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**FROM THE GARBAGE CAN MODEL TO THE THEORY  
OF RECYCLING: RECONSIDERING POLICY  
FORMULATION AS A PROCESS OF STRUGGLING  
TO DEFINE A POLICY STATEMENT**

**PHILIPPE ZITTOUN**

*Abstract*

One of the main paradoxes produced by the garbage can model is the empirical observation that a proposal does not necessarily appear through problem-solving but by a coupling process where a proposal searches for a problem. This empirical observation looks like a paradox for those who consider that the meaning of a policy proposal is fundamental during the policy process. This article suggests a new way to combine the garbage can model with the argumentative turn by taking into account both of them: the coupling process between a solution and a problem highlighted by Cohen, March and Olsen and the gluing process that allows the argumentative strategy which contributes to give meaning to a proposal.

**Keywords:** garbage can model, coupling, strategic action, *bricolage*, policy.

The “argumentative turn” in policy analysis suggests making “a shift away from the dominant empirical, analytic approach to problem solving to one including the study of language and argumentation as essential dimensions of theory and analysis in policy making and planning”<sup>1</sup>. Expanding upon Majone’s<sup>2</sup> idea that discourse is present in all stages of the policy process, the argumentative turn tries to understand the central role of meaning in the policy process; the construction of knowledge through the subjective grasping of reality; the production of interactions and agreement through discussion, discursive exchange, and argument; and the sharing and propagating of ideas, problems,

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Fischer, *The Argumentative Turn Revisited: Public Policy As Communicative Practice*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Giandomenico Majone, *Evidence, argument, and persuasion in the policy process*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989.

and proposals by convincing or persuading. Following Habermas' critique of technocracy<sup>3</sup> and theory of communicative action<sup>4</sup>, the argumentative turn first proposes to reveal the processes by which rationality and expertise dominate the policy process and more generally the power of "strategic action," which has an effect on behavior<sup>5</sup>. Second, the argumentative approach suggests defending "communicative action", which allows for the reconciliation between an intersubjective perception of the world and the intention of actors entering into an agreement process.

Over the last 20 years, a growing number of important works have enriched the approach of the argumentative turn in different ways. These works allow us to better understand problem agenda setting by showing key aspects of the process of discursive construction, including identifying and defining a problem or issue, naming it, and identifying its cause and its audience, as well as how existing policy discourses influence reality by constructing categories, defining a certain vision of world, etc. But, like many other policy analysis approaches, the discursive approach of the argumentative turn has difficulty both grasping policy change and, more specifically, the way a problem pushed by an agenda triggers a policy change. These challenges are transformed into an empirical paradox when the argumentative turn is juxtaposed against the garbage can model.

As emphasized by Cohen, March, and Olsen<sup>6</sup>, following empirical observation, the garbage can model considers that a solution is not found through a problem-solving process but rather created independently of it. Most often, the authors note that it emerges before the problem and it is coupled with a problem that emerges later. In this way, this coupling is not the result of a meaningful linking process, meaning the solution is neither the result of rational problem-solving through strategic action nor the result of communicative action, the two kinds of action suggested by Habermas. The strength of this perspective comes essentially from its empirical basis. Thus, all policy analysis activities that are strategic or communicative actions which help to analyze problems, identify goals and instruments, formulate alternatives, and define solutions are rendered useless in the empirical and real process, or have only a theoretical function.

If we take into account this empirical model in which a solution seeks a problem, we also need to reconsider the argumentative turn and more generally the distinction operated by Habermas between strategic and communicative action. How can we defend a critical view of strategic and technical discourse about a solution that rationally solves a problem if, in social reality, the solution emerges before the problem? How can we defend a communicative action if, even after deliberation, the solution existed before the discussion?

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *La technique et la science comme "idéologie"*, Gallimard, Paris, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Id., *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, Fayard, Paris, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Id., *Vérité et justification*, Gallimard, Paris, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Michael D. Cohen, James. G. March et al., "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice", in *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17, 1, 1972, pp. 1-25.

To analyze this paradox, we must change our view of the garbage can model by considering the “formulation” stage differently. Although this stage is generally both underestimated and under-researched by policy analysts, the main activities during this stage are those of creating meaning in order to strengthen a statement on policy change by transforming a proposal for an instrument into a problem solving activity, thereby defining the identity of and empowering the potential owner. In this process, critical and rational discourses play a paradoxically complementary role to test, select, and strengthen the process of coupling a problem and a proposal. Following Boltanski and several French authors, this paper suggests a shift from critical perspectives of policy analysis to political science understanding of the policy process, which takes into account the role of analysis and critique.

To do this, this paper first examines the coupling process and defines it not only as an empirical phenomenon, but also as a problem that actors must solve. Second, it considers coupling as a process of constructing meaning, as well as the importance of critique and rationalization to consolidate it. Finally, it explores the conditions under which a proposal transforms and discursively succeeds.

### **The Coupling Process as a Complex Problem Coupling a Problem with a Solution: An Empirical Paradox**

The link between problems and policies is one of the most complex questions in policy analysis. To simplify, two opposing perspectives can be identified. The first perspective is interesting in terms of its questioning of rationality or of meaning. In this case, the proposed solution always comes after the identification of a problem and a problem-solving process<sup>7</sup>. While this perspective includes a wide range of different approaches from the rational choice model and bounded rationality to some interpretive models, namely new institutional models, the main idea is to consider that there is a time-oriented link between a problem and a solution that comes after the problem-solving stage. The main differences between the approaches included in this perspective result from different understandings of the constraints on the problem-solving process, which limit the number and kind of solutions that are examined.

