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CAN POLICY ANALYSIS REMAIN ABOVE THE FRAY OF POLITICS? INTENTIONS, BELIEFS, AND SETTINGS IN BERGER AND NEUHAUS'S MEDIATING STRUCTURES

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Abstract

This article discusses the history of mediating structures theory in the American context. It focuses on the 1977 essay To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy by Berger and Neuhaus and those authors' claim that their policy analysis constituted an apolitical set of policy prescriptions. This paper examines that claim in light of historical, philosophical, ethical, and policy-analysis perspectives, through the work of Deborah Stone, and through the lens of virtue ethics; namely, in the work of Aristotle and Alistair MacIntyre.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, mediating structures, policy analysis, virtue ethics

INTRODUCTION

The 1970s were a time of great public anxiety and disillusionment in the United States. The economy was in a deep recession. Watergate and the Vietnam War had traumatized the country and polarized society along political and cultural fault lines that erupted in horrific violence and social upheaval. Despite the massive deployment of public resources in the innovative programs of FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society, problems of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality lingered. Public trust in the federal government's ability to solve these problems was at low ebb. It was in this context that the American Enterprise Institute, the pro-market, conservative Washington think-tank, launched the Mediating Structures Project. This policy-analysis initiative sought to advance a conservative agenda of restrained government and individual empowerment through the promotion of families, churches, neighborhoods, and voluntary associations—the so-called mediating structures. In 1977, Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus published the hallmark achievement of the Project, the incredibly influential treatise *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*. The paper's main premise is that modernity, particularly the modern "megastructures" of government, business, and organized labor, had isolated the individual and drained democracy of its connective meaning. While the public clearly wanted the services the modern welfare state provided, it was palpably averse to expansive, impersonal bureaucracy, government writ large, and "bigness as such." Acknowledging this apparent dichotomy, Berger and Neuhaus concede that "the welfare state is here to stay" and that it should in fact *expand* the benefits it provides. At first blush, this idea seems counterintuitive to what we know about conservative economic ideology in which "smaller government" is the rule. To resolve this apparent inconsistency, *To Empower People* proposes that policy-makers should employ mediating structures, not government-administered programs, as vehicles for the mitigation of social problems. As Grosby (2010) puts it:

 Berger and Neuhaus sought to circumvent the deleterious, enervating influence of the overbearing, paternalistic, and ambivalently desired welfare state on the character of its citizens...by arguing for a public policy that would promote 'alternative mechanisms' to provide social services. (p. 194)

Among the assertions Berger and Neuhaus go on to make in this essay is that their approach "cuts across political divides" and represents a way forward that is "free of the ideological baggage of the past" (1977, p. 242). But does their theory of mediating structures emanate (or subliminally derive) from a particular political agenda? Can this analysis—indeed can any policy analysis—remain above the fray of politics as Berger and Neuhaus claim? This paper examines that claim in light of historical, philosophical, ethical, and policy-analysis perspectives.

I begin by exploring the historical underpinnings of mediating structures theory, beginning with its roots in Tocqueville. I then turn to the work of Deborah Stone (1997) to illuminate the intrinsically political nature of policy analysis from the sociological perspective. Berger and Neuhaus share considerable common ground with Stone in the conception of community organizations, voluntary associations, religious institutions, and the like as the building blocks of civil society, and in the general rejection of universalizing, Kantian rationality in policy analysis. However, these theorists diverge sharply on the model of society that is most desirable and representative of reality. Where Berger and Neuhaus are thinly veiled proponents of the market model—itsself one of the three “pillars” of what Stone terms “The Rationality Project”—Stone argues forcefully and convincingly for a civic model, the polis. Adding philosophical depth to the discussion, I next examine Berger and Neuhaus’s assertion of political neutrality from the perspective of virtue ethics. Specifically, I employ Aristotelian concepts of civic virtue and MacIntyre’s contextualization of human political (and all other) action within the social and environmental web of intentions, beliefs, and settings. I conclude by offering a synthesis of the ideas outlined above and a way forward that focuses on the concrete, democratic practice of civic virtue and deliberative democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Mediating Structures Theory

