11

Clumsy Conclusions: How to Do Policy and Research in a Complex World

Marco Verweij, Michael Thompson and Christoph Engel

John Maynard Keynes, who was not renowned for his politeness, once wrote on a Treasury paper that had been passed to him for comment: 'I would be in full agreement with this if the word "not" was inserted in every sentence.'

Much the same, we feel, holds for orthodox policy analysis. Indeed, as we have argued for some time now, much progress can be made simply by slipping the words 'not' or 'never' into the precepts that have long been drummed into the heads of those who aspire to be policy analysts:

- A single, agreed definition of the problem is the first essential.
- Always clearly distinguish between facts and values.
- Establish a simple metric – dollars, quality adjusted life years, expected utility, etc – so as to be able to compare and assess policy options.
- Optimize.

Turning all these 'dos' into 'do nots', we might expect, would be mightily resisted, both by those who analyse policy, and by those who make or implement it. Indeed it was, when these heretical shibboleth-Inversions were first proposed, twenty or so years ago. Back in the 1980s, for example, when John Adams first spelt out the implications of the risk compensation hypothesis for Britain's road safety policy (recounted in Chapter 6 of this book), enraged cabinet ministers demanded that he be dismissed from his university position. A few years later, a senior British policymaker, Sir Kenneth Barrill, told Brian Wynne (who had been predicting that the insistence of the British government on a single definition of technological and environmental issues would lead to a decline of public trust and consent; predictions that later materialized spectacularly with the crises over mad cow disease and foot-and-mouth disease) that, whilst there was much truth in what he said: 'when it comes to the actual business of deciding policy, you can sod off!'

Around the same time, when one of us proffered similarly helpful advice to the United Nations Environmental Programme (in relation to environmental...
and developmental issues in the Himalayan region), he was told that it was 'completely useless' and 'academic bullshit' to boot.

But those dismissive responses seem now to be things of the past, and the previously threatening messages seem to have got through and to have been absorbed (to some extent, at least) both by the policy analysts (who are now beginning to understand that there are contending discourses, and are actively taking on board the sort of implications that come with what is sometimes called 'the argumentative turn'⁶) and by policymakers (who now quite welcome the idea of plural rationalities framing and its associated notion of clumsiness). Indeed, some of these practitioners (especially if they are at the 'street level' – nuclear installations inspectors, for instance) embrace the theory quite eagerly because, as they explain, it makes good sense of what they actually do (whilst the orthodox theories suggest that if that is what they are doing, then they should not be doing it). Indeed, John Adams and one of us recently wrote a 'clumsy report' – Taking Account of Societal Concerns about Risk – for Britain's Health and Safety Executive which, far from being fed straight into the shredder, is now publicly available on their Website.⁵

So something seems to have happened. Elegance-imposition, it seems, is no longer the force it used to be, and clumsiness, though not yet all the rage, is no longer being rejected out of hand. All of which encourages us to draw some rather ambitious, albeit tentative, conclusions by linking this evident transition to some of the grander transitions that have been (or are) happening on the world stage: transformations that have been rather inadequately captured by notions such as The End of History, The New World Order, Globalization, The Clash of Civilizations, The Age of Empire, Communitarianism, Postmodernity, Global Risk Society, and so on.⁶ However diverse and informative these notions might be, all of them have been proposed from, and advocate, a singular – and not a plural – logic, and have therefore captured but a part of our forever changing worlds.

What has ended? What has taken its place?

A bold suggestion would go something like this: the acute importance of what we mean by clumsiness becomes clear once we take the terrible events of the last century into consideration. This time-slice, of course, was what Eric Hobsbawn has called 'The Age of Extremes'.⁴ Indeed, it was the century of the 'isms': communism, Maoism, Leninism, Marxism, Third Worldism, colonialism, imperialism, national socialism, fascism, culminating (in the eyes of some of those who are still stuck in the singular mode) in the triumph of capitalism and liberalism, though punctured from time to time by Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism. In large parts of the world, in the Age of Extremes, one or more of the voices have found themselves silenced. Neither the individualistic nor the egalitarian voice could make itself heard in the Soviet Union, for instance, as is evident in the Brezhnev-era joke: 'we [the fatalised masses] pretend to work and they [the upholders of hierarchy] pretend to pay us'. Attempts to govern by severely repressing other ways of organizing and thinking – spectacular instances would include Pol Pot's 'Year Zero' in Cambodia, the McCarthy 'Un-American Activities' era in the United States, and Mao's Cultural Revolution in China – have created much misery by imposing a debilitatingly simplistic set of principles.

