Understanding Policy Change as a Discursive Problem

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ABSTRACT In understanding policy change, classical approaches generally treat public policy as an object which can be studied directly and whose change can be measured objectively. In this article, we will show how this objectification process involves difficult to surmount epistemological problem because objectification, in the classical approaches, involves the researcher in the use of normative analytical techniques which usually distort the object, i.e. public policy, beyond recognition. To avoid such a distortion, it is proposed that analysts should focus not on an “objective” notion of change, but on a “subjective”, “discursive” one; on the way participants define policy and identify change in the construction and de-construction of “policy statements”. Not yet well developed and still relatively heterogeneous, discursive approaches to policy analysis attempt to reintegrate the subject, in this case the participant, into the heart of the analysis of policy dynamics. Their idea is not to separate the subject and the object, i.e. the actors and the policy, but to consider discourse as an ontological link between both. The question of change as such does not disappear but is recomposed. The production of a discourse of both change and its causes is considered as a fundamental activity for actors trying to influence other actors in order to transform public policies.

Introduction

How is it possible to grasp and analyze policy change? How can we define it and establish its limits? How can we connect it to a set of causes? And what are the kinds of hypotheses a researcher should formulate to better understand these phenomena? This double work of the researcher, both normative and causal, underscores the difficulties we face when we analyze change: we need both the definition of a frame to grasp change and structure analysis as well as to conduct the analysis itself.

Many researchers objectify public policy as a prelude to examining its dynamics. In other words, the researcher tries to eliminate the subjective appreciations formulated by the participants who directly define what public policy is in the process of making (and altering) it. This attempt at objectification implies that the researcher can have special access to the essence of policies and objects and directly establish whether or not they have changed. Objectification involves reducing

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policies to some category of “facts” – such as instruments, laws, ideas, or institutions – that can be observed independently from participants.

But observing these different elements is not enough to resolve the methodological issues involved in the assessment of policy change. Every year, new laws are voted in, devices are modified and budgets are amended. To get around this difficulty of permanent and plentiful change, researchers try to measure the extent of change and distinguish between “small” and “large” changes. Partly inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s works on scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1983), they are forced to mobilize a non-objective “normative” frame which allows them to discern qualitative variations in policy “objects”. In most approaches, “large” change becomes a rather rare and specific phenomenon. The normal flux of policy is termed “incremental” (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993) or “secondary” changes (Sabatier 1999) and its marginal nature is assumed to be limited by “path dependent” evolutionary processes (Pierson 2000). The rare works which identify and analyze more significant changes tend to confine them to particular moments or short periods of time (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

To this first normative element, a second one – not of the same nature – is added: identifying causal factors and relationships. Once again, this work is particularly difficult because it is not only a question of determining a temporal succession of phenomena but also showing that there is a connection between the two phases or states of a phenomenon. This connection, the only thing capable of transforming a coincidence into causality, leads automatically to a series of complex epistemological and methodological issues. This connection must establish a beginning point for change which serves as an anchorage point allowing us to distinguish alterations which precede and succeed it. The researcher then tries to isolate the endogenous causes of change (peculiar to the system and to public policies) from the exogenous ones (external events derived from “social”, “economical”, “environmental” or “political” systems). But the attempt to objectively identify these causes is always confronted with the contingent, non-reproducible and specific character of the policy event under observation. Overcoming these idiosyncrasies requires the use of generalities and abstractions, producing a de-contextualized theory of change which is intended to be applicable to other empirical situations, but which must be re-adjusted – sometimes significantly and sometimes marginally – to take into account the specifics of other case situations. As Merton (1951) argued in the case of “big sociological theories”, the problem with these, even when presented as middle range, is that most of the time they cannot be easily adapted to other empirical cases and oblige researchers to distort them to fit a new context or, worse, to permanently modify them each time a new case is examined.

This raises several interesting issues in the effort to answer the question “why haven’t policy researchers produced a viable theory of change”? The answer may well be that the very analytical devices they mobilize to identify and explain change deform the object they observe so that the absence or existence of change may simply be an optical effect caused by the method employed. In other words, the identification of change may involve such a twisting of reality that it ineluctably leads to a dead end as soon as researchers attempt to generalize their results.

Many researchers, in fact, appear to have recognized these issues and to have abandoned any effort at objectifying policies. Charles O. Jones and John Kingdon (Jones 1984, Kingdon 1995), for instance, have showed that the distinction should be
made between an “objective” situation and a “subjective” problem (as viewed by participants) and argued that only the latter is relevant for the analysis of policy dynamics. In the same way, in the sociology of science, Bruno Latour insisted on the analytical dead end involved in the effort to objectify the process of scientific production and focused his attention instead on the process of objectifying as it is carried out by the researchers themselves (Latour 1990).

A discursive approach to the question of policy change suggests a different route to analyzing and understanding policy dynamics, one which avoids the errors of objectification. Not yet well developed and still relatively heterogeneous, discursive approaches attempt to reintegrate the subject, in this case the participant, into the heart of the analysis of policy change by taking into account not only the way a problem is constituted, but also the way a policy is defined. The actor’s discourse is considered to be the indispensable link which allows policy change to be understood. The question of change itself does not disappear but is recomposed. The production of a discourse of change and its causes is considered as a fundamental activity for actors trying to influence other actors and transform public policies.

Public Policy Change: A Researcher’s or a Policy Maker’s Role to Define?

