based on cogitation and those based merely on political interests and power. While he rejects the claims of rationality in both politics and planning, and hence in models based on interactions and intellect, he does demonstrate clearly the uses and abuses of each.

Wildavsky’s work on public policy also involves the third element of the triad discussed by Robert Hoppe—Participation. In this essay on the “Citizen as Analyst” contained in this book he points to the importance of an informed body of citizens considering possible policies and doing their own analysis. And that analysis would inevitably lead on to their participation in the policy process, in whatever manner was available for them to do so. Likewise, in the other chapters contained here there is a pervasive sense that in a democratic political system attempting to do policy without the involvement of the public is a mistake, and likely to increase the already high risk of mistakes.

III. POLICY ANALYSIS IS NORMATIVE

Alan Meltser, a policy scholar who was a rough contemporary of Aaron Wildavsky, once argued (1975) that policy analysts who did not have their own ideas about what they wanted in a policy were only “baby analysts”. That is, they might be able to perform high quality technical analyses but without a normative foundation, and some understanding of what “good policy” was other than in a technical sense they were not really contributing much to the debates over policy. While that characterization may appear harsh, it does argue for the importance of political values in making and assessing policies. Saying a policy will “work” may beg the question of for whom it works and for what purpose.

Evaluation is the stage of the policy process where values become most important (see Wildavsky’s chapter on evaluation in this volume). If we are to evaluate a policy we compare the results of the programs involved with the goals of the program, to see to what extent those goals were achieved. An evaluation must also consider the unintended consequences of the programs being considered, and the opportunity costs of the use of scarce resources for this policy rather than for others. But policy evaluation

should go beyond those assessments, as important as they are. Evaluation of policies involves considering the goals of policy, and the appropriateness of those goals

As well as specific policy goals, policy analysis also involves broader social goals. Late in his career Aaron Wildavsky became interested in cultural theory, especially the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (see Wildavsky, 1987). In particular he was interested in how people developed preferences for policies. Rather than assuming that preferences developed from rational calculations of self-interest, he sought the roots of preferences in political culture. While political culture has become extremely unfashionable in comparative politics Aaron Wildavsky demonstrated the relevance of broad cultural patterns to the study of public policy.⁴

In summary, ideas and culture are central to policy, but these are perhaps more difficult to include in objective analysis of policy than are “hard” economic facts. But the difficulties in measurement does not undermine the utility of the concepts for understanding how governments work and how policy is made and implemented.

IV. POLICYMAKING IS INSTITUTIONAL

Institutions are another factor that is central to Aaron Wildavsky’s understanding of public policy. As well as being a student of policy, he was a student of at least two important institutions in American government—the bureaucracy and the presidency. And several of the chapters contained in this volume demonstrate that concern with the influence of those institutions on policy, perhaps most clearly the chapter on the Carter presidency and the discussion of the self-evaluating organization in public administration.

But Aaron Wildavsky’s appreciation of the role of institutions in policy analysis is not confined to the bureaucracy and the presidency. His large corpus of scholarly work on policy is filled with insights into institutions and the way in which the individual institutions (or organizations) and their interaction. And the logic of his thinking about policy can be seen clearly through an institutionalist lens. For example, the notion of clearance points in the implementation book is a precursor to the idea of veto points and veto players that has been important in rational choice perspectives on institutions (Tsebelis, 2002).

In this view of governing all the actions associated with policymaking are embedded in institutions, including social institutions broadly defined.

Individuals are important actors but they gain much of their importance for policy through interacting with other individuals within institutions. In these interactions values such as trust among individuals and the predictability of their behavior, enable decision-making to occur in ways that might be impossible with more atomistic individuals.

The importance of institutions can be seen in Wildavsky's comparative work. While clearly deeply involved in thinking about politics and policy in the United States, Aaron Wildavsky also accepted and promoted the importance of context in understanding government and policy (see Pollitt, 2013). His comparative discussions of budgeting in the United States and the United Kingdom, while demonstrating some important similarities, also demonstrated the importance of institutional differences. And his work on budgeting and planning in poor countries, mostly done with Naomi Caiden, emphasized the role of context and the folly of imposing models developed for more affluent countries in these situations.

