

Book Review: Working for Policy

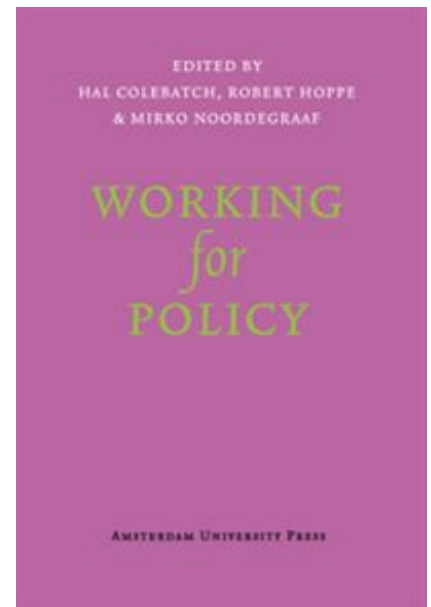
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Dave O'Brien opens up the black box of policy making in this diverse collection of essays for the academic eye. The essays paint a picture of policy emerging from politicians, bureaucrats, professional experts, advocacy and interest groups, as well as academics, media and citizens, in situations where policy is never a linear process with clear beginnings, middles and ends.



Working for Policy. Hal Colebatch, Robert Hoppe and Mirko Noordegraaf (eds). Amsterdam University Press. March 2011.

Academics, media and the public have all had a longstanding interest in understanding the often opaque practices surrounding the policy process. This new collection of essays, based on papers from the Interpretive Policy Analysis conference in 2006, is a valuable tool for those attempting to open up the black box of policy making. However, the book, like many such collections of essays, does not entirely cohere, with a laudable breadth of examples coming at the cost of a single, easy to follow case study. This diversity also suggests the book will, in the first instance, be read by a mainly academic audience, which is a missed opportunity for a collection that offers genuine insight into the lived reality of policy making, in a manner which goes beyond that of political memoir, media commentary or an academic's theoretical reflections.



Working for Policy positions itself in contradistinction to the narrative of 'authoritative instrumentalism' that has come to dominate teaching of public administration, the training of analysts, the public perception of policy making and much media discussion of contemporary government. The essays in the book paint a picture of policy emerging from politicians, bureaucrats, professional experts, advocacy and interest groups, as well as academics, media and citizens, in situations where policy is never a linear process with clear beginnings, middles and ends.

To support this view of policy making the book uses five organising principles. First, the collection aims to explore accounts of policy in the age of multi-level governance, with all of the case studies describing the interactions between governmental, non-governmental and civil society actors. Second, the book endeavours to focus on how policy is actually constituted as an idea, a practice and also as an object. Third, the book has a political commitment to improving the relationship between the practice of policy and academic accounts of that practice, by focusing on the work surrounding policy. Fourth, the book draws attention to the day-to-day reality of policy making. Finally, the discussions of policy work are placed within an interpretive framework, looking at policy as more than just the product of individual policy workers' actions.

Following the initial three chapters which offer the structure of the book (chapter one, by the editorial team), key theoretical insights informing the range of discussions in the text (chapter two by Hal Colbatch) and an excellent, although brief, literature review of second-order approaches to understanding policy (by Mirko Noordegraaf), the core of the book is six case studies. The case studies discuss EU politics, economic policy, sustainable development, the built environment and water management. All are detailed and engaging, albeit drawing on very different areas of policy making. The range of case studies was the main weakness in the content of the book, although short introductions to each section of the text provide clearer links between seemingly unconnected case study discussions. The book draws mainly from Dutch examples, but has a sufficiently strong discussion of the lessons of 'policy work' to avoid seeming parochial. Chapter 5, De Vries, Halfman and Hoppe's discussion of Dutch Econometric policy advice, seems at first highly specific, but its insights on the negotiations between econometric experts and government bureaucrats draw on themes that are familiar to a whole range of nationalities, including the limits of expertise, the problems of representing uncertainty within evidence and the questions of accountability in policy areas that draw on seemingly objective social science.

A particular strength of the book is the participation of policy workers, whether as sole or joint authors, or as

co-creators of research written up by academics. The book is not naive in presenting the potential for cross-sector collaboration, exemplified by the contrasting chapters by Amanda Williams, former policy analyst and now academic, and by Chris Shore, a professor of anthropology. Williams holds out the possibility of co-production by academics and practitioners (a position strongly favoured by this author), whilst Shore tempers this enthusiasm by reminding the reader of the epistemological distance between those two groups. Shore seeks to preserve the possibility of critical academic work that may overturn the conventional modes of public, academic and practitioner discourses around the policy process by asking questions do not, in the first instance, seem to be concerned with the immediacy of solving policy problems. Williams asks that both academics and practitioners attempt to reach mutual understanding and in doing so create more relevant applied research. What is striking about these two fascinating positions is that they both have merit, but the authors of the book's conclusion resist the temptation to crudely synthesise these two much nuanced discussions of academia's place in policy work.

The challenge for the book depends as much on its format as its content. At a time when academic research can generate [thousands of hits by a mention on a well subscribed blog](#), its worth asking if there is still a place for the edited collection that may take several years of careful gestation. Book chapters can be much more difficult to find than journal articles, notwithstanding the pay wall protection enjoyed by many academic titles. As a result it will be a shame if the important and valuable insights into contemporary policy work gain only an audience of public administration academics familiar with the concepts, if not the examples, contained in *Working for Policy*.

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