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The Methodological Challenge of Cross-National Research: comparing cultural policy in Britain and Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores methodological issues that need to be considered when embarking in cross-national cultural policy research. The first part offers a discussion of the limitations of much of the currently available comparative research in the field, and particularly work that relies heavily on comparison of cultural statistics. By drawing on an extensive discussion of the case study of Britain and Italy, the second part of the paper attempts to put forward a number of suggestions with a view to developing a more appropriate and more holistic comparative research methodology for the field of cultural policy studies. To this end, inspiration is drawn from the contribution of a number of disciplines in the field of social sciences – as well as public policy studies - where comparative research, and related problems of methodology, have long been discussed and theorized. In particular, the concept of *contextualization* will be shown to be extremely useful when comparing notions of culture and policies across nations.

INTRODUCTION

Today we live in an increasingly “globalised” world, in which the local, national and international dimensions are more and more interwoven, and this is true whether we are discussing the production of commodities, the characteristics of the knowledge economy, the birth of social or political movements, or the spread of new ideas and values. It is therefore inevitable for most countries to feel the need to look at each other’s experiences when making important political and administrative decisions. In this context of increasing interdependence between nations, it is easy to understand the reason for the growing interest in comparative research.

These are indeed the circumstances in which comparative cultural policy studies have developed. This paper will therefore attempt to analyse some methodological problems arising from the comparative study of public policies for the cultural sector by adopting as a case study a two-nation comparative observation of Italy and the UK. Looking in particular at the very different ways in which the concept and the study of public policy have developed over time in the two countries, as well as the different notions of culture on which their cultural policies are based, the discussion will attempt to highlight the limitations of much of the currently available comparative cultural policy research. The concluding section of the paper will finally propose some ideas for further research and for a broader, multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary approach to the study of cultural policies. Indeed, only such an approach can succeed in accounting for the difficult cultural, administrative, political and legal traditions between the countries observed, thus providing a better understanding of the mechanisms of cultural policy-making within the countries in question.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF CULTURAL STATISTICS IN CROSS-NATIONAL RESEARCH

Comparative cultural policy is a very young discipline which is increasingly acquiring a growing degree of popularity among scholars interested in the study of cultural studies, public policy, cultural economics, and, more broadly, the economic and legal conditions for cultural production and distribution. The earliest examples of comparative studies of this nature date back to about 30 years, when a small group of experts began conducting research and compiling reports and papers, mainly on behalf of international organizations such as UNESCO (Wiesand 2002). In Europe - on which the analysis in this paper focuses - this phenomenon can be clearly

detected in the tendency shown by European Governments, around the early 70s, to look beyond their national borders for inspiration and solutions to their policy problems. Observing one's own national policies in comparison to other countries is indeed a very good way to get a fuller understanding of the policy-making processes and their effectiveness in the homeland. This observation is especially valid for EU countries, where the attempts on the part of international and transnational organizations (first and foremost the European Community itself) to establish common standards in several public policy areas have represented a strong incentive for researching the ways in which other EU countries have faced common problems (Antal et al 1996, 10).

As a result of this growing interest in cross-national comparisons of public policies, the first European intergovernmental conferences on cultural policies took place in Venice in 1970 and in Helsinki in 1972, with the aim of looking at their objectives and their financial and administrative aspects (Wiesand, 2002). Furthermore, the interest in this topic has not ceased to be a stimulus for the setting up of ambitious cross-national research projects, especially on the part of European and international bodies such as the Council of Europe or UNESCO. And we cannot avoid mentioning in this regard, the programme of national cultural policy reviews that was set up in 1985 by the Council for Cultural Co-operation within the Council of Europe. The reviews involved two types of report for each country that took part in the programme: a 'national' report was produced by the relevant authorities (i.e. Ministries of Culture, of Foreign Affairs, etc.); a second was compiled by a team of experts appointed by the Council of Europe (D'Angelo and Vesperini 1998, 12-13).

This was certainly an important step forward in the developing of an international interest in the exercise of cross-national, comparative cultural policy analysis. However, from the point of view of methodology, which is the issue with which this

paper concerns itself, there are problems with this type of research that do not allow us to consider this project as a genuinely comparative study on various national cultural policies. The UNESCO series of publications *Studies and documents on cultural policies* presents similar problems: each of the volumes offers a description of the cultural policy of each state; however, the data presented in each booklet have been collected in different ways in each country, and at different points in time. The data are thus not harmonized because they reflect the very particular political, institutional and administrative realities of each country, as well as different practices in data collection. The data are, thus, impossible to compare (Schuster 1996, 30).

Unfortunately, the harmonization of data collection, and therefore the comparability across states of national cultural statistics, is - even among EU countries - still not an achievement as much as a target, albeit a target that seems to be getting closer. At the European level, good results have been achieved, and a 'common statistical language' has been developed that allows for the collection of consistent statistics (and consequently for sound international comparisons) in the field of economics. Currently, work is being done towards a more focused development of harmonized EU cultural statistics via the involvement of Eurostat, the Statistical office of the European Communities and the institution, in 1997, of a cultural statistics LEG (Leadership Group) with a mandate to start producing statistics on cultural expenditure, employment in the cultural sector, etc, comparable across the EU (Allin, 2000). Another factor worth mentioning here is the recent trend in the rise of the phenomenon of the international "cultural observatories", whose work is often of a cross-national nature and whose number and importance in the context of the diffusion and production of cultural data have been consistently growing in the last decade. Schuster (2002, 29-39) in his recently published work on the cultural policy information infrastructure, has contributed a detailed discussion of the rise of organizations such as cultural observatories and network and the ways in which their

activities of data-gathering, monitoring and dissemination of information – as well as their particular *modus operandi* - has increasingly impacted (in ways that are both good and bad) on cultural policy research.

However fundamental the development of comparable international cultural statistics is for the development of cross-national cultural policy analysis, it is important not to reduce methodological issues in comparative cultural policy to a mere discussion of harmonization of statistical data. In fact, too often comparative cultural policy is limited to a discussion over comparability of national public arts expenditure data, and to the 'league table' approach that tends to come with it. The problem with the latter is that it seems to reduce the comparative study of policies for culture to the production - more or less rigorous - of tables that claim to compare government support for the arts in different countries (normally by charting the proportion of per capita state expenditure on the arts and culture)². Indeed, to borrow the words of J. Mark Schuster, who has written widely on the problems concerning the scarce availability, reliability and comparability of cultural statistics in comparative cultural policy research, "the league table has become a *sine qua non* of much comparative research on arts funding" (Schuster 1996, 24). He goes on to argue that often these tables, while giving the impression of providing answers to fundamental questions about state support for the arts in various countries, actually raise more questions that they answer (Schuster 1996, 23-26).

An interesting case in point is one of the latest statistics-based comparative studies of public funding of the arts carried out in the UK, and commissioned by the Arts Council of England in 1998. According to the data presented in the published report, the cultural sector allegedly occupies less than two per cent of the total public

² The Research Report *International data on public spending on the arts in eleven countries* published by the Arts Council of England (edited by Feist *et al.*) in 1998 and discussed later on in the paper is one of the most recent and ambitious examples.

expenditure in many European countries. The proportion of public resources devoted to culture seems to be, in fact, less than one per cent in the two countries at the centre of this study, Italy and the UK (Feist *et al.*, 1998). Undoubtedly, there are a number of reasons that call for a cautious approach to such data. For instance, subsidies to public libraries are not included in the calculation of public expenditure on culture in the UK. However, in the section devoted to Italy, archives and libraries are included in the tables charting government's expenditures on culture. Therefore, data presented in the report offer a distorted picture of the financial commitment of the British state to culture. As a result, comparing the data presented in different sections of the same report turns out to be a rather pointless, if not even misleading, exercise. This can be explained by the fact that the report is based on the analysis of *existing* published and unpublished data available in each country. Such data has been collected according to differing criteria across different countries, and some of the extant statistical data might be impossible to disaggregate. This is indeed a problem common to much cross-national work that relies heavily on quantitative material.

Therefore, the 'league table' approach and, more generally, a study of cultural policy that relies exclusively or mainly on quantitative data (usually the comparison of national expenditure data to explain differences between cultural policies across nations) can be misleading and, indeed, has been criticized as such within the academic literature in the field (Schuster, 1988 and 1996; Kawashima, 1995; Feist and Hutchison, 1990). It is not in the intention of this paper to provide a detailed criticism of this type of research. However, in the present context it might be useful to refer to Schuster's (1996, 34) reference to an article, now famous within the American public policy literature, written in 1971 by Max Singer. The article was entitled – rather eloquently – *The vitality of mythical numbers*. Its content is very simple, yet meaningful: once a statistic is produced (no matter how incorrectly) and

starts being quoted, it takes on a life of its own. As a result, the imaginary statistics might enter the official debate on cultural policy, being quoted for years without their original source and its reliability ever being verified.

