Anti-Poverty Policies and Evaluation: A Critique of the Pluralist Conception of Politics and Evaluation

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ANTI-POVERTY POLICIES AND EVALUATION:
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The beginnings of U.S. federal evaluation research can, in descrip-
tive historical terms, be located in McNamara's Department of Defense and the
later requirement that all federal government agencies adopt a Planning,
Programming, Budgeting System. While the formal PPB system was discontinued
in 1971, the analytical or policy evaluation activities it required, still
live on, especially in agencies dealing with human resource development and/or
social welfare programs (Schick, 1973, Wholey, et al, 1970). Given the recent
advocacy of increasing and improving federal evaluation efforts, I think it
important to examine some of the assumptions and consequences of those
assumptions of the general evaluation research model, particularly in regard
to anti-poverty policies.

Evaluation research, whether it be of anti-poverty policies or court-
ordered school-desegregation programs, is much like other social science
research. The chief difference is that the hypothesis of evaluation research
is, on a very general level, that some governmental agency program has achieved
its intended goal. While this simple statement in reality often involves
dealing with a whole host of methodological and organizational problems, the
point is that evaluation research is intended to be useful to decision-makers.
Evaluation research is not primarily concerned with theory building and theory
testing, but with practical "real-world" affairs. This makes evaluation
research important and often controversial. It is controversial because it can
effect (or is perceived as such) the budgets, staff size and power of various
agencies and the distribution of public benefits to various classes or
categories of citizens. It is important because methodological and empirical
issues - such as sample size and representativeness, validity and reliability
of measures, accurate operationalization of program goals, and appropriate-
ness of causal models and inferences - now have (or are perceived as having)
immediate and direct political consequences.

Some evaluations, for instance, the Coleman report and the Westinghouse
Learning Corporation - Ohio University study of Head Start, have become centers
of controversy. It has been argued that criticisms of these evaluations, while
explicitly directed toward methodological issues, are basically politically and
ideologically motivated (Williams and Evans, 1969; Weiss, 1972). The implica-
tion seems to be that such criticism will severely hinder not only the utiliza-
tion of the given specific evaluation study, but will also retard the extension
and improvement of evaluation generally. When evaluation advocates call for
de-politicizing evaluation, they are not claiming the evaluation is not part of
the political process or that evaluation does not have political implications.
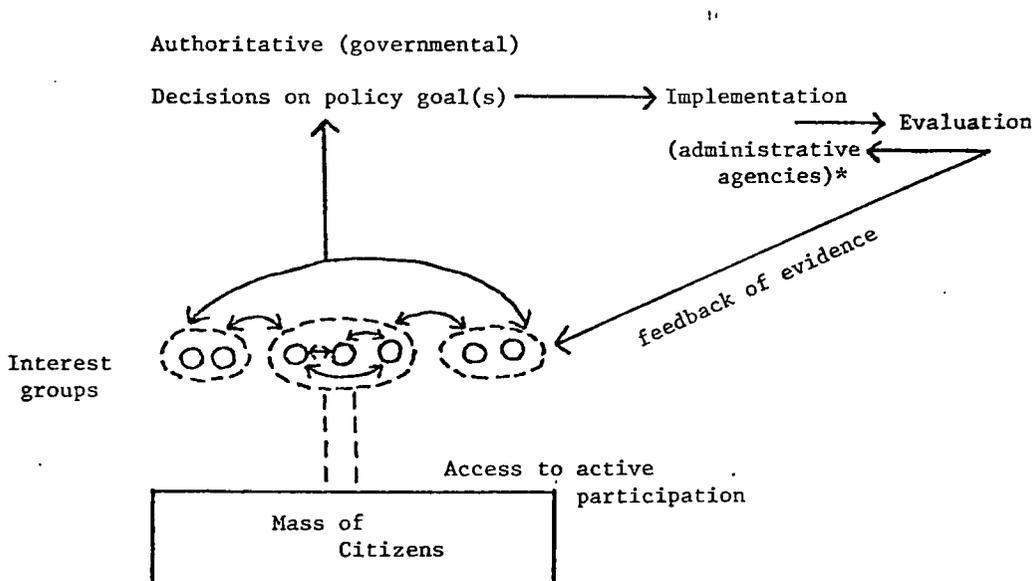
Rather, evaluation must be de-politicized so that it can help make political decisions more rational by supplying evidence (of an "objective or disinterested" character), which presumably is equally available to contending parties, on which to make decisions about maintaining, expanding, modifying or abandoning programs intended to achieve some general policy goal. That is, in order for evaluation to be useful, the design, implementation and data analysis phases of evaluation must be free from pressures that would or could bias the out-come(s) in one direction or another. Indeed, much of the recent literature about evaluation is concerned with such issues as quasi-experimental designs, causal models, the proper organizational locus of evaluation projects, and multi-variate statistical methods (see, for instance, Rossi and Williams, 1972; Wholey, et al, 1970; and Weiss, 1972). In order for these evaluation phases to be free of biasing pressures, this requires that parties interested in a policy area eschew political-ideological attacks upon evaluation. It is in this sense that evaluation research needs to be de-politicized and its a-political or disinterested character preserved, recognized and enhanced. This is, I submit, the typical frame of reference for considering the issue of politics and evaluation.