Misery, moreover, that could have been avoided, had ways been sought out to resist the various simplifying and voice-silencing urges. One might instance the terms that were imposed in 1919 on Germany and its allies by the Treaty of Versailles, the centralization of both economic and political power in post-colonial Africa, the imposition of import-substitution policies in Latin America that were later replaced by equally one-sided structural adjustment programmes, Western development 'aid' to places like Nepal, Free World support for local tyrants who were supposed to be anti-Soviet Union ('He may be a sonofabitch, but he's our sonofabitch!', to recall the realist Cold War refrain) and communism in the whole of central and eastern Europe, Cuba and China.⁸ So many policies and programmes have gone so horrendously wrong and, for all the variety of the principles that underlay them, they all share a single defining characteristic: they are all, in their different ways, over-elegant. Demonstrably over-elegant, we would add, when assessed in relation to the four-voice scheme that we have been relying on for our own concept of clumsiness.

But why, it could be objected, should four be enough? A number of answers are possible. 'Because there only are four' would be the hard-line answer. 'Because four is better than three or two or one, and going beyond four seems not to confer any further improvement' is the better response: an instance of the sorts of answers that, if the bible is to the believed, turneth away wrath. And then, of course, we might point to the oft-noted and apparently rather formidable cognitive limits on decision-making.⁹ Given these constraints, four is probably about the most we can imagine.

Of course, just because things have become clumsier as we have emerged from The Age of Extremes, it does not follow that all those over-simplistic isms have now gone away. Stalinism is still up there in the saddle in North Korea, much of Nepal's countryside at present is in the de facto grip of Maoism, and fundamentalism is alive and well in many Islamic countries. But, as is evident from the chapters in the second half of this book, many parts of the world – Hungary, California (if it was a country, then it would be ranked 7th in the world in terms of economic clout) and even China – are clumsier than they were and are, in many instances, getting clumsier.

If we think in terms of a tetrahedron, with each of its four apices corresponding to the 100 per cent representations of just one of the ways of organizing and perceiving, then we can visualize a 'feasibility space' (for clumsiness) towards the centre of gravity, (Figure 11.1) and away from each
Delphi-sampling of his fellow experts on China. His tentative conclusion is that China is not yet in the feasibility space but appears to be moving towards it.\textsuperscript{12} Such a scheme would allow us to keep track of both the shifts towards clumsiness within countries, and the regimes that are resisting these shifts (or even moving themselves, or being propelled, in the opposite direction. This also brings us to the whole question of how we should change the way we do Social Science.

Some worthwhile changes in the way we do social science

A first, and we hope, very obvious point is that the approach by way of clumsiness is most certainly not a way of avoiding having to know a lot about the particular issue you are concerned with. Cultural Theory's fourfold scheme is not some nifty little gadget that you can slap down onto gun control, flood risk, road safety, Himalayan hydro, the Internet or whatever and then read off the clumsy answer. Rather, and as we hope is evident from all the preceding chapters, it is a way of extracting that extra (and crucial) little bit of practical insight, once you have equipped yourself with a thorough understanding of the issue that you are addressing. Achieving all that, unaided, though possible, is not easy, which we feel, goes a long way towards explaining why so many of the chapters in this book have more than one author.

So we can begin by pointing to an oddity: that empirical research within the natural sciences is usually a team effort, whilst empirical analysis in the social sciences is often an individual undertaking. (Think, for instance, of the usual requirements for a doctoral degree in the social sciences.) The oddity is then compounded, once we concede that it is usually more difficult to observe social phenomena (nationalism, say, or social capital-formation) than natural phenomena (the polarity of a magnet, for instance, or the thinning of the ozone layer). Hence, why the lone social scientist (however intrepid he or she may be)?

Clumsiness makes it even more difficult for the social scientist to go it alone, in that the clumsiness notion, as well as requiring the researchers to know all the ins and outs of their cases, debars them from the straightforward path that is followed by so many of their more elegant fellows, who are able to accept 'the problem' as it is defined in some World Bank or United Nations report, and then to take the analysis from there. That path is closed off in the world of the would-be clumsy practitioner, who has to begin from the assumption that all definitions of any issue (and the solutions that follow from these) – all the technical reports, statistical tables, cost-benefit analyses, computer-based models, etc – are systematically analysed in terms of the fourfold plural rationality scheme that is provided by the theory of socio-cultural viability.
Doing all that is a tall order. It may well involve her or him in teasing out the particular ‘model of stability and change in nature’ that is being relied on unquestioningly in, for example, the determining of the assimilative capacity of the North Sea in relation to a pollutant such as titanium dioxide (an ingredient in most toothpastes). Then he or she will need to burrow into the cost–benefit analyses that have been relied upon, so as to discover the particular discount rate that is being used: is it high and uniform (the individualistic construction), or low or even negative (the egalitarian construction), and so on. And how are ‘infinite responses’ – such as ‘No amount of money will compensate for the loss of this rare species of mammal that is found only in the threatened patch of tropical rainforest, or for this Norman chisel that happens to lie in the path of this proposed airport runway’ – being coped with? (These responses cannot be entered into any cost–benefit analysis as presently constructed, as it takes only a single infinite value to incapacitate an entire cost–benefit analysis.)¹³ Are such infinite responses being factored in as significantly higher than the highest of the finite responses, or have they been excluded completely (as happens, for instance, in COBRA: the cost–benefit model that is used by Britain’s Department of Transport, in which priceless landscapes are ascribed zero value on the grounds that they have no development value)? Our would-be clumsy researcher will also need to stick her or his nose deep into the tables setting out the various levels of the statistical harm, so as to ascertain the particular dose-response curve that is being used: is it linear (hierarchy), quadratic (individualistic: radiation, in low doses, is actually good for you) or parabolic (egalitarian)?¹⁴ And, when risk-acceptability is being so dispassionately calculated, what method is being used in determining the level of consent: expressed preferences (egalitarian), revealed preferences (individualistic), or natural standards (which is the level of background radiation – hierarchical)? On and on.¹⁵