Whether it is a question of a public policy’s definition or the identification of its change, the researcher is faced with several essential problems. As set out above, the object (public policy) must be grasped in such a fashion that making change becomes “a problematic”, while hypotheses must also be developed which combine policy makers’ opportunities and constraints, and can be related to both exogenous phenomena and endogenous mechanisms.

The first problem which a researcher faces is the identification of change. Which analytical device can be used to locate the change? One can start with identifying the laws and the multiple reports of experts encountered in researching a policy area. Discourses can be read in reports and accounts – such as interviews and inquiries of policy makers, archival study and the gathering of press articles – but, in all cases, the researcher is likely to be confronted with a profusion of different views and elements. To avoid this profusion, reduce this complexity and determine which elements are the actual policy changes, some device is needed to enable the classification, ordering and treatment of all these disparate elements.

Aaron Wildavsky’s (1969) analysis of the evolution of the PPBS (“Planning, Programming and Budgeting System”) is, from this point of view, enlightening in many ways. His criticism of the application of PPBS shows both the inability of such devices to reduce public policies to simple indicators and the requirement for a more qualitative process if public policies are to be properly evaluated. Wildavsky shows that the logic behind the PPBS method involved a rationalization process aimed at reducing public policy into an instrumental tool: a goal with quantifiable solutions. According to a complex grading scheme, with between four and seven levels, each possible solution was connected to a goal which was then interwoven with another goal at a higher level and so on. Wildavsky showed how this device foundered when confronted by a profusion of information on potential costs and benefits which, through the reductions and the short cuts carried out by analysts in the effort to simplify them, transformed public policy into an object with no correspondence at all.
to reality. That is, public policy would seldom correspond to a unique goal and the analysis could not deal with the fact that the goals of the state are often multiple and contradictory. It was thus not possible to treat, on a hierarchical basis, goals as varied as the improvement of education and national defence or the reduction of poverty. In addition, he showed that due to the interdependence between policy ends and means any process based on their strict separation would fail. Finally, he also insisted that there are policy alternatives which are not measurable and depend on different political orientations for their interpretation and resolution. To this first series of criticisms on the reductionism of PPBS, Wildavsky added a second set of concerns which emerged from the fact that the participants of the public policy itself “make” policy and give it meaning. They do so in a process of discursive struggle which ultimately ensures that policy making is an exercise in power and not pure rationality.

Other public policy analysts were similarly confronted with this difficulty in defining the nature of a public policy and of public policy making, a normative prerequisite essential to the identification and analysis of policy change. Charles O. Jones (1984), for example, considered that the definition of a public policy substance is not at the heart of the analyst’s work, but is the indispensable means to understand the processes which are (“Many political scientists (including myself) are more interested in process than substance. For them, substance (e.g. inflation and actions to curb it) is merely a way to study process. . . .Defining the term policy is a first order of business”). Jones ultimately settles on a definition by Eulau and Prewitt (1973): “Policy is defined as a ‘standing decision’ characterized by behavioral consistency and repetitiveness”. Thus to the idea of aggregation, he adds the notion of consistency and of stability in time. This idea is important because it is part of the change problematic itself.

However, public policy is an agglomerate of goals, laws, programmes, decisions, effects, problems, and other elements. It is therefore composed of many components of a different nature. Defining public policy thus appears as a process of establishing connections and equivalences between and among these different elements. As Heclo (1972) explains, public policy is neither a particular decision nor a “general social movement” but is halfway in between and the aim of analysis is to define its limits or frontiers.

In fact, since public policy is characterized by the (relative) stability of its different constitutive elements, change becomes an interesting process to observe and studying it allows us a better understanding of workings and effects of policy-making processes. Understanding policy change means, however, that the researcher must define a public policy as one already stabilized. That is, every time a new decision is taken, the researcher has to determine if the latter reinforces the stability of public policy or, on the contrary, breaks with it. Setting up of a new instrument, the modification of others already in use or the elaboration of a new goal can all be considered policy change only against the backdrop of some pre-existing instrument or goal. Which particular set of instruments and goals is chosen to represent the policy change “baseline”, therefore, is of critical importance in the analysis of policy change, but is a very difficult assessment to make.

To illustrate this difficulty, the example of the dynamics of housing policy in France can be used (Zittoun 2000). Many researchers who studied this policy area asked themselves this question: did a 1977 law constitute a turning point in French
housing policy? For some, like Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Christin 1990), French housing policy underwent a very major change at the time, a real turning point described as “neo-liberal”. This law redefined the main instruments used in housing policy and introduced new ones. The analysis of the instruments, their newness, and their changed characteristics made it possible for the researcher to say that the 1977 law constituted a change compared to the policy elements previously in place and those which were to be voted afterwards. For Bruno Lefebvre and Michel Mouillard (2000), however, this law did not change much and, in their view, the new instruments did not transform the situation but rather fit in the wake of another great turning point which they situated as occurring ten years before. Yet another author (Edou 1996) explained that although some instruments changed, housing policy itself did not really change as measured by the stability of budgetary allocations to this area over the previous 30 years.

Each of these authors, by proposing the identification of a period of change, tries to alter the understanding and direction of public action. They include it within a broader framework and connect it to a larger problematic. This framework is what answers the question: how to determine that a policy has indeed changed? And having different frameworks is what makes it possible for researchers to disagree on whether a reform such as that involved in the 1977 French housing initiative is “a major” or “minor” one.

