

Research, Policy and Politics: Connections, Collusions and Collisions

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ABSTRACT

It hardly needs elucidating that the interrelations between social research and politics, including the domain of policy-making, are numerous and manifold. Their connections and the ways these are handled are highly varied in several respects, ranging from instances where the respective fields are complementary and geared towards common objectives, via experiences with significantly contrasted premises and understandings breeding abundant confusion, to other contexts marked by profound suspicions, hostility and conflict between vastly different worlds and outlooks. In the light of the diversity of roles, issues and agendas involved, it is interesting to look more closely at some of the areas of interface between social research and politics/policy. This article presents a preliminary overview of different kinds of interactions between the fields of research and policy, followed by a closer look at several sources of tension between the outlooks and expectations from a policy perspective and those from research and researchers' perspectives. The focus is especially on the respective manifestations as they occur in the field of development studies.

Keywords: policy, politics and research; social sciences; development studies

1. Research and politics interactions

When entering the arena of research and politics/policy connections, we should first recognize basic continuities running through the realms of *politics* and *policy* (and thus also those of politicians and policy-makers), viewing them as essentially a single broad field – to be dubbed “politics” or “policy” as convenience demands. After all, policy-makers supposedly prepare and execute policies for or on behalf of their political superiors, even though we know very well that they also have their own politics and that conversely politicians often seem to be following rather than leading their policy staff (Smith 1988). While we should not underestimate the differences that exist between politics and policy, the basic idea is to appreciate how in a number of different ways, researchers come to relate to a larger and complex

“political” realm comprising the state and its affiliated institutions, throwing up numerous political and policy issues for deliberation and analysis.

With these provisos, several aspects call for attention when reconnoitring the interrelations between the spheres of research and politics/policy: what are the respective expectations from and orientations towards each other which they exemplify; what causes them to be complementary in various circumstances while being quite opposed in others; and why indeed do the two worlds often appear to both need *and* confront each other? In order to delineate a way of handling these questions, it will be useful to scale down to a level allowing us to relate to more specific experiences and exchanges. Following that, we will look at how research from various perspectives tends to relate to policy and politics, and subsequently at how politics/policy may approach and handle research. In the latter respect, some current trends deserve particular attention.

2. Research facing politics and policy

There are numerous areas of contact between the worlds of social research and of politics and policy-making, encompassing a whole range of different orders. Together they form dynamic fields of interaction, which often involve close rapport and mutual interests, but may also invoke uncomfortable connections, strains and conflict. Reciprocal orientations between social research and policy-making are often based on expectations of complementary relevance and mutual benefit. Occasionally efforts are made to lay bridges and promote common perspectives and programs, yet the relations concerned may also turn out tenuous, and at times, the policy embrace of research may get too close for comfort.

Leaving aside science-oriented worlds of research on numerous topics – from astronomy to zoology – that occasionally draw attention from politics or policy in the light of innovations or interventions related to the particular field of interest, the interactions and connections between “research” and “politics” in a more narrow sense – namely that with regard to “the political” – are still endless. Any publisher’s catalogue of literature on politics (together with substantial parts from history, philosophy, law and economics) may illustrate this. Beyond this, inasmuch as the “science” aspect within political science presupposes research and reflection about “the political”, this disciplinary field alone can per definition incorporate virtually the whole gamut of possible research-politics connections.

More broadly, academic research on politics, such as from anthropology, political science, development studies or other angles, is being initiated from a whole range of vantage points. First, in its most “scientific” form, research may be undertaken to try and “objectively” analyze, interpret and comment on empirical political and policy processes. This is not unlike the engagements of the “pure scientist” in the categorization developed by Roger Pielke, who distinguishes between different kinds of orientations which researchers may have vis-à-vis their subject matter. In his *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics* (2007), Pielke identifies a range of qualitatively different interactive relations between research and policy. In this categorization, Pielke’s “pure scientist” represents the type that would focus on research without any consideration for its use or utility, and thus in its pur-

est form without any direct connection with policy decision-makers. Within political studies, a behavioral stream that for years sought to come to quantitative analyses and propositions through advanced methodologies came close to this characterization, at least in its aspirations to arrive at “value free” political analyses. The social sciences have made great efforts to try and develop such value-free research methodologies to analyze political behavior, but whether these have succeeded in banning all possible subjectivities remains questionable. Following frequent criticism on its “sterile” pre-occupation with trying to develop quantifiable data sets, the orientation now seems to have lost its one-time claims to scientific pre-eminence.