With the garbage can model, Cohen, March, and Olsen shifted the approach of problem resolution. While a lot of earlier studies of policy and

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Harold Lasswell, *The decision process: Seven Categories of Functional Analysis*, Bureau of Governmental Research, College of Business and Public Administration, University of Maryland, 1956; James Anderson, *Public Policy-making*, Praeger, New York, 1975; Charles O. Jones, *An introduction to the study of Public Policy*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, California, 1984; Charles E. Lindblom, Edward J. Woodhouse, *The Policy-Making Process*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1993.

decision making tried to understand all the limits and constraints that can disrupt the problem-resolution process, Cohen, March, and Olsen modified this perspective by suggesting that the most common process is not the choice by problem resolution but choice by “flight.” Their main idea was to independently consider the stream of the problem and the stream of the solution and to note that, in their empirical observation, the proposed solution was designed with another problem in mind. In this model, the solution “flew” from one problem to another by association.

As Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) explained, “A major feature of the garbage can process is the partial uncoupling of problem and choices. Although decision making is thought of as a process for solving a problem, this is often not what happens. Problems are worked upon in the context of some choice, but choices are made only when the shifting combination of problems, solutions, and decisions happen to make actions possible. Quite commonly, this is after problems have left a given choice arena or before they have discovered it (decision by flight or oversight)”<sup>8</sup>.

With this empirical observation, the three authors questioned the perspective of researchers who sought to understand the policy-making process. While the majority of researchers try to understand, and sometimes to ameliorate, the problem-solving process, they confront a reality in which policymakers first find a solution and then couple it with a problem. Even for the interpretative approach, in which the question of meaning is central, this observation is a problem. How can we grasp the meaning of policy if there is no logical reason for pairing a problem with a solution as it is rather the result of chance or opportunity? For this reason, the coupling of pre-conceived solutions with problems represented a paradox for researchers.

Kingdon, one of the rare authors that tried to enrich the garbage can model from decision process to policy-making process, even suggested that the coupling process between a problem and a solution, both of which are designed independently from one another, is the “key” to successful policy change<sup>9</sup>. The “coupling” process consists of joining a proposed solution that “[floats] around and near the government, searching for a problem to which to become attached”<sup>10</sup> to a pressing problem included in the government’s agenda at a particular political moment.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Cohen, James. G. March *et al.*, *op .cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> “These three streams of processes develop and operate largely independently of one another... The key to understanding agenda setting and policy change is their coupling... A problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change and the constraints do not prohibit action. Advocates develop their proposal and then wait for problems to which they can attach their solutions”. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Longman Classics Edition), Longman Publishing Group, London, 2002, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

But the real innovation of Kingdon's work was to develop the idea that this coupling is not random<sup>11</sup> but the result of the work of policy entrepreneurs, and he cited three reasons for this: First, he suggested that the problem agenda-setting process represents a selection and a construction process in which only a few problems emerge. Second, he considered that "everything cannot interact with anything else", but did not explain further. Third, he underlined the role of constraints in the process.

If the first reason corresponds to an important literature about the construction and the "life" of a social problem<sup>12</sup> and the third point about institutionalism, the second point is quite new, but not adequately developed. If some authors, like Kingdon, write about coupling, it is almost always more as a fact than a complex process. For example, Baumgartner and Jones<sup>13</sup> discussed the process of connecting solutions to problems, but they did not explain the complexity of this process. Sabatier<sup>14</sup> cited this question as puzzling, but does not push more. Fischer considered that the purpose of a policy solution is not only to solve a problem but it also represents a normative symbol and interpretation of the world, but does not challenge the idea that when a solution arrives before a problem, the meaningful linking of problem with an appropriate solution is much more complicated<sup>15</sup>.

Taking the garbage can model into account, the main difficulty is the contradiction between the process of coupling, which makes the process of attaching a solution to a problem look quite easy, and the idea that this process is not random or marked by many failures and / or difficulties. Why does the coupling process often fail and, in these instances of failure, how can we understand the specificity of the process?

### **Problem Agenda Setting versus Policy Formulation**

To address the question posed above, it is first necessary to examine the difference between the stage of "policy formulation", in which policymakers shape proposals into policy instruments, and the stage of "problem agenda setting", in which problems take a form and occupy a place. For a lot of policy analysts, these two stages are by nature different, as one is more of a selection process and the other is more a definition process.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206: "Yet it would be a grave mistake to conclude that the processes explored in this book are essentially random".

<sup>12</sup> Authors such as Gusfield, Cobb and Elder, Jones, Easton etc.

<sup>13</sup> Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Paul A. Sabatier (ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Franck Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2003.

The policy formulation stage is generally considered to be a question of choice between different, pre-existing policy instruments. Many of the authors of the literature on policy formulation are most interested by the factors that influence the choice of policy instrument rather than the consideration of how a policy instrument is defined and designed during the process of formulation and the selection of an instrument.