In one form or another, mediating structures are as old as human society itself, with family as the original such entity and religious congregations closely following. For our purposes, however, the history of mediating structures is relatively short and begins with the America Alexis de Tocqueville studied and wrote extensively about in the 1830s in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville marveled at the depth and breadth of the American propensity to form spontaneous voluntary associations to mitigate social problems. Against this uniquely American approach (the uniqueness of which is disputed by some historians, who point to analogous and interrelated dynamics at play in Europe at the time—see Hoffman, 2003), Tocqueville contrasted the problem-solving tendencies of the French (his own countrymen) and the English: the former, he noted, were more likely to look to public officials to solve social problems, while the latter looked for leadership from the aristocracy. Tocqueville’s two-volume study, published in 1835 and 1840, has had an indisputably profound impact on the way Americans and American policy-makers have seen themselves and the democratic project in the United States. We continue to reserve a primary role for voluntary associations and non-profit organizations in the resolution of American social problems to the present day. This continuing emphasis on voluntary associations and other mediating structures in the policy-making approach of both of our major political parties in recent history attests to the accuracy, clarity, and power of Tocqueville’s observations (Couto, 1999, p. 37; Grosby, 2010, p. 193).

By way of brief history, we can say that the focus on mediating structures—voluntary associations in particular—as vehicles for the redress of social problems has experienced notable historical peaks and valleys. Focus and activity expanded rapidly and in incredible volume throughout the nineteenth century, until, by the turn of the 20th century, the massive proliferation of associations and all manner of social clubs had severely undermined the Tocquevillian elevation of these mediating structures: As Hoffman (2003) describes it:

Because the phenomenon of associations had become so general, and because the number of associations had exploded, it seemed difficult to maintain that associating with others promoted the political idea of improving mankind through the development of virtue and the sense of common good. The more widespread the phenomenon of associations became and the more it embraced previously excluded groups, the more unbelievable this claim, along with the reliance on the political power of virtue and civilization, became. (p. 291)

In this context, associations had become less about the political empowerment of people and more about congregating among one’s like-minded hobbyists. Cultural critics in the first decade of the 1900s openly flogged the phenomenon as shallow and philistine in character (Hoffman, p.p. 291-292). This pervasive negativity toward

Tocqueville's moral and political vision of society founded on and intertwined with voluntary associations eventually reached its height—and the Tocquevillian vision its nadir—in the moral, societal, and economic debacle of the Great Depression. It was around this time, in the context of massive poverty and natural and economic disaster that public sentiment in the United States shifted dramatically from reliance on philanthropic societies and voluntary associations to assuage human misery. The New Deal programs launched a shift in the conception of government's role as an innovative, efficient, and benevolent force in the mitigation of social, economic, technical, and even cultural problems. This trend continued into the mid-1960s with the implementation of Johnson's Great Society agenda. The Great Society expanded the social contract FDR had established through the aggressive and imaginative implementation of a myriad of innovative social programs, legislation, and even cultural agencies. Among these massive achievements are Head Start, Medicare and Medicaid, the War on Poverty, the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Food Stamp Act of 1964, the Department of Housing and Urban Development Act, the National School Lunch Act of 1968, and the list goes on and on. And then things began to change.

The Great Society programs emerged at a time of great social upheaval that led to the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the peace movement against the Vietnam War, and the student movement, all of which were intertwined and broadly unified in their concern with social and economic equality, and a wariness of the benevolence of government. This dynamic rippled through the scholarship on mediating structures theory and led to renewed focus on voluntary associations in particular. In 1973, philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III funded a commission to produce a formal assessment of the relationship between democracy and voluntary associations. The task force was officially dubbed The Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs, and colloquially known as The Filer Commission after chairman, John Filer. This commission coined the term "Third Sector" to refer to nonprofit organizations, and thereby elevated them to an equal place in the taxonomy of democratic social and economic organizing principles, alongside government and the for-profit business sector. It also expanded the definition of the voluntary sector to include hospitals, libraries, and universities (Couto, 1999, p. 41). This "democratic-trinity nomenclature" persists in the literature to this day.

The Filer Commission also attributed to the third sector certain expanded roles, including:

Public policy or political roles in both government and the market...[suggesting that the third sector] initiates new ideas and processes, develops public policy, supports minority or local interests, provides services prohibited to government, oversees government, oversees the marketplace, brings the sectors together, gives aid abroad, and furthers active citizenship and altruism. (Silverstein, 1983, in Couto, 1999, p. 42).

In the wake of the Filer Commission and the shift in public sentiment it articulated and fostered, came the American Enterprise Institute-funded Mediating Structures Project.

