Public Policy Analysis: Deux ou Trois Choses que Je Sais d'Elle

I am extremely grateful for the honour that the UAB has bestowed on me today. Even if I have a lingering feeling that I do not really deserve it, I am not only very happy to receive it but also very proud of it. It shows that my efforts of the past fifty years have been recognized as worthwhile by my colleagues and friends.

My pride, however, does not prevent me from understanding that this doctorate has not been awarded to me in recognition of any earth-shattering "discovery" able to alter the evolution of the political sciences. Of course, it is also not a prize meant to encourage a promising young scholar to keep up the good work and keep searching for new and more important results. I suspect that it is, rather, a reward for a career in which—using the work of much more deserving scholars—I have tried to develop a way of looking at the governmental process that allows us to better understand it, and, as I will explain in a minute, to "do something" in order to improve the chances of getting the desired results in solving collective problems.

It is therefore only natural that I use this opportunity to summarize what I think I have learned during my career and what, in my opinion, we know and still do not know about public policymaking, that is, how we should proceed in trying to solve collective problems.

As some of the less-young members of this audience will certainly have already recognized, I borrowed the title of my speech from an old movie by Jean-Luc Godard in which he narrates 24 hours in the life of a not very lovable character: a middle class woman, an indifferent mother and part-time prostitute who is more interested in shopping than in anything else. The choice seems appropriate not because I assimilate my subject matter—public policy analysis—to the protagonist of Godard's movie but rather because of the way in which it was filmed. This manner of filming resembles the way I assembled the different elements that form the *deux ou trois choses* that I will present in this speech (which are actually are six or seven). The movie had no real script, in the traditional sense of the word, and even less did it have a narrative line with a well-defined plot. In an extreme version of the *Nouvelle Vague*, it was partly improvised by actors wearing earpieces who, in the middle of a scene, were forced to answer surprise questions posed by Godard himself. Furthermore, Jean-Luc Godard, enraged with the actress playing the leading role—Marina Vlady —for having refused his marriage proposal, was no longer on speaking terms with her. He communicated with her not in person but only through his collaborators or through the earpieces. If one add that *Deux ou trois choses* was filmed only in the morning because the afternoons were devoted to shooting a different movie in order to help a producer friend who had financial difficulties, one may be surprised that the movie was made at all.

Now, I feel that the way my generation of scholars—mostly European continental—developed their approach to the study of public policies resembles the apparently chaotic process that I have just described. Not having had any formal training in the discipline—actually, we were the very first to teach it in our universities—we assembled different elements coming not only from the

American tradition dating since Lasswell but also from public administration, organizational sociology, law, public and development economics, game theory, urban planning, etc. One must also remember that people of my age were students in 1968. If we were quickly forced to abandon our utopian hopes, we nevertheless maintained the idea that modern philosophers had to try to change the world—even if only in the pretty tame way that I will describe later on. It was this foundational multidisciplinarity, coupled with the imperative to produce what Lindblom called "usable knowledge," that shaped how we were thinking and doing research.

Of course, what I will present here is my personal view of the discipline. There are other perfectly legitimate ways of looking at public policies. And some of them are nowadays much more widespread than my own version. Let me give you an example. One of the central concepts of public policy analysis as I know it—the resources of the actors—is totally ignored by the vast majority of textbooks on public policy. But since the UAB has awarded to me this doctorate for my work, I think that I have the right and the duty to present my own approach without discussing the competition. The audience of this speech will certainly be able to form its own opinion without an explanation by me of the advantages of my *démarche*. I just hope that the necessary synthesis and the inevitably technical nature of some passages does not too much obscure the general message of my presentation.

The first thing that I know about public policy analysis is that it is about empirical research. At the end of the day it is nothing more and nothing less than a set of concepts that are useful for investigating the reality of the governmental process—and, more generally, the ways that collective problems are tackled, solutions are sought, programs are formulated, decided, and implemented, and outcomes are evaluated. It might look peculiar, or downward eccentric, to start my presentation in this way, but as a matter of fact this is exactly how it emerged for me and for many of my colleagues. We were deeply frustrated by our inability to reconcile the concepts we had learned during our education in law, public administration, or sociology with what we were observing when researching the workings of the political/administrative systems. We were looking for new ways of making sense of the processes we were interested in. With public policy analysis we found a new unit of analysis, the policy, an analytical space within which it was possible to arrange the different elements that we were gradually discovering to be relevant in such a way as to identify causal connections and give reasonable explanations of outcomes. This first point is less obvious that it seems: it basically means that public policy analysis is not about theory building through desk research, is not about designing complex taxonomies by introducing clever distinctions. It is rather the quest for analytical tools able to give the researcher the possibility to offer convincing explanations of what he or she is able to observe.

