



Gladwell's journalistic approach has, if nothing else, helped put a label on a variety of events that hadn't been given a single name before. As Richard Bernstein has written, one of the great roles of sociology has been the way it 'has given the world phrases and concepts that crystallised new and blinding insights into the conditions of individuals in society', such as 'charisma', 'lifestyle' and 'power elite'. By popularising the term 'tipping point', Gladwell could have a durable impact at this level at least.

In addition, while I was suspicious of Gladwell's bullet-point writing style, I do not want to sound too churlish about what is still the rare virtue of clear prose. Even if his overarching argument is weak, Gladwell succeeds in the vital task of giving us the information. In a market not overly receptive to new books about serious social science, *The Tipping Point* has been widely reviewed and recommended by the likes of the main business books page of Amazon.com.

If just a few business people read about the psychology case studies in the book then Gladwell will have succeeded in telling people something new. This sums up the merit of the book: the way it reports the existence of a great deal of research that fits a common pattern. The experts already knew this; Gladwell is the first to tell everyone else about it. That may be journalism, but it is also bringing a new idea in sociology to many people who had never heard it before.

Reviewed by
Richard Salmons

Public Policy and Political Ideas

Dietmar Braun and
Andreas Busch
Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar
1999, £49.95,
ISBN 1 8064 182 7

Anyone concerned with influencing public policy has to address the question of what determines policy: ideas, interests or institutions? The existence of think tanks shows that some people believe in the significance of ideas, and that beliefs about society and government affect policy outcomes.

Yet the resources devoted to ideas-based institutions such as think tanks is miniscule compared to those devoted to political parties and interest groups. This reflects a post-war consensus among political scientists that interests are the driving force of politics, mediated through specific institutions.

This consensus was undermined by the rise of Thatcherism, Reaganism and economic rationalism, which were not and could not have been predicted by conventional political science. This has led to a major resurgence in academic literature emphasising the central role of ideas, as reflected in this volume.

The editors claim that they 'did not intend to demonstrate that ideas matter. This has been demonstrated beyond doubt by the existing literature. Instead, it endeavoured to answer the question when and how ideas might matter in comparison with the more common analytical

frameworks of interests and institutions' (p.190).

It does this in two parts: three theoretical chapters which explain the many different ideational theories that exist before comparing them to rational choice theories of interests; and seven empirical chapters that seek to test these theories. They cover a wide range of topics: higher education, new public management, tax harmonisation, drug policy, European regional policy, health, and welfare states. A wide range of countries are considered, but they are almost exclusively taken from Europe. The US literature is ignored. There is no case study taken from Australia, although one of the authors, Janet Lewis on health, is from the University of Melbourne.

Unfortunately the book is written in the turgid prose that covers for academic writing, so it is difficult to recommend the book to anyone except academic specialists in this area, or policy experts with a particular interest in the policies studied. Nonetheless, the book does raise some interesting questions for readers of *Policy*.

First, how do ideas influence policy? In a variety of ways: as resources, legitimisers, cognitive frames, catalysts, inhibitors, learning processes, and perceptions of interests. Braun identifies those theories that see ideas as a means of power-seeking versus those based on argumentation. While the ideational theories are multitudinous, the book concentrates on three main ones.

First is the neo-marxist referential theory based on Gramsci, who sought

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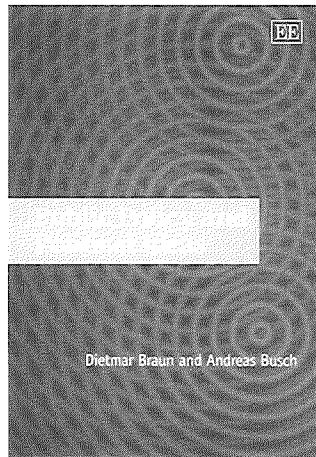
to save marxism from refutation by introducing the idea of ideological hegemony. In this view, ideas are used as a means of defending interests. How many of us defenders of the market have been met, not with argument and refutation but dismissal as simply the paid hacks of business interests. This reflects the referential theory.

The second school, formulated by Paul Sabatier, is known as advocacy coalitions, which are policy networks of actors sharing a common policy project based on shared principles. The third is Peter Hall's paradigmatic model, which explains the rise and fall of Keynesianism using the cohesive quality of ideas to explain how Keynesianism came to be embraced by a wide variety of interests. It is Hall who emerges strongest from all the empirical studies.

The second interesting question is whether ideas can be reconciled with rational choice models that emphasise interests. One of the foundations of modern liberalism has been rational (or public) choice theories which explain policies as the result of narrow special interests, thus tending to downplay the impact of ideas.

In one sense public choice is self-refuting in that its advocates clearly believe that if everyone shared their perception of the political process, policymaking would improve. Busch shows that ideas are more than 'hooks' for interests, as some rational choice theorists claim; however, ideas as 'focal points' is compatible with the insights of rational choice.

Third, there is the question as to why liberalism has had a dramatic affect on economic policy, while the welfare state has proved to be highly resilient in the face of the liberal onslaught. The explanations for welfare resilience include the legacy of path-dependency, the lock-in of



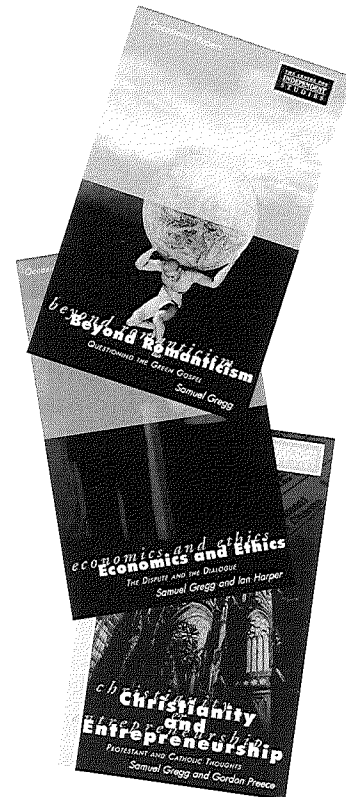
interests and electoral hazard. I think the considerable literature on this subject underestimates the dynamic effects of the reforms that have been put in place. Reform does not require the crisis or 'rupture' that one saw with macroeconomic policy.

Liberals have failed to develop a compelling narrative that explains the weaknesses of the welfare state as structural rather than being due to resources, a story that articulates alternatives for overcoming uncertainty, and that convinces that the status quo is a recipe for disaster in the future. Welfare reform in the United States would be a useful model. We need a storyteller such as Charles Murray to transform the debate.

This volume may not be exciting reading, but it left me more optimistic about the prospects of moving the policy paradigm in a more liberal direction. It would be helpful to have additional resources for those who contribute the most to the ideational debate. Just as every academic book ends with a demand for more research, so perhaps every article in *Policy* should end with a call for more donations to CIS!

Reviewed by
Dr Nigel Ashford

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