Another well-trodden path is foreclosed to the clumsy analyst. While pursuing research, one cannot be guided by one ideology only, or a single set of normative concerns. The clumsy analyst cannot, for instance, expose yet another contradiction of late capitalism, or argue that some claim of environmental destruction has been exaggerated, and then sit back self-contently. One must consider social and political processes from a variety of normative viewpoints, and can only suggest a practical course of action, or label a policy ‘successful’, if it appears worthwhile from a plurality of normative concerns.

To be able to get oneself into a position to ask all these sorts of questions, to then dive into the purportedly mental, scientific and factual accounts of what is going on so as to pinpoint the unquestioned assumptions – the myths of nature – that are at work, and to then map the entire hubristic terrain that has been so cavalierly rolled out so as to obscure the true extent of the uncertainty that is entailed in any particular policy issue, requires much more than just a spot of interdisciplinarity. It calls for a much rarer commodity: complete transdisciplinarity (including all the social sciences collapsed into one another,¹⁶ engineering, chemistry, ecology, geomorphology and so on). Challenges like this, it seems to us, are best handled by transdisciplinary teams. Rare individuals, we concede, may be able to do it all on their own – rather in the way that Reinhold Messner was able to climb Everest solo and without oxygen – but they are few and far between (nearly all of those who reach Everest’s summit are members of expeditions, and most of them also rely on oxygen to get there).

Indeed, Dipak Gyawali is the Reinhold Messner of this volume. He has no co-authors, but only because he is fluent in Nepali, Hindi, Russian and English, is a water engineer trained in the most prestigious school in the then Soviet Union, holds a master’s degree in political economy from Berkeley, has dedicated his whole life to the analysis and alleviation of poverty in South Asia, and has done a stint as a cabinet minister with responsibility for water resources. But more often than not – much more often than not – complete transdisciplinarity will have to be achieved by teamwork. Such teamwork, as many a social scientist has ruefully concluded, is about as easy herding cats! Difficult, yes; impossible, no.

Our world, we believe, is a complex and dynamic one. Nowadays, most people live in a multitude of constantly splitting, merging and overlapping social domains that are intertwined in ever-changing ways with a wide array of equally dynamic and varied ecological and technological domains. Our book has been an effort to describe some of the regularities that can be found amidst all this endless change, and to explain how we can rely upon these regularities in our never-ending efforts to exploit the opportunities, and avoid the dangers, that the continuous transformations of our social, technological and ecological worlds bring about.

May our futures be clumsy!

Notes


3. For some of his publications, see Brian Wynne and Alan Irwin, Mistrust in Science? The Public Reconstruction of Science and Technology (Cambridge: Cambridge
institutionalism is bi-rational: it allows for both markets (individualistic transactions) and hierarchies, and for two-way traffic between these two forms of organizing. Social capital, in its latest formulation—encompassing bonding social capital (egalitarian) bridging social capital (individualistic) and linking (hierarchical)—is tri-rational, and so on. It is by such a process of subsumation that the various varieties of the social science disciplines can be folded into one another. See, for instance, Michael Thompson, Marco Verweij and Richard Ellis, ‘Why and How Culture Matters’, in Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).


8. It might be objected that there simply was no way of resisting these simplifications that were imposed in the expansion of communism, but the fact that they were resisted in Malaya (which went from civil war and colonial status to independence and multi-party democracy) suggests otherwise.


10. Some of these—called the stable democracies—were the ones Almond and Verba focused on, in the immediate post–Second World War years, in their classic study of political culture: Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, The Civic Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).


14. This refers to the shape of the curve at low levels of exposure, which is where all the uncertainty and controversy is concentrated. For a more detailed treatment of these curves and of the ways in which upholders of the various solidarities tend to favour one and distance themselves from the others, see Adams, op. cit., pp. 47–50.


16. Neo-classical economics is mono-rational: it assumes that the individualistic way of organizing and perceiving holds sway everywhere and always. The new