Second, research may critically scrutinize politics and policy-making in more normative and judgmental manners, such as when seeking to expose growing authoritarianism or lack of democratic engagement, questioning the premises of state-building strategies in some cases, or in various other respects. Presumably Pielke would categorize such approaches as approximating what he identifies as the concerns of the “issue advocate” (Pielke 2007, 15). Nonetheless, in reality the difference between these variants is largely gradual. Methodologically even the most neutral research approaches aiming to arrive at “objective” representations of reality may find themselves informed by normative assumptions, while conversely critical political analysis may reach the stature of universally accepted texts.

Pielke’s types of researchers, representing and highlighting different research methodologies and objectives, may come with contrasted backgrounds and motivations to their engagement in political inquiries. For the “pure scientist”, academic interest may be the principal driving force, spurred by a striving to achieve better understandings, seeking the “truth”, or a determination to correct predominant assumptions. As for the “issue advocates” and other critically disposed analysts, the researchers concerned may embark on examining policy questions for their clarification and regulation, but also in the interest of the communities concerned. In either case, their involvement may be put forward as being for the benefit of the “scholarly community”, though that often seems added only as an afterthought.

Other kinds of research engagements within the politics and public-policy area comprises *action-research* of sorts, undertaken by individual researchers or NGOs acting as agenda-setting agencies. Some such engagements may have special relevance in crisis situations, where NGOs of the Pax Christi type may play useful roles on a semi-independent basis towards conflict mediation and resolution. The practical relevance of these engagements, however, may remain limited to what a particular government in final authority is prepared to allow or support. Nonetheless, partly on the basis of priorities expressed on the ground, community-oriented research of this kind can in principle contribute to the formulation of agendas for action and negotiation. In Pielke’s categorization, this would figure as the role of his type of “honest brokers”, namely scholars who relate to decision-making processes by clarifying and, at times, seeking to expand the scope of choice available to decision-makers (Pielke 2007, 17). Still, Pielke’s types (the “pure scientist”, “issue advocate” and “honest broker”) probably should not so much be regarded as carrying invariable research-personality attributes but as contextually determined role designations. One and the same researcher may play a role as issue advocate in one context and of “honest broker” in another.

More significantly different in principle is another variant in the research-politics/policy nexus, namely that where research is undertaken to amend, rationalize or reinforce political or policy processes, or as a manner of reflecting on any such adaptations. Some work on strengthening “state capacity” falls in this category, together with other more applied research on public-policy issues or work in support of negotiations towards conflict resolution. The DFID-sponsored IDS Sussex Research Centre devoted to studying the “Future State” thus largely concentrates on identifying emerging contours of novel policy programs thought worth possible replication, such as decentralized service delivery or taxation management (IDS/DFID 2007). However, in commissioned research, the scope for more substantial research engagements with political processes and structures almost necessarily remains limited, given the need for the research to remain “power-neutral”.

Incremental adaptations of political institutions and procedures take place recurrently in many places, in some cases informed by research, in others not. Grander overhauls of political processes are more usually the thought-product of new power-holders following some major political reversal, towards which actual research may only make modest contributions. Nonetheless, some countries, like Uganda and Eritrea in the mid-1990s, installed Constitutional Commissions which arranged for elaborate fact-finding on popular preferences for governance structures, only to ignore most of the inputs collected when it came to actual implementation. Fundamental critical research advancing alternative political arrangements may contribute to illuminating insights, fueling stimulating debate, but is often destined to lead a mostly theoretical existence.

Research projects focused on policy interventions are often enacted as *commissioned research*, which may include innumerable modes and subject areas in its application. Research-policy connections are complex here, as researchers in these instances will mostly be expected to comply with the demands and directives placed on them by those in charge of policy, though with the latter possibly representing a different line from those responsible for the interventions as such. In cases of dispute, “policy” theoretically will have the final word in determining what exactly will be investigated and how, though certain understandings and deals between contracting parties may come to play a role. Inevitably, therefore, tension and friction occasionally arises between applied researchers and commissioning agencies, especially if the research concerned is to establish “what went wrong” in certain instances (Wenger 1987). Still, policy-makers in principle are expected to subscribe to the idea of “objectivity” and give credit to the notion of professional expertise and codes of conduct with which research results are to be obtained. If much depends on the outcome of the research for one party or another, however, intense fights and efforts to influence the results may be anticipated. Evaluation of policy may then turn into a notable politics of evaluation. All this in any event comes in contrast to independent researchers pursuing their own objectives, attempting to get a better understanding of the dynamics of political and policy processes and trying to make the propelling factors and interests explicit, assuming that access to relevant data can be obtained.