An explanation for this state of affairs can be found in the fact that much of the comparative research that has so far been carried out in the sphere of cultural policy is very political in its intent, and thus often confuses research and advocacy. As a result, the desire for increased understanding often gives in to the political desirability of certain outcomes over others. Indeed, it is not rare for the policy-makers that commission research to have a more or less explicit political purpose. (Schuster, 1988 and 1996; Kawashima 1995 and 1999). Consequently, too many of the available studies are the product of a time-limited commission from arts agencies or funding bodies whose genuine objective is not to further knowledge and understanding through research (Schuster, 1988, 2). Moreover, nowadays in most countries, arts organizations work on very tight budgets that do not often include resource allocations especially devoted to funding research. This means that more often than not, resources for research are taken from resources that would have otherwise been spent on cultural activities. Hence the sometime considerable internal pressure, within arts organizations, against funding research (Schuster 1996, 34). In such a context, it is important to underline the important contribution that the academic world could make to the development of more methodologically sound and unbiased research in the field of cultural policy studies.³

³ However, as Kawashima wrote in 1999, it still seems true that "...there has been a gap between practical, policy-oriented research and academic, theoretical research" (Kawashima, 1999, 2)

CULTURAL POLICY ACROSS NATIONAL BOUNDARIES: THE “MODELS OF CULTURAL POLICY” APPROACH

Although a significant proportion of cross-national studies in the disciplinary area of cultural policy studies is based on the presentation and the discussion of quantitative data, it would be wrong to assume that this is the only type of comparative research currently available. In fact, another important strand of cross-national research has been developing in parallel to the ‘league table’ type described above. This alternative form of cross-national analysis is represented by what could be labeled as the ‘cultural policy models’ literature. By this expression, I refer to the body of work that discusses the different administrative frameworks for cultural policy in different countries in the attempt to derive, from such observation, a number of “archetypical” models of cultural policy to which all others could be more or less be ascribed. This type of work, whose most influential examples were published in the mid-80s, quite often attempted to establish and observe the links between national cultural policies and the cultural, intellectual and historical contexts of the countries in which they had developed. In many ways the contribution of such works is still valuable, in so far as it brings to the attention of the reader how different styles of cultural policy-making are a result of a number of complex variables and historical developments. One of the most illustrious representatives of this approach to cross-national research is the influential collection of essays edited by Cumming and Katz (1987a) with the title *The Patron State: Government and the Arts in Europe, North America and Japan*.

In their introductory chapter, Cumming and Katz acknowledge the diversity among different countries' cultural policies and the institutions that are in charge to define and implement them. More importantly, they explicitly link such diversity to each country's particular context: “...this variety reflects not only differing national traditions in the organization of public functions, but differing philosophies and objectives

regarding the whole area of culture and the arts” (Cumming and Katz 1987b, 4). The chapters that make up the book all share the ambition to shed light upon such differing philosophies of policy making for the cultural sector, as well as the varying definitions - adopted among different countries - of what cultural forms the state should take upon itself to finance and promote. Moreover, on the basis of their historical roots, Cumming and Katz (*Ibid.*, 5) identify two main patterns of political development on which contemporary national cultural policy models have been molded. The first is that of the royal absolutist states such as France and Austria, and the other is represented by more limited monarchies that developed in highly mercantile countries, such as the Netherlands and England. Countries like Germany and Italy - which were united in a single state only in the second part of the nineteenth century – display, according to this paradigm, a mixture of the characteristics of either group. From these diverging historical factors derived the various models of contemporary cultural policy presented in *The Patron State*.

According to Cummings and Katz (1987b, 12) there are indeed various different organisational forms that governments can choose in order to pursue their goals with regards to cultural policies: one is the quasi-public institution at arm’s length from the government which tends to prevail in the Anglo-Saxon world, having been pioneered by UK. The alternative approach is based on the notion that cultural provision and support are simply examples of the many functions of the state, and as such, they are to be run according to the normal rules and procedures that regulate the public administration. One variant of this approach is represented by the so-called “French Ministry of Culture Model”, whereby responsibilities for policy-making, funding and advocacy for the cultural sector are all reunited under the roof of a single ministry, headed by a cabinet minister. In Cummings and Katz’s paradigm, Italy represents a second variant of the normal public administration approach, since responsibility of cultural programmes is – in this case – divided amongst several ministries. In both

the Italian and French models, however, resources for culture are allocated following the same budgetary procedures as for any other form of public spending, and the same control mechanisms are in place as for any other government's departments and ministries (*Ibid.*).

However, following the creation in Italy – in 1998 - of the first unified Ministry for Culture since the fascist era, it might be argued that the difference identified in the late 1980s by Cumming and Katz between the French and Italian variants of the public administration-based model of cultural policy has lost much of its relevance today. Indeed, the Italian Ministry for Heritage and Cultural Activities has, according to Carla Bodo (2002, 3) “finally achieved the full status of a ministry of culture comparable to the ones existing in most European countries”⁴. Equally outdated is the discussion of Germany's federal policies for culture, in view of the re-unification of Germany following the fall of Berlin wall in 1989.

However, besides the obvious and inevitable obsolescence of the information it presents, from a methodological point of view, there are further limitations in this collection of essays. Arguably, *The Patron State* belongs to that category of work that Schuster (1996, 30) has wittily labelled as the ‘ten countries, ten chapters and a staple’ literature. This is because the discussion offered by each chapter is in fact developed independently from the other chapters in the book. No common framework has been adopted and shared by the many authors whose papers are brought together in the volume. No particular disciplinary perspective nor methodological approach has been consistently endorsed by all the authors. So, on the one hand, the chapter on Italy consists of a detailed and rather technical

⁴ The competencies of the unified Italian ministry now include the performing arts, cinema and copyright; only responsibilities for information and arts education are still beyond its remit (Bodo 2002).

discussion of the legislation relevant to the administration of the cultural sector in force at the time in the country and how it originated in the Fascist era (Palma and Clemente di San Luca 1987). On the other hand, the chapter on the UK adopts a more discursive tone and - after an attempt to link prevalent notions of culture in Britain to the country's Protestant tradition and to the political dominance of capitalism - presents a historical review of the development of the main institutions responsible for the distribution of public resources to the British arts sector.

As the following sections of this paper aim to show, there is a well founded reason why a legal focus is more appropriate to understand the logic of cultural policy-making in Italy - and therefore preferable to an approach based on historical reconstruction such as the one chosen by F. F. Ridley (1987) for his chapter *Tradition, Change, and Crisis in Great Britain*. However, no explanation or justification for the adoption of such different approaches within the same collection of work is offered, since each chapter represents, in fact, a self-contained and independent unit which the authors have developed from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, emphasising different aspects of the process of cultural policy-making.

A second influential work of the "cultural policy models" type is represented by the collection of essays edited by Cummings and Schuster and published by the American Council for the Arts in 1989. The contribution by Hilman-Chartrand and McCaughey to the volume is the most relevant to the present discussion. Their paper looks at the ways in which different governments articulate and implements their cultural policies, and on this base, they identify four different models of the state's involvement in the financial support of the cultural sector. Hilman-Chartrand and McCaughey's chapter begins with a discussion of the centrality of the so-called "arm's length principle" in Western public policy and in the promotion of the arts and

culture on the part of the state. However, there are other alternative modes of public support that need to be taken into consideration. In the authors own words:

The arm's length principle [...] is not the only possible mode of public support to the fine arts. There are four alternative roles for the State: Facilitator, Patron, Architect and Engineer. Furthermore, the State can have two different objectives – to support the process of creativity or to support production of specific types of art such as socialist realism (Hilman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989, 48).

The chapter goes on to provide examples of each of the four models of state support for the arts just described (*Ibid.* 48-53). So, the United States with its generous policy of promoting the arts through incentives to private donations in the form of foregone taxes, represent the Facilitator state. Great Britain, embodies the type of the Patron State, which is characterised by the reliance on bodies at “arm’s length” from the government for the distribution of public resources to the cultural sector. France is the archetypical Architect state, where culture is highly bureaucratised and crucial decisions are made centrally by a Ministry for Culture. The fourth model of state intervention is the most appealing to governments with totalitarian tendencies, since it features the subjection of cultural policies and strategies to the obtainment of political goals, and artistic decisions are made and modified according to changes in the government’s political priorities. Interestingly, after describing at great lengths the various models of state support of the arts, Hilman-Chartrand and McCaughey (*Ibid.*, 53) admit that “[a]lthough these roles are mutually exclusive in theory, in practice, most nations combine some or all of them”. Furthermore, the final section of the chapter, sets out to demonstrate how these ideal roles of the state *vis à vis* the arts have been progressively converging, so that “[m]ost countries have, to varying degrees, adopted all four modes of public support” (*Ibid.*, 72) . In the fifteen years that have intervened since the publication of Hilman-Chartrand and McCaughey’s

work, with the process of globalisation now well underway, this trend towards convergence has become even more marked, and the role of the state in the promotion of the cultural sector has become so complex – if not even, occasionally, contradictory (Belfiore 2004) – that the four ideal types described above are not as useful a tool in understanding how cultural policy develops differently in different countries as it probably was when they were first conceptualised.