This marks a real difference between policy formulation and problem agenda setting, in which the definition and the transformation of the problem, like its “naming, blaming, claiming”, is one of the main features used to understand its propagation. In the complex process of problem agenda setting, inspired by authors like Dewey, Schattschneider, Cobb and Elder, Gusfield and Stone, a constructive and discursive path can be ascertained, through which a situation becomes a problem, and then becomes a public problem with causal links, a public, and responsible parties<sup>16</sup>. Each stage represents a step towards transformation and selection. In other words, in order to make it to the agenda, a problem must successfully pass through a transformational process. But when these same authors try to grasp the concept of policy formulation, the question is very different – less constructivist and discursive.

Since the early days of policy analysis, the constructivist view has been included in the work of policy analysts. For example, when James Anderson, one of the first authors to propose a view of the different stages of policy process, described problems and the policy agenda, he insisted on the importance of not only the problem but also the construction and the perception of the problem<sup>17</sup>. It is always important to understand why some situations result in a problem and why some others do not, as well as to understand the role of problem transformation during this process in order to overcome difficulties. In the formulation of policy proposals, the question of construction is missing. It is as if proposals exist and do not change, thereby limiting the process to a question of selection from existing proposals.

In Charles Jones’s work, the two processes are very similar. First, the complex process through which a problem arrives on the government agenda reflects important aspects of perception, definition, and aggregation. Different problems can emerge from a single event depending on interpretations, definitions, and meaning. Jones proposed using the term “formulation” to express the process by which “to develop a plan, a method, a prescription, in this case for alleviating some need, for acting on a problem”.<sup>18</sup> In his view,

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<sup>16</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, H. Holt and Company, New York, 1927; Roger W. Cobb, Charles D. Elder, "The Politics of Agenda-Building: An Alternative Perspective for Modern Democratic Theory", *The Journal of Politics*, 33, 4, 1971, pp. 92-915; Elmer E. Schattschneider, *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff*, Ayer Publishing, Manchester, New Hampshire, 1974; Joseph Gusfield, *La culture des problèmes publics: l'alcool au volant: la production d'un ordre symbolique*, Economica, Paris, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> James Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Charles O. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

proposals come from problem resolution, but this is more “political” than “planning.” Finally, Jones conceptualized the process of proposal formulation as having three stages: formulation (a proposed solution emerges), legitimation (support from policy actors), and budgeting (this proposition obtains a budget).

The influential work of Jones and Anderson thus proposed a conceptual view that was very different from that of problem agenda setting to policy formulation. This difference is evident in Kingdon’s model too. On the one hand, Kingdon insisted on the definition process of the problem. This process is considered to be a transformative process in which an event changes into a public problem that mobilizes the attention of government. On the other hand, the process of generating proposals is observed as “a selection process in which a large number of possible policy initiatives are narrowed to a short list of proposals that are seriously considered”<sup>19</sup>.

The main difference between these two processes is not only the difference between selection and definition, but also the role of the variation of the problem and instrument within the process. If varying the definition of a problem is one of the keys to its success, then it is not a question of the formulation process, in which all simultaneously existing instruments are simply selected for their quality.

### **The Difficulty of Joining the Two Processes**

The difference between policy formulation and agenda-setting is not only a difference in nature (selection versus definition), but also a difference in dynamic, as the former is more incremental and the latter is more erratic and unpredictable, and this means that even if a lot of problems come to be included in a policy agenda, few policy proposals will be taken into account. Thus, the probability for successful coupling is rare.

This difference in dynamic was first noted by Kingdon. In addition to many other authors, he considered agenda setting to be a very agitated process in which a problem quickly comes to light and disappears just as quickly. This rhythm is very different from the rhythm of policy formulation in which the change process is more incremental. This is one of the key differences used by Kingdon to justify the independence of the two streams and to highlight their convergence as a significant event.

This difference in rhythm is also the key element used by Jones and Baumgartner to build their model<sup>20</sup>. For them, a stable policy process exists, in which there is limited adjustment. An agenda setting problem can threaten the stability of this process. One of the more interesting ideas of the authors is the

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<sup>19</sup> John Kingdon, *op.cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



importance of flexibility to allow for the joining process. They insist on a long process of deterioration of policy “image”, which creates the conditions for coupling.

This independence is also the result of two kinds of actors that are present in each of the streams. While there is a wide range of actors inside the process of problem agenda setting, there is generally a policy community that has a monopoly in terms of expertise and it tries to maintain the status quo, thus preventing change. Problem agenda setting comes from outside to stress the system, as Easton suggested<sup>21</sup>.

Although the streams are independent, the key question remains as to why the coupling process works sometimes but not all the time. In the literature, a lot of explanations can be found as to why some problems make it to an agenda and others do not; however, there are very few explanations as to why the proposed coupling of certain solutions with problems fails to be considered.

One way that was suggested by Baumgartner and Jones consider the deterioration of the policy image as the key to allowing a problem to shock a policy and transform it. For them, policy images “play a critical role in the explanation of issues to the previously apathetic”<sup>22</sup>. In this same work, the concept of image, which is “a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals”<sup>23</sup>, is not well defined, but what can be understood is that image is a normative conceptualization of policy from the perspective of the public.