To analyze a public policy or prove the existence of its change in this way, the researcher produces specific knowledge of the object of investigation which is distanced from that produced by the actors themselves. However, just as with the PPBS analysts cited above, the researcher is faced with a profusion of information and must apply a set of rules or a normative frame which distinguish between types or modes of change. Peter Hall (1993), for example, differentiates third order “major” changes from more “minor” first and second order ones.

Paul A. Sabatier similarly considers that policy change can only be understood through the development of normative devices internal to the subsystem which makes it. He therefore writes:

Thus, it is the topic and the scope of policy change that determine whether it is major or minor. Linking change to scope also makes it clear that the same change may be minor for one subsystem and major for a subsystem nested within. For example, changing automotive emission standards may be “major” for the automotive pollution control subsystem but relatively minor (i.e., dealing with secondary aspects) for the larger air control subsystem. The ACF thus provide a clear reference point for determining the magnitude of change. (Sabatier 1999: 147)

Sabatier proposes identifying the “deep core” and the “policy core” found in each subsystem. The identification of each “deep core” and its dissociation from the “policy core” and “secondary aspects”, however, involves the same kind of methodological problems identified by Wildavsky in the case of the PPBS. That is, how do we connect values to instruments? How can we differentiate the “secondary aspects” from the “core”? And what makes it possible to say that a policy is connected to one value rather than another, to such and such a goal and not to another (as well)?

Again this can be illustrated by looking at the case of French housing policy reforms. The direct and “objective” observation of the housing policy does not help
us to see it any more clearly. Some instruments frequently change titles and the
criteria for such changes often involve subtle but basically meaningless nuances. And
the policy objectives are found nowhere else than in the statements or the writings of
the participants so their interpretation cannot be separated from their authors. Of
course, the researcher can directly read the texts of laws, analyze statistical figures,
understand the reports and documents put forward, but each time this concerns only
the multiple “tracks” left by the actors. In other words, it is impossible to make a
simple dissociation between facts and interpretations because of the conditions under
which these “facts” are constructed.

For example, Paul Sabatier (1999) relegates the budgetary allocations to the
second aspects. But if we take, once more, our example of French housing policy,
we see that every year the government votes on the quantity of social housing which
should be built in the country. If this quantity goes down from 120,000 to 1,000,
everyone will consider that it is a major change. If this level of decrease is seen as a
major change, however, what then is the precise moment which would constitute the
transition from major to minor? 100,000? 80,000? Would the transformation of a
construction subsidy into an equivalent tax reduction be considered an important or
a secondary change? In France, such a transformation was voted on in 1995 and was
defended by the government as a minor change whereas the opposition considered it
a major one. Is it possible for the researcher to make a choice between these two
interpretations? Is it not more interesting for him to understand how these
interpretations serve the participants as a power?

The observation of instruments does not help us to determine a method which
would allow us to clearly define the frontier between change and stability. Like other
ttempts to objectify policy measures, these generally lead to the realization that
collected data goes through the participants’ filter and the normative and subjective
biases of the investigator. Just as are problems, public policies are subjective
constructions and no objectifying logic can grasp them without simplifying, reducing
and twisting their reality.

Investigating Policy Change over Time

If the observation of one decision at a given moment does not allow us to objectively
define the existence of change, would the observation of many successive decisions?
This is what Charles Jones suggested in the definition quoted above (as did Paul
Sabatier, who urged the examination of public policy over a period of a decade or
more). Can the “hard core” become visible by observing a longer period of policy
making?

Let us go back, once again, to our example. Many of the authors quoted
previously have tried to show how the succession of measures passed in the 1980s
and 1990s came to confirm the existence of a new “hard core” different from the one
present in the 1960s. The identification of these two distinct “hard cores” allows
them to confirm their hypothesis that a change occurred in the 1970s. Once again,
this solution, a priori attractive, poses two fundamental problems. The first problem
is to know what defines the “hard core”, allowing new measures to be linked to it. In
this case, our authors suggest a “neo-liberal” paradigm exists. However, once again,
whether an instrument should be considered neo-liberal, or not, is far from obvious.
Looking more closely, there are many interpretations of the same instrument that
can be provided. Allowances to individuals, for example, is a tool considered by some to be neo-liberal and by others to be interventionist. It cannot be clearly classified as neo-liberal or interventionist without leaning on the side of some actors against the others. Moreover, in France, the term “neo-liberal” has always been considered politically problematic and has never been used by the actors themselves.

The second problem is one of incoherence in measures. During 20 years, housing policy has been subjected to many recovery plans and also to periods of restriction. How can this history of relative incoherence in the use of tools and instruments be properly aggregated into a pattern of change? Do we have to give less “weight” to some measures than others? If, as March and Simon (1969) explain, decision goals are generally unclear, unstable and contradictory, how can an aggregation of decisions become stable, clear and coherent?

Through this example, we can see that much of the identification work behind analyses of policy change involves structuring the reality observed by the researcher; pulling together some measures and minimizing others in the construction of reasonably coherent policy histories. While seeking to identify change, the first consequence for the researcher is the simplification of the reality observed. The second consequence is to undermine the work of participants when, for example, the analysis produced by the participant claims a real change has occurred whereas the researcher has decided that it is not the case (and vice versa). Finally, the third consequence concerns the identification of the causes. Identifying only that a change has taken place in 1965 or in 1977 (to refer to the example of housing) does not provide an adequate appreciation of the real causes of change.

**Defining Change to Identify Causal Variables**

The devices which make it possible to identify change give rise to many problems for researchers. With respect to the identification of key causal factors lying behind policy change, scholars have traditionally explored two ways of tackling this question.