BEYOND A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

In the light of the preceding observations, it cannot be denied that a lot still has to be done to conceptualize comparative cultural policy, so that we are able to go beyond a purely quantitative methodology based on international comparison of cultural statistical data. Cultural expenditure is certainly an important aspect in so far as it represents an expression of a government's priorities in cultural funding and, consequently, in the broader sphere of cultural policy. Thus – as Clive Gray (1996, 218-219) warns us - what is spent, how it is spent and the effects of what is spent are important issues in understanding cultural policies. This is especially significant when public expenditure is observed over the longer term, in order to register changes in governments' priorities and preoccupations vis à vis cultural policies. However, this paper aims to suggest that a quantitative approach cannot alone suffice to understand the workings of the cultural sector and of policies for it across nations. To this end, a methodological approach is needed that allows and requires a more in-depth study of the cultural, social and political history and the cultural debates within the countries being compared, as well as an understanding of their legal and administrative systems as a precondition for discussing cultural policy mechanisms cross-nationally. The importance of such an approach is eloquently exemplified by the case study of the comparative analysis of the cultural policy of Britain and Italy.

For obvious reasons, an in-depth discussion of the contrasting historical developments within the political, administrative and legal realms in Italy and the UK is beyond the scope of this article⁵. However, before turning to the analysis of public policy making with specific regards to the arts and culture, it is necessary to consider the frame in which public policy is made and studied in the two countries, and examine whether the contrasting understanding of the very notion of *policy* might affect decisions that are made in the administration of the public cultural sector. The following section of the paper will thus consider the different ways in which the two countries understand and talk about policy and its relation to the sphere of politics. The paper will then concentrate on the different ways in which the notion of culture - upon which cultural policy is based - has been articulated within the two countries, and the implications for the cultural policy researcher.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PRACTICE: TALKING ABOUT POLICY IN BRITAIN AND ITALY

As Peter John explains, “research on policy seeks to understand how the machinery of the state and political actors interact to produce public actions” (John 1998, 1). Its main focus of analysis is therefore the ensemble of decisions that determine the output of a political system (in the case presently under scrutiny, cultural policies) as well as changes that such decisions produce outside of the political system itself, which are normally referred to as ‘policy outcomes’ (for example, increased levels of participation in cultural activities, or changes in the age or social composition of arts audiences) (*Ibid.*). The ultimate *raison d’être* of the discipline of public policy research, thus, lies in the ambition to explore and explain the complexities of the policy-making process. As John (1998, 1-2) further explains:

⁵ The following section of the paper indeed represents an excerpt of a more comprehensive and exhaustive comparative study of Britain and Italy that is still in progress.

Public policy seeks to explain the operation of the political system as a whole. This is its main contribution to political science. The policy-orientated approach looks at public decision-making from the viewpoint of what comes out of the political process. Each element of policy-making is considered to cause a particular output and outcome.

Despite the discipline's focus on policy outcomes, policy researchers are well aware that policy-making remains nevertheless a highly political exercise. Indeed, each policy sector contains within itself all the elements that make up a political system: elected politicians, civil servants, pressure-groups, bureaucrats and so on, as well as the complex fabric of institutional relationships, law and regulations that govern any modern political structure. It thus logically follows that one of the principal goals of policy-oriented research in the politics sphere should be "to sharpen up the analysis of politics by examining the links between decision-makers as they negotiate and seek influence in the governmental system" (John 1998, 2).

As a sub-sector of public policy, cultural policy can therefore be described as the variegated forms of institutional structures that have been set in place by national and local government to support, as well as regulate, the heritage and the diverse creative and artistic endeavours that make up the creative sector. However, as Bennett (1995, 201) points out, cultural policy is not limited to governmental activities, since also the measures adopted by organisations within the cultural sector itself are an equally important aspect of cultural policy. As Miller and Yúdice (2002, 1) explain, 'organizations solicit, train, distribute, finance, describe and reject actors and activities that go under the signs of artist or artwork, through the implementation of policies'.

In this sense, cultural policy, despite being concerned with arts and what might appear – to the naïve observer – concerned with the aloft and timeless preoccupations of aesthetics⁶ is in fact a rather political terrain, no less than other aspects of policy, such as health or social policy where the political element might seem more obvious. In fact, as Jim McGuigan (1996, 5) argues, the political element has been, until very recently, what has been most attractive to researchers working in the disciplinary fields that are grouped under the umbrella term of cultural studies. Consequently, while ‘cultural politics’ - intended as aesthetic practices that aim to challenge the mainstream and the cultural establishment – have received great attention, the more pragmatic ‘politics of culture’ - which include not only policy analysis but also policy formulation - have been somewhat neglected. McGuigan suggests that an explanation for this lack of interest might reside in an exaggerated form of critical purity on the part of researchers working within cultural studies, as well as on their reluctance to get involved in the state’s regulatory processes (*Ibid.*). This might contribute to explain the relatively recent development of the academic interest in cultural policy research that was discussed in the preceding chapter.

It is important, however, to put such slow development of cultural policy studies as a discrete field of research into an appropriate context. It is significant to note how, in fact, the systematic study of public policy (of which cultural policy can be seen as a sub-discipline with a stronger humanistic connotation) is itself a rather young field of enquiry within political science. Beryl A. Radin (2000, 1), in trying to describe what it means to be a policy analyst, goes as far as claiming that “[d]espite the growth of the field over the past several decades, this is not a profession that the general public understands. It is obvious that policy analysis has not gained a place in the world of professions equal to that of law, medicine or engineering”. This might seem a rather

⁶ Arguably, however, such naïve observers are today on their way to extinction, since postmodern theory has made a point of negating the existence of any non-politically charged notion of what represents art or aesthetically valuable endeavours.

surprising statement, especially to the British reader, in consideration of the escalating reliance of UK government and policy-makers on consultants, analysts and the ever-increasingly powerful 'think-thanks'. However, if we turn to Italy, we would have to conclude that the state of affairs there is rather different, and an Italian reader would certainly be more sympathetic towards Radin's statement.

Indeed, if research into public policy has had a slow development in the Anglophone world, this has been even slower in Italy, where public policies and policy-making have not received a degree of attention and scrutiny parallel to that of other major European countries. In his research guide to contemporary Italy, Bull (1996, 34) attributes this to the fact that, in the early 1960s, when the question of state intervention and public policy-making became a crucial issue, Italian political science was so underdeveloped that it was just incapable of properly analysing the changing circumstances. In other countries, around that same time - following the establishment of welfare states - the interest in the understanding and evaluation of public policies constituted a crucial encouragement for the development of public policy research (John 1998, 4). The above-mentioned shortcomings of Italian political science meant that, there, public policy became the preserve of academics with a legal, economic and sociological background. A more systematic approach to the study of public policy was eventually prompted by the establishment of the Italian welfare state in 1978 (Bull 1996, 35), although policy analysis first entered the world of academia only in the mid-eighties, when the first courses on public policy were established in a limited number of universities.

Today, public policy still represents only a minority interest within the broader field of Italian political science - which is itself reputed to be lagging behind and struggling in catching up with international developments (Bull 1996, 34-35; Regonini 2001, 46). Regonini (2001, 46) further laments the fact that even as late as 1990 'public policy'

was not to be found in the subject index of the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* (the main political science journal in the country), nor have Italian publishing houses shown much interest in foreign publications in the field, with the result that a number of works by 'classic authors' of the public policy tradition, such as Lowi, Schön, Allison, Wildavsky and Kingdon, are not available in translation. The following section of the paper will explore a possible explanation for such a late development in the interest in public policy and its study in Italy.

***“NOMINA SUNT SUBSTANTIA RERUM”?* A QUESTION OF VOCABULARY**

Regonini (2001, 12) suggests that one of the causes for such a lack of interest in policy research on the part of the Italian academia might be linked to the fact that a very large proportion of the extant literature in this area has been produced in the United States. Consequently, a certain appreciation of the administrative and political structures in place there - which the Italian policy researcher might not necessarily be acquainted with - is required background knowledge for the full understanding of the available public policy literature. More importantly, work produced in the American cultural context refers to concepts and values that are not equally diffused - or even acceptable - when transposed into the Italian system of beliefs and values. This concept is effectively clarified by the reception, in Italy, of what is universally seen to be now a 'classic' text of policy analysis: Lindbloom's 1959 article entitled *The science of "muddling through"*. This otherwise influential article, as well as its very title, could not solicit but the uttermost suspicion in a culture such as the Italian one, characterised by a deep-rooted sense of reverence for the written law as a guide to public administration. This reverential attitude to the law is indeed reflected in disputes over conflicting interpretations of single words of the legislative text that can engage law experts and high courts alike for whole decades. It is therefore common

for the educated Italian reader to feel that, while policy studies might provide useful guidance towards an improved public administration, they do not display an adequate standard of scientific solidity at the theoretical and methodological levels to command academic credibility (Regonini 2001, 12)⁷. The lack of a unitary *corpus* of literature in the disciplinary field of public policy, to be shared by all those involved in it and commonly referred to, further enhances the difficulty of seeing public policy as a fully legitimate subject for academic research (Regonini 2001, 13).