A second way is proposed by Sabatier. For him, the resistance to problem shocks to the policy system can be explained in terms of the capacity of the actors to resist new information, such as, for example, a new problem. Paul Sabatier (1999) suggested that these difficulties come from the belief system of these actors: “They will resist information suggesting that their basic belief system may be invalid or unattainable, and they will use formal policy analysis primarily to buttress and elaborate those beliefs (or attack their opponent’s views)... The basic argument of this framework is that, although policy-oriented learning is an important aspect of policy change”<sup>24</sup>. But this explanation is not really convincing either. Why is it not difficult for actors to accept new information about a problem, but it is difficult in terms of a policy? Why is the behavior of actors within the problem’s agenda-setting stage so different from that of the policy formulation stage?

Though the question of meaning is present within both the process of agenda setting and policy formulation, it is not completely considered in either of these processes. Policy image is nothing more than a interpretation of a policy, and the consequence of a policy image and resistance to new information depends on how this information is interpreted.

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<sup>21</sup> David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1965.

<sup>22</sup> Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Paul A. Sabatier (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 19.

### **Coupling to Give Meaning to a Proposal for an Instrument The Meaning of an Instrument as a Problem**

One way to answer this question about the incompatibility between policy agenda setting and policy formulation is to shift the view of policy formulation and consider coupling as a discursive phenomenon that occurs during the policy formulation stage to give meaning to an instrument and to allow it to become a more attractive option for policy change.

To develop this idea, it is necessary to return to the interpretative approaches and the advanced knowledge produced by them about policy meaning. According to these approaches, the meaning of a policy instrument is not only a key element of policy change but also a problem that the policy actors must solve.

Majone was one of the first authors to suggest that policy instruments are “seldom ideologically neutral” and their distribution is not neutral, with some groups that win and some groups that lose<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, they cannot really be distinguished from their goals, and their results are shaped by institutional structure. In this case, as Majone explained, “[T]he choice of policy instruments is not a technical problem that can be safely delegated to experts. It raises institutional, social and moral issues that must be clarified through a process of deliberation and resolved by political means”<sup>26</sup>. He concluded by considering the major role of institutional structures and arrangement to shape meaning and for comparing instruments.

Majone proposed considering debates over instruments as political debates. According to him, the formulation process becomes a debate process in which the question of meaning is important. Policy analysis is transformed into a policy argument that can influence the policy change process.

While Majone introduced the question of meaning and persuasion, and demonstrated the incapacity to separate fact from value, he did not really consider the complex link between an instrument and its interpretation. In his view, instruments have their own meaning and the purpose of the problem is more to clarify goals, values, and interpretations than to build them.

Fischer went further by proposing a more complex view of policy meaning. He suggested that “each policy has different meanings for different participants”, the meaning of policy instruments is “ambiguous and manipulable”, and the policy process must be considered as “a struggle to get one or another meaning established as the accepted one”<sup>27</sup>. Considering public policy as a discursive construct and policy analysis a discursive practice, he defined policy “as a political agreement on a course of action or inaction designed to resolve or

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<sup>25</sup> Giandomenico Majone, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Fischer, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

mitigate problems on the political agenda” and considers that we must take into account “the subjectively oriented goals, motives and intentions of policy actors”<sup>28</sup>. In this way, he was one of the first authors who suggested that the struggle over the meaning of a policy proposal is central to the policy formulation stage.

In the same way, Hajer<sup>29</sup> developed the idea that the “narrative storyline work” on policy must be taken into account to better understand the importance of interaction in creating policy meaning, which is not a given but is rather constructed. As such, Hajer is interested in discursive coalitions, which are neither pre-existing nor share a pre-existing common belief system (like in Sabatier’s model) but are rather coalitions that share a “narrative storyline” and constantly interpret policy. Interpretative approaches help us to better understand that policy is a discursive construct and the struggle over meaning plays a central role in the policy process, but it is very difficult for these approaches to take the garbage can model into account. One of the reasons for this is probably because the two main models of action, strategic and communicative action inspired by Habermas, do not allow the garbage can model to be taken into account.

Strategic action is a teleological model in which each actor identifies his or her end (objective) and adapted means of achieving that end. In this kind of action, the meaning of discourse as a means to an end serves to influence other actors and the power struggle between them. In this model of action, the dominant actors always eliminate any problem that challenges a dominant policy, and policies do not need to be linked to problems in order to be imposed.

Communicative action is a model of interaction in which actors who are equals try to build an inter-subjective understanding of reality through discussion. In this model, all the actors are equal and the solution needs to be coupled with a problem to be meaningful, but the solution always emerges after the problem and related discussion reach agreement.

### **Rethinking Policy Formulation as a Process of Defining a Policy Proposal Statement**

To find a new way of taking the garbage can model into account, we return to the policy formulation stage. Generally, this stage, in which the proposal takes shape, is underestimated and under-researched. For example, while there is some scholarship about problems that do not make it to policy agendas, there is very little scholarship concerning the failure of policy proposals. The failures, however, tell us more about the conditions under which

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> Hajer, M. A. & Wagenaar, H. (Eds.) *Deliberative Policy Analysis: Understanding Governance in the Network Society*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

ideas successfully become “credible” policy proposals. More generally, this stage can be considered as a pragmatist stage in which a discourse plays a central role in guiding, defining, and/or critiquing new couplings.