The second thing that I know about public policy analysis is that it is--and is meant to be—applied social and political research. If our explanations of what happened in a specific case are correct, it follows that we should be able to make predictions about what is likely to happen in a different case as a consequence of a policy decision and its implementation. This is a foundational element of our work: the idea that we are trying to improve the theory and practice of public policy making, by better understanding the reality of the policy process so that we can suggest ways of

overcoming the obstacles that often make collective problems intractable. Our work is supposed to be useful to policy makers, whether they are politicians, civil servants, or policy advocates. Our work should enable them to manage the policy process in a way that helps them attain their goals. From my own experience as policy advisor, I can confirm that the ability to use the conceptual framework that the literature has gradually developed gives the analyst an advantage over the other experts—usually lawyers and economists. This framework allows us to cope better with the complexity of the policy process in contemporary political and administrative systems.

I will return to this point toward the end of my speech. For the time being, though, let me simply state, using the words of Aaron Wildavsky, that the *art and craft of policy analysis* works essentially at the micro level. This is not a limitation. If all politics is local, as the Americans say, then all policy making is basically a micro process even if sometimes it has vast consequences that alter the real world in a very relevant way.

This brings me to the third thing that I know about public policy analysis. I want to stress that public policy making is about the interaction of actors with different values, different type of goals, different perceptions of the problem and of the context, different roles to play, different resources. Managing the process means trying to achieve a certain degree of coordination between the actors so as to avoid conflict as much as possible and to secure the engagement of those actors whose resources are needed to tackle the problems effectively. Sometimes, this coordination can be achieved through formal procedures. But in almost all cases, it happens through the informal means of adapting to unavoidable constraints and/or manipulating the elements of the game in such a way as to generate the desired behaviours. This centrality of the actors is—or should be—a fundamental element in public policy analysis. In the never-ending debate between structure and agency that characterizes historiography, public policy analysis is squarely on the side of agency.

Two well-known quotations can help clarify my point. The first comes from Alexis de Tocqueville and was used by Graham Allison in his seminal book *The Essence of Decision*:

I have come across men of letters who have written history books without taking part in public affairs, and politicians who have concerned themselves with producing events without thinking about them. I have observed that the first are always inclined to find general causes, while the second … are prone to imagine that everything is attributable to particular incidents, and that the wires they pull are the same as those that move the world. It is to be presumed that both are equally deceived.

In other words it is the agency of men within a given context that makes change possible. But this does not mean that it is easy. As Machiavelli wrote 500 years ago:

> *It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Thus it happens that whenever those*

who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly….

Policy innovation, so much more when it is radical, has few friends and a lot of enemies, says Machiavelli. He acutely emphasizes how, on the one hand, it is often difficult to mobilize the support of the potential beneficiaries; and how, on the other hand, the laws naturally reflect the previous balance of power, the one that is necessary to alter.

The specificity of the political decision, especially when it seeks to introduce major changes, lies in the fact that the actors have structurally different and often conflicting goals. Also, their preferences are endogenous to the process. What I mean is that more often than not actors choose their goals on the basis of the goals of other actors. Contrary to what organizational consultants seem to believe, conflict and lack of cooperation are not the pathologies of badly designed or badly managed organizational systems. They are the often intended but sometimes unintended consequences of what we call democratic political systems. Think of horizontal subsidiarity, intergovernmental relations, and the division of powers.

Of course, the actors and their resources and strategies are not the only elements of the policy game. At least since the work of Theodore Lowi, we have known that the content of the decision affects the process and its outcomes. The concentration of costs and benefits strongly influences the likelihood of conflict and more in general the willingness of the stakeholders to engage in the process, i.e., to become actors who spend their resources. Fritz Scharpf has attracted our attention to how the ways in which the actors interact—the so-called patterns of interaction—are full of consequences for the policy process. The ability to shift the game from open conflict to negotiation or collaboration (and vice versa) can improve the chances of policy success. The literature on networks has also shown us how the form and properties of the policy network are important elements of the policy process in both the decision-making phase and the implementation phase. And John Kingdom has shown us how specific moments in time, the windows of opportunity, play a major role in making reforms possible. In particular, a change in policy often requires some sort of discontinuity in the decisional context. As Leonard Cohen wrote in one of his few optimistic songs, "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in".