Such scepticism is without any doubt accentuated by the fact that the word *policy*, in fact, does not exist in the Italian language. As a result, in Italian (as well as in most other main continental European languages) it becomes much harder to make explicit the distinction between *politics* and *policy* that is immediately obvious to the English speaker. This has implications that go well beyond the impossibility of translating in an elegant way expressions such as, for example, “the politics of cultural policy”. For it is significant to point out how the words ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ have, in the Anglophone linguistic context, a strong autonomy not only of a lexical nature, but also at the level of meaning. As Regonini (2001, 19) shows, in the American political and cultural frames of reference, such a distinction often shifts into an open contraposition, whereby the notion of *policy* is felt to be freer from connotations of partisanship and corruption than *politics*.

Arnold J. Heidenheimer (1986) has contributed an interesting review of the historical foundations and the principal consequences of the divergence between the concepts of ‘politics’ and ‘policy’ in English and other Continental European languages. He bases much of his conclusions on examples derived from German and French, although the paper’s central argument is also valid for other European languages.

⁷ As the opinion by Beryl A. Radin (2000) referred to above confirms, this is hardly a sentiment limited to Italian academics, though it is arguable that it might be more intense amongst them for the reasons suggested by Regonini (2001).

Heidenheimer (*Ibid.*, 3) maintains that the fact that many languages in Europe do not possess a term for policy that is distinct from that for politics is a terminological problem that is primarily responsible for the difficulties in establishing a genuinely cross-national literature on political science. His paper represents an important attempt to study in a systematic way what he (*Ibid.*, 4) refers to as the “polis-family of words” (in so far as the terms under analysis in his paper are all derived from the Greek terms *polis* and *politeia*). His aim is to achieve a better understanding of the development of terminologies over time and across language areas, with a view to reconstructing the series of events that brought the English language to develop a notion of ‘policy’ complementary to that of politics, while in the other Continental languages both meanings came together in the sole term of politics.

The importance of Heidenheimer’s work lies in the fact that, as observed by the German political scientist Sternberger, there is “no comprehensive philological study existing so far which would inform us about the curious migration or migrations of these words through the ages, or about the striking changes of meaning they underwent in the course of time” (quoted in Heidenheimer 1986, 4). Although over two decades have passed since Sternberger wrote these words in the early 1980s, the underdevelopment of research in this area seems to be still unchallenged. Accordingly, today there still is no established analytical framework that deals specifically with the variation of meanings of similar words across languages as well as changes in the meaning of those words over time. This means that quite often both ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ are translated as ‘politics’ without much awareness, on the part of professional translators, of the need to make explicit the actual difference in meaning conveyed by the two English words. It is very telling that Regonini, writing in Italian in 2001, in order to represent faithfully the thought of foreign theorists whose work she refers to in her book, has felt the need of going back to the original texts and offer her own translation of crucial passages, in view of the shortcomings of the

available published translations of those same classic texts (Regonini 2001, chapter 1).

Unfortunately, limitations of space do not allow me to discuss here in great detail the historical reconstruction of the evolution of the words *policy* and *politics* offered by Heidenheimer. Suffice it to say that he establishes a correlation between the decline of feudalism and the rise of an urban merchant class in England and the diffusion of the term *policy* (with its already mentioned more positive connotation with respects to *politics*). His main argument is that:

The English *policy* became generalised in a socially downward direction in ways that the Continental term *Policey* could not. That is, terms that were initially attributed to royalty and higher strata came to be applied also to the actions of ordinary citizens. [...] In the Continental systems with higher stateness⁸, the terms *Policey* and *Politik* became, over roughly the same period, semantically further removed from the private word of the burgher and citizen. Both concepts were becoming associated with actions at higher levels of the evolving nation-states (Heidenheimer 1986, 14).

In summary, Heidenheimer believes that the shifts in meaning among the various terms belonging to the “polis-family of words” in different European languages is ascribable to the different political circumstances of the various countries, and are the reflection of their political traditions (e.g. higher or lower degree of ‘stateness’) and of different priorities in governmental concerns within the arenas of both domestic and foreign policy (Heidenheimer 1986, 7-15).

⁸ Heidenheimer (1986, 9) maintains that nations can be distinguished on the basis of their different levels of ‘stateness’. Quoting Ernest Baker, he writes: “State societies” like France and Germany developed historical and intellectual traditions of the state embodying the “public power”. “Stateless societies” fall short of perceiving “the state as an institution which acts”. Englishmen tended rather to see in the executive, “just a bundle of officials, united only by a mysterious Crown which serves chiefly as a bracket to unite an infinite series of integers”.

Far from being a dispute of purely linguistic relevance, Heidenheimer's arguments have very important repercussions on the ways in which speakers of different languages think and write of politics and policy. Heidenheimer himself proffers very telling examples. He recounts his attempt to prove wrong, with a simple empirical test, the belief beheld by many Continental political scientists that – despite the limitations of their native languages – when reading foreign texts in translation, they are able to gather from the context whether the English writer refers to 'policy' or 'politics' in his or her arguments. However, when asked to translate the heading of a press release that read "Industrial Policy = Industrial Politics" the press staff of European embassies in Washington offered very different translations. More significantly, even countries sharing the same language came up with rather different renderings of the heading. So, if the French embassy translated the given sentence as "Le politique industrielle = le politiques de l'industrie", the Belgian Embassy's version was the substantially different "Politique industrielle = politique policienne de l'industrie". While the Spanish Embassy's interpretation is the yet different: "Una politica industrial = Political industrial Global", the Germans had to render the obviously troublesome second part of the heading with an incredibly long circumlocution: "Industriepolitik = parteipolitische Auffassung von der Foederungswuerdigkeit bestimmter Industriezweige" (Heidenheimer 1986, 20-21).

What are the consequences of the linguist *impasse* the preceding examples so sharply point out? According to the Italian social scientist Giovanni Sartori (1984 and 1973) - who has conducted extensive research into the theory of political and social concepts, their historical development and their links to language - such consequences are, as a matter of fact, extremely significant. He insists (1984, 15) that whatever we know is mediated by language and that since "language is the sine qua non instrument of knowing, the knowledge-seeker had better be in control of the

instrument". At the centre of Sartori's argument is the claim that rather than simply expressing thought, language is in fact a 'thought-moulding instrument': words 'interpret' things. Sartori therefore holds that the language user thinks through a vocabulary that embodies and reflects a general way of perceiving and conceiving things (*Ibid.*, 18). To make this concept clearer, he refers to the notions of *semantic projection* and *semantic import* (*Ibid.*, 16-17). This is how he explains their meaning:

the semantic import of words entails that (1) what is *not named* largely remains *unnoticed* or, in any event, impervious to cognitive development; and that, (2) the *naming choice* (selecting a given word within a given semantic field) involves a far-reaching *interpretive projection*. All told, then, projective semantics brings to the fore both the *constraints* and the *pathways* that any given natural language imposes upon and affords to our perceiving, thinking and knowing.

Sartori clearly shares Heidegger's scepticism of the researcher's capacity to go beyond the conceptual limits of his or her natural language in order to grasp notions and concepts (as well as the full meaning of the words that express them) elaborated in other languages. Drawing on a biblical paraphrase, Sartori (*Ibid.*, 17) explains that "in the beginning is the word, that is, *naming*". When we express what we have in mind, we select, among the number of possible choices offered by our natural language, those words that can best represent our thoughts. Conversely, we would struggle to express effectively what we mean unless we are able to find the words for it, and, by the same token, we cannot form a sentence unless we already know the meaning of the words contained in it. Sartori therefore agrees with Taylor, who wrote that "language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is" (quoted in Sartori 1984, 17).

It should be clear at this stage that these arguments have very serious implications for the question of the consequences of the lack of the word 'policy' in many Continental languages (including Italian) that has been discussed so far. These, have been spelt out very powerfully by Whorf (quoted in Sartori 1984, 17-18), who writes: "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages ... we cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to ... our speech community". It follows thus, that "facts are unlike to speakers whose language background provides for unlike formulation of them". In conclusion, Whorf argues that thinking "is in a language – in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system ... by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning"⁹.

Sartori warns of the possible extreme interpretation of Whorf's relativism as a principle of 'untranslatability', which he thinks would be an exaggerated reaction. However, he reinforces the point that whenever people think about something at any point in time, they do so in relation to a particular linguistic system which is taken to be a 'given'. This is the meaning of Sartori's insistence upon the role of language in moulding thought which was referred to above. He exemplifies this point with a number of convincing examples (Sartori 1984 19-22). He begins with the preference displayed by the English language for the word 'government' over the word 'state', which has resulted in the systematic translation of the French *état*, the German *Staat* and the Italian *stato* as 'government'. Conversely, other European languages consider 'government' merely as one of the partitions of the state, which they still consider as a broader, general entity. The practical consequence of this different

⁹ According to Sartori, the fact that translators have somehow managed, for millennia, to translate written works from one language into another does not question the validity of the point made, since the polyglot in fact 'rethinks' in each of the languages he or she is proficient in, rather than actually translating as such (Sartori 1984, 65).

linguistic reference is that whoever decides to write on the topic of the state in English is handicapped, according to Sartori, in two different respects. First of all, the writer is exposed to the ambiguity of the relationship between the words and concepts of state and government. On the other hand, he or she would also tend to limit the scope of the research, in so far as the more pragmatic approach (implicit in the reduction of the concept of state to that of government) misses out on what has been written in other languages and within cultures attached to the more theoretical notion of state. These are indeed more likely to have elaborated a more abstract, juridical as well as philosophical theory of the state.