Howlett explained that policy formulation is “a process of identifying and assessing possible solutions to policy problems or, to put it another way, exploring the various options or alternatives available for addressing a problem through policy analysis”<sup>30</sup>. He identified four tasks in policy formulation: appraisal activity, dialogic (debates on policy options), formulation (drafting some form of proposal), and consolidation. But Howlett suggested taking into account additional factors more precisely: the process of defining the risks and merits of each option, the importance of policy advisors who transmit policy advice, the role of ideas and framing, and the role of discourse, which could become a constraint. Even if he does not take into account the garbage can model, Howlett suggested transforming the policy formulation process into a stage in which defining the characteristics of policy plays a specific role inside the policy process.

To move beyond the work of the above mentioned authors, policy formulation can be considered as a definition stage in which some actors try to define not only a proposal but also its capacity to solve a problem and to change a policy. In this way, the chronological order of a problem and a solution becomes less important than the arguments to prove the strength of the coupling.

A policy proposal is a statement about a policy instrument that does not yet exist and about which the adviser wants the government to decide, or it is about a policy instrument that exists but the adviser seeks to modify.

For example, actors explaining to a mayor that he must increase the number of policeman are providing a form of policy advice. This advice is not simply a policy proposal constructed into advocacy discourse. To convince the mayor, the actors develop some arguments and explain why this proposition is a worthwhile of adoption by the mayor. Three kinds of methods can be identified, that are used by actors to make sense of an instrument.

The first kind of method is to couple this proposal to a problem it can solve. While Kingdon discovered that the coupling process exists as empirical reality, he had difficulty understanding why this coupling process is so important. Here I defend the hypothesis that the coupling process is the key element to making sense of an instrument with the goals of transforming it into a “solution” and making it attractive and convincing.

The meaning process must be grasped as a game of language. As Wittgenstein suggested, we must understand language as a game with words and all the activities which use words<sup>31</sup>. Defining, ordering, selecting, naming,

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Howlett, *Designing Public Policies: Principles and Instruments*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Recherches philosophiques*, Gallimard, Paris, 2005.

and other linguistic activities can be considered as different games that authors practice. In this way, Wittgenstein suggested that, to grasp reality, the observer needs to not be influenced by his own understanding of words and statements.

We can apply this gaming process to coupling. Actors who propose coupling can be considered as players who join two concepts, a problem and an instrument, thereby creating a puzzling game. In this way, they transform an instrument into a “solution”. Coupling becomes the problem of the game that the players must solve by utilizing different strategies to couple problems and instruments in such a way as to help them win and avoid using combinations that do not work.

This *bricolage* does not necessarily occur chronologically and the actors can begin with either the problem or the solution. The capacity to join a solution to a problem is more important. This coupling is the result of agency of actors and their strategies and not just a simple result of logic or a random process.

As a strategy, this *bricolage* coupling becomes not only a simple reality that must be noted but also a problem that must be understood. Some authors have observed that coupling is a problem. Simon observed that this link is really subjective and not very consistent, observing how the link between the means and the end is located inside a statement in which the means can be transformed into the end as a function of its place in the sequence<sup>32</sup>. Lindblom considered this link as a cognitive *bricolage* that actors develop to solve an overly complex problem<sup>33</sup>. But each time the authors imagine that the game always begins with the problem and the problem signifies a process of resolution.

### **Making Coupling Convincing: Strategic and Communicative Action Simultaneously**

While Lindblom understood that producing solutions led to unavoidable *bricolage*, he never understood why actors rejected his proposition to build a “science of muddling through”. Likewise, some interpretive authors do not understand why actors move from a strategic action to a communicative action. However, one of the reasons for this is that all policy proposal statements are not always judged by just their validity, which is always partial, but are also judged by the incentives they offer.

In 2000, the Prime Minister of France, Lionel Jospin, sincerely explained his failure to help an industry by stating that the State cannot solve all problems. This statement was hardly critical during the electoral campaign and served as

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, Macmillan Co., New York, 1947.

<sup>33</sup> Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through", *Public Administration Review*, 19, 1958, pp. 78-88; Charles E. Lindblom, *Inquiry and Change: the Troubled Attempt to Understand and Shape Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990.

proof of the prime minister's inability to govern and to change society. The question is not whether this sentence is true but rather what Jospin's motive was behind this statement. In this way, the question of coupling is not only understood as a communicative action, proving the capacity of a solution to solve a problem, but also as strategic action to show that the government can prove its interest in and ability to solve the problem.

One important source of confusion over the coupling process can be located in the bi-pass aspect of the process: the *bricolage* stage in which an actor couples a solution to a problem and the process of discursive transformation that makes this coupling convincing. Actors may spend a lot of time defending a solution and trying to link it with a problem once the solution appears on an agenda, and they need to develop strategies to make the coupling convincing. This process of convincing is an essential one that allows a coupled solution and problem to circulate throughout a network, stabilizes the coupling, and transforms it into a policy proposal.

Two processes are critical for the stabilization of a coupling. First, the participant who couples a solution to a problem via *bricolage* techniques need to make the solution fit (in the form of an instrument) the consequences of a problem in such a way that this process appears to be the result of problem solving. *Bricolage* is like scaffolding. The actors need to couple a solution to a problem but also need to abandon it when the coupling process is finished. The capacity to produce, in this way, some rational arguments that can prove the reasonableness of this coupling is essential. For example, a participant who explains that a problem has both a cause and a solution can construct a bridge between a solution and a problem through the presentation of rational arguments that link the two.