NGOs and other parties operating in complex and conflict-ridden situations have their own concerns and agendas and often seek support for their position and interventions through commissioning research, expecting researchers to share their points

of departure. Researchers, on their part, may seek to interest NGOs or other agencies in the research they intend to undertake, often trying to cast the latter in terms that seem to match with the interests of possible sponsors. In short, a complex field of interactions is at work here, with researchers, sponsoring bodies of various sorts and actors representing actual dynamic forces continuously engaging in realignments vis-à-vis one another. Naturally this may significantly influence the nature of the enquiry and the kind of resolution sought. At times, one will find researchers and commissioning agencies at similar wavelengths, sharing a basic open-endedness towards the issues at stake and their possible resolution. In other instances, the conditions attached to contract research propositions will set severe constraints to the scope of enquiry allowed.

External agencies concerned with issues of conflict resolution in the field, such as NGOs, may not be in a position to engage in these situations with entirely open agendas: they may be expected to mediate according to a certain set of rules or criteria which are part of their brief and are immutable. The larger the external organization involved, the more complex their operational guidelines may turn out to be in this respect. Naturally this reduces their flexibility on the ground and the openness allowed to the research concerned. Questions may then arise to what extent social research can still primarily address actual problems encountered on the ground rather than having to adhere to agency demands and interests. In the pursuit of issues designated as of key agency interest, other concerns may be accorded less weight, even if they are potentially graver. Ethical questions then call for attention: how freely can an enlisted researcher determine her/his own priorities in the enquiry and interpretation? Again, if “independence”, “objectivity” and “neutrality” are important considerations, then presumably the criteria by which one would judge the performance and choices of individual researchers should also be applied to NGOs and other agencies taking up research-based roles vis-à-vis instances of social conflict and statehood dynamics.

Last, actors associated with statehood projects may themselves undertake research ventures, which may be politically motivated and driven. This was once the case with the historical enquiries undertaken in the 1950s by the *Bakonjo Life History Research Society*, a fore-runner of the *Rwenzururu Movement* in Western Uganda, which strove for equity, autonomy and independence throughout the decades that followed (Doornbos 1970). The research sought to retrace and highlight “roots” and became a major incentive towards the articulation of political identities and popular demands for recognition for the Bakonzo and Baamba people around the Ruwenzori mountain range on the Uganda-Congo border. Similar kinds of community-initiated researches have played a role in other African contexts.

3. Politics and policy facing research

But what perspectives and approaches emerge if we turn around the connection to enquire how politics-cum-policy approaches research? How does “politics” tend to handle research and what does it expect from it? Here the first and foremost role of “politics” that comes to mind in relation to research is simply a passive one, allowing itself to be scrutinized and assessed by political research as the latter’s given subject area, though occasionally entering into discussion or debate about the merits of the

evidence presented. This is the connection we know best and which has filled libraries with innumerable studies and reviews of politics past and present – which undoubtedly it will continue to do, subjecting politics and policy-making to continued assessment and critical discussion. In view of this familiarity there is no need for any extensive discussion of it in the present context.

Another disposition and tendency one may encounter on the side of “politics” and policy-making vis-à-vis research, at least in development studies, is definitely less passive. Politicians and policy-makers are often suspicious of “troublesome” researchers who come with their own ideas, always inclined to ask “other” or even the “wrong” kinds of questions, while being less keen to supply the kind of information that policy demands. This leads to frequent attempts on the policy side to ward off research and researchers from its terrain, restricting the area open for public scrutiny and trying to keep the subject area under control. The politicians and policy-makers concerned may be “local”, encountered in a “field” context, or those finally engaged as donors or otherwise in determining development priorities and relationships. Political determination to keep researchers at bay may employ a whole array of methods and means to restrict their access to information. At times, this involves hide and seek struggles over relevant data, with one party trying to keep them closed off and the other side trying to uncover them by whatever means available, direct or indirect. At the petty bureaucratic level, restrictive measures from the side of politics and policy may include the throwing-up of access barriers like research clearances (often involving lengthy and intimidating bureaucratic procedures) as demanded from aspiring academic researchers in various countries, research fees from rent-seeking “research” institutions officially licensed to provide visiting researchers with legitimate status, or demands for prior inspection and authority approval of research reports to be published. All this may be done to retain final control over who will be permitted to pry into sensitive data or issues, but simultaneously out of fear for critique or violation of the “truth” as policy-makers see it. Occasionally it leads “policy” itself to present seemingly objective positive pictures of policy intentions and outcomes in lieu of disputed research findings. At times, this may give rise to delicate balancing acts on the part of agents of policy, who so risk blurring the distinction between presenting “information” and “propaganda” while by doing so possibly prompting new enquiries. And last but not least, where external researchers are perceived as unwanted intruders of sorts, they can be subjected to secret-service operations of various kinds in order to track their movements and activities. The workings of such policy responses and instruments, illustrating how research-politics collisions may occur in seemingly unexpected quarters, provide a rich terrain for possible case experiences.