Authors like David Easton (1965), James Anderson (1975) and Charles O. Jones (1984) connect together two processes through the elaboration of a causal link: the emergence of a new problem and the building of a new action. The analysis is thus located temporally before the new action and the problem is seen as generating it according to more or less complex mechanisms, depending on the author and the case examined.

A second approach considers problems and solutions to be independent “streams” or “stews” which are worked out in a simultaneous way by policy actors. According to Cohen et al. (1072) or John Kingdon (1995), each stream has its own logic and its own specific manner of operation, thus making change the fortuitous result of their encounters. The “stages heuristic approach” to policy making, itself the object of so many criticisms, similarly leads to this more complex understanding of public policy. By separating the different stages of public policy, these approaches show policy is not the result of a single decision but, on the contrary, can be understood through the manner in which agenda setting or evaluation occurs, as much as through formulation, decision or implementation.

These works tend, on the one hand, to be based on the analysis of the participants’ various discourses while, on the other, considering change as permanent and
structural because no problem can remain on an agenda forever. David Easton (1965), for example, underscores the way policy participants formulate “requirements” for successful problem definition and resolution. For this reason, he suggests analysts stop talking about the “interests” of the participants since the concept of “interest” imposes the researchers’ ideas about policy actors’ motivations on them, obscuring what they are actually saying and doing. Charles Jones (1984), similarly, focuses on the terms which participants use in discussing a problem. In other words, the researchers who concentrate on this stage are more interested in the way participants themselves define the problems.

As for the stage of formulation of solutions, putting a new problem on the agenda could cause a transformation of the existing public policy. This stage involves experts and bureaucratic participants trying to transform a problem so that new actions can solve it. Researchers thus work more on revealing the issues and practices which are behind theses discourses (Sabatier 1999) but must avoid objectifying the process in too rationalistic or lack-step a mode.

Cohen et al. (1972), for example, claim decisions correspond to a changing combination of the problems, the solutions and the decision makers. By considering each occasion of choice as a garbage can in which the various kinds of problems and solutions are thrown at that moment by the participants along with their appearances, they assume the independence of each of these three elements (problems, solutions, decision makers) as well as the contingent character of their encounter (related to the “occasions of choice”). The chaining which connects them loses its logical and “staged” character to become the result of particular processes of interrogation.

This form of permanent policy-making “bricolage” was already present in the first writings of March and Simon (1969), who insisted on the fact that the goals given to the participants are often unstable, change progressively, and can only be understood by a contingent approach freed from any normative character. We also find this idea of the participants’ permanent “do-it-yourself” “muddling-through” in Lindblom’s works (Lindblom 1958). Both Simon (1945) and Lindblom insist on the impossibility for the participants grasping the full totality of a more and more complex reality, composed of problems without solutions, incomplete information and fragmented goals. To this particularly uncomfortable situation for the researcher, we can add Lindblom’s idea that decisions are more the product of a compromise between the involved participants or of their contingent satisfaction rather than the result of any more purely rational understanding and analysis.

For both approaches to policy causation, then, the comprehension of decisions can be made only in a contingent way according to the participants’ subjective preferences and not by ex post facto rationalizations of those preferences made by the researcher. This establishes an essential borderline between rational and other approaches to policy analysis. Understanding the way in which the participants think becomes a key factor in understanding and analyzing policy causes.

At this point, however, another fundamental question arises: how to connect the participants’ actions to the essence of what they produce, public policies. In other words, the question is not only how do the participants decide what to do but also what do they decide and how does the essence of their decisions influence the decision process? For instance, when Lindblom proposes his model of “muddling through”, he produces a normative conclusion that the results of such processes, the
policy, tends to change only in a “step by step” or “incremental” fashion. In the same way, Pierson encloses the result inside “a path dependency” and Paul Sabatier switches from an analysis of confrontations inside the participants’ coalitions to the way in which these coalitions modify the “secondary aspects” of policy.

Now, how can we reconcile an analysis which insists upon the critical role played by the participants’ subjectivity in policy making with the objectifying identification of the object and the nature of policy change? It is at this moment that researchers generally turn to two major ideas. The first consists in connecting participants together, gathering them into a relatively homogenous and dominant group such as a “subsystem”, “community, “advocacy coalition” or “network”. The second idea consists in imposing on this group a collective framework which is essential for them and reduces the significance of their individual “action” to minor policy changes.

In the network concept, for example, there is generally only one group of participants. In Marsh and Rhodes’ (1992) work, to take a particular case, a complex game of exchange of resources allows for only one single issue network or policy community for each public policy. Sabatier is one of the rare researchers to propose a priori a more pluralist view of the participants. Sabatier prefers the term “coalition” to “network” in order to underline the existence of more than one alternative network. However, when we read him attentively, we realize that there is still always one dominant coalition inside each policy subsystem.

With subsystem models of policy dynamics, change can be understood as occurring through one or more of three basic processes: the participants’ learning and changing their behaviour and discourses; the change of the dominant coalition in a subsystem; or the existence of policy dynamics external to the subsystem. In the first process, learning is in itself the result of two possible causes: the arrival of an unexpected exogenous event, or “feedback” able to reveal the need for an adjustment in policy. Learning is regarded as producing essentially minor changes. As for the second case, the change of a dominating network is usually linked to a period of “crisis” and is generally caused by other external changes (electoral, generation change, new leadership, etc.). In the third case, there is a specific effect of structural or institutionalized environments on individual cognition and subsystem behaviour. So, policy change is a consequence of an environment change which has an effect on internal system parameters.