Let's take an example. In French housing policy, some actors defend the idea that the government needs to develop an instrument to support the construction of new public housing. They couple this proposed policy instrument to the problem of homelessness and develop rational arguments to explain that the crisis has a cause – the insufficient number of new housing buildings – and the development of public housing, a consequence, increases the total number of new buildings. In this case, it is not important to understand the instability of this argumentation process, as some other actors argue that building new housing never reduces the number of homeless people. The question is more the capacity of the argument behind this statement and its ability to rationalize this coupling and make sense of the proposed instrument to solve the problem. The second process is the design process. It is probably the more complex process of the two processes to grasp. Like physicists who try to find an "elegant" physical law to explain the universe, participants in the policy process try to "elegantly" couple solutions to problems in order to make them more convincing. This idea of "design" can be traced back to Aaron Wildavsky,

who explained that policy analysis is not a science but rather an art or a craft. In this way, he expanded upon the work of Lindblom, which examined the stratagem used by participants to find solutions to problems. Because they cannot rationally solve an overly complex problem, participants develop simplified processes to get around such difficulties.

Several analysts have suggested dividing overly complex problems into smaller problems that can be solved, though it is not possible to demonstrate that the solution to one of these smaller problems can necessarily be a solution to the whole problem. This is the reason that Lindblom considered “analysis” and “simplification” as the only stratagem that can solve an unsolved problem. Following Lindblom, Wildavsky concluded that the art of developing stratagem to solve an unsolved problem is not a science, but rather it is an art, and the beauty of its essence is sometimes more important than its stability and validity. Policy design can be understood as the capacity of practitioners to “design” coupling that a lot of other people will find “credible”. There are no fixed rules of the design process, but rather it represents an inter-subjective understanding that can be observed.

The rationalizing and designing processes contained in the *bricolage* stage of coupling are the two main ways in which the coupling process is stabilized, that allows for the abandoning of *bricolage* techniques.

### **Three Transformations to Policy Proposals in the Policy Formulation Process: Solving, Identifying, Empowering**

#### ***1. Transforming a Proposal to “Stick” to a Problem: Solving***

If the link between a problem and a solution is just a game of language and not rational, the question is to know why just any solution cannot be coupled to any problem. Here, I develop the idea that all coupling is tested during discussions between an adviser and the person the adviser wants to convince. These testing activities are central to the policy formulation process.

The coupling process, as suggested, is used by some proposal advocates to advise main actors to adopt the proposal. But, we cannot consider these discussions between these actors as neutral. In these discussions, the speaker is not only an adviser, but he is also testing the proposed coupling of the problem with a solution to prove its stability.

For example, when faced with suburban violence in 2005, President Chirac suggested lowering the legal age for apprenticeships from 16 to 14. There was a large public reaction to this idea and private debates ensued to argue that this solution would never solve the problem at hand. This kind of reaction is nothing more than the refusal of actors to seriously take into account

the solution coupled by Chirac to the problem of suburban violence. This instance illustrated that coupling can be contested and face difficulty in terms of credibility.

One of the arenas in which the coupling of problems and solutions can be rejected is during public debate. In this controversial arena, a lot of contestation can develop as an argumentative process to test the stability of the coupled problem and solution. As Edelman suggested, the political arena is one of the most important contentious sites in which a lot of actors try to differentiate themselves from one another<sup>34</sup>. Generally, this means that no policy proposal can be suggested without facing some amount of contestation.

There are two consequences of such contestation in the public sphere. The first one is the anticipation that results from such controversy on the part of the actors who want to propose a new coupling. Because they know that they are going to confront a lot of criticism of the coupling, the actors, before proposing the coupled problem and solution, verify that the proposed coupling can be easily defended. When an adviser suggests a proposal to a political leader, for example, the discussion between them could be interpreted as a testing process to verify the strength of the coupling. In this way, we can understand why certain couplings are weak, which means that coupling could never be proposed without a certain amount of expected criticism.

For example, in the discussion about how to solve the noise problem in Paris, some actors proposed reducing the speed limit. Whether such a coupling of problem and solution is successfully proposed and debated by the city council depends on the several factors. For instance, the proposal by some actors to reduce the speed limit on the ring road, where the noise problem was the most serious, was marginalized and not taken very seriously. This means that the credibility of the coupling, depending on the beliefs of listener, is central in the coupling process.

The second consequence is that, during the discussions, the proposal is often redefined in such a way as to “stick” more to the problem. As some pragmatist philosophers suggested, the test discussion is a way to produce knowledge. In this case, sometimes the test provokes and results in a modification of the proposal.

The tramway project in Paris is one example of how test discussions result in the modification of a proposal. During the first step of this project, a proposal was designed to solve the transport problem in Paris. Some engineers designed this proposal to be the best rational solution.

In 1995, a new problem of pollution emerged and was added to the agenda. Advocates of the tramway proposal tried to couple this proposed solution to the problem of pollution. In their efforts, the tramway proposal was redefined not only as a solution to the issue of rising pollution, but the framework of the

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<sup>34</sup> Murray Edelman, *Pièces et règles du jeu politique*, Seuil, Paris, 1991.



proposal was also modified. In this way, the changes in the framework appear to be a consequence of this new coupling, which was not a neutral process.

The transformation of the proposal can be understood as the consequence of the coupling process. The significance of this is that the process of debate and negotiation is important and can impact the proposal itself, directly or by anticipation.