While not staking any claims to the innovation of the basic theory of mediating structures, which they acknowledged had been around some time, Berger, Neuhaus, and their collaborators in the Mediating Structures Project did claim new ground in applying it to particular public policies:

The idea of mediating structures has its precedents in nineteenth-century sociological thought; Durkheim, Tocqueville, and others wrote about the small associations bound together by ties of kinship or common interest, in which most people find community. What is new in our project is the attempt to update the mediating structures notion and use it as an organizing principle for rethinking public policy in post-industrial society. (Kerrine and Neuhaus, 1979, p. 11).

Berger and Neuhaus's 45-page treatise, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* was the tip of the spear for the Mediating Structures Project. For the purposes of their essay and the Project broadly, Berger and Neuhaus defined mediating structures as "*those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life*" (1977, p. 241). Their essential argument was that the pressures of modernization had created a schism in American society. On the one hand there are monolithic institutions called *megastructures*. These are the modern state, organized labor unions, giant corporations, media

conglomerates, the massive bureaucracy of the education establishment, and the powerful and influential associations that represent the professions—the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, and so on. On the other hand, there is “that modern phenomenon called private life. It is a curious kind of preserve left over by the large institutions and in which individuals carry on a bewildering variety of activities with only fragile institutional support” (p. 241).

As a provisional antidote to this state of being, in which the individual is in a constant state of anxiety vis-à-vis the megastructures, Berger and Neuhaus prescribe a public policy approach to fulfill human needs while simultaneously assuaging the dissonance individuals feel in their relations to the megastructures—where on the one hand, people intuitively understand and accept the need for the modern welfare state, and where on the other hand there is sharp and pervasive distrust of government and cynicism about its ability to serve human needs. According to this approach, policy-makers would reverse the trends they associated with the expansive bureaucracy of the New Deal and the Great Society toward undermining mediating structures, and in fact, increase government utilization of them. While admitting that their list is far from exhaustive, the mediating structures that these analysts focus on are church, family, neighborhood, and voluntary associations (p.p. 240-243).

In both political and historical terms, Berger and Neuhaus’s work and the Mediating Structures Project were wildly successful. The transformative vision they outlined of re-directing public resources into the hands of private, third-sector agencies for the delivery of public benefits was embraced whole-heartedly by conservative policy analysts and policy-makers alike. The apex of this achievement came in the Reagan administration and is summed up in Reagan’s iconic remark, “Government is not the solution to our problems; government *is* the problem.” However, an important link was lost in the translation of Berger and Neuhaus’s theory into the practice of policy-making. As Couto (1999) notes,

The renewed emphasis on mediating structures in the 1980s came with and from the ideological stature of market democracy. Declining commitments to government regulation and social policies and programs to promote equality stimulated a search for new sources and stocks of social capital. Berger and Neuhaus found them in mediating structures. Mediating structures could supplement or replace public programs to address social problems. Robert Putnam’s work supported the conservative revision of the political role of mediating structures. It ignored and diminished the economic function of mediating structures and the material side of social capital. Social capital, in Putnam’s work, consists almost exclusively of moral resources (p. 53).

Setting Putnam aside for the moment, we can see that, while lip service was paid to Berger and Neuhaus’s stated goal to “expand government services without producing government oppressiveness” (p. 243), in practice, through the Reagan administration’s devolutionary regime, the *responsibility* to expand these services was in fact levered onto the third sector, *but the economic resources necessary to support that expansion did not follow* (Salamon 1997, p.p. 420-421). Ironically, this bait-and-switch tactic amounted to what small-government conservatives routinely decry in the context of federal program requirements passed down to states and localities—namely, it was an unfunded mandate. It was also an instance of the kind of “magical thinking” for which Berger and Neuhaus themselves derided proponents of publicly-funded-and-administered approaches to social problems: “The extravagant rhetoric of the modern state and the surrealistic vastness of its taxation system encourage magical expectations that make contradictory measures seem possible” (p. 240).

While President Barack Obama has recently marked an attempt to restore the faith in government that was fostered by Roosevelt and Johnson’s achievements, there is no doubt that the Reaganite shift transformed public policy and attitudes towards government in the 1980s. It is also clear that this transformation continued through the 1990s and reverberates to this day. Couto (1999) notes:

Republicans and Democrats alike...[invoke] mediating structures as if the tasks of addressing social and individual needs [flow] naturally from a divine endowment of voluntary associations—first revealed by the prophet Alexis de Tocqueville—and from the market—as revealed by its prophet, Adam Smith” (p. 7).