All the policy evaluations and discussions of politics and evaluation that I've seen assume or accept the dominant theory of the U.S. political system - pluralism*. Thus, policy goals are viewed as the result of bargaining among various coalitions of interest groups. Such coalitions are not stable, but shift as issues or classes of issues change. Each interest group has limited power and consents to the "rules of the game." Such bargaining results in piecemeal, incremental policies. In this view, all citizens are seen as essentially similar, each having equal access or opportunity to participate in the political arena. Figure I presents a highly simplified schematic diagram of the pluralist view of the political system and the place of evaluation in the system. Evaluation comes at the "end of the line" of a cycle and provides feedback in the (intended) form of "objective" or "disinterested" evidence about the outcomes of a policy decision. This evidence is then to be used in the following cycle.

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*While some have distinguished different varieties of pluralism, for the purposes of this paper, all pluralisms are essentially the same.

Figure 1

Pluralist Model of Political System
(Including the location of evaluation)

Authoritative (governmental)

Decisions on policy goal(s) ─────────→ Implementation

─────→ Evaluation

(administrative ←─────

agencies)*

feedback of evidence

Interest
groups

Access to active
participation

Mass of
Citizens

Legend

0 ─ ─ ─ ─ interest group

( ) ─ ─ temporary coalition

←──→ ─ ─ bargaining and influence attempt

─────────

* Administrative agencies also often behave as interest groups, and their
location in this figure is not meant to suggest otherwise.

But does the pluralist perspective adequately account for policy decisions concerning the poor - such as the creation, passage and implementation of the Economic Opportunity Action and its provisions for Community Action Agencies and Community Action Programs? And if it does not, what does this imply for the appropriateness of the traditional evaluation approach? The fundamental axiom of pluralism is that policy decisions are the result of bargaining among interest groups that have some power, and that have something (symbolically but especially materially) to gain or lose from the decision. While the poor apparently had something to gain from the Economic Opportunity Action and from Community Action Programs, to what extent did the poor act as an interest group in framing or in securing approval of the Economic Opportunit, Act? Levitan (1969) shows that various interest groups, mostly federal departments and agencies such as HEW, Labor, Commerce, and the Bureau of the Budget, did indeed bargain over, and arrive at compromises about substantive and administrative issues. However, nowhere is there any evidence that the poor were involved in the decision process. Sheppard (1969: 487) puts it succinctly "Unlike other class-related laws, in this case the law was only remotely - if at al] - the result of lobbying or direct pressuring by the class intended to be positively affected."

Most analysts of the political history of the Economic Opportunity Act, though sometimes puzzled by it, are not much concerned with explaining this apparent anomaly, preferring to see governmental decisions as being not just the result of pluralistic bargaining, but also, on occasion, the result of a rational, more or less disinterested, professional solving orientation (see, for instance, Donovan, 1967; Sundquist, 1968; Rubin, 1969; Marris and Rein, 1967; Moynihan, 1965; and Moynihan, 1969). The pluralist-problem solving perspective, thus, sees the War on Poverty as originating in the recognition of poverty as an important social problem by professionally trained social scienti in foundations, universities, and goverment who were able to influence sympathetic politicians in the Democratic administration. Many of the specific programs, such as Community Action Program, are seen as attempts to apply, to some extent, social science concepts and theories, to important social problems The War on Poverty programs, to the extent that they are based on social scienc theories at all, are based on or congruent with the cultural or sub-cultural theory of poverty (Valentine, 1968). While the cultural theory of poverty, and its chief rival, the situational theory are not well-developed theoretically (Spilerman and Elesh, 1971; Herman, 1974), the cultural perspective sees (hardcore) poverty as the result of socialization in a sub-culture that produces personality characteristics and orientations (such as fatalism, preference for immediate gratification, feelings of powerlessness, etc.) that prevent such poo from taking "full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportuniti that may occur in their lifetime." (Lewis, 1968: 6) Thus, traditional evaluations of anti-poverty programs would attempt to assess to what extent such programs (in their various forms) resocialized, changed the personalities, of the poor who were, in some way, included in the program. This was certainly th case in Westinghouse-Ohio University evaluation of Head Start, and appears to b the case in evaluations of Community Action Programs.