An alternative and altogether different way of constructing the policy-research nexus open to policy is the commissioning of research by government or other agencies. Commissioning research may concern socio-political issues as well as many technical matters, though the latter can surely also involve political controversy. There can be many possible reasons for choosing this route. Criteria often advanced for this option of outsourcing include the specialized expertise required for enquiries into certain niche fields, and the professional neutrality and formal independence of the investigating institution or researchers called for. Many such arrangements are routinely made between contracting parties for different fields of expertise, in prin-

ciple without leading to disputed results or provoking problematic relationships between the contracting parties. Frictions may arise however in cases where the merits of the issue at stake call for “independent” investigation, but where the agency most concerned about its possible effects may seek to deliberately influence the outcomes. Numerous conflicts have emerged within this overall sphere, causing the area of research commissioning to become ridden with controversy and strained relationships (Wenger 1987). Commissioning research may also aim to pre-empt the exploration of particular research topics in sensitive fields, so as to avoid unwanted curiosity from independent researchers. Within broad areas normally given over to semi-official research outcomes and exchanges, independent academic research may be perceived as an irritant, to be either ignored or suppressed. One such case of institutional blocking of academically undertaken research and its professionally accepted results is described in my joint article with Piet Terhal on “The Limits of Independent Policy Research: Analyzing the European-Indian Dairy Aid Nexus” (1993), which explored the limits posed to independent policy research as manifested with respect to the assumed benefits of European dairy aid policy to India. The research project had looked into the implications of massive European dairy imports for the marketing scope of small Indian dairy producers, but in doing so had annoyed the architects of the scheme as it was seen as questioning the myth of success surrounding the project, which had served as the rationale for subsequent aid applications.

Yet another variant of how politics and policy may approach and handle research is even more ominous. This includes ways of deliberate obstruction or blackmailing of research projects on issues of policy-making, or alternatively of attempting to infiltrate social-science research networks and steer them in particular directions. During the Cold War, *Project Camelot* in Latin America became infamous as an example of the latter strategy employed by the US Army, causing considerable controversy (Horowitz 1967). In the words of its architects, the project was meant “to make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations of the world.” More recently, a replay of these issues has been taking place around the \$ 75 million MINERVA research program launched by the US Department of Defense, in search of academic alliances in combating threats of insurgency and terrorism such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. The American Social Science Research Council (SSRC) has taken this up as a matter calling for broad-based attention and debate, giving rise to an intensive flurry of academic positions on the pros and cons of such kinds of collaborative linkages (Social Science Research Council 2008).

In recent times, a relatively novel kind of nexus between the domains of policy and research has been for various global institutions and consortia to initiate major agenda-setting research programs on particular strategic themes. Initiatives of this kind have become increasingly common on issues of development, conflict and governance as well as on other subject matter. In such programs, national research institutes and occasionally individual researchers may be encouraged to participate – by implication steering them away from other interests and research questions. The World Bank has become a central player in such initiatives, frequently joined by other international and national agencies subscribing to the virtues of larger programmatic approaches to broad-ranging policy issues. Advantages emphasized include the bridging of communication gaps between policy-makers and researchers,

avoiding fragmentation of efforts and promoting coherence between individual research engagements on common themes. Enhanced capacity creation is envisaged, as engaging larger and multi-disciplinary teams theoretically permits approaches more commensurate with the requirements of complex issues, bringing economies of scale also in other respects, and more. All these represent powerful arguments for programmatic and theme-oriented approaches to research and the funding of it. However, they also entail key and far-reaching shifts with respect to the nature and thrust of the research-policy nexus.