Stillman's (2004) analysis of the demonization of federal bureaucracy—which of course, extends to the context of social-service delivery by public agencies—further delineates this trend:

George Bush [and] his son, George W. Bush, ran against 'bureaucracy'...one of Bill Clinton's first actions as a president was to appoint...Vice President Al Gore to head a task force, which produced...*The National Performance Review* (NPR), aimed at recommending fundamental reforms in the federal bureaucracy and cutting federal personnel by 250,000. Presidents in recent decades have promised to 'cut it,' 'trim it,' 'reform it,' and 'clean it up.'...Politicians mirror...public disgust. From left to right in the political spectrum, bureaucracy is a target. (p. 5)

These remarkable facts of history—particularly the Clinton administration's stunning assimilation of market-driven notions of government as exemplified in the "Reinventing Government" initiative and Welfare-Reform legislation of 1996—are testaments to the rhetorical power and ideological force of Berger and Neuhaus's work on mediating structures. They also attest to the effectiveness of the aforementioned work of Robert Putnam. Best known for his 1995 journal article "Bowling Alone," in which he decried "couch-potato democracy" and the decline of American engagement in civic associations, Putnam "reinforced the easy assumptions Americans make about the relationship of voluntary associations and democracy, first noted by Tocqueville [and] offered renewed hope of finding solutions to public problems that did not require government intervention and, perhaps, support" (Couto, p. 52).

Having established this history of mediating structures in theory, in public-policy analysis, and in implementation, we will now consider the work of Deborah Stone (1997) to see what insights can be gained into the political motivations (or lack thereof) that inform Berger and Neuhaus's policy approach to mediating structures.

Stone and Political Reasoning

In *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, Deborah Stone outlines two broad objectives. The first is to debunk as a viable model of political reason what she calls "the rationality project"—the common goal of "the fields of political science, public administration, law, and policy analysis [to rescue] public policy from the irrationalities and indignities of politics," and to replace this messy process "with rational, analytical, and scientific methods" for policy making (1997, p. 7). The rationality project, Stone asserts, naively and wrong-headedly seeks to prescribe a single, unifying vision of social and political reality for the purpose of identifying and actualizing the good in and for society. Further, Stone says, "the very categories of thought underlying rational analysis are themselves...a kind of paradox, defined in political struggle," and "analysis is itself a creature of politics" (p.p. 7-8). Stone's second broad objective is to delineate an alternative to the rationality project for policy analysis—one that contextualizes and defends policy paradoxes as the healthy and necessary, if unruly signs of a robust, inherently imperfect democracy:

Unfortunately, much of the literature about public policy proceeds from the idea that policy-making in practice deviates from some hypothetical standards of good policy-making, and that there is something fundamentally wrong with politics. In creating an alternative mode of political analysis, I start from the belief that politics is a creative and valuable feature of social existence (p. 8).

Stone goes on to delineate three "pillars" of the rationality project: a model of reasoning, which she posits as a step-wise process of rational decision making; a model of policy making, which is the production model; and a model of society—the market. Against these models, Stone formulates and poses her own, each designed to challenge conventional notions of politics and policy-making. Her model of political reasoning involves metaphor and analogy, "but not just for beauty's sake or for insight's sake," rather it is "strategic portrayal for persuasion's sake, and ultimately for policy's sake" (p. 9). Stone's model of policy-making is defined as "a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideals that guide the way people behave" (p. 11). It is a model based on the struggle over ideas. And finally (for the purposes of this paper), over the atomistic market model of society, Stone prefers a model of society as a political community—the polis.

Conceptualizing the Polis

Polis is the Greek word for city-state. Stone employs the word to label her model of an interconnected, interdependent, and inherently political society, which stands in stark contrast to the market model. According to economists, in the market-model social system, individual actors exchange goods or services with other actors in mutually beneficial transactions where benefit to the individuals can include benefit to family, friends, and partners. It is the mass accretion of these countless, mutually beneficial transactions, which are motivated by the stimulus of competition for finite material resources, that ultimately adds value to a society and enhances its overall quality of life. There is no collective expression of will or intention in this model. By contrast, the polis, being by definition a community, makes politics and policy possible. Without community, there is no politics or need for policy. A theoretical world where there are no communal objectives or ideals, no collective will or intentions beyond those motivated by individual competition and self-interest simply does not ring true to human experience. As Stone observes, “Untold volumes of political philosophy have tried to define and explain this phenomenon of collective intention. But even without being able to define it, we know intuitively that societies behave as if they had one” (p. 18). How else to explain the psychology of mobs? How else to explain multiculturalism? Fashion? The race to land first on the moon? Politics and policy are necessary to define, harness, shape, re-shape, balance, and even curtail these fundamentally social phenomena.

