

Passado, Presente e Futuro dos estudos sobre Políticas Públicas: Uma entrevista com o Dr. Thomas A. Birkland

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O crescimento e as transformações nos estudos sobre políticas públicas vêm chamando a atenção de diversos estudiosos nas últimas décadas. Do surgimento dos estudos de políticas públicas como sub-área da ciência política à criação de um campo de conhecimento próprio, chamado de Policy Science, modelos de análises, teorias explicativas e aportes metodológicos foram criados e vêm sendo testados em diferentes sociedades e sistemas políticos. De forma inovadora, a apresentação deste Dossiê Temático intitulado de “Estado e Políticas Públicas” será feita por meio de uma entrevista com um dos principais autores e pensadores desse processo de formação dos estudos de Políticas Públicas, Dr. Thomas A. Birkland. Birkland é atualmente “William T. Kretzer Professor de Políticas Públicas” no Departamento de Administração da North Carolina State University e autor de diversos livros e artigos, entre eles um importante manual de estudos do processo de políticas públicas - “Introduction of Policy Process” (Birkland, 2011) - o livro “After Disaster” (Birkland, 1997). A entrevista é composta por seis perguntas e respostas sobre o passado, o presente e o futuro dos estudos do *policy process* que devem interessar e provocar o leitor e os estudiosos sobre o processo de políticas públicas.

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Brasil: *How do you see the trajectory of the studies of public policies over the past years? Is it possible to affirm that public policy (in its various aspects and areas of analysis) have never been valued as it has been in the past two decades? If the answer is yes, why do you think that public policy has gained so much attention, not only by academics, policy makers and government officials, but also by the media and the whole society more broadly?*

Birkland: I see the trajectory of policy *process* studies over the last thirty years as settling into three or perhaps four dominant research traditions: the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), and, to some extent, Institutional Analysis and Development. This is where we stand now in policy process studies located, primarily in political science departments. There are other ways to conceive of policy studies, such as the study of substantive policy content, or such as through quantitative policy analysis. But these research directions don't often add much to knowledge of social science, in that they do not really create theories, test hypotheses, and advance social science.

Policy process studies, of the sort in which I am engaged, have gained so much attention in recent years for two basic reasons. First, the frameworks or models we use to study public policy making and policy change—MSA, PET, ACF, and IAD—are more refined than they were thirty years ago. At the same time, they create as many questions, about the theory and about the method, as they answer. This is a good thing, for it's the way science progresses. A second reason for this growth is that the tools we have to study public policy, both qualitatively and quantitatively, have also improved. Computing power is several orders of magnitude greater, even on personal computers, than it was two decades ago. The open-source statistical software movement, such as manifested in the R statistical software, has made very sophisticated techniques less expensive. Even for

qualitative researchers, advancements in text mining and automated content analysis make possible studies that used to require thousands of hours of manual coding.

I am not as certain that policy studies have gained much more attention in the public and media, at least in North America. I see very little reason to believe that policy makers and the general public are even aware of what we do in this field. In the United States, political actors are always seeking to cut social science funding from the National Science Foundation budget. There is a persistent belief that elected officials know more about policy making than do policy scholars. There may be some truth to this, but policy makers could learn something about their own institutions, behaviors, and biases, if they choose to pay attention to our work.

Brasil: *Nowadays, what is the meaning of studying public policy? In other words, what does it mean to study a public policy or the policy process? What are the main lines of studies, the main analytical aspects proposed by these studies?*

Birkland: The main lines of study are outlined in the first chapter of my textbook, and they include:

- Comparative policy studies, which compare different states' policy making styles and outcomes
- Policy analysis, which applies tools, often borrowed from economics, to assess whether and to what extent a public program has had an effect
- Substantive policy expertise, involving becoming expert in a particular policy field, such as transport policy, foreign policy, macroeconomic policy, education policy, environmental policy, and so on. Such expertise is about the actors that make, and that are influenced, by laws and regulations, and their

implementation. But such expertise does not always mean that social science is advanced.

- Policy process studies, which I described earlier.

Brasil: *The theories and models of analysis in public policies have originated mainly from the United States and Europe, for example the Multiple Streams, Punctuated-Equilibrium, Advocacy Coalition Framework and Policy Agendas Project. In your opinion, what is the importance of these theories and models being disseminated to other countries and contexts like Brazil, and other countries in South America, Asia, etc? Do you consider that the use of these frameworks and methods in other countries can contribute to the understanding of their local policies (such as health and education) as well as for the improvement of these models and methods?*

Birkland: All these frameworks have in common their foundation in democratic systems. All of these approaches (including the Policy Agendas Project, which supports PET), assume a democratic political system with reasonably open venues in which policy is made, fluid participation, and robust political debate. Of course, the extent to which democracy even exists in the United States is questionable, as more decision making is dominated by a growing plutocracy.