Sartori (1984, 21) further suggests that even the different ways in which different peoples see themselves as part of a national community might be affected by linguistic differences. To stick with the Italian and English languages, 'people' is, in English, a plural noun, whereas its Italian equivalent *popolo* (as well as the German *Volk* and the French *peuple*) is singular. This linguistic difference is paralleled by the difficulty on the part of English-speaking political writers to see the people as "an oversoul, or as an organic indivisible entity", while such notion is at the very basis of the Italian, French and German speech communities. Sartori thinks that this might not be a simple coincidence, rather, his hypothesis is that "when we say 'people are' we are semantically prompted to perceive and conceive a multiplicity, a sum total of 'each body', while those who say 'people is' are predisposed and encouraged to conceive an 'allbody', a whole that subsumes its parts" (Sartori 1984, 21).

What implications do the considerations presented so far have on the specific case in point for this research?

THE PREVALENCE OF 'ABSOLUTE POLITICS' IN ITALY

If one were to accept Sartori's theory of language as a thought-moulding instrument, then it would consequentially follow that the fact that the Italian language does not possess a distinctive word to express the meaning conveyed, in English, by the word policy should be a prime reason behind the slower development of public policy studies in Italy. This seems confirmed by the observation made by the renowned social scientist Alessandro Pizzorno that the Italian public sphere is dominated by what he calls 'absolute politics' (*la politica assoluta*). Implicit in the notion of absolute politics is the belief that political action is the only form of activity that can significantly transform society. According to this view, political action is the only means by which the life of the nation, and in fact, the life of humanity as a whole can be improved according to an ideal of perfection (Pizzorno quoted in Regonini 2001, 18). In Pizzorno's view, then, at the heart of absolute politics is the conviction that collective quality of life can only be enhanced through forms of political action that aim to radically change the structure and distribution of political power within society: party activism, political mobilization, voting at political elections and even the choice to fight the current political system (Regonini 2001, 18). In this perspective, 'relative politics' (*le politiche relative*) - that is specific policies targeted at the solution of a number of issues arising from the life of the community (transport, education, health and so on and so forth) - are clearly seen as subaltern, amounting to merely dependent variables. Policies are indeed conceived, at best, as either obstacles to be removed or as useful tools to gain consensus, and therefore advantage, in the rather more significant game of politics.

Regonini (2001, 18) further elucidates Pizzorno's theory by explaining that deep-rooted in Italian political perceptions is the idea that *politica* intended as 'politics' (that is, the ensemble of the intricate relationships between government, party leaders and voters that are founded on the striving for ever stronger consensus and

power) and *politica* as 'policy' (intended as the strategies put in place to tackle a collective problem or issue), rather than being two distinct concepts expressed by a single word are, in fact, just two aspects of the same phenomenon. In this case then, the first idea of the word *politica* expresses its most crucial and essential traits, while *politica* as policy depicts what are clearly only derivative or secondary aspects¹⁰.

This internal differentiation in the meaning of the Italian word *politica* clearly causes the ambiguity in practical usage lamented by Heidenheimer, but also seems to prove right Sartori's claim about the neglect that befalls the concepts that a language does not explicitly express by naming them. Following Sartori's line of reasoning, the slow development of the discipline of policy analysis and, more generally, the scarce interest in public policy in Italy could be accounted for by the very lack of a word for policy. This linguistic situation creates a pathway of thought that directs attention to the more comprehensive notion of politics rather than to the more specific notion of policy which is adumbrated within it.

Moreover, in the Italian case, the linguistic ambiguity is even more marked than for other continental European languages. As noted by McGuigan (1996, 7), the French language – like the Italian - does not possess a specific term for policy, however, it has managed to create a distinction between the masculine form *le politique*, which refers to institutionalised politics, and the feminine *la politique* which refers more directly to the science of politics and policy. The Italian language, as we have just seen, can only rely on the feminine noun *politica* which thus embodies both meanings. To complicate things even further, in the phrase public policy, it is not only the noun which is difficult to translate in Italian, but also the adjective 'public'. This, in

¹⁰ Regonini (2001, 20) gives a number of examples, taken from the Italian press, of public declarations of Italian ministers and politicians which clearly reveal that such subordination of policy to politics, far from being limited to the perceptions of the general public, is in fact shared by politicians themselves. Very telling is the case of Francesco De Lorenzo, once Minister for Health, who – when asked by a journalist whether he would like to repeat his ministerial experience - answered that rather than being involved in government (that is, policy-making) he would much prefer to go back to being involved in 'politics with a capital P'.

Italy, is generally interpreted as having the more restrictive meaning of 'belonging or pertaining to the state' rather than the broader acceptation 'of or concerning the people as a whole' received in the English language (according to the OED).

Resulting from the complexity of the Italian situation is the central role acquired by jurists, who, stretching the boundaries of their discipline, have turned public policy (and, consequently, cultural policy too) into one of their specific competences. If on the one hand this has had the positive effect of filling the already discussed research gap in this field, on the other hand, it confirms the unchallenged prominence that law holds on the understanding and research of the Italian public sphere. Furthermore, during the 1960s, Italian jurists positively resisted the development of political sciences as an autonomous discipline in order to maintain their intellectual dominance over the academic study of public policy-making. (Regonini 2001, 47).

The major consequence of this state of affairs is that, in Italy, the bridge between scientific research and active involvement in the solution of issues of collective significance has been built and controlled by the legal disciplines alone. As a result, the framework in which it has become customary to discuss public issues in Italy is that elaborated by the legal disciplines - though the boundaries of their competences tend to be so flexible that they often come to include also economic, sociological and organisational considerations¹¹. Hence, policy difficulties and failures have been narrowly interpreted in terms of the inadequacy of the norms and laws that regulate the public sector, or their violation on the part of the main actors in public-policy making (Regonini 2001, 47).

¹¹ It is interesting to note that while the legal discipline has displayed a clear tendency to absorb other fields of enquiry, other academic areas have developed in accordance to a strict and limiting interpretation of their scope for research. So, economist have limited themselves to the analysis of economic issues, while pedagogic experts have stuck with educational issues, architects with city planning ones, and so on and so forth (Regonini 2001, 47).

However, as Regonini (2001,26) firmly points out, although there are significant overlaps between the sphere of *law-making* and *policy-making*, they by no means coincide, neither practically nor conceptually. The difference between these two domains is somewhat harder to grasp in the Italian context, in view of the fact that laws often appear to be the only tool Italian institutions can use to direct public resources towards specific objectives¹². Yet, the effectiveness of public policies should be rather evaluated on the basis of their success in tackling issues that concern a large section of the community. In this perspective, it might actually be a sign of a very successful strategy when policy makers manage to obtain good results just by improving institutional co-ordination and putting the available technologies to the best use, rather than resorting to the creation of new legislation. In short, as Regonini explains (2002, 27), there is no direct link between the scope and precision of the law and the scope and precision of the actual policies. Public policy-making entails the conscious resort to a wider range of resources and technologies than those allowed for by the extant laws. Indeed, policies in Italy tend to be based more on what the law does not forbid than on what the law requires to be done. Consequently, mediation, persuasion campaigns and the promotion of incentives to action (which are all strategies allowed but not recommended by the law) are the most influential elements in the policy-making process and might have in fact a greater impact on the end results than the legislative act alone (Regonini 2001, 28).

If we take as an example the Italian cultural sector and if we were to judge Italian cultural policy-making purely on the basis of the legislation produced to regulate the sector, we would have to conclude that Italy does not have policies for the promotion

¹² Regonini (2001, 26) offers a corroborating example of this typically Italian attitude to law-making by referring to a newspaper article published in Italy in 1999 in which a senior Italian magistrate lamented the sorry conditions in which his profession had to carry out its functions (e.g. lack of computers, adequate furniture and office supplies) and attributed it to the deplorable fact that no new laws had been promulgated for the sector since 1990. And yet, Regonini sarcastically observes, it is dubitable that a new law could result in the sudden, miraculous apparition of the much needed and desired computers, desks, etcetera.

of access to arts and culture comparable to those that have been developed in the UK. However, if we look, rather, at the number of people working in the public cultural sector, at the number of court decisions that have relevance for the field, at the level of public resources spent on keeping prices for the live performance arts and museums low (much lower, in fact, than they are in the UK), then we might reach a very different conclusion. The systematic study of public policy-making should not limit itself to the consideration of the relevant legislation, but should also include the analysis of all the actions and strategies adopted by the key players in public policy-making that can produce consequences that affect the community, as well as the decision not to take action at all (Regonini 2001, 65). Effective policy-making thus cannot be limited to acting in conformity to the law.