The Building Blocks of the Polis

But then how does the individual act within and upon the polis? Stone posits that cooperation—the flip side of competition, that hallmark of the market model—is a necessary ingredient in the empowerment of individuals to effect policy (p. 26). The English language has terms for the coordination of groups of individuals working toward the same goals: alliance, association, collective, cooperative, council, committee, coalition, organization, party, support-group, society, union—some of these Stone lists, some I’ve added. All of these words describe conglomerations of individuals who organize themselves, or are themselves organized by circumstance, into entities that interface with other entities within the polis, and with the polis as a whole, in order to achieve policy goals—whether they be at the family, religious congregation, office, business, neighborhood, town, city, county, state, or federal level. To understand the fundamental aspects of how public policy is shaped, one must first understand that the essential, basic “unit” of society (what Stone terms the polis) is not, in fact, the individual—as the strictly rational market model holds. Rather, Stone tells us, “influence, cooperation, and loyalty are powerful forces, and the result is that groups and organizations...are the building blocks of the polis” (p. 27). Thus, the individual acts within and upon the polis through her activity within smaller groups—family, neighborhoods, churches, community agencies, voluntary associations and other nonprofits, trade unions, citizens groups, political parties, etc.

Stone outlines three main reasons for assigning to groups and organizations a fundamental role in the polis: (1) People belong to institutions and organizations even when they are not formal members. (2) Policy-making is not only about solving public problems; it is also about how groups are formed, split, and re-formed to achieve public purposes. And (3) groups are important because the decisions of the polis are collective (pp. 27-28). The first point is a subtle one, but easy enough to see. After all, one belongs by default to a neighborhood, even without joining a neighborhood association, and one is born into a family. In both cases, individual interests are still represented in the polis by a larger group or community. To take another example, the interests of a poet, violinist, or sculptor seeking patronage for his work benefits from the lobbying of arts and humanities organizations, whether he takes memberships in these organizations or not.

The second point goes to the strategic nature of groups and the fluidity of their alliances with other groups. It also underscores the importance of groups in political action. For example, the recent public debate and policy considerations over climate change have created strange bedfellows in otherwise socially conservative Christian groups and thoroughly liberal environmental groups. Some Christian groups are re-framing their short-term ethical and political goals to address and reverse the damage humanity has done and continues to do to the planet—the

stewardship of which they deem to have been entrusted to them by their God—through global warming (Moyers, 2007). One can imagine that this sort of alliance will dissolve rapidly in other contexts, if and when the policy goals of the alliance are met. And one can hardly deny the power of these groups to affect policy changes, especially now that they are allied. One also notes that even the fractures created in the Christian community over the “detour” the enviro-Christians have taken away from other core Christian-right issues, such as abortion or same-sex marriage, will undoubtedly heal over in the right circumstances (i.e., when their collective goals require unanimity on behalf of some policy fight or other).

While we’ve already essentially established the third point, there is a key component of the power and influence of groups that Stone illuminates in her elaboration of that phenomenon that bears emphasis. For beyond the obvious formalities of the mechanisms of government, lobbying, public service on juries and committees, and so on, “public decisions are implicitly collective in that even when officials have ‘sole authority,’ they are influenced by outside opinion and pressure” (Stone, pp. 27-28). For of course politicians and business leaders are subject to the laws of public opinion. Moreover, in a democracy, these actors make their decisions within the context and strictures of more concrete laws—those of organizational social roles and parliamentary procedure—and these are all collectively determined and formed. Decisions are also formed by the character of those who make them. On this note, we turn to a discussion of virtue ethics to further illuminate Berger and Neuhaus’s mediating structures paradigm.

Virtue Ethics and Political (and Other) Baggage

Virtue ethics is generally attributed to Aristotle—who worked out its intellectual contours most thoroughly in his *Nicomachean Ethics*—but it dates back to Plato, and before him, to ancient Chinese ethics (Hursthouse, 2012, p. 1). Virtue ethics, broadly speaking, can be thought of as an ethics of purpose—a teleological approach to meaning-making, morality, and the philosophical project of identifying and pursuing the good. Teleology derives from the Greek *telos*, which means the end, purpose, or essential nature of a thing (Sandel, 2009, p. 186). For our purposes, the thing in question is the human being.