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## ***2. Transforming a Proposal to Integrate Identity: Identifying***

The issue of the strength of a proposal in terms of its ability to successfully overcome criticism is not the only challenge of a new coupling. There is also the issue of its ability to attract new actors to advocate and support the proposal. The main idea here is that the discourse of a proposal contributes to the identity of the speaker who enunciates it.

The interest in observing the discourse of a proposal and not simply the ideas included in it results from the observation that no idea can “fly” alone. There always needs to be advocates who express these ideas in the form of a discursive interaction. In this sense, the discourse must be examined in terms of discursive practice that takes place between two speakers or more.

Perelman is one of the first authors who insisted that we need to consider that the argumentation process around a policy proposal depends on the participants in this process<sup>35</sup>. He suggested distinguishing between the conviction process whereby a speaker addresses a general public, and the persuasion process through which the speaker tries to change the opinion of a specific listener.

Our first consideration, building resistance to criticism, could be considered as a conviction process because it is not directed at a specific audience. Rather it is part of the general debate that seeks to demonstrate the strength of the proposal to solve a problem. This second point is about the persuasion process and the idea that a policy proposal reflects the identity of its owner.

More precisely, there is an interesting discursive transfer from the quality of the proposal to the identity of the owner. If a spokesperson of a policy proposal explains that this proposal is a “modern” or “equitable” one, he or she not only qualifies the proposal but also qualifies him – or herself – as well. Is a spokesperson for an “innovative” proposal not an innovative person as well?

Because it is generally difficult to qualify oneself directly, the process of transferring identity from the proposal to its spokesperson can be understood as a very important quality that plays a specific role in the persuasion process. To persuade a policymaker to adopt a proposal, its spokesperson can qualify the

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<sup>35</sup> Chaim Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *La nouvelle rhétorique: Traité de l'argumentation*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1958.

proposal to underline that, if the proposal is adopted, the spokesperson can claim and adopt these new qualities.

This idea comes from the hypothesis developed by George Herbert Mead, which states that discursive practices contribute to constructing the identity of the speaker. This identity is a social identity that illustrates how a person displays the same qualities of a group they belong to or that distinguish a particular social group. This process of identifying can be understood in terms of the similarities and the differences within societies. Later, Edelman, who worked more specifically on political discourse as per Mead's hypothesis, suggested that discourse must also be observed as a factor that contributes to identity construction of politicians.

Because defending a proposal produces identity, the persuasion process takes into account the identity of the audience to which a proposal is being presented. This allows the spokespersons for the proposal to persuade the audience that adopting a particular proposal will contribute to their own identity construction. We can consider this hypothesis as helping to explain the success or the failure of a proposal by taking into account the difficulties or the facilities needed by actors in order to negotiate their identity with the identity of the proposal presented to them.

This process of negotiating identity cannot be considered as neutral. Here it is suggested that adopting a proposal not only has an impact on the owner of the proposal, who is qualified in some way by the proposal, but also on the proposal itself, which needs to be modified to become attractive. As Latour suggested in his theory, we can observe the proposal as the link to the network that defends it and each nodule of the link is a focus point between actors and the proposals<sup>36</sup>.

In this way, during the identity negotiation process, the transformation of a proposal needs to be observed as a critical force to facilitate the proposal's adoption by new actors.

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### ***3. The Transformation of a Proposal and the Integration of Power: Empowerment***

To be adopted, a proposal not only needs to be strong and solid enough to resist or overcome criticism and control identity, but it also needs to overcome power restructuring. This goes beyond the legitimizing aspect of power which is part of the debate.

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<sup>36</sup> Bruno Latour, *Changer de société – Refaire de la sociologie*, La Découverte, Paris, 2006.

The question of power is one of the more complex issues to take into account in the public policy process, especially the formulation process. On the one hand, all decision making engages a political authority and reflects the unequal position and the strength of elites. On the other hand, the nature of governing regimes depends on who has influence on who in discursive interactions, while position is not the only way to understand this relationship.

When Dahl<sup>37</sup> worked on urban policy, for example, he studied urban policy proposals from the conception of the first ideas that led to their development, to the selection of proposal's spokesperson, to the process by which the proposal became a decided policy. In this way, he discovered the importance of political leaders and their advisers, who produce half of the new proposal that is debated and negotiated. He specifically insisted that there was an important step that clarified and massaged a vague idea into a policy proposal and highlighted all the energy and resources that actors need and develop to create proposals from these ambiguous ideas. He also insisted on negotiation, or the process by which leaders need to convince and persuade other leaders that a project could be a good opportunity, or at least does not provoke problems. For Dahl, a leader's capacity to negotiate the realization of a project is the key to the project's success or failure.

Similarly, Banfield<sup>38</sup> suggested that in a world in which power is puzzling and fragmented, we need to understand the nature of influence (who influences who and about what). For Banfield, influence is nothing more than a means to organize an overly fragmented world. In this way, he identified different "systems" of influence and suggested the significance of the influence of power on the capacity of actors to promote or to block a proposal.

In an effort to follow up the arguments of these two authors, I take into account the fact that convincing and persuading both represent forms of power. When an adviser wants to persuade a mayor, he tests two important aspects of power. First, depending on who the mayor is, the adviser recognizes the importance and the position of this leader. He uses that as a reference map for understanding power distribution. Power, thus, originates from the ideas that some actors have about the capacities of other actors. As Pierre Bourdieu suggested, the position and social hierarchy of actors needs to be taken into account before they begin to speak, and thus what happens during discussions is not the only factor that is important<sup>39</sup>. Taking into account power as a function of objective position, as he suggested, renders the advisor as unable to influence the leader. Here, we consider that there is a subjective view of position, and

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<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Who governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1961.