V. PROBLEMS ARE NOT SOLVED, ONLY AMELIORATED (AT BEST)

A good deal of the literature on policymaking is directed toward designing interventions into the economy and society that will "solve" a problem (see Howlett and Lejano, 2013). Coming up with a solution is a logic goal, seemingly, for making public policy. Further, in the real world of making policies in the political process, advocates of a policy must promise that they will solve the problem, and indeed often must promise benefits that even they are aware are unlikely to be achieved. The political process is not kind to those who promise only to maybe make things a little better. And perhaps this conviction about the capacity of a policy to alter in a predictable way its target is crucial for building enthusiasm about the program.

But most policies do not solve the problem for once and for all. And if they do then the problem addressed probably was not really a major problem for the society. Even an intervention that appears relatively easy to make, such as building a road from point A to point B will not solve the underlying problem of traffic congestion, and many studies have demonstrated that building a new road simply provides more space for more cars and congestion is largely unchanged. Given the complexity of social and economic problems, and the rather inadequate knowledge about how to intervene and with which instruments, policymaking is an ongoing struggle to make the world a better place.

This struggle for amelioration is highlighted in Wildavsky's essay on health policy contained in this volume. The challenge facing health policy-makers is that the demand for health, although in reality what is delivered are medical interventions rather than health per se, is largely insatiable. For health policymakers the problem is exacerbated because marginal improvements in health become more costly the healthier an individual, or a population, becomes. Given the longevity and generally good health status of populations in the industrialized world, adding a single month to life expectancy may be difficult and costly. And therefore, since few new apparent benefits are delivered, health policy can appear to be a failure.

Any number of scholars and practitioners have recognized that policymaking is more continuous than discreet, but Wildavsky went one step further and argued that policy was its own cause (Chapter x, this volume). His "Law of Large Solutions" was that any large-scale intervention would transform the environment and create the need for additional policies, which may also produce more policies, *ad infinitum*. This is a recognition of the problem of unintended consequences of most human interventions into society (see Merton, 1936), because of inadequate understandings of the dynamics in those systems. It is also a recognition of the "tireless tinkering" that governments are engaged in attempting to get policy right (Carter, 2012), and in attempting to satisfy the demands of citizens.

This essay on policy as its own cause also addresses one of the other persistent problems in public policy—the segmentation of government and the need for coordination (see Peters, 2015). Not only does the creation of a new policy upset existing conditions in one policy domain, it can have consequences for the relationships among policies, requiring further adjustment and attempts to get programs to work together effectively. This is especially true given the organizational foundations of government, and the political and policy arrangements that exist among these actors.

Unlike many students of coordination within the public sector, however, Wildavsky does not assume that the coordination required among public organizations and programs will necessarily come about through hierarchy.⁵ If we examine attempts of the public sectors in various countries around the world to create more "joined up" government (Pollitt, 2003) they usually rely upon the creation of more authoritative institutions or procedures. But coordination can also be achieved through more collaborative and cooperative means, beginning at the bottom rather than at the top of government.

Finally, the emphasis on amelioration and the continuous need to make and revise policies is manifested in the discussion of learning, and especially learning from failures. If we conceptualize most policymaking as in essence a set of experiments made by governments with often inadequate information (Campbell, 1998), then learning from failures is perhaps one of the most important tools in the tool chest of policy analysts. While politically it is difficult to accept failure, for the analyst it may only be one more step along the road to making a better policy.

VI. THE POLICY ANALYST MUST BE A SKEPTIC

The world of public policy is filled with enthusiasts. Every politician or interest group will have a pet project that they will save the world, or at least a large part of it. As already noted this tendency to oversell policies is a structural consequence of the need to persuade other actors or the public. But it is also a product of genuine commitment on the part of individuals who believe very deeply about an issue and also believe very deeply that they have a solution, or more precisely *the* solution, for that issue.⁶ These commitments may drive good policies forward, but they can also propel less worthy policies onto the agendas of the public sector and eventually into actual operation.

Into this world of enthusiasm the task of the policy analyst is to bring some skepticism and some restraint. This is not just skepticism for its own sake, but an attempt to force those enthusiasts to consider carefully the effects, intended and unintended of their policy ideas, and also to consider the costs. The task of the policy analyst is to “speak truth to power”, which was the title of the American version of this book. This commitment to using the tools of policy analysis to bring a greater sense of reality, and an understanding of risk, is central to the contributions that Aaron Wildavsky made to the study of public policy.

The notion of policy as its own cause, and his numerous writings on budget reform attempts in the United States (see Wildavsky, 1978), demonstrate some skepticism about the capacity of reformers to reform effectively. This perspective can be related not only to his observations of numerous reforms that were less than fully successful, but also to his institutionalist perspective. That is, there is an argument, often more implicit than explicit, that institutions—meaning also formalized procedures such as in budgeting—that have grown up over time are more capable of producing effective outcomes that are mechanisms that are less clearly defined and developed on an ad hoc or presumably more objectively rational basis.