Hursthouse (2012) defines virtue ethics as one of three major approaches in normative ethics. It may, initially, be identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach which emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that which emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism). Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped. A utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize well-being; a deontologist will point to the fact that, in doing so the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as ‘Do unto others as you would be done by;’ and a virtue ethicist will point to the fact that helping the person would be charitable or benevolent. (p. 1).

To Hursthouse’s example, one might add that the virtue ethicist would help because doing so is consistent with the norms or expectations of community, or more specifically, the norms and expectations of civic virtue (one of the features of which is presumably looking out for one’s fellow citizen). This virtue of community or civility is bound up in Aristotle’s greater conception of the end or purpose of humanity, which Sandel (2009) summarizes beautifully:

Only by living in a polis and participating in politics do we fully realize our nature as human beings. Aristotle sees us as beings ‘meant for political association, in a higher degree than bees or other gregarious animals.’ The reason he gives is this: Nature makes nothing in vain, and human beings, unlike other animals, are furnished with the faculty of language. Other animals can make sounds, and sounds can indicate pleasure and pain. But language, a distinctly human capacity, isn’t just for registering pleasure and pain. It’s about declaring what is just and what is unjust, and distinguishing right from wrong. We don’t grasp these things silently, and then put words to them; language is the medium through which we discern and deliberate about the good.

Only in political association, Aristotle claims, can we exercise our distinctly human capacity for language, for only in a polis do we deliberate with others about justice and injustice and the nature of the good life. (p.p. 195-196).

Alasdair MacIntyre, perhaps the best-known modern virtue ethicist, extended the Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics by focusing on the social, environmental, and historical context of the human actor. For MacIntyre,

Moral lack arises as a result of a society's denial or neglect of its own narrative history and the impetus to fragment persons from their historical narrative and community for the perpetuation of the individualist modern myth. [He] asserts that all reason emerges from a living tradition; in fact human self-knowledge also emerges from somewhere. He writes, 'What I am therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present' (221). In this sense, the notion of a modern 'individual' as a rational, independent agent is a myth (Becker Sweden, n.d.).

This understanding of reality posits that we are all part of a larger narrative in which our *raison d'être*, our *telos*, is entailed, and in which it unfolds moment-by-moment. To adopt a Shakespearian turn of phrase, it is our role and aspiration (our *telos*) as actors in this powerful play (of life, of history) that we might contribute a verse. Seen in this way, it becomes clear how, for MacIntyre, we are the sum of our intentions, beliefs, and settings. We are what we inherit, and that inheritance—that baggage—whether political or other, is present to some degree in every choice we make, in everything that we do. In MacIntyre's view, we act unvirtuously (immorally, unethically) when we try to deny this and act as though we are rational, independent agents with either deontological or utilitarian-consequentialist powers of mechanistic clarity. This judgment also pertains to those, like Berger and Neuhaus, the American Enterprise Institute, and all others in the market-rationalist camp, who believe that individuals make self-interested choices in a vacuum, leading to the good as determined by the sum of those choices. Thus, we can see how Stone's conception of the polis begins to gel with the virtue ethicist's view of the good.

Berger and Neuhaus Through the Lenses of Stone and MacIntyre

Having waded through the thickets of context presented by our discussion of Stone, Aristotle, and MacIntyre, we move now to an analysis of Berger and Neuhaus's claim of freedom from political baggage for their influential work *To Empower People*. I'll proceed by highlighting the points of agreement and then the dissonances between these theoretical interlocutors.

First the points of agreement: Stone's and Berger and Neuhaus's approaches are well aligned on the matter of mediating structures' role as building blocks of society. Berger and Neuhaus's application of mediating structures theory supports Stone's insistence on a community model of society and her analysis of the fundamental role of groups and organizations in the polis. Related to the assertion that individuals are subsumed and actualized in groups even when the two are not formally connected, is Berger & Neuhaus's call for individuals in neighborhoods to take up more responsibility for localized security. Neighborhoods would be strengthened, they claim, if public policy were to strongly encourage and support "the informal 'law enforcement agents' that exist in every community—the woman who runs the local candy store, the people who walk their dogs, or the old people who sit on park benches or observe the streets from their windows" (p. 244). It should be noted, however, in light of recent high-profile vigilantism cases such as the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida in 2011, that one might well question the wisdom of this prescription. Supporting Stone's notion of the flexibility and mutability of groups and organizations, the mediating structures studied by Berger & Neuhaus "have demonstrated a great capacity for adapting and innovating under changing conditions"; moreover, "they exist where people are, and that is where sound public policy should always begin" (Berger & Neuhaus, p. 241). "Where people are," of course, is in essentially finite communities. Therefore, this assertion resonates strongly with Stone's observation that "because politics and policy can happen only in communities, communities must be the starting point"—that is, the building block—"of our polis" (p. 18). For what are groups, but communities?