These frameworks can be applied to other nations, particularly when we view them as much as organizational behavior theories as they are political theories. The MSA, for example, is derived from Cohen, March, and Olsen's work on "garbage can" theory as based in *organizational* behavior. But important adjustments must be made to these theories when they are applied to other states. For example, Brazil is a younger democracy, and may not have developed precisely the same democratic institutions as states with longer experience with democracy. Applying these theories to states like the UK or France means that we need to

remove federalism as an important part of the rules of policy making, although the devolution of power to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, in the UK, and to the Basque areas and Catalonia in Spain suggest something like the complexity of American federalism. Even in the case of Spain, for example, another variable in national policy making is the substantial differences in language and culture in these other areas versus in the center, focused on Madrid.

I am not an expert in the application of these frameworks outside the United States, but I do know that, in particular, Europeans have drawn on these theories. I think it would be very fruitful to see such theories tested and refined in South America, realizing that there would not be a single model for Central and South America, given substantial differences between these states.

Paul Sabatier, some years ago, made some explicit changes to his ACF based on feedback from new democracies and nonfederal systems. Clearly, scholars worldwide are testing these theories in new contexts.

Brasil: *In your experience as a researcher and lecturer, what is your analysis of the multidisciplinary public policy? What are the positive and negative aspects of teaching and researching on a multidisciplinary field? What would be the main challenges related to this issue for young professionals and researchers?*

Birkland: I have always considered the study of public policy to be an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor. The field has its roots in political science, economics, and, to perhaps a lesser extent, history, sociology, and other fields. As has been noted by other scholars, effective scholarship requires both broad understanding of policy theories and expertise in a particular policy area or set of areas, so that one can test hypotheses using actual policy situations. Depending on the particular area of policy expertise one develops, one may need to rely on work done in different disciplines. For example, I study disaster policy, which is not a well-

studied area of policy in political science, but which is better studied by sociologists, geographers, urban planners, as well as many engineering disciplines, so I rely on the literature in all these fields.

This sort of interdisciplinary work poses a significant challenge to researchers in the North American context; I am not sure how these challenges work in other systems of higher education. The challenge comes in conducting interdisciplinary research but writing for disciplinary journals. Political scientists in particular are expected to publish in mainstream political science journals, but the questions we pose are often not well understood by editors and reviewers at these journals, sometimes because they consider the work to be “too applied,” and the research questions we pose may be seen to overlap with the kinds of things that sociologists are more interested in. We therefore publish in interdisciplinary journals in specialized policy fields that may reach a very broad interdisciplinary audience, but that may not research many members of the disciplinary departments to which we belong, and in which we earn tenure.

Brasil: *Do you think that the creation of the International Public Policy Association would be a response to the growth of public policy studies? Could this establish greater dialogue and networking among the various studies conducted in the area around the world? How does the creation of this association can impact the future of studies on public policy?*

Birkland: The creation of this group is indeed a response to the growth of policy studies, and, in particular, in policy *process* studies. I believe it will help network scholars from around the world—indeed, it has already done so, as I can personally attest—and I think it will be influential to the future of policy studies. This influence will be most obvious in the exchange of ideas about policy areas among scholars who, before the ICPP was formed, did not often speak between

continents. ICPP has already facilitated some very fruitful conversations between North American and European scholars. I know that Asian scholars are involved, but I have not had as many interactions with them. The same is true of South America. Based on what I know about some of the excellent scholarship emerging from South America, I believe Brazil could be a real leader in policy studies in South America.

Brasil: *To conclude this interview, I would like to ask you about your views on the future of public policy studies. What are the next challenges? What can be improved? What does it remain to be answered with regard to the subjects involved in the study of public policy?*

Birkland: The future of policy studies will be characterized, in the next 10 to 20 years, by three trends. First, the field will continue the trend from the last 20 years, in which three or four dominant frameworks will be used and tested to study various policy phenomena. This situation may be changed, and perhaps improved, by the as-yet unforeseen development of an improved theoretical framework that is able to incorporate the major features of the dominant theories.

Second, the field will likely be transformed by emerging developments in the study of individual behavior in political contexts. New research from psychology and even neuroscience and biology is likely to shape our models of how individuals behave in politics. I have not followed this work carefully in recent years, but it will deserve our attention.

A third trend is the improvement of the sophistication of our research methods and tools. A significant trend is in “big data,” which means large data sets characterized by data about individual or government behavior gathered among a large set of subjects over a long time. The challenge with big data is the tendency for large data sets to contain spurious correlations that are hard to detect through

our typical model specifications. Furthermore, the increase in computing power will allow us to code a large amount of textual behavior to find trends in the narratives told by policy actors; these techniques will make the Narrative Policy Framework, advanced by McBeth, Shanahan, Jones, and others, a more important way of thinking about analyzing policy discourse, regardless of the approach taken by the researcher.

Assim, finalizamos e agradecemos ao Dr. Birkland pelas opiniões e disponibilidade em responder às questões elaboradas para essa entrevista.

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