<sup>38</sup> Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence*, Transaction Publishers, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Seuil, Paris, 2001.

sometimes an inter-subjective view of position, which determines who is selected as being important to persuade.

For example, many actors want to persuade a mayor because they think the mayor has the real power to decide. Even if that is not the truth, as power is always fragmented, this simplified view of power helps shape the actors' strategic and persuasive action. The most interesting observation here is that if a lot of people believe that a person is the most influential decision maker, this person becomes the most influential decision maker as a result of the shared, collective belief in this person's power.

But, and this is the second aspect of power, by trying to persuade an influential leader, the adviser tests his own capacity to have influence on important people. Through such actions, the adviser supposes that he can arrive to change a leader's perspective, and, in Dahl's sense of power, to have power over the leader. If a map exhibiting the distribution of power helps to choose "influential" people that an adviser needs to convince, the second aspect of adviser's motivation is his or her own capacity to influence those people who occupy more powerful positions.

In this way, advisers combine a conception of power as a position and also see power as situated in a relationship. Many scholars may think of these two conceptions as an ontological contradiction, but the actors have no doubt that they can combine these two aspects of power. In that way, the persuasion process during the process of policy formulation is not only a question of argument and identity, but also a question of power. Through these activities, actors recognize inequitable distributions of power and change this through their actions in the policy arena to gain power. It is akin to a boxing round in which an outsider challenges a champion to take his title. At the same time, he recognizes the champion's title before he fights him, as gaining this title is the reason for the fight. The outsider supposes that he can win the round and it is this uncertainty that motivates him.

It is the reason that, to interest a leader, an adviser needs to explain why adopting a proposal contributes to recognizing the power position and to contributing to the legitimation aspect. This dimension explains why some leaders support "unpopular" policies. In this way, even if the policy is contested, leaders affirm their capacity to legitimate their "strong" position.

In France, François Mitterrand's decision to end the death penalty in 1982 is considered by French commentators as a proof of courage because the policy was unpopular. Why would a leader support this kind of position? Not only would he support such a stance to illustrate his conviction, but also because he believed that he could in this way affirm his courage and his legitimacy to govern.

### **Coupling, a Central Political Activity in the Stage of Policy Formulation**

When Dahl expressed interest in the path that a policy proposal follows, from the moment in which the proposal is presented to the moment a proposal becomes a decision with a focus on influence throughout this process, he opened a new way to consider the stage of policy formulation. Unfortunately, this way, to observe the path of policy proposals is often disregarded and authors prefer to concentrate on the policy change when a proposal is strong enough to take the place of an old one.

The purpose of this article was to develop the idea that the path of policy proposals is not linear and this bifurcation, impasse, mutation, and/or consolidation is the result of three processes: an argumentation process to transform it into a convincing solution to a problem, a process of negotiating identity that is persuasive, and a process of empowerment that results in legitimation. These processes seem like complex problems that an adviser needs to solve by finding efficient interlocutors and good arguments.

The formulation process seems like an active step in which participants strategize and take action to make their proposals stronger. For them, the coupling process becomes a problem they need to solve and not just an opportunity they take advantage of without difficulty. The capacity to make a proposal into the solution for a specific problem transforms the proposal into not only a credible instrument, but also a legitimate instrument.

The success story of a proposal allows us to better understand how a solution finds a problem, the role of identity among political participants, and factors that legitimize a government, all at the same time. Finally, we also need to take into account cases of failed policies to better understand the factors that lead to unsuccessful actions of actors and their failed attempts to couple problems and solutions.

To conclude, we need to think about the question of coupling utility. Why do participants spend so much time and energy coupling a solution to a problem?

Easton suggested that a problem that is included on an agenda is like an input that stresses the political system<sup>40</sup>. The problem makes social disorder visible and, as suggested by Gusfield, puts a collective actor “in charge”<sup>41</sup>. This means that the process of problem agenda setting identifies an aspect of society that illustrates a condition that is considered dangerous and not acceptable.

So, the coupling process can be understood as a process of legitimation, in which a government shows that it can address the needs of society by finding a solution. In this way, any actors who want to defend a policy proposal can observe this problem agenda-setting as an opportunity to legitimate a solution.

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<sup>40</sup> Davis Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Gusfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-38.

They are ready to couple this problem with a proposed solution and present this proposal to the leaders who are in charge.

In the Ivory Coast, there is a tribe that has a surprising tradition. When the king dies, all people behave as if they are crazy, do not respect the rules, do everything that is generally forbidden, do not respect symbols of power, like the throne, and produce chaos in society<sup>42</sup>. When a new king is nominated, order returns. The period of disorder is a way to explain that, without a king, there is chaos, which legitimizes the king<sup>43</sup>. A problem is like chaos and a solution is like a way to transform disorder into order. A solution needs a problem just as order needs disorder to justify and legitimate it.

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<sup>42</sup> Georges Balandier, *Le Pouvoir sur scènes*, Balland, Paris, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Philippe Zittoun, *La fabrique politique des politiques publiques*, Presses de Science Po, 2013.