The affinities of the two arguments in question don't stop there, however; for Berger and Neuhaus also maintain that

It is precisely with respect to mediating structures that most people do have, in the most exact sense, a political will. On matters of family, church, neighborhood, hobbies, working place, and recreation, most people have a very clear idea of what is in their interest. If we are truly committed to the democratic process, it is *their* political will that public policy should be designed to empower. (p. 249)

What is this but an argument for the group (i.e., the mediating structure) as the building block of the polity, and a call to support and strengthen the community values which Stone so ardently espouses? Note, however, that the ideologically-charged rhetoric of market-rationalism is present even in this passage espousing the virtues of community-determined empowerment—for even in this context, Berger and Neuhaus make sure to underscore the fact that the individual has the best idea of what is in his or her interest.

The mediating structures model also underscores the contradictions inherent in a community-based system of society, where groups constitute both discrete elements or patches of the societal quilt of the polis and also, taken together, form its whole cloth:

Beyond providing the variety of color, costume, and custom, [a pluralistic society model] makes possible a tension within worlds and between worlds of meaning...Whether the participants in these worlds see themselves as mainline or subcultural, as establishment or revolutionary, they are each but part of the cultural whole. Yet the paradox is that wholeness is experienced through affirmation of the part in which one participates. (Berger & Neuhaus, p. 248).

Thus, just as the individuals who make up groups in a society have two sides—the competitive and the cooperative—so, too, are groups that are two things at once. This is a paradox that Stone would surely appreciate.

But as we've seen, while *To Empower People* shares certain affinities with *Policy Paradox*, those likenesses are not air-tight. In fact, they unravel quite quickly when one subjects *To Empower People* to the scrutiny of one of its authors' own critiques of rationality:

[History] is a messy, disorderly, most irrational constellation of shifting interests and passions. Serendipity, not logical consistency, marks its course: both rational understanding and rational action must reckon with the facticity of the irrational and, most important, with the fact of unintended consequences. Distressing though this is, it is a fact that most of our actions do not lead to the consequences we intend or anticipated. I would contend, following Max Weber, that this is the single most important insight to be derived from the modern historical and social sciences" (Berger 1991, in Grosby 2010, 194).

It seems here that Berger wants to eat his cake and have it too. He is apparently in agreement with Stone in her general critique of the Rationality Project in two of its manifestations: the step-wise approach to rational decision-making and the process model of policy-making. That is, he generally agrees that rational approaches break down; however, he seems unaware that his market-rationality approach is in fact, a rational approach—or, rather, it is the particular assertion of rationality that market-rationalists espouse. It is a form of rational magic, a dogma, not unlike Adam Smith's Invisible Hand. In the final analysis, then, what Berger and Neuhaus advocate in *To Empower People* is not a polis model of society, but rather a market model of society. And while, on the rhetorical surface, they agree with Stone in her conclusion that policy analysis is not and cannot be rational because reality is too unpredictable to be tamed by even the best-engineered policy solutions, Berger and Neuhaus themselves are herein caught out: they claim *their* approach is "above the fray" of irrational politics (i.e., it's politically neutral; read: rational)—but it is not. It is not politically neutral, and therefore it is not rational in one sense. But it is rational in another sense, in that it favors the conservative approach of classical liberalism and market rationality. This is a paradox of meaning and semantics, enough to make one's head hurt. And as if all of this wasn't confusing enough, setting aside *To Empower People's* disastrous consequences, ironically, both Stone and MacIntyre would doubtless agree that the particularity of its policy approach is nothing more than the natural tendency of human actors pursuing their telos. The "sin," if you will, in virtue ethicist terms, is that they assert that their approach is apolitical. For in

this assertion is a denial of the narratives the Berger and Neuhaus bring to their analysis—their intentions, beliefs, and settings. And for MacIntyre, this displays a clear moral lack. For according to him, there is no policy analysis divorced from intention, belief, and setting.

