CHAPTER 3

What Sort of Ideas Become Public Ideas?

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Gary Orren and Steven Kelman have argued that ideas about what is good for society, rather than selfish interests alone, explain much of political activity and policy making in America. In this chapter I explore four subsequent questions: where do we see the effects of these ideas? how do we know that any observed effects are the effects of public ideas and not private interests? what sorts of ideas become important? and how can such ideas be created? If one thinks of public policy as ideas that have power in guiding public actions rather than as an abstract set of techniques for developing and testing ideas, then these questions are the most fundamental in the field.

Some Ideas That Matter

To begin my analysis, I offer some examples, drawn from my professional experience, of ideas that seem to matter. I want to insist on these examples as evidence for the propositions I will put forward. But it is probably more accurate to see them as illustrations. My account of how these ideas have operated is impressionistic rather than well documented. The examples are drawn from a relatively narrow range of substantive fields (principally criminal justice) and are hence not necessarily representative of all fields of public policy. Still, as one participates in policy debates and observes organizations in action, one cannot help being impressed by the apparent power of public ideas. Here are seven examples that impressed me.

Alcoholism and Alcohol Policy

For the last several decades, alcohol policy has been shaped by the concept of alcoholism.[1] In this concept, the world is divided into two kinds of people: normal people and alcoholics who cannot reliably control their drinking and therefore experience unemployment, marital difficulties, and more than their share of ill health and accidents. Alcoholism is seen as a disease rather than as a moral failing. And virtually all of the society's alcohol problems can be attributed to the behavior and condition of the alcoholics.

With this diagnostic conception, the solution to the alcohol problem seems obvious: the goal of public policy must be to identify and treat alcoholics. A conservative strategy to achieve this goal is to wait for the alcoholics to identify themselves by experiencing problems and then refer them to treatment. A more aggressive strategy is to develop early detection programs to identify problem drinkers before they get into difficulty or become alcoholic. At the extreme, the society could develop genetic markers to identify individuals especially vulnerable to alcoholism and provide them with drugs or teach them techniques that will insulate them from problem drinking before any problems appear.[2] The common thread in these approaches is identifying individuals who are now alcoholics or at risk of becoming alcoholic.

These ideas undoubtedly capture an important part of the alcohol problem and the policies that might be effective in controlling it. They are consistent with some important facts about the epidemiology of alcohol use and with some important new developments in biochemistry.[3] They are also consistent with a spirit that prefers to see the problem of alcohol as a result of disease rather than moral failing. This point is particularly important in light of the current historical interpretations of Prohibition, which view the enterprise as not only a practical failure, but an inappropriate effort to impose middle-class values on an immigrant population.[4].

But what if some significant portion of the alcohol problem is produced not by alcoholics, and not even by "problem drinkers" or "proto-alcoholics," but instead by perfectly normal drinkers who drink unwisely and unluckily?[5] After all, ill-timed moments of drunkenness can produce very bad consequences, such as traffic accidents, drunken assaults, even disputes that become the basis for unemployment and divorce. Even if any individual bout of drunkenness is very unlikely to produce these results, so many people occasionally become drunk that these events may turn out to be significant in the overall problem.[6]

If unlucky or ill-timed drunkenness is an important factor, policy instruments designed to deal with alcoholics may well miss it.[7] Of course, if *everyone* is treated as being at risk of alcoholism, then the

mechanisms of early detection and treatment should be successful. But there may be more efficient ways of going after the problems of drinking in the general population. For example, one could reduce the overall quantity of drinking through taxation or by limiting the availability of alcohol.[8] Or one could encourage the general citizenry to drink more wisely by passing laws prohibiting certain kinds of drinking behavior or offering health education programs. Or one could try to make the social and physical environment less hostile and dangerous to those who are occasionally or often drunk.[9] These are logically possible policies, but they are hard to recognize or take seriously if one is thinking primarily in terms of identifying and treating alcoholics.