But consideration of these elements, relevant as they are, should not overshadow the lesson taught by Charles Lindblom: it is partisan mutual adjustment, the agreement between actors with different and sometimes divergent goals, not some ill-inspired revival of the rational model of policy making, that makes our democratic systems viable. Even when confronted with terrible contemporary problems— growing inequality, climate change, terrorism, immigration, to name a few —we must resist the temptation to believe that the solution lies in radically changing how we treat collective problems. To generate durable and sustainable policy reforms, what we need is the work of policy entrepreneurs able to shape the content of a proposal as well as the process of adoption and implementation in such a way as to gain the consensus of the necessary actors— those who control the resources that are necessary if the policy is to be successful.

This brings me to my fourth point. Public policy analysis is about understanding and managing complexity in the public sphere. During my—alas!—long career I have investigated a wide range of policies: intergovernmental relations, environmental protection, urban policies and planning, social and economic local development, and bureaucratic reform at all territorial levels. These policies have a couple of things in common. In the first place, they are complex, in the sense that many different types of actors with different goals play a major role. In the second place, the actors are usually organizations—sometimes in the private sphere, more often in the public sphere. In this specific field the necessary coordination between the actors has seldom been achieved through the usual mechanisms of hierarchy or market competition. The public organizations often had their own autonomous legitimacy, and the private actors were usually NGOs not interested in financial gain. The necessary strategies were therefore much more complex and diverse and implied the ability to substantially modify the policy process. It is when applied to just this type of situation that the conceptual framework of public policy analysis is most useful. A friend of mine once said that using public policy analysis to study routine decisions is as dumb as shopping for groceries with a Ferrari. But when complexity is a fundamental feature of policy, the conceptual framework prevents oversimplification when used for explanatory purposes and mainly when the task ahead is to design *effective* policies.

My next point is a little more complicated. It pertains to the importance of institutions. Of the three "I's" that are important in public policy literature—ideas, interests, and institutions—I have always privileged interests. I find it easier to explain and predict the behaviour of actors by assuming that this behaviour is purposive, in the sense that the goal or goals they pursue are derived from their perceived self-interest. Ideas of course are important insofar as they shape the values of actors, suggest causal links between problems and solutions and, at the macro level, constrain individual behaviours (the cognitive context).

The effects of institutions on policy are more difficult to pinpoint. Although this relation is probably the basic research question that I have addressed over the last fifty years, and although a lot of my advisory work has been about institutional design, or may be exactly for this reason, what I know about institutions is limited and rather disappointing. I know that institutions are important. I know that the same institutional setting in a different context can produce very different and sometimes opposite outcomes. I suspect that institutions should be adapted to the nature of the problems they are supposed to confront. I believe that institutionalization can have the double effect of creating new actors and of establishing the relevance of a specific policy problem—think, for example, of the creation of Departments for Environment in the 1970s and 1980s. I believe that actors can improve their chances of attaining their goals by using institutions. But this is really all I know about institutions with different levels of certainty. It is not much.

So when I hear a politician or a scholar state with great emphasis that this or that institutional reform will definitely produce great or terrible results, I always get a bit angry. I have spent my life studying the importance of institutions and I still do not have many certainties. How can they be so certain?

As I approach the end of my speech, I think that it is appropriate for someone who has been in the field for more than 40 years to offer some advice on the work that must be done in order to improve our knowledge and give better advice to policy makers.

By and large, we can say that the research strands of public policy analysis are three: the study of policy decisions, the study of policy implementation, and policy evaluation.

As far as the study of policy decisions is concerned—and in particular the study of policy innovation— we have made a lot of progress. We know, for instance, that in order to maximize the chances of success, we have to design the content of the policy, the instruments to use, and the process of adoption all together, as one integrated package. In light of these requirements, I am not terribly impressed by some of the literature on policy formulation and policy design. I feel that too often it is mostly descriptive or classificatory in nature and does not help either the analyst or the advisor to clarify the causal links between the behaviour of the actors and policy success. Nevertheless, we have accomplished a lot in the study of policy decisions and policy innovation. This does not mean that there is no more work to be done. The radical changes in political systems that we have been witnessing in recent years represent a major challenge to the established way of doing things; may be the lessons we have drawn from our research are no longer valid. But at least we know which elements we need to take into account in order to design effective strategies.