The commitment to realism, and skepticism, when discussing possible policy interventions can be seen clearly in the several chapters on specific policy areas contained in this volume. As already noted the chapter on health policy demonstrates the many conundrums which health policy analysts confront—something that is all too evident in the United States in 2017. Likewise, the chapters on education and on urban services point to the need for clear, analytic thinking in policy areas that are often dominated by ideology and unexamined commitments to particular dogmas. And the chapter of alternative ways of funding charities builds on his skepticism about the common use of tax expenditures as an alternative to public spending (Wildavsky, 1985).

It is important to understand that the skepticism and caution about policy expressed in Aaron Wildavsky's work is by no means nihilism or simply being negative about the attempts of others to improve the performance of the public sector. To some extent it appears to be the opposite. The concern with public policy expressed in this book, and in Wildavsky's other work, demonstrates the interest in making the world in general and the United States in particular a better place through public action. But those goals of improvement cannot be reached simply by accepting every idea that is advanced. Rather, those goals will only be reached by deliberate action and careful design of policies, while understanding that the probabilities of success are far from one hundred percent.

VI. BUDGETING IS CRUCIAL FOR POLICY, AND POLITICS

Although not as evident in the *Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* as in much of his other work, the public budget is central to Aaron Wildavsky's contributions to public policy analysis, and especially to thinking about the politics of policy. This is also one of the relatively few areas of his work that would fit into the contemporary emphasis on quantitative analysis. His work on budget models (Davis et al., 1966; Wildavsky, 1984) provided insights into the incremental nature of public budgeting and sparked a large number of elaborations⁷ and attempted refutations of the approach.

But his quantitative work on the budget was perhaps overshadowed by his qualitative work. His *Politics of the Budgetary Process* (1964 and a number of later editions) provided an institutional and political explanation of why the outcomes of the process were incremental, and seemingly irrational. But when the magnitude of the task in making a national budget involved is considered, then using shortcuts and rules of thumb that

minimize decision-making costs may indeed be the most rational way to proceed. Further, the repetitive nature of the process enables any errors made in one year to be corrected in following years. This understanding of budgeting also emphasized the institutional nature of the process, and especially the institutionalized patterns of interactions among the participants.

His other major qualitative work on budgeting—*The Private Government of Public Money* (1974), with Hugh Heclö—further elaborated his approach to budgets and the politics involved in making the thousands of decisions contained within any budget (Heclö and Wildavsky, 1974). This book remains probably the best single exposition of the politics of public spending in the United Kingdom, even after decades of change and apparent revolution in Whitehall (see Parry, 2003). And although functioning within a significantly different set of institutions the budgetary process in London demonstrated some of the same characteristics found in the earlier study of budgeting in Washington.

It is extremely unfortunate that contemporary political science and policy analysis has largely abandoned this interest in the budgetary process.⁸ Some of Wildavsky's numerous students followed in his footsteps and focused on the budget, but many of these scholars have retired or moved on to other interests. The budget remains the best single statement of government priorities available, and has the virtue of being providing a ready-made ratio level dependent variable, but yet we look at it all too infrequently. While it is difficult to argue against the proposition that appropriations and public expenditures are only the beginning of a process to produce policy outcomes for citizens, they remain crucial starting points.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As I said at the beginning of this essay Aaron Wildavsky is, in my estimation, one of the two most important figures in public policy studies. Unfortunately those contributions do not appear to be recognized adequately by newer generations of policy scholars who may now simply take his contributions as givens, and as part of the general knowledge about public policy that we all share. I do hope that the republication of this book, and this introductory essay, can help return Wildavsky's immense contributions to the mainstream of thinking about public policy.

The hope is that reissuing this book will not just to honor the man, but also help to bring his way of thinking about public policy more clearly

into focus as we think about contemporary policy issues. The several dimensions of his contributions outlined above all have great relevance for policymaking in the present time, but also may have to be reconsidered in light of the nature of contemporary politics and policymaking. Aaron Wildavsky was writing in a very different political climate, with different types of policy challenges, so perhaps we should think about what has changed as well as what persists.