To a degree, one can view this problem as nothing more than an analytical oversight. Two observations make the situation somewhat more sinister, however. First, few studies identify the importance of "normal" drinkers in society's overall alcohol problem. Indeed, this kind of understanding is made impossible by the practice of viewing anyone who has a problem with drinking as an alcoholic or proto-alcoholic. Second, as long as one thinks of the alcohol problem as lying among the alcoholics, it is hard to see it as being in the alcohol or in the general population. This deflects attention from some possibly significant pieces of the puzzle.

In fact, defining the alcohol problem as a problem of alcoholism produces a powerful political coalition uniting three constituencies: (1) the alcoholic beverage producers (who are not held responsible for the alcohol problem and can argue successfully against any new efforts at taxation or restriction of supplies); (2) the groups that "treat" alcoholics (to whom flow any public resources devoted to the solution of the problem); and (3) the general population of drinkers (who can rest assured that their drinking is not a problem). It is almost as if a conspiracy had arisen to keep the society ignorant of the role of nonalcoholic drinkers in causing the alcohol problem and of the potential value of policy instruments such as taxation, drunk driving laws, and public health education in dealing with it.

Dangerous Offenders and Selective Incapacitation

In recent years, crime policy has been heavily influenced by two closely related concepts: "dangerous offenders" and "selective incapacitation."[10] The basic idea is that a relatively small fraction of the criminal offenders accounts for a large proportion of the overall crime problem.[11] Consequently, an effective way to deal with the crime problem is to identify such offenders, increase the likelihood that they are arrested and successfully prosecuted, and lengthen their periods in confinement.[12] This basic idea is a very old one. Why has it now become powerful?

The most important answer is that the idea seems to solve an important contemporary problem: how best to use the nation's scarce prison capacity to control crime. The nation's prisons and jails are currently overcrowded, largely because more people have been arrested and successfully prosecuted for crimes.[13] A second factor crowding the nation's jails and prisons has been a policy shift from "indeterminate sentencing" (which allowed parole boards to adjust prison sentences and therefore to increase or decrease prison populations in response to immediate circumstances) to "determinate sentencing" (which took away this discretion and slightly increased the terms served for individual offenses). This shift in sentencing policy was in turn motivated by a widespread disillusionment with the practical potential of "rehabilitation" (a crucial supporting element of the policy of indeterminate sentencing) and with the justice of a sentencing scheme that left offenders convicted of the same offense serving different amounts of time in prison.[14]

The ideas of dangerous offenders and selective incapacitation seemed to point the way toward more effective use of prisons: if we could distinguish the most active, persistent, and dangerous offenders from the others, then we could use our existing prison capacity more effectively. The result would be either less crime or lower prison costs than if we failed to identify the most active offenders.

This proposal was put forward with some important scientific trappings. New evidence suggested that some offenders were much more active, persistent, and violent than others.[15] A simple system, apparently more accurate than its predecessors, was developed to identify the violent offenders on the basis of characteristics such as current offense, prior record, juvenile criminal record, drug abuse history, and patterns of legitimate employment.[16] A new analytic model made it possible to calculate how much better the society could do in terms of reduced crime or reduced prison populations if it was willing to pursue selective incapacitation as a principle of sentencing.[17] These features gave the old ideas some freshness and technical legitimacy that they would otherwise have lacked.

Of course, these concepts were attacked on all the usual powerful grounds—for example, that the evidence of concentration of offending in a minority of the criminal population was not credible, that the model predicting significant benefits from selective policies was based on inappropriate assumptions or was calculated incorrectly, that the predictions were too inaccurate to be tolerably just to individuals, that the predictive tests included inappropriate characteristics of individuals, that it was wrong to base sentencing decisions on predictions of future conduct, and that bail could not legitimately be used to control crimes by people who had not yet been convicted of an offense.[18] In the past, these criticisms had been sufficient to keep proposals for selective incapacitation off the agenda of criminal justice policy. Now, however, the criticisms seemed insufficient, and the concepts gained great prominence and standing.