We can conclude the present review of the different attitude towards the notion and the study of public policy in the Italian and Anglophone context with the observation made by Regonini (2001, 48) that, in the case of 'policy' - as for any other concept that is extraneous to the lexicon of a culture - the problem is not so much the filling of a gap but, rather, the creation of a new space. This entails the necessity to challenge that culture's current systems of interpretation which join together to form a solid and shared self-sufficient structure of thought that is so strong as to be capable of making any new approach seem irrelevant. In Italy, one of the most significant elements in the current system of thought is represented by the dual concept of political parties and power. In Italy, the prevailing conviction is that public policy-making is so enmeshed with and conditioned by political power-games, so affected by the ever-changing allegiances among different parties and so functional to their political strategies, that that it would make no sense at all to make it into the object of a distinct and autonomous area of academic research (Regonini 2001, 48).

Unsurprisingly then, one of the central concerns of political science research in Italy is the study of power. Conversely, the American cultural context, which provides the

background for much of the available public policy literature, does not give the sphere of politics the importance nor the deference the European (and Italian in particular) context does (Regonini 2001, 66). Therefore, if we compare the approach prevalent in political science in Italy and in the Anglophone context, we have to conclude that the lack of interest in public policy that Italy displays has not resulted merely in the setting aside of a large portion of the discipline (in favour of the study of the more 'political' aspects of policy making). Rather, it has resulted in the adoption of a totally different approach to the understanding of policy altogether, an approach so different, in fact, as to make common terms such as, for instance, 'politics', 'power' and 'institutions' not completely corresponding in meaning (Regonini 2001, 66 and 52).

The arguments presented so far with regards to the thought-molding power of language are not meant to be interpreted in a deterministic way so as to result, in practice, in a conservative position (whereby the limitations imposed by language-based patterns of thought do not allow for accepted notions to evolve and change over time), nor as a negation *ipso facto* of the possibility of truly understanding phenomena occurring in cultural and linguistic contexts extraneous to the researcher. However, as the case of Britain and Italy clearly demonstrates, when embarking in cross-national research, it is important to be aware of linguistic and cultural variations and to explicitly tackle their implications for the research process.

DIFFERING NOTIONS OF CULTURE IN BRITAIN AND ITALY: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As far as Britain is concerned, notions of culture on which public funding of the arts and culture were originally based can be evinced by the text of the Royal Charter that in 1947 ratified the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain (one of the main

components of the British arts funding system and a major policy maker in the field). Although the role of the Arts Council and its legitimacy as superior arbiter of cultural and aesthetic value has been contested over the years, it is undeniable that it still represents a crucial element in the British cultural policy system.

The Charter described the purpose of the newly founded public body as ‘developing a greater knowledge, understanding and practice of the fine arts exclusively’ and increasing their accessibility to the people of Britain (Quoted in Hewison, 1995, 43). The stress on the need for broadening access for the ‘fine arts exclusively’, that is for high cultural activities, betrays the reliance on what has been defined as a *Liberal Humanist notion of culture* (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, chapters 1 and 2). Indeed, in Britain and throughout Europe, cultural policies were originally structured - and to a certain extent still are - around this intellectual discourse, which identifies Culture (here rigorously with a capital C) with the ‘great’ European cultural tradition. A central point in this Liberal Humanist view was the belief in the right and potential of all individuals to benefit from culture. The principle of the democratisation of culture originated from this conviction, only to become the main guiding rationale for most of post-war British, and indeed European, cultural policies. However, such a restrictive view of culture came to be strongly questioned from many directions, to the extent that battles over the definition of the word culture have been a fundamental feature of the British post-war critical debate (Hewison, 1995, 34).¹³

¹³ Significantly, notions of culture upheld by the Arts Council’s Charter (which influenced the notion of the type of culture that the State ought to promote) were largely consistent with those of other important British cultural institutions of the time, such as the BBC - within which debates over “culture” have had similar developments. In the words of John Reith, its first director-general, the BBC was meant to be “a drawn sword parting the darkness of ignorance”, and its mission “to offer the public something better than now it thinks it likes” (quoted in Bennett 1995, 208). However,, “If the BBC began with a self-assured, straightforwardly ‘civilizing’ discourse, in which culture was dispensed by upper-middle class, non-regional male voices in ways that were imagined as improving to the less formally educated masses, the fragility of the assumption that this represented either the public or their interests was inevitably exposed” (Lewis 2003, 46)

In particular, the need arose for a new elaboration of the notion of culture that would allow for it to be seen as a 'lived experience' and for a reclamation of the 'popular' element of culture from its denigration on the part of the cultural establishment. This view was expressed by the new multidisciplinary field of 'cultural studies', which affirmed itself in Britain during the late 1960s and early 1970s in association with its institutional site in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. The aim of the new discipline was (and still is) a model of cultural analysis that questions, deconstructs and challenges the distinctions between 'high' or 'elite' culture and 'mass' or 'popular' culture, and gives prominence to the investigation of the relationship between cultural practices and power (Barański, 2001, 8-9; Forgacs and Lumley 1996, 1-8). The values promoted by this new approach to cultural analysis were those of pluralism and diversity, together with a distinctly postmodern sensitivity for the 'Other', and the emphasis on those subordinate discourses and groups that had been traditionally marginalized by the cultural establishment and academia. These new radical developments in cultural theory put increasingly under pressure the old arts funding system and its elitist definition of culture that many felt to be now obsolete and irrelevant to the life of many British citizens¹⁴.

Indeed, the very Arts Council of Great Britain, in 1991, launched the largest consultation exercise ever undertaken in the arts in the UK, encompassing forty-four discussion-papers and more than sixty seminars investigating a number of aspects of British cultural life at the time (Sinclair, 1995, 365-366). The exercise resulted in the publication of a policy document entitled *Towards a National Arts & Media Strategy*. The document proposed a much revised and broader definition of the arts and culture as 'an integrated whole': "Distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture,

¹⁴ This was hardly a phenomenon limited to the UK. In fact, similar challenges to Liberal-Humanist conceptions that identified "Culture" with the great Western artistic tradition were also occurring in many other European countries, in many cases anticipating British developments. See for instance Looseley (1997) on France and Vestheim (1994) on Scandinavian countries.

between 'commercial' and 'non-commercial' arts, between professional and amateur, do not reflect the way that most people experience the arts: high quality and cultural significance are what matter, and they can be achieved in a whole range of forms from opera to television drama, from sculpture to folk song" (ACGB, 1992, 5).

The permanence of such an all embracing notion within the official cultural policy discourse in Britain is attested by the Mapping Document of the creative industries published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the first time in 1998. It covered, together with more traditional cultural forms (such as the performing and visual arts, architecture and film), also advertising, designer fashion, interactive leisure software, design, and software and computer services. This is indeed the cultural sector as defined, today, by the very government department that is in charge of drawing the policies for the sector itself in the UK.

The problems inherent in a comparative research between Britain and Italy will be clear once we have looked at the characteristics of state involvement in the cultural field in Italy. First of all, it needs be mentioned that if cultural policy is a discipline that has not fully established itself in the world of international academia, it is even less so in Italy. Here, debates on cultural policy have been pretty much limited to insiders and often confined to reports produced by government departments, to the extent that the most obvious sources for the researcher who wants to reconstruct the evolution of cultural policies in Italy are the texts of the laws that regulate the cultural policy sphere (Bianchini, 1996, 291). An explanation for this is that – as was mentioned earlier - cultural policy, in Italy, is effectively one of the many branches of Administrative Law. The cultural sphere is thus administrated through various different types of legislative acts, which, altogether, make up Italian cultural policy (Gordon 1995, 10). Further complications arise because of the *ad hoc* nature of much of this legislation, which is frequently of an emergency financial nature and

therefore largely inconsistent when not openly contradictory (Feist *et al.*, 1998, 90). Important legislative changes have taken place in Italy since 1998 and have brought about dramatic changes in the Italian cultural policy system. I refer here principally to the d.lg. 368/1998 which introduced the first unified Ministry of Culture since the Fascist era, and the *Testo Unico* (d.lg. 490/1999) which has reorganised into a single legal act all the existing legislation that had until then regulated the cultural sphere and which dated as far back as 1939. Indeed, the latter is most important in the context of this discussion. The *Testo Unico* provides a definition of what is to be considered within the scope of State intervention in the cultural sector, as it offers the most recent definition of *beni culturali*, that is 'cultural assets', on which Italian cultural policy is largely based. It is interesting to note that the notion of cultural assets worthy of public subsidy has not substantially changed since the fascist law n. 1089 of 1939 (which has been guiding Italian cultural policy until the elaboration of the *Testo Unico* in 1999).

A closer look at the articles that define the concept of 'cultural asset' reveals that the eligible cultural items must in fact be physical assets. The factor that characterises them as 'cultural asset' is indeed their very physical nature in conjunction with their cultural value (Cammelli, 2000). Interestingly, works of art that are not at least 50 years old or whose creator is still living do not qualify as cultural assets (Zerboni, 2001, 117). The new regulations also define the State's role as one of preservation, management and promotion of cultural assets (Chiti, 1998). This is in fact a partial move away from Italy's traditional focus on the preservation of the existing heritage. In financial terms, though, the upkeep of such an incredibly rich archaeological heritage still absorbs the largest share of available funds: over 40 per cent of UNESCO's world cultural heritage sites are located in Italy alone (Feist *et al.*, 1998, 89).