This seems reasonable enough as far as it goes, but does it go far enough? It does not, if there is another perspective that more adequately accounts for the War on Poverty programs. An elite or limited pluralism perspective provides a more convincing explanation of the War on Poverty. As developed by Gamson (1968), in an important but much neglected article, the U.S. political system can best be described as one of limited pluralism. Gamson agrees that the political system contains multiple centers of power, but then argues that the political system normally operates to prevent incipient groups from achieving full entry into the political system, and thus such groups are unrepresented in the political system. Represented groups do indeed bargain and compete among themselves, but they also cooperate (whether intentionally or not is unimportant) to maintain the boundary (i.e., hinder entry) to the political system. For instance, the creation of political organization among unrepresented groups is discouraged by such general social conditions as (1) a lack of access to information about the effects of political decisions, (2) the lack of politically experienced and skilled leaders, and (3) the "culture of subordination". The political establishment can and has undertaken more specific actions that discourage the formation of interest groups and their inclusion in the political system. Such boundary maintaining activities include: (1) attempts to undermine the legitimacy of a developing interest group; (2) harassment of leaders; (3) co-optation of leaders; (4) going around leaders of a developing interest group and appealing to members and potential members to reject the interest group and its leaders as their representative; and (5) incrementalism in the resolution of major social issues. Gamson explicitly points out that all citizens are not the same. Social stratification of citizens affects access to and resources available for participation in the political system. Figure 2 presents, once again, a simplified and heuristic diagram of the elite or limited pluralism perspective.

<u>Figure 2</u>

Elite or Limited Pluralistic Model of Political System
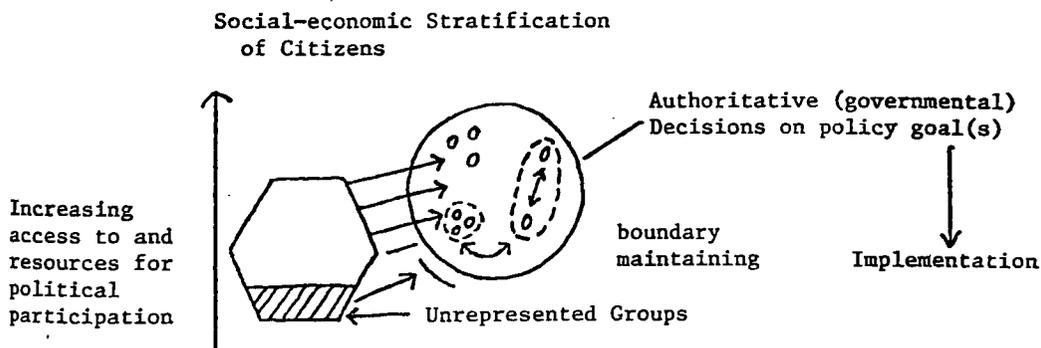
Legend

0 - - - - interest group

(- - -) - - temporary coalition

↶↷ - - bargaining and influence attempts

Since most research on the poor has been concerned with investigating the culture or subculture of poverty, the psychological characteristics of the poor, and the impact of programs designed to resocialize the poor, there is little direct data available to assess the extent to which the poor, or what and which proportion of the poor, are unrepresented in the political system. However, I think it safe to contend that for the most part, and in comparison to more privileged socio-economic classes, the poor are unrepresented.