This range of causal processes takes us back, in a certain way, to a Kuhnian vision of how changes occur in the production of knowledge (Kuhn 1983). On the one hand, we discover stable periods where the changes are marginal and where an existing paradigm dominates. Changes result essentially from the efforts made by participants to reduce incoherence in an existing paradigm, that is to say of the participants’ learning which difficulties – “anomalies” – are involved in the logical or practical application of this paradigm. And, on the other hand, we find periods of paradigmatic “crisis” which are characterized by an unstable transitional stage leading to the replacement of one paradigm by another.

The Elements of a Discursive Approach to Policy Dynamics

Several problems emerge in this paradigmatic-subsystem account of policy causation. First, the link which connects alterations in participants’ behaviour to
the content of change in public policies remains relatively vague. This problem is the direct consequence of the fact that the researcher cannot really prove the existence of causality in observing a correlation between the two events. Second, the idea of paradigmatic/subsystem hegemony ignores the possibility raised by Sabatier that subsystems are composed of multiple coalitions grappling for supremacy.

To refer to the comment made by Karl Popper to Thomas Kuhn,

I claim that Kuhn is wrong from the point of view of the history of science. One of his historically proved theses is that from the moment when a science becomes ripe, it comprises nothing but one mainstream. It is simply wrong. The history of sciences shows that the theory of the matter . . . always comprised two trends . . . and that these two theories did not only fight one another but also enriched each other. (Lorenz and Popper 1995: 71)

In other words, the idea that coalitions clash permanently and that public policy is the unstable result of the negotiation between battles of wills and learning is not really considered in the paradigmatic stability model. A pluralist approach, however, does connect a participants’ subjective analysis to the analysis of different forms of actions.

And thirdly, the model poses the problem of defining and accurately characterizing paradigm and subsystem altering external events, and measuring their effect. Indeed, why do some events have an effect while others do not? The idea of the existence of institutional or cognitive environments which bind participants is similarly problematic. Can the researcher grasp them directly to show how their alteration is a cause of policy change? Works on the development of “neo-liberalism” in Europe, for example often focus on the notion of the “weight of ideas”. Bruno Jobert’s (1994) work is enlightening in this regard. It shows that “neo-liberalism” is not imposed in the same way in the different European countries and how its significance and its variations are different in terms of the public policies supposedly based upon it. An instrument considered in one country as “neo-liberal” can be considered differently in another. Such a remark does not mean that there is no circulation of ideas or of frameworks which are linked to the actors but, once again, highlights the difficulties encountered by the researcher since they are not easy to discern.

If today researchers find it hard to stabilize their theory of change, it is not, in my opinion, because they did not find “the right formula” but rather because they seek to reconcile what cannot be reconciled. Indeed, understanding the actors subjectively while objectively grasping the nature of public policies may be impossible. It is not a question here of claiming that policy change does not exist. It is rather a question of considering all the difficulties involved, a priori, in the analysis of policy change and the challenges this poses to the erstwhile analyst of policy dynamics.

From this point of view, a discursive approach provides an interesting alternative methodology to the standard “positivist” view of policy change. Rather than interrogating the existence and the causes of policy change with all its attendant epistemological difficulties, we can analyze actors’ production of policy change discourses as an essential element required to install a new public action.

For the moment, these discursive approaches are heterogeneous and uncertain but hold out promise in the study of policy dynamics. Authors such as Peirce (1878),
Dewey (1927), Wittgenstein (2006), Habermas (1999), Foucault (1966, 1971), Barthes (1985), Latour (1990, 2005, 2006), Callon (1989), Edelman (1988), Fischer (2003), and Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) have worked on the significance of language and discourse from the perspective of different disciplines. While traditional philosophies are based on the idea that there is a separation between object and subject, proposal and fact, an objective world and a world that represents itself by the language of the subject, pragmatic philosophies try to underline their inseparable character. In these approaches, according to Habermas, no knowledge of the world is possible without two conditions: the language and the inter-subjective agreement which constitutes its elements. In other words, the question is not to know if the object exists independently from the subject which states it, but rather to take into account that it is impossible to dissociate this object from the linguistic process in which it fits.

In this approach to policy analysis, a policy discourse is not associated with a restricted definition (official speeches) but in the broadest sense. A discourse thus includes the whole of the words and the sentences used by all the relevant policy actors in multiple places and moments throughout the policy process. In a new law-making process, for example, it is relatively simple to understand that the discourse is composed of the multitude of discussions taking place at the same time in the legislative process. These discussions are not only in the media but also take place in many meetings with ministers concerned, Parliaments and/or the multiple organizations in the country affected by the proposal. Discourses are controlled by procedures, as Michel Foucault observed: “I suppose that in any society the discourse production is at the same time controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures which role is to entreat its powers and dangers, control its random event, dodge its heavy, frightening materiality” (Foucault 1971: 10).

Rather than objectifying public policies, the discursive approaches are interested mainly in the way in which actors speak about policies. The developed arguments, the definition of the problems, the formulation of the solutions or the identification of the consequences are regarded as key question in discourse analysis. As Murray Edelman (1988) explains, these new approaches clarify the “performative properties of the language . . . [and] see the texts as fields of force working the subjects as much as they are worked by them” (21). Three of these language performative properties are particularly interesting for us here.

