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Boekbespreking van: Understanding Policy Fiascoes
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Book Reviews

Mark Bovens & Paul 't Hart, *Understanding Policy Fiascos*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, and London 1996

In this already much-acclaimed book Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart tackle an important subject in a systematic fashion: how to explain the occurrence of, and increase in, so-called policy fiascos. The short-cut answer to this question lies in the definition of a policy fiasco that they employ: "performance defects [that produce] situations of (...) subjectively significant social change, that (...) are highly politicised" (p.15). First of all, policy fiascos are a social construct: different actors perceive various policy outcomes in different ways at different moments. An evaluation of events and the causal chain producing these events is an essential part of their perception. Second, however, policy fiascos are also political issues: the stakes actors have, are also affected by the question of which events eventually are widely defined as policy fiascos. Fiascos may improve the positions of some, but weaken those of others. A policy fiasco, therefore, is primarily a political issue that is not only rooted in interests, but also in views of the fabric of society.

According to Bovens and 't Hart this Janus-faced character of policy fiascos can be grasped by posing four questions. First, which social and political biases are at work in determining what events are perceived as a fiasco? Different contexts in terms of time, space, and culture account for different evaluations. At the same time, politicians and the various media all have their own incentives to portray some events rather than others as clear failures (p.21-52). The second question that a researcher should pose is whether outcomes can indeed be attributed to individual agents. Indeed, the notion of fiasco carries with it the idea of man-made disaster. Interestingly, Bovens and 't Hart argue against an analysis that would be limited to a top-down perspective of the policy process. Such a view of subsequent stages of the policy process is likely to attribute the occurrence of fiasco to a mismatch between strategy and implementation and to leave it at that. Instead, they favour a bottom-up approach that starts with the executioners of the policy that failed. This procedure is more likely to trace the causal chain back to managerial and organizational problems, or to bureaucratic infighting. Their main conclusion is that any analysis of cause and effect will entail elements of social construct and political interests (p.53-72). The third issue they address is, once agents have been identified, how should the specific choices they have made be

explained? Could the fiasco have been avoided, had a different route been chosen? Here the authors show how analysts' different world views are likely to attribute policy failures to different types of causal mechanisms and to infer different conclusions as to the inevitability of the fiasco. For instance, analysts who employ a problem-solving frame, are likely to focus on cognitive deficiencies of policy-makers. Bovens and 't Hart therefore make a strong plea in favour of analytical pluralism (p.73-92). Finally, they pose the question why blaming occurs and why some agents rather than others are held responsible (p.94-128). Bovens and 't Hart show how different symbolic meanings are attributed to fiascos in different societies and under varying circumstances. To them fiascos often symbolize the presence of crises in existing political orders. Fiascos can thus be agents of change. That is why an analysis of the politics of blaming, inherent in the social construction of fiascos, should be an important aspect of fiasco research.

Bovens and 't Hart have written an important book: they develop an analytical framework for a comparative analysis of fiascos that is explicitly entrenched in the various aspects of the policy-making process. Moreover, they highlight the analytical biases from which most research on disasters, failure, and fiascos suffers. In addition, they show the road to fruitful analytical pluralism. They make a very strong start with their two-sided concept of a policy fiasco as both a social construct and a political phenomenon, especially in dealing with the first and second questions. In my view, however, too little attention is paid later on in the book to the political component of policy fiascos. To a certain extent the book even becomes an analysis not of how agents, causes and blame are identified in a process of social construction, but rather of how policy analysts produce different identifications because of their own predispositions. On the one hand, rightly so, because, as Bovens and 't Hart themselves show (p. 130-131), the very work of fiasco analysts is likely to be a constituent element of the blaming process. On the other hand, it is as important to explain why one kind of identification of agents and causes rather than another gains the upper hand.

The authors originally set out to conduct a comparative analysis of a large number of cases and to formulate an explanation of the occurrence and frequency of policy fiascos (p. ii). However, they conclude that such an endeavour proved impossible because of the element of social construction involved. Fortunately, Bovens and 't Hart refuse to adopt a fully relativist position, now so fashionable in political science and public administration (p. 147-148). In my opinion, their analysis implicitly offers several avenues for further, less subjective, research.

First, Bovens and 't Hart attribute time frames and preferences to several actors: politicians have a short horizon that does not go beyond the next elections; administrators usually adopt a longer term perspective, but guard the interests of their bureaus. These attributes of actors may offer a first foundation to stipulate the direction the actors' behaviour may take when events, actors, causes, and blame must be identified. Second, the media surface regularly as important intermediate institutions that help construct fiascos. The incorporation of theories of media behaviour and

their relationship with politicians, civil servants, as well as their audiences may bring us closer to explaining both the occurrence and the frequency of fiascos: the dramatization of news may independently call for the presentation of events as disasters or fiascos. Third, in explaining the surge in policy fiascos over the last two decades, Bovens and 't Hart correctly point to the rise in expectations citizens have of government. This would lead one to expect fiascos to occur more frequently in some policy domains than in others. Moreover, it would call for a further inquiry into the politics of disappointment: why are citizens mobilized by some policy failures and not by others? Finally, the authors discuss extensively the intriguing matter of the symbolic meaning fiascos may have for society as a whole and political culture in particular. This aspect of policy fiascos opens the road to an analysis along functionalist lines, with an emphasis on the specific functions fiascos may perform for (certain parts of) society.

All in all, the book deserves praise for having set disasters, fiascos, scandals, etc. on the research agenda of political science and public administration, for disentangling difficult conceptual and methodological problems, as well as for pointing to several inroads future analyses might take. In general, however, such future research calls for a strengthened combination of the elements of social construct and political opportunity. In all likelihood, agenda-building theory needs to be part of such a combination. If Bovens and 't Hart continue their exploration of this interesting empirical domain, I hope that they will incorporate several aspects of some of their previous work, that are hardly touched upon in this book, especially their work on whistleblowers and entrapment.

Bertjan Verbeek

Marta Kirejczyk, *Met technologie gezegend?: Gender en de omstreden invoering van in vitro fertilisatie in de Nederlandse gezondheidszorg*. (Blessed with technology: gender and the controversial introduction of *in vitro* fertilization into the Dutch healthcare system) Jan van Arkel, Utrecht 1996, ISBN 90 6224 372, DFL 49,50

My first encounter with IVF in real life, as opposed to in the newspapers, was when, in about 1985, a fellow medical student told me he had to find a job soon, and might not even be able to finish his course, because he needed money so that he and his wife could afford an IVF procedure. She had had one or more operations on her fallopian tubes, but so far without result. IVF the new technique, the costs of which would not be reimbursed by their health insurance company and which was therefore expensive, was their last hope - the only possibility left to have children of their own. What impressed me most was the fact that he was willing to forgo any chances of a career, and did not seem to mind what kind of job he would get, just as long as it would provide him with the money to buy this last chance. I don't think I had ever realized just how important it is to people to have their own children.