Italian cultural policy thus can be essentially defined as a series of measures for the protection of cultural heritage and the support of 'high' cultural forms such as ballet, classical music, opera theatre, and the visual arts. Interestingly, whilst cultural industries have become, in the UK, an increasingly important area of cultural policy-making and one of the current government's priorities, the cultural industries in Italy (with the exception of the public broadcasting institution, RAI) are mainly left to fend for themselves in the marketplace, and state intervention is limited to some modest subsidies to the film industry and the press to help them survive cases of market failure (Bodo 2002, 8). As Carla Bodo (*Ibid.*, 16) explains, in Italy there is no overall legal framework to promote the cultural industries. A possible explanation for this is the difficulty of establishing such a framework when the relevant legislative responsibilities for the creative industries sector are divided between the Ministry for Communications (which is in charge of radio, TV and the press) and the Ministry for the Heritage and Cultural Activities (who holds responsibilities for film and the performing arts).

This emphasis on heritage is a particularity of Italian cultural policy that could be explained by the undeniable reality that Italy has "the largest 'open-air' cultural patrimony in the Western world', which has turned her into what Sergio Romano has defined as a 'gigantic cultural warehouse' (Romano, 1984, 12), fundamentally unmanageable. Suffice it to say that only 5% of the entire Italian artistic heritage is catalogued, and many works of art are kept in storage and are never shown to the public: half of the 4,000 or so paintings owned by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence are permanently in storage (Bianchini, 1996, 300)¹⁵. The peculiar focus of Italian cultural

¹⁵ This small percentage of artefacts exposed to the public is in fact in line with the European average. However, it feels still rather low for a country – such as Italy - that has made of heritage preservation its number one cultural policy priority. Indeed, since a large proportion of Italy's public resources are consistently channelled into the preservation and restoration of cultural assets that the public never get access to, is the observer to conclude that Italy funds conservation for conservation's sake?

policy on 'cultural assets' can therefore be at least partially explained by the huge responsibility that the Italian state has in front of its people, and in fact the whole world, of looking after an immense cultural patrimony.

However, a number of British as well as Italian scholars working in the field of Italian studies have demonstrated how the persistence of a very conservative definition of culture in the policy debate, as well as within the Italian universities, is in fact rooted in the Italian intellectual tradition (De Mauro, 1987, 2-5;). The identification of culture with the printed word, traditional education and with the high arts has been explained with the enduring prestige of the intellectual tradition of neo-idealism (associated particularly with the philosophers Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile) which identified culture with intellectuals and cultural history with intellectual history - and therefore made little effort to question accepted notions of culture and the privileges of intellectuals in society (Forgacs and Lumley 1996, 3; Eco, 1983, 225; Dombroski, 1998). According to this view, the persistence of a 'humanist-intellectualist' concept of culture was also responsible for the limited influence in Italy of Anglo-American political science and sociology, and – above all – cultural studies. Indeed, the revolution in cultural analysis that took place in Britain (and from there spread to America and most Anglophone academic circles), contributing to a profound re-evaluation of accepted notion of arts and culture within the public arts funding system, simply did not have a counterpart in Italy. Therefore, the radical questioning of official cultural values that came with it simply did not take place. In fact, old cultural values survived even after the counter-cultural movements of 1968, which is rather significant, given that these were quite vital in Italy (Forgacs and Lumley 1996, 4).

In the light of these necessarily brief remarks on British and Italian cultural and intellectual history, it is evident that the two countries show marked differences in

cultural traditions, as well as administrative and political system¹⁶, that cannot be discussed here at length for obvious reasons, but which do affect the cultural policy-making in the two countries

On the whole, we can conclude that, on the one hand, recent British cultural policy focuses on the fostering of creativity among the population, on the cultural industries and the relationship between new technologies and the cultural sector. On the other hand, the most recent legislative act which, in 1999, reorganised the pre-existing Italian legislation concerning the administration of culture and cultural assets excluded from public responsibility (and thus an important channel for funding) any form of art or artefact whose creator was still living or that had been produced less than 50 years before the law was enforced. So, for instance, a comparative study of the visual arts sector in Italy and the UK that were mainly based on a comparison of cultural statistics (such as state expenditure for the sector in a given period) - without a discussion of the different delimitation of the state responsibilities for the visual arts sector in the two nations - would leave completely out of the picture the situation of the contemporary visual arts in Italy. Consequently, it would not contribute to a genuine, deeper understanding of the general issues concerning the visual arts in the two countries.

¹⁶ Another important factor that also bears important implications for the cross-national analysis of the development of cultural policy in the two countries is the fact that Britain is a *common law* country (where changes in public administration can be made without large-scale law-making exercises being required), whereas Italy is a *public law* country (where change in law is required in advance, though is generally not sufficient to insure the implementation of changes in actual policy) (Lo Schiavo 2000, 693).

TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY: THE CONCEPT OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

In the light of the preceding arguments and the case study of Britain and Italy, we are forced to conclude that the methodologies that currently guide comparative cultural policy research are largely inappropriate, and do not meet the specific requirements of cross-national research.

The final section of this paper will thus attempt to offer some suggestions towards the development of a more appropriate methodology for comparative, cross-national analysis within the cultural policy field. To this end, inspiration can be drawn from research and debates that have taken place in the context of other academic disciplines. In particular, comparative social research and comparative policy studies seem to be the areas that can provide the richest wealth of implications for the field of cultural policy studies. In particular, the notion of *contextualization* elaborated by social researchers will be shown to be especially significant and useful.

The reason why it seems convenient to look at these disciplines for a way out of the methodological impasse in which comparative cultural policy research seems to have been trapped, is that the theorization and discussion of methodological concerns in cross-national research are more developed within these academic fields. Moreover, a review of the available literature in cross-national social research and policy analysis reveals that the problems that scholars within these fields have had to face, when developing suitable research methodologies, are substantially similar to those facing the cultural policy researcher. Significantly, Hantras and Mangen (1999, 91), who have written extensively on the topic, consider that some of the crucial issues inherent in a comparative approach to social research stem from the fact that “[m]uch of the officially sponsored research is primarily dictated by pressures to extract ‘lessons from the homeland’”. They report that only recently the sector has witnessed

the establishment of a more robust research agenda aiming at the definition of well-constructed models and the testing of theories. However, they conclude that much of the extant literature on the comparative research process tends to focus on ‘thematic content and findings’ rather than on theorizations and explorations of the theory and methodology of the research process. They maintain that:

[T]he growing interest in cross-national comparisons within the social sciences since the 1970s has not therefore been matched by commensurate advances at the theoretical and practical level. As a result, the material collected in international projects is often not directly comparable, and the findings reported to sponsors may be biased or misleading” (Hantrais and Mangen 1999, 91).

These observations indeed reflect the objections moved against current practices in cross-national research in the cultural policy field cited earlier in this paper. These methodological difficulties, thus, are not exclusive to this field of study, but seem rather intrinsic to international comparisons of cultures and policies. However, the existence of these problems has been acknowledged and thus appropriately confronted in the social sciences. A number of ways have hence been suggested in order to be able to compare cultures and policies across nations in a more rigorous and meaningful way.

In particular, the most interesting contribution that comes from the sociological field is the development of *contextualization* as an approach to cross-national comparative research that can successfully circumvent some of the difficulties inherent in this type of research (Hantrais and Mangen 1999; Hantrais 1999).

Linda Hantrais (1999) maintains that contextualization is central to all the possible approaches to comparative social research. Currently, social scientists are indeed showing an increasing interest in issues surrounding contextualization, which is now

considered a fundamental component in cross-national comparative studies. Hantrais (1999, 94) writes that "... an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political context in which social phenomena develop is a precondition for successful cross-national comparative research". In the same paper, she also delineates the development of the discipline over time, and the changing attitudes toward the importance of context in cross-national research. She identifies three possible approaches to comparative social research: the universalist, culturalist and societal approach.

According to Hantrais's schematisation, the belief of the early sociologists in the possibility of deriving general laws from sociological observation (in order to explain social phenomena across different cultures) deeply affected the international comparative research that was carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. Cross-national social research at this stage "...was grounded in the assumption that universal characteristics could be identified in social phenomena, independently from a specific context... This is because universalist theory was culture or context free" (Hantrais 1999, 94). The problem with the universalist approach is that it results in a research process which places its emphasis on the search for similarities and points of convergence among nations and cultures. It thus ignores the specificity of the social, political and cultural contexts of the social phenomena studied, since it is based on the assumption that "there are shared, universally identifiable, pressures and trends working across all industrialized societies" (O'Reilly quoted in May 1997, 181)

Alongside this school of thought, a rather different approach was elaborated by the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s, on the basis of a number of studies that were undertaken on cultural diversity in urban settings. Whereas the universalists' body of research aimed at seeking uniformity and commonalities among countries (in order to draw generalizations and infer theories from observations), the Chicago

School chose to concentrate their attention rather on particularism and national uniqueness. They aimed at trying to underline differences among countries and cultures through comparative research. If the universalist approach takes no regard of context, the culturalist one is based on relativism and culture-boundedness. Accordingly, the very possibility of generalizing from field observations was rejected on the basis of the denial of the existence of universal concepts that could be meaningful across national boundaries. Indeed, this approach “placed such great emphasis on social contexts and their specificity, distinctiveness or uniqueness, that meaningful comparisons and generalization were made very difficult, if not impossible” (Hantrais 1999, 95).

