

Policy Analysis and Evaluation in a Fact-Free World

Robert Klitgaard, January 20, 2017

This week the new semester began at Claremont Graduate University, and I'm teaching two graduate courses that ordinarily would be easy to motivate and justify. In our current political climate, both courses may represent the enemy.

One is called "Policy Design and Implementation." It is a public policy course that shows how analysis can help citizens and policymakers address hard problems facing society.

The other course is "Cost-Benefit Analysis." It is offered in the economics department and is an option also for students of public policy. It shows how to analyze various of the costs and benefits of public programs—and business decisions and what foundations and nonprofits do.

In the past, both courses had the bouquet of rationality against the forces of ignorance and narrow interests. The spirit if not the techniques of both courses was approved, idealistic, against the conventions of politics as usual. "Let's expand the reach of reason," as James Q. Wilson put it in the late 1990s, was an attractive slogan, especially for students and professors and professional analysts. "Let's figure out what works," was a call acceptable to most advocates and critics alike. True, it was hard to show examples of analysis expanding reason's reach into political life, and from the 1970s on, professional evaluators decried how seldom their evaluations were actually put into practice. But the goal was as unquestioned as the Enlightenment's.

Today, the bouquet may be better termed a foul smell. The aroma of arrogance: intellectuals telling us what to do, with their incomplete models and data, and the implicit embrace of public policy, as if more and better government were what we needed now.

And critics have sniffed out complicity and bias among those who do policy analysis, economics, and evaluation. The studies tend to leave out uncomfortable variables, which biases the results to favor interventions that later prove ineffective. Policy studies tend to exaggerate certain dangers to encourage government to do more.

Their language often belies biases. For example, take *access*. Many uses of this word don't refer to the *availability* of a clinic or a place to buy green vegetables or a job-training program, but to *use*—or, implicitly, to results of the use: the value-added or even outcomes.

Diversity is another loaded word. "We need to enhance diversity" often contains narrow definitions of the scope and dimensions of desirable diversity. Mathematically, more from one group means fewer of another: what are the costs

of that, in terms of the primary performance indicators of the school or business or government agency? The goal of diversity sometimes masks the goal of redistribution.

Such slanting and limiting have, to many in our polity, become noxious. Trust in the analytical enterprise itself seems to have waned.

Similar points could be made in international relations. On one side, *American leadership* is treated as if it were a self-evident goal, either from the world's perspective or America's. On the other side, the rights of citizens from faraway cultures are asserted to compel American actions, be they humanitarian or military or development assistance. Free trade sounds good, just as the word freedom does; but the textbook conclusions of International Economics 101 are doubted, just as the free movement of factors of production from finance to people is increasingly questioned.

At moments like these, what are the roles of policy research, evaluation, and cost-benefit analysis?

The roles can't be more of the same. They can't have the illusions of what Clifford Geertz called "size-up-and-solve social science." They can't be, "Here's our model, do B." And they can't simply accept the goals and alternatives presented by the status quo.

We need a radical remake of policy analysis and evaluation.

First: let's question the problems or so-called problems. Take poverty. What is it, how is it measured, how much of "it" exists where? And to whom, how much, and by what criteria are various kinds and degrees of poverty considered "problems"?

Second: let's ask what can be done with what results, by whom, at what cost, and with what unintended consequences.

Third: let's look at success stories and see what can be learned from them about defining the problems and solutions and about evoking effective responses from government, business, and civil society.

Fourth: let's open up the analytical process, from start to finish. Defining "the problems." Getting the data. Analyzing the data. Interpreting the results. Moving from results on paper to actions on the ground. Evaluating what is done and not done, and the various consequences. And regrouping to ask, so what?

Finally, the goal. Rather than trying to derive an answer or dictate a policy, analysis can enhance creativity. We need to redirect ourselves as scholars and analysts, and our institutions, toward that creative end. Our purpose and our behavior have to be at once humbler and bolder. Humble, because we agree that our data, models, and examples are imperfect. Bold, because these data, models, and examples can help others reframe the problems they face, ponder new alternatives, and create practical ways to move forward.

These five headings can guide our individual studies and our relationships with various audiences. They are guiding what my students and I are doing in those two graduate courses that just got underway. We might call it “policy analysis and evaluation 2.0.”