The elite or limited pluralism perspective sees governmental policy decisions, especially those dealing with or "for" the poor (or for other unrepresented groups), not as exercises in consensual problem-solving, but rather as a means of winning elections without alienating established interests in (i.e., while maintaining the stability of) the political establishment. Though Piven and Cloward (1971) do not explicitly utilize Gamson's model of the political system, their analysis of the functions of welfare fits very nicely with and illustrates Gamson's views. Piven's and Cloward's (1971) primary thesis, supported by chronological data they present, is that expansive welfare policies (increasing expenditures, "loosening" requirements) function to dampen civil disorders, while restrictive policies (decreasing expenditures, "tightening" requirements) function to reinforce work norms. Betz (1974) recently provided additional empirical support for this basic thesis when he demonstrated with cross-sectional data that cities experiencing riots had significantly larger increases in welfare expenditures the year after the riot than non-riot cities. Thus, there is evidence that supports the proposition that welfare policies are not attempts to solve the poverty problem. (See also Goroff (1974).) Rather, the functions of welfare policies are to win elections (either by creating and appealing to the prejudices of working and middle-class people or by "buying" the votes of the poor) and maintain the stability of the political system (either by heading off changes in the political system that civil disorder might bring about or by emphasizing, to both the poor and non-poor alike, the necessity of work).

In the course of documenting this basic thesis, Piven and Cloward (1971) offer an explanation of the origins and functions of the War on Poverty that is consistent with their basic thesis and with Gamson's theoretical model of the political system, and at odds with the pluralist problem-solving accounts. Briefly, they argue that by the 1960s most local urban Democratic parties were unconcerned with and hence unresponsive to the black and poor in the cities. The national Democratic party and its candidates, though, were dependent on capturing and holding this constituency. In order to do this, the federal government intervened in local welfare arrangements, not directly through liberalizing legislation, but indirectly by creating programs, such as the Economic Opportunit Act and its provisions for Community Action Programs, that helped to mobilize pressure against local welfare policies. Regardless of the intentions of the key political actors, the War on Poverty and its Community Action Programs, by circumventing local Democratic establishments, functioned to overwhelmingly secure the inner city poor and black vote for the national Democratic party, and its candidates - Kennedy and Johnson. However, in some cities the conflict between the poor and the local political establishment (often Democratic) became

so intense that mayors and others contended that the stability of the political system was threatened. The opposition of big city Democrats and their allies can account for the retreat from citizen participation in Model Cities programs established by the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 (Cole, 1974); Strange, 1972). Unlike CAA programs, all federal funds for Model Cities programs go directly to the municipal government, thus reestablishing local political control over the programs.

It is, of course, unrealistic to expect evaluation studies conducted or sponsored by the government to depart from a reliance on the pluralistic problem-solving model of the political system or to go beyond investigating the extent to which formal policy goals (no matter how multiple, vague or broad they may be) are achieved, and at what cost-benefit ratio. However, the point of this exercise is to show that traditional evaluation can not be truly de-politicized. Evaluation, particularly of anti-poverty or other social welfare policies, can not but be political, even in its research phases, being based on the pluralist theory, evaluation research is constrained to raise only certain issues and hypotheses. Evaluation, in this view, functions (whether intentionally or not is unimportant) to reaffirm the pluralist view, and to focus analysis on specific programs rather than on the political system which produces them.

One sometimes senses that evaluators and evaluation advocates are uneasy about the narrowness of evaluation research. For instance, Weiss (1972: 334) in a section titled, "Implications of Evaluation: A Radical Critique" argues that " in a basic sense, the bent toward the negative that is characteristic of social action evaluations is not something to be masked or shunted aside. To the extent that null results are real and not an artifact of primitive methodology, they betoken serious weaknesses in social programming." Later she concludes that "it is time we recognized the failure of our moderate, piecemeal, cheap solutions to basic social problems. They have been tried and evaluation research has found them wanting. Bold experiments are called for. It is a fraud to perpetuate variations on outmoded solutions to problems that are rooted in our system of social stratification." (Weiss, 1972: 337)

If the elitist model presented here has any validity, and I think it has a great deal, it implies for those of us concerned with analyzing poverty and inequality and attempts to reduce it, that we not allow formal policy goals and their evaluations to define the entire field of investigation. Additional issues and questions need to be raised. It implies that relying exclusively on the government (or more broadly, the political system) to seriously do something about reducing poverty and inequality is foolhardy. Finally, it implies that poverty and inequality might be more effectively reduced by focusing on ways of promoting the formation of interest groups among the poor and of easing entry into and changing the established political system. That is, the problem of poverty might be more fully solved if we analyze and find ways of changing the policy process, instead of analyzing and changing only the policies.

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