First of all, the discourse makes it possible to connect the actors to the policies. Policy analysis, as we have shown above, faces difficulties in reconciling the empirical work of understanding the actors’ behaviour and the subsequent outcomes of policy activity. Discourse analysis is interested in the way in which the actors put public policies into words, and thus we can propose a new kind of link. In the case of a new law, for example, the researcher does not need to wonder if this law represents a policy change but can shift his analysis in order to understand how the actors produce a discourse about this question and whether or not this has changed.

In the second place, the discourse also makes it possible see whether or not, and how, actors come to agreements on policy actions. This agreement function constitutes an essential pillar of the discourse (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). As we have shown, much of the policy analysis literature has focused on networks or coalitions. But this literature remains relatively vague on the nature of the links between the actors operating in these subsystems. For the discursive approach, this
link exists as actors go through the process of building up a common discourse around an action to be invoked. To evoke this common discourse, we can use terms such as a “policy statement” and a “discursive coalition” to identify the (re)grouping of actors and discourses which occurs in the policy process.

The third characteristic of a discourse is that it is an instrument of conflict. In other words, there often exist, in public policies, at least two distinct statements in competition. The majority of the discursive approaches, as such, generally fit into a pluralist mode. However, this conflict plays a particular role, on the one hand to consolidate the link of the actors between each other inside the coalitions, and on the other in the stabilization process involved in the generation of a policy statement itself. It is in the discursive confrontation that policy arguments are stabilized (or disappear), the solutions defined, the problems clarified and the links between the actors consolidated. In other words, confrontation plays an essential part in the development of policy action. The “policy statement” is thus a key element of a discursive analysis of policy change. Inside this statement, a desired action becomes a problem solution, a vector of policy change and an engine for legitimating an organization or paradigm.

Herbert Simon (1945) had already worked on such a concept by suggesting that a decision was connected to a statement, selected among options, chaining means and ends and values and facts together to the point where they become indistinguishable. He thus underlined:

the mixed character of ethical statements. They should clearly arise from the preceding illustrations that the majority of the ethical propositions comprise factual elements. Most of the requirements not being ends in themselves but intermediate goals, the question of their adequacy for ultimate purposes which they aim at remains a factual question. It is completely useless here to wonder if it is ever possible to unfold the chain of execution in order to isolate a “pure” value, an end which is only desired for its own sake. (50)

Simon concluded that the only way to distinguish a means from an end was not to objectify it but to observe its positioning in the “enchainment” of a policy statement.

Michel Foucault (1966) also suggested a similar method. For him, it is the capacity of the individuals to grasp reality, put it in order and into words and connect it to action which makes a participant’s work original. Rather than considering that these connections are per se visible, readable, obvious, and even rationally structured, however, Foucault stressed the need to investigate the way in which individuals make statements in specific places and the way they spread ideas. Like these authors, adherents of discourse analysis use the policy statement as “evidence” which gathers together policy elements in a way that no researcher’s objectified rationality could.

The policy statement, however, should not be mistaken for a “policy core” or a “paradigm”. Unlike a paradigm, it is not a representation of policy which might be produced by the participants or as a result of the work of a researcher (Jobert and Muller 1987). As Foucault explained, it is a question of being interested not in “representations which could be present behind discourses but discourses as a series of distinct and regular events” (Foucault 1971: 61). The policy statement is thus not...
“a representation of the problem, its consequences and possible solutions to solve it” (Muller 2004: 371), but a pragmatic and discursive construction (Roe 1994, Fischer 2003) which associates (Latour 2006) problems, solutions, devices, arguments, publics and participants (Deleuze 1986). In other words, to go back to John Dewey’s (1927) arguments, participants experience this statement and make it “come to life”, transform it or stabilize it. Its stability depends then on the number of speakers who use it or produce a different one.

Let us go back now to our example of housing policy. As we have seen, at the beginning of the 1970s, some actors proposed to establish allowances to persons. During the first years, all the work of these actors consisted in arguing that this instrument was a solution to the housing problem and a vector of the housing policy change. To do so, they used a study of PPBS type, i.e. an analysis comparing the efficiency of the allowance to the builder vs an allowance to person. The first tool makes it possible to help public organizations build accommodation for individuals below a certain income ceiling. The second gives financial assistance directly to the individual to pay rent, an assistance level calculated on the base of the income. The first tool is the one which constitutes the essence of the housing policy in France. Econometricians and others urging reform focused on producing a policy statement connecting the second instrument to the housing problem and explaining how its adoption would constitute an important and necessary housing policy change.

John Kingdon (1995) has already suggested that much policy making consists of actors with solutions to defend, who try to find problems to which to couple them. We would suggest that this linking inside a policy statement is not only a question of opportunity, as Kingdon suggests, but requires a specific type of discursive activity on the part of the actors in order to tightly join together the problem and their preferred solution. This effort generally requires not only the production of arguments supporting the solution but also the reformulation of the problem itself and an adjustment of the solutions based on this reformulation.

In the French housing policy case, this occurred in an important report, in which experts made a criticism of the existing housing policy by reformulating the nature of the problem it was expected to address. They argued that the allowance to builders produces injustices by selecting tenants only at the moment of admission (their income usually increases once they are in a stable housing situation), and produces segregation by obliging the poor to find accommodation in some buildings and not others. They thus defined a new public issue as “the poor who must benefit from the assistance and must be able to choose their housing” (Zittoun 2001: 686). They connected it to a new instrument, the assistance to the person, and new interlocutors, private rental companies. Secondly, the experts suggest the suppression of the builders’ allowance and its replacement by an allowance to the person constitute a reform of great importance.