IMPLICATIONS, DIRECTIONS, CONCLUSIONS

Stone argues that society is not a market, but rather, it is a dynamic, *deliberative* community that engages in a vibrant, spirited, and necessarily contentious dialogue about policy. With Stone's argument in mind, it is instructive to consider other conceptions of an oscillation of approaches between two poles—that is, between, what Morone (1990, in Couto, 1999) terms the democratic promise and the democratic prospect:

The democratic wish is suspended between the democratic promise of limited government for individual liberty, which has roots in the dread of government and trust in economic markets, and the democratic prospect of social and economic equality, which is rooted in a yearning for community. The democratic wish moves toward one pole or the other and shifts its elements, including mediating structures, with each shift. Much of the literature on mediating structures...places them in the democratic promise of limited government. (p. 66).

Torralba and Pallazi (2010), employ Aristotelian virtue ethics in the context of organization theory in a way that is equally applicable and illuminating in the context of deliberation in the polis:

Deliberation is the process that must precede decision-making because it is concerned with things that mostly occur in a certain way but in which the outcome is not clear, is uncertain...[Aristotle's] reflection on means is realistic and credible and constitutes a very valuable doctrine in order to achieve the success that organisations aim for...The mean between excess and deficiency is virtue. For example, between arrogance and cowardliness we find bravery, between waste and avarice, generosity, or that honour is at the midpoint between vanity and pusillanimity. (p. 109).

Similarly, Stone notes:

Categories are human mental constructs in a world that has only continua. They are intellectual boundaries we put on the world in order to help us apprehend it and live in an orderly way. That is the meaning of the phrase 'social construction of reality' [the title of a book by Berger and Luckmann (New York: Doubleday, 1966)] and the school of thought it denotes—not that there is no reality apart from social meanings, but that we can know reality only by categorizing it, naming it, and giving it meaning. (1997, p. 375).

Thus we see a synthesis of virtue ethics, Stone's theoretical approach, and Couto's progressive political approach to mediating structures. The notion of policy-analysis as finding a sweet spot, the mean, the virtue of deliberative character and the exercise of practical wisdom. Between the two poles of political left and right (i.e., between the polarities of modern-American Progressivism and Conservatism) is a balance, a mean, which is always moving and inconstant in the context of any practical policy analysis. The policy analyst of virtue recognizes his or her own biases and openly brings them to the table, but is also open to persuasion, mediation, and the possibility of their inadequacy.

Policy analysis in a democracy is untidy business. On its face, this statement is rather obvious to even the casual observer of American government and politics. What is not so obvious, and what I hope this paper has helped to make clear, is that this messiness is not only explicable, but also necessary to the survival of our form of government—in fact, it is necessary to our very survival. Policy analysis is definitively and demonstrably *not* above the fray of politics; it *is* politics—at least one instrumental form of politics. Policy analysis is politics as practiced by the sublimation of what would otherwise be violent struggle in the form of reasoned argument. Stone (1997) puts it this way:

The categories of thought behind reasoned analysis...are themselves constructed in political struggle, and nonviolent political conflict is conducted primarily through reasoned analysis. It is not simply, therefore, a matter that sometimes analysis is used in partisan fashion or for political purposes. *Reasoned analysis is necessarily political*. It always involves choices to include some things and exclude others and to view the world in a particular way when other visions are possible. Policy analysis is political argument, and vice versa. (p. 375, emphasis in the original)

But settling the question of whether policy analysis can be “above the fray of politics”—it cannot—is perhaps ultimately an unsatisfying reward for making one’s way through this analysis. Yes, the world in this sphere of human endeavor, like so many others, is beyond the ability of science and rationality to resolve. There are no perfect answers. So what is the point in trying? For Aristotle and MacIntyre, the trying itself is the highest form of virtue—the fulfillment of our purpose as innately communal beings and contributors to a multitude of conflicting narratives leading to an ongoing narrative. For Stone, it is a matter of self-preservation—the imaginative and self-defensive management of boundary tensions: “Political reason is our privilege. It allows us to conduct our border wars with imagination words instead of weapons” (p. 380). And in this context, we can truly appreciate Berger and Neuhaus’s aim to effect—by the artful navigation of the inherent tensions between pluralistic reality and aspirational unity—“more imaginative accommodations.” Here, the poets demand their pay, and so I will give them their due by ending with words from the quintessential American poet of democracy, imaginative accommodation, and paradox of various kinds, Walt Whitman: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then, I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (1892, p. 72).

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