In between these two extremes, Hantrais (1999, 96-97) places an intermediate position which she defines as the ‘societal approach’. This is based on the view that it is possible to generalise from observation, and hence derive theories, provided that the national specificity of the social, cultural and political contexts in which social phenomena manifest themselves is properly accounted for. This last, societal approach to comparative research is indeed at the basis of the methodological model that this paper strives to advocate for the achievement of a meaningful cross-national cultural policy research. Such an approach might successfully contribute to overcoming some of the limitations, and prevent some of the abuses, of current comparative research in this area. The problems that the comparative researcher might incur are made clearer by the distinction made in 1990 by Else Øyen (1990, 5-6) between four archetypes of comparative researchers: the purists, the ignorants, the totalists, and finally, the genuine comparativists.

The ‘purists’ are those who firmly believe that comparative work is no different from any other type of sociological research. They would therefore not feel the need to accompany their comparative studies with any particular methodological discussion

relative to the specific problems of cross-national comparisons. The second group is represented by the 'ignorants', who are clearly ethnocentric in their approach. They indeed recognize the special nature of cross-national work, but they tend to 'import' uncritically in their research theories and principles developed in other countries, irrespectively of social contexts and historical and cultural differences. In Øyen's words, they "pursue their ideas and data across national boundaries without ever giving a thought to the possibility that such comparisons may add to the complexity in interpreting the results of the study" (1990, 5). This is unfortunately a very common tendency in the sociological tradition. The third group are the 'totalists' who are – at least in theory – aware of the complications and the methodological issues involved in comparative research. However, "[t]hey consciously ignore the many stumbling blocks of the non-equivalence of concepts, a multitude of unknown variables interacting in an unknown context and influencing the research in question in unknown ways. And they deliberately ignore the scientific requirements regarding the testing of hypotheses in settings which do not and cannot meet the conditions for such testing" (Øyen 1990, 5). Finally, the 'comparativists', believe that comparative social research is a type of research that poses very specific methodological problems that need to be addressed, and they tackle their research questions accordingly.

Øyen's categorization is obviously based upon ideal types, and it is thus somewhat artificial and schematic. However, it has the distinct advantage of facilitating the task of qualifying the most common type of comparative research that has so far been undertaken within the field of cultural policy research. It seems possible at this stage of the discussion, to suggest that extant cross-national cultural policy analysis is markedly 'totalist' in nature. Indeed, the intent of this paper is precisely to argue in favour of the need for comparative cultural policy research to shift from a 'totalist' to a more genuinely 'comparativist' position.

RESEARCH VS. ADVOCACY

This paper has attempted to argue against a purely quantitative methodology, and against using public expenditure as the main cultural policy output measure, whilst at the same time alerting the reader to the inadequacy of the already mentioned ‘ten countries, ten chapters and a staple’ literature to generate true understanding of cultural policy issues across countries (Schuster 1996, 30). As noted earlier, changing patterns of public funding throw light on government’s changing priorities, which are of great importance in cultural policy. However, our argument is that comparisons of data on public expenditure on cultural policy alone do not suffice to offer explanations of developments within national cultural policies. Indeed, we have seen that one of the main problems with the currently available literature is its descriptive nature, and the fact that it does not always aim at providing an interpretation of the phenomena under observation. The descriptive moment is the necessary first step of any comparative research, but it will only produce information, not understanding. This is why there is a great need for a more theory-building approach to the study of cultural policy (Kawashima 1995; Schuster 1988, 6).

Equally important in defining an appropriate comparative methodology is the need to distinguish policy *analysis* from policy *advocacy*¹⁷. In *Understanding Public Policy*, Thomas R. Dye maintains unequivocally that “[l]earning *why* governments do what they do and what the consequences of their actions are is not the same as saying what governments *ought* to do, or bringing about changes in what they do. Policy advocacy requires the skills of rhetoric, persuasion, organisation, and activism. Policy analysis encourages scholars and students to attack critical policy issues with the

¹⁷ For a discussion of the often-blurred divide between advocacy and research see Schuster (2002, 27-29) and Bennett (2004).

tools of systematic enquiry” (Dye 1975, 5). Unfortunately, as Dye himself recognises (1975, 14), this is often easier said than done, since the people who are actually undertaking policy research are often programme administrators, who have a vested interest in proving the success of their programmes. It is thus essentially important to separate as much as possible research from policy implementation and advocacy for funding. This is very difficult to achieve in practice though, in view of the way the cultural sector is structured and the way it works. More recently, Radin (2000, 92) has explicitly acknowledged that “[a]nalysts cannot insulate themselves from the dynamics of politics, interest groups, and deadlines”. At the end of a detailed discussion of the many pressures that policy analysts have to operate under, Radin (*Ibid.*, 105) concludes:

... the tensions between the imperatives of the two cultures – the cultures of analysis and politics – are not easy to avoid. They are a part of the day-to-day life of the policy analyst, playing out in different ways in different environments, and the stress that emanates from them is part of the lifeblood of the policy analysis profession and should be expected in a democratic system. Analysts are rarely in the controlling role in this relationship, and most have acknowledged that their legitimacy is derived from elected or appointed political officials.

Although public policy experts agree that there has been a shift away from the belief that policy research can be fully apolitical (Radin 2000, 104), Oliver Bennett (2004) in a recent article warns about the consequences that are unavoidable whenever the researcher succumbs to the temptation of blurring of the boundaries between research and advocacy:

Advocacy-inspired research [...] does, of course, impose severe limits on the kind of research that will be conducted. Research questions will be designed to produce answers that are in the organisation’s interests;

research that might produce uncomfortable findings will, as far as possible, be avoided.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The present discussion has attempted to show how the pleaded effort to conceptualise and theorize about cultural policies cross-nationally needs to be founded on an extensive knowledge of the circumstances of the countries chosen as case studies, in respect of the principle of *contextualization*. In particular, those factors that might affect the cultural sphere need to be taken into account when assessing and investigating cultural policies. This is tantamount to advocating a strongly interdisciplinary approach to methodological issues in comparative studies. This is a well-accepted notion in comparative social sciences. The sociologist Rokkan in 1978 wrote that cross-national research entails a “built-in transition from internationality to interdisciplinarity: it is simply difficult to establish acceptable comparisons between countries and cultures without bringing a broader ranges of variables than those of only one discipline” (quoted in Øyen 1990, 11).

More specifically, the most obvious requirement for the comparative research model here proposed would be a clear and complete picture of the mechanisms of cultural policy and their functioning within the nations studied as a necessary precursor of any rigorous comparative study. In particular, what is excluded or included by governments within their domain of action is very significant in shaping national cultural policies and should thus be a prime object of analysis. Moreover, the reconstruction of the historical development of cultural policies in the context of the political, cultural and intellectual history of the countries is unavoidable if we want to convincingly account for differences and particular national developments.

Furthermore, because cultural policy does not operate in isolation from other spheres of public policy, the approach that we are here proposing would require that we investigate and compare the legal, administrative and political frameworks in which cultural policy decisions are made. This would allow the researcher to understand how policy-making in the cultural arena fits into the broader patterns of state intervention. Indeed, understanding to what extent cultural policies develop and operate independently of other policy areas, and the extent to which they feel the effects of external pressures can clarify the changing circumstances of cultural policy within different states.

These are all very ambitious aims, and indeed the research model that this paper advocates calls for a strong methodological stance. I refer here to the need to acknowledge that, in order to achieve a comparative research that is able to go beyond the mere description (as recommended above), it is preferable to limit the number of countries being compared. This would enable the researcher to examine a larger number of variables and aspects than would be feasible in a larger-scale comparison (Hantrais 1999, 99). The currently popular format of comparative study exemplified by the report published in 1998 by the Arts Council of England (Feist *et al.*, 1998) which compares data on public spending on the arts in eleven countries, does not lend itself to the type of in-depth study that we are proposing. Limiting the number of countries observed would also allow for a focus on the question of equivalence of concepts in different contexts - or even, as shown by the case study of Italy and the UK, the *lack* of equivalence in different contexts, a crucial issue in cross-national research. This is indeed an accepted principle within the social sciences. In Linda Hantrais' words, "[t]he smaller the number of countries included in 'narrow-gauge' studies... the greater the contextual detail and the chances of approaching a more holistic comparison, and the easier it is to be consistent in

specifying and applying concepts and in using qualitative evidence” (Hantrais, 1999, 101). This is certainly a necessary requirement to achieve a broader, multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary approach for cross-national cultural policy comparison, which is precisely what this paper has attempted to advocate.

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