A policy statement hence was structured in the following way: “the housing problem is related to the difficulty of the poorest to find accommodation. The most efficient formula to help them find accommodation and not to be in ghettos is to assist them according to their income. Such assistance will make it possible for these individuals to benefit from the housing market” (Zittoun 2001: 686). Obviously, we can look for values, “beliefs”, paradigms to this thought which combines belief in the virtues of the market and redistributive policy, criticism of the assistance given to those who do not need it and the rejection the ghettos.
These issues, however, are structured within the interaction of debates over the policy. Hence it is important to note that when a law was passed in 1977 influenced by this report it was more complex than the report itself. Rather than replacing the builders’ allowance with an allowance to the person, the law combined both tools. To understand why this combination occurred, we must observe a second policy statement developed by other actors. These actors acted in defence of the builders’ allowance and suggested a new builders’ allowance was required in order to build accommodation “of quality”. To avoid housing the poor only, they proposed to open this new allowance to 80% of French workers. To compensate for the higher rents that would result from this new process, they suggested setting up an allowance to the poorest people. So, the allowance is exclusively reserved for people who obtain a new social housing.

It is here, initially and above all, that a discursive analysis of policy statements bears fruit. It has the capacity to make sense of the transformation of a new instrument into a problem solution and understand how it is combined with other housing policy instruments to produce a new meaning for policy. This discursive production of sense making has a performative use; it facilitates agreement among the actors.

This second property of the discourse is in the origin of the formation of the coalitions. First of all, let us recall the importance of the policy networks in the policy analysis. As Marsh and Rhodes (1992) explained, the development of the network concept underlined that the focus should not be put on the organizations but on the relations which maintain the actors from various structures together within the same policy sector. Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky (1974) showed thus how a Ministry of Finance resembled a small village where all actors are and remain in contact. However, one of the important problems of these networks analyses is, as Rhodes and Marsh (1992) noted, the link which must be made between network and public policy. Thus, they wonder how and in what sense network activities promote or constrain policy change.

Discursive approaches try to resolve this problem by underlining the importance of the discourse in the construction of the actors’ agreement. Thus, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot (1991), for example, are interested in the importance of the justification processes in the construction of the agreement between the actors. According to them, actors need to justify their positions if they want to co-ordinate their actions. To justify a policy position is then a discursive act which requires that the actors eventually come to an agreement even when their starting positions can be quite distant.6

Without going further into the details of their approaches, we would suggest that the agreement between the actors necessarily goes through the establishment of a minimal common policy statement. It is in the process of circulation and refinement of such a statement that the statement is consolidated or, on the contrary, decays. In other words, the link between the coalition and the statement is consubstantial and the existence of a coalition can be noted only in the capacity of the actors to agree to the same policy statement. On the other hand, the statement can only exist under the condition that actors carry it. Stabilization of the statement and the formation of a “discursive” coalition are thus two closely dependent processes.

Let us consider again the example of the housing policy. At the beginning, the idea to set up a new allowance to the person was proposed and supported only by some
actors located in the Ministry of the Economy and Finance. Using a new form of expertise inspired by the PPBS, they published their statement and defended their new “policy” alternative in various fora such as a commission in charge of producing a report on housing policy. Each time, they were marginalized by alternative discourses until the election of a new president of the Republic allowed them to find new allies in Cabinet. A commission set up in 1975 proved to be the occasion for them to popularize their statement. Between the two periods and the two commissions, the statement became more complex, better integrated with existing housing policy and consolidated. The robustness of the statement was built symmetrically with the constitution of an actors’ coalition which carried it forward. The statement was thus spread to as many places as occupied by the members of this coalition. The success of the statement and the force of the coalition consequently become inseparable.

Analyzing a policy statement makes it possible to observe the structuring of the conflicts and to apprehend the questions of power within policy subsystems and political systems. Some discursive approaches deny the question of the capacity and the asymmetry of the relations between actors, however other approaches attribute more importance to power and conflict. This is true of Foucault (1971), for whom “the discourse does not simply represent the fights or the systems of domination but what the fight is for, with what it is led, the power which one seeks to seize” (12). By saying that, Foucault saw the discourse not as a reflection or consequence of a structure of domination but as constituting it. An order, a command, an influence always requires a vehicle. From this point of view, discursive approaches regard power not as an attribute but as a relation (Dahl 1956). However, this relation requires words to be expressed. Furthermore, Foucault suggests that the words represent power to the point that they also become the objective of the fight. Of course, it is easy to think of the importance of prohibited words in totalitarian systems, but Foucault more generally shows, just as for madness and sexuality, the place of the prohibited in various other kinds of societies is also critical.7

Following these reflections, we can say that the policy statement is important on at least two levels. First of all, it takes part in legitimating who has to carry out an action. The second type of power is more individual. It comes from the speaking actors themselves. By mobilizing a statement, the individuals can become actors in a process in progress. In the various cases which we evoked, the individual who deploys a statement at a meeting is not a simple vehicle for its expression. Rather, the actor becomes an essential element in its articulation. It is not a question to look at the interest a priori as a rationalized and objectified form but to observe it inside the interaction between the statement and the speaker (Callon 1986, Edelman 1991). The presence of power within public policy discourses makes it possible to better understand the way in which a statement structures policy conflicts. A statement which proposes a new action is indeed often carrying new ratios of power. In that, the stabilization process which it requires is not made without difficulty. Whether through the production of destabilizing arguments and/or a competing statement, it is rare that a proposal for new actions does not encounter resistance or conflict.