The same degree of success cannot be attributed to implementation research. This is a bit paradoxical, because it is exactly the possibility of studying the process of implementing complex policies through the new approach that has persuaded many scholars to abandon the strictures of the public administration tradition. It is difficult to overemphasize the impact that the pioneering studies of Aaron Wildavsky and Eugene Bardach had on my generation. But we must admit that today we do not know much more than we knew 40 years ago. In my opinion, this is an important field of research that should be explored using new conceptual tools.

And finally, there is evaluation research. This is a field in which public policy analysis competes with other disciplinary traditions. Therefore, it is important to define what is the added value, and eventually the aim, of using our conceptual framework for evaluative purposes. To be blunt, I would say that we policy analysts would be advised to leave the field of impact evaluation and the overall goal of increasing the accountability of policy makers to economists. I say so partly because they are better equipped to produce credible analyses with all the "scientific" trimmings that appeal to the media and politicians. And partly because in the complex policies that represent our elective object of research, the use of counterfactual analysis, randomized control trials, and all the paraphernalia of so-called evidence-based policy making are, to my mind, a dead end. This is because the relationships between research, policy, and practice are complex, multi-factoral, nonlinear, and highly context-specific. Policy analysts would fare much better if they stuck to their specialty, the analysis of actors' behaviour. This implies, in the first place, the necessity of evaluating the policy by asking whether it has modified the behaviour of the target group in the desired direction and by the desired amount. This means forgetting about final outcomes and

concentrating on how and why the policy had been successful in bringing about the desired behavioural changes. Methodologies and techniques like process tracing can help make our evaluations more rigorous. But if we are to learn what works and what does not work as we try to solve collective problems, it is important is to keep in mind the decisional space of the policy makers, what they realistically can do.

It is now time to close my presentation, and I will do so by bundling together all the remaining things that I know, or that I suspect.

In the first place, I know that we do not have a general theory of policy making and implementation, and I suspect that it is also impossible to build one. The reason lies not only in the contextual nature of the policy game but also, and more fundamentally, in the fact that our own work modifies the object of our study. Actors learn and adapt their behaviour not only in light of their own experience but also in light of the research that we do. Through education and training, the cognitive endowment of politicians, civil servants, representatives of interests groups, and, obviously, experts has been progressively modified and enriched. As a consequence, they have changed their strategies and preferred courses of actions, which makes our previously valid interpretations and advice less useful.

This is why, on the one hand, it is better to stick to the micro-foundations that are unlikely to change, and on the other to concentrate on middle range or partial theories that not only are linked to specific contexts but probably also have a limited shelf life. In my own work, I have concentrated on strategies for policy innovation and, more recently, on causal mechanisms explaining successful implementation. This work at least offers a sort of checklist that the policy designer can consult to quickly assess the feasibility of a policy.

This brings me to a second lesson that I am very convinced of. We learn very little by studying policy failures; the study of policy success is much more likely to generate new and useful knowledge. The focus on policy failures at its best only produces negative results, by pointing out elements that generate decisional blocks and/or implementation gaps. And even then the researcher cannot be sure that under different circumstances the same elements would not have totally different effects. In a simpler world, it was probably understandable, even if not totally justified, to optimistically assume that policies should work as intended. But today, after so many failures, we know that effective policy innovation is extremely difficult and good policies, at least in the sense that they achieved the desired results, are rather the exception than the rule. It stands to reason therefore that there it should be some specific feature explaining the good results. The ability to identify that feature has the potential to enrich our knowledge about the policy process. Apart from any other consideration, successful policies are easier to study—after all, the actors are eager to let the world know about their success. Successful policies are easier to study and they are much less depressing for the researcher.

One very last point. As I already said public policy analysis is about complexity and from this conviction I developed the following statement, which I jokingly call the first and only Dente law of policy making. It goes like this:

> In order to solve a complex policy problem, the policy making process must exhibit the same amount of complexity—at least in the sense that the number and diversity of actors involved should reflect the types of interests affected by the problem or by the solution

In other words, trying to solve complex policy problems by drastically simplifying them is stupid and dangerous. At a time when populist leaders base their message and gain popularity by promising miraculous solutions, it seems to me appropriate and indeed to be the duty of every student of politics to recall Jacob Burckhardt's famous warning against the terrible simplifiers, "these ruffians….who will one day descend upon our old Europe". Or, to borrow the words of a great friend and colleague who left us much too early, Luigi Bobbio: democracy does not live in Gordium. Emulating the example of Alexander can only end in failure.

This, I think, is the most general lesson that can be drawn from the practice of Public Policy Analysis. It teaches us humility and patience. It reminds us that all the solutions we are likely to find are only partial. And that the complexity of modern societies is not something we must be afraid of.

Thank 'you.