First, much of Wildavsky's career was during a period of greater optimism about the capacity of government to govern and to make effective interventions into the society. That optimism has waned almost everywhere, and largely vanished in some quarters. Behind his advice of caution for policy enthusiasts there was always a strong sense of hope about the capacity of the public sector to make the lives of citizens better. Despite the evidence of success of some even highly controversial programs, that hope would be seen as hopelessly naive by many on government in the twenty-first Century.

Second, during that time politics was seen at times as the counterpoint to technical analysis, and that the technical might dominate. Politics has become dominant, and indeed excessively dominant, in policymaking in the United States and to a lesser extent elsewhere. It is dominant to the extent that rather than worrying about the dominance of technical solutions there is a real need to ensure that there is some attention to the available evidence in policy areas such as climate change and health care (Rogowski, 2013; Graham, 2017). In an era in which policy scientists are talking about evidence-based policymaking, the reality of policymaking appears to be "policy-based evidence making".

A third point that distinguishes Aaron Wildavsky's work from contemporary policymaking, especially in the United States, is the commitment to institutions and institutional processes. The contemporary demeaning of institutions, whether public or private, goes hand in hand with the demeaning of expertise. For Aaron Wildavsky institutions were crucial for creating some predictability in the midst of what might otherwise be extreme uncertainty. And, as he has demonstrated with the work on the budgetary process, those institutionalized patterns of behavior may enable decision-making when faced with seemingly overwhelming tasks.⁹

Despite the apparent differences of Aaron Wildavsky's work from the contemporary *Zeitgeist* of politics, his approach to policy remains relevant and perhaps needed more than ever. His emphasis on the values involved in public policies, and his concern with the need to build political

understandings about the nature of policy, are all important for making policy in the twenty-first century, just as they were at the time he was writing. And perhaps more than anything the underlying notion that public policy can work and can make the lives of citizens is crucial for the current age.

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NOTES

1. His essay on health policy remains useful and insightful even after decades of change in health policy in the United States. I still include it in the first week of readings for my undergraduate class in health policy.
2. I am referring to policy analysis, or policy science, as a discipline here. It could, however, be understood equally well as the intersection of a number

of more conventional disciplines—economics, political science, law, and numerous substantive areas such as environmental science—all working on policy problems.

3. The *Washington Monthly* published an article recounting two exercises in policy analysis of the same program. One utilized the full armamentarium of the social sciences and concluded that the program was a failure. The other, conducted by the School of Public Policy at Berkeley, Wildavsky's own institution, and focusing more on perceptions and "softer" criteria declared the program a success.
4. In the terms of the New Institutionalism preferences were argued to be a function of a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequentiality (March and Olsen, 1989).
5. Donald Chisholm's book on non-hierarchical coordination (1989) came out of the same Oakland project that the implementation book did, and was directly influenced by Wildavsky and this conceptions of policy and policymaking.
6. Although for those of us who have been doing public policy for some decades this phrase is associated with Aaron Wildavsky, the original use was by the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the Seventeenth Century.
7. As a graduate student I regularly trooped through the snow in East Lansing, Michigan carrying boxes of IBM cards to the computer center, all to test the Davis, Dempster and Wildavsky models for the state budget. Trying to explain to my current graduate students the idea of using cards, and that one could only get one run of the data each day, is somewhat like telling one's grandchildren stories of the good, or not so good, old days.
8. This statement may be somewhat hyperbolic, but it is notable the extent to which political science and public policy analysis grounded in political science, invest little time and energy in understanding and explicating this crucial political document. But also consult The *OECD Journal of Budgeting*, and the work of Jon Blondal.
9. As well as the extreme partisanship, the deinstitutionalization of the US Congress helps to account for the continuing inabilities to pass a budget in a timely manner.

INTRODUCTION: ANALYSIS AS ART

Aaron Wildavsky

“What is Policy Analysis?

Why do you ask?”

Anonymous

It would be a disservice to suggest that my images of policy analysis sprang full blown from imagination, or with the exact order into which these ideas have been pressed here. These conceptions are shaped by what was happening to me—devising a curriculum for a school of public policy, as much in an effort to understand analysis as to teach it—and to the country—the social programs of the sixties, filtered through one to two hundred analyses a year done by students and colleagues. That I came to analysis via the study of budgeting, in which politics and economics are intertwined, may account for my refusal to dissolve one into the other and my preference for trying to keep them together as political economy. Though now I think of myself as a political economist, I was first a political scientist. The capacity to make decisions in the future, to mobilize support for substance—that is, political rationality—is at least as important as generating economic growth so that there will be resources to allocate.

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