Conflict is thus a fundamental element in the analysis of policy change as a discursive activity. It is probably even the centre of the political question in the
policy processes. The discourse, through its three performative characteristics, is and remains to be studied like the act which produces the actions and the meaning they are given. In the discursive approach, the study of change focuses on the way in which actors work out a new policy statement and construct a coalition around it. Methodologically speaking, the researcher must follow the process of policy statement formation through the places and the moments in which they are made, through the actors who deploy it and try to stabilize it against opposition.

As Foucault (1971) argued, the stabilization of a statement is a rare, difficult and expensive process. It requires an actor to convince some actors of its appropriateness and to clash with others who disagree. It must twist the space of meaning and the actors’ game in which it is involved. It is confronted with other existing and institutionalized statements which reduce the space for new possible actions. It is not possible then to reason in terms of “causality” but to observe the efforts which the actors produce to build these new associations (Latour 2006).

Conclusion: From Public Policy Change to the Change of Policy Statement

To sum up, the idea suggested here is thus not to continue trying to identify objective policy change and its causal factors, as many analysts of policy dynamics have done. The aim is rather to observe how the participants produce this identification, define the problems and transform instruments into solutions.

As Max Weber suggested, the stake of the analysis is not to define values but to be interested in the way in which participants mobilize them. In other words, in discursive analysis it is a question of “skirting” the imperceptible character of public policy by leaving off all attempts to work on its substance and turn instead towards the participants and the way in which they try to grasp and manipulate policy “reality”. Therefore, rather than considering the connection between a problem and solution as the result of either a sequential rationality, chance or “opportunities” (Kingdon 1995), we can say that it is a consequence of the specific work of these participants to experiment and/or maintain it. Rather than considering the content of the participant’s discourses and their strategy separately, it is better to consider the capacity of the participants to impose a content. Rather than regarding the interests on one side and the ideas on the other, it is a question of understanding how participants experiment with the definition of interests and the ideas that they profess. Rather than identifying, on one side, the networks and on the other their beliefs, we would like to consider that it is during the experimentation with the connections between belief, problem and public policy that the contingent coalitions are formed which ultimately determine policy content.

Thus the question of understanding policy change as a discursive problem moves us towards another problematic which consists of understanding how policy statements and the participants’ coalitions that form them are changed and transformed. How do they give form to the “Public and its problems”? How do they suggest a new alliance between a problem and a solution? How do they give substance to an institution, make it live or survive? Such a line of questioning and the principles of discursive inquiry suggested here provide an opportunity for researchers to branch out towards new fields of research into policy dynamics (Zittoun 2007).
Notes

1. “Most decisions concerning administrative rules, budgetary allocations, disposition of case, statutory interpretation and even statutory revision” are “secondary aspects” (Sabatier 1999: 122).
2. Why is a European directive, for example, regarded as a constraint in some countries but not others? In a recent work on road noise cartography in Europe, we show for example that the European directive imposing this map on the large cities was sometimes considered as an essential external pressure and was sometimes not taken into account at all. Each time, it emerged that the force of the constraint depended on the actors’ capacity to state it and defend it.
3. In his work *Truth and Justification*, Jürgen Habermas (1999) explains the questioning around which this linguistic turn was organized. It particularly concerns the relation between the subject and the object as a starting point. Bruno Latour (1999) recalls that this process is nothing else but breaking the myth of the Platonic cavern separating the objective, lighting truth on one side and the subjective, darkening, social relations on the other. This myth rests on the figure of “Who knows”, the scientist, the only one able to make this to and fro trip between these two worlds (objective knowledge and subjective darkness). Latour denounces this figure of the scientist separating the world as it is and the world as represented by human beings. “The double rupture of the Cavern is not founded on any empirical investigation, on any facts of observation, it is even contrary to the common direction, the daily practice of all scientists” (Latour 1999: 27). Conscious of this difficulty, many science sociologists are interested precisely in the way in which researchers were permanently overlapped in the society (by their laboratory, their financing, their relations, etc.) and made objectification an essential stabilization process of the coalitions and knowledge.
4. “What is this coherence – which we immediately see that it is neither determined by a sequence *a priori* and necessary, nor imposed by immediately sensitive contents? Because it is not a question of binding consequences but bringing closer and isolate, analyse, adjust and fit together concrete contents; nothing more groping, nothing more empirical (at least outwardly, on the surface) than an order among things” (Foucault 1966: 11).
5. As Gilles Deleuze (1986: 33) suggests, “speakers and recipients are variants of the statement among others, which depend closely on the conditions defining the statement itself as a function”.
6. They are relatively close to Mary Douglas’ work on the formation of the collective action through the construction and the stabilization of a system resting on analogies, allowing resemblances and classifications (Douglas 1986).
7. Inspired by Foucault’s work, Murray Edelman considered the question of power to be critical to the discursive construction of problem definitions: “This shows in particular that this work does not have only the role of transforming a situation into a problem but also indicating “which is virtuous or useful and which is dangerous or unadapted; . . .which acts will be rewarded and which will be sanctioned; . . .those which exert the authority and those which accept it” (1988: 42).
8. Bruno Latour (2006) proposed to reform sociology by not defining society and determining causalities of any identified change, but by being interested in the way in which the participants produce society and experiment it.

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