Through its agenda-setting actions combined with the power of the purse, the world of global policy-steering thus establishes a stronger grip for itself on what is being initiated by way of policy-oriented research. The effects of this get further enhanced if other (e.g. national) funding organizations for scientific research dependent on government or external support are induced to follow suit, as appears to be a growing trend in Europe and elsewhere. By implication such departures narrow the scope for independent academic research to gain access to funding for projects that appear out of tune with the policy interests of the day, even though they might well open up novel ways of looking at key problem areas. At the present time, research management and policy in the development arena increasingly tend to be creeping together in order to jointly determine research priorities. In the Netherlands, for example, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a number of relevant research organizations jointly set up a *Development Policy Review Network*, aimed at “building bridges between science and practice”. They also founded an *International Academy* aimed at sponsoring graduate research on issues of fragile states, conflict and development, among other things (CERES 2007). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs retains the decisive voice in determining which projects are “policy relevant” and may qualify for funding. Like-minded initiatives, though resulting in other types of structures, have been taken in other countries. DFID, the British government’s aid organization, together with selected academic institutions has set up several specialized research centers to focus on issues of long-term concern to them, such as the Conflict State Research Center at the London School of Economics and the Future State Research Center at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

In principle, all such initiatives seem to be taken for very plausible reasons: for aspirant researchers and their home institutions, it is one way (though sometimes perhaps too easy a way) to access data, plus, of course, project-funding. For policy desks, it ensures a flow of information, though at times not necessarily the kind of information they would actually be looking for or would be able to do something with. Often it will add to officers’ reading burdens while leaving unclear exactly what use it may have to them. But then somehow the policy side may also get a sense of reassurance that a) no surprising harm or embarrassment is to be expected from the side of research and that b) in the end they will remain comfortably in control.

It is important to place these trends and initiatives within a wider perspective. When considering the nature of research undertakings into issues of resource conflicts, institutional gaps and inequities in African and other non-Western settings, one matter deserving attention is the massive scale which these activities have come to assume. Social research on dimensions of conflict, livelihood strategies, contestation over power and development projects, as well as on numerous other topics, pres-

ently involves vast numbers of researchers, outlays of funding, organizational networks and specialized institutions especially set up for the purpose. Most of these resources and inputs are externally driven. The underlying policy orientation and implicit assumption is that if insights gained through research and its recommendations are followed, then mitigation of conflict will ensue and “development” will be served. These are large claims, in part serving as self-justification of the research and commissioning institutions – NGOs, multilaterals and others – and in the end of the individual researcher alike. By implication, a pretension that usually remains unspoken is that externally driven social research has a key role to play with regard to the resolution of social conflicts, the clarification of development options or preparation for interventions. Often, though, the initiatives undertaken rest on a myth of relevance of development research. Too readily, perhaps, this role is seen as carrying its own justification for what may amount to prying into social and political dynamics in various locations elsewhere, fed on a presumption that externally derived knowledge deserves a self-evident A-status. But convincing cases demonstrating that timely social or political research has markedly led to an improvement of the situation following the implementation of the recommendations are rare. Instead, such discrepancies add to an uncomfortable feeling that expectations associated with the promises of externally led research remain insufficiently scrutinized.

4. Concluding remark

In recent years, one observable trend in development studies and related terrains of social research has been for research sponsorship to increasingly become “conditional”, that is, for research projects to stand a chance of gaining access to sources of funding if they agree, and thus are a priori designed, to follow programmatic priorities and premises set by the sponsoring agencies. In consequence of this trend, the locus of initiative with which new areas of research are opened up and initially demarcated tends to shift away from that of researchers’ curiosities and preliminary interests to notions developed by program desk officers of sponsoring agencies, national or multinational, in line with broader policy concerns. The relative balance between researcher-initiated and agency-initiated research-project designs which was maintained for long thus tends to make way for more preponderant agency roles in this regard. Substantially different purposes and expectations tend to be associated with different kinds of research sponsorship, however, potentially resulting in contrasted orientations of the final accounts. In the face of these tendencies, the creative element of original individual thinking and research which occasionally has given rise to fresh departures and insights – and at times could prove relevant to policy in due course – stands to lose if obtaining research funding becomes increasingly conditional upon following the criteria and priorities of pre-designed policy-oriented programs and executing a slice of them. In the end, social research may find itself increasingly molded into an advisory function for donor policy-making instead of independently engaging in problem analysis. In light of this, it has already been observed that development research “has lost its innocence”. Donor involvements and orientations are increasingly part of the problem and should be incorporated into the purview of research rather than be formulating the research issues.

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