Two other characteristics of the policy debate seemed unusual. First, no one seemed to notice that the criminal justice system was already behaving in a highly selective manner.[19] In reality, the concept of selective incapacitation was simply the mirror image of so-called rehabilitative sentencing, which proposed an early release for offenders who seemed to have rehabilitated themselves, while those not yet rehabilitated would remain incarcerated.[20] The goal of selective incapacitation—to keep dangerous offenders in prison a little longer than those who seemed less dangerous—was clearly the same. Parole boards had long used the same criteria in deciding who should be released as were now being proposed for selective incapacitation.[21] Thus some portion of the potential benefits of selective policies was already being exploited by the criminal justice system, and there was correspondingly less benefit to realize in the future.

Second, the policy debate about selective incapacitation generally focused on whether it was proper to use predictions in the criminal justice system. But one could equally well view the issue as one of discriminating between people who had been unusually persistent offenders in the past and others who seemed less persistent, more accidental offenders.[22] Such an approach would significantly alter the discussion of whether the policies were just, since it would eliminate the issue of prediction. It would also have important implications for how one constructed the discriminating tests, since the only relevant variables would be those related to prior criminal conduct. This, in turn, would reduce the practical value of the policies. But the point is that there was little possibility of even getting on the table the idea that the policy should be based on backward-looking discriminations rather than forward-looking predictions. The debate continued to focus on the issue of "prediction."

The Deinstitutionalization of Juvenile Offenders

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of deinstitutionalization began to influence the juvenile justice system.[23] This concept urged the abandonment of large institutions previously used to house delinquent children. Much of the opposition focused on the buildings themselves, which were large, often locked, and remote from the children's home communities. A powerful sociological theory predicted that this radical separation from the community and the official labeling of the children as delinquent would harden them in their criminal tendencies.[24]

These predictions gained credibility because they seemed consistent with two important facts. First, recidivism rates seemed intolerably high. Second, those who recidivated most quickly and disastrously were generally the offenders who had spent the most time in juvenile facilities.

In addition, it seemed impossible to run decent programs within such facilities. This view was supported by observations of conditions inside the institutions and by social psychological experiments. Inevitably, the professional staffs became "guards" and the children became "inmates."[25]

Opposed to the disappointing reality and dire sociological predictions of the institutions for delinquent children was a hope also rooted in a theory. This hope was that, for the most part, children had the determination and the capacity to grow into responsible citizenship.[26] The central problem was simply to avoid corrupting them. No elaborate process of exhortation, aid, and control was necessary to accomplish this task. To the extent that socializing efforts were required, they could be provided by indigenous community institutions rather than public bureaucracies. Such notions appealed not only to liberals optimistic about human capacities for spontaneous virtue, but also to fiscal conservatives, who saw an opportunity to save money for the state. After all, the institutions were quite expensive. If the liberals were prepared to retreat from the public provision of the services supplied in the institutions and to rely instead on private community capabilities, the fiscal conservatives would not protest.

These forces were sufficient to close the juvenile institutions in Massachusetts and reduce their use in other states. But there had been no real evidence that the institutions were exacerbating the problem of juvenile crime and recidivism, and no particular program or idea was proposed to replace the institutions. Over the years, states relied more on "community programs" and the "private sector" to supervise delinquent children. That may have increased the degree of connection between the children and their communities.[27] Moreover, there was much broader and wider experimentation with particular kinds of programs for supervising and rehabilitating delinquent children.[28] But there was no significant breakthrough in levels of juvenile crime or recidivism. Instead, suspicion increased that the juvenile justice system gave youthful offenders a free ride, and pressure arose to shrink the jurisdiction of the juvenile courts so that more crimes committed by children could be handled within the adult criminal courts.[29]

The Drug Enforcement Administration: Jailing Bad Guys

In 1974 President Richard Nixon created the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which united several existing federal agencies focused on reducing the supply of drugs to illicit markets. The new agency included the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (itself the product of an earlier reorganization that had combined the Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the Food and Drug Administration's Bureau of Drug Abuse Control); two special organizations recently created to give special emphasis and new capabilities to drug enforcement—the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement and the Office of National Narcotics Intelligence; and a portion of the U.S. Customs Agency that had been particularly active in investigating narcotics smuggling. The hope was that combining these diverse agencies might improve coordination and overall effectiveness in dealing with illegal drugs.[30]

In designing a successful supply reduction strategy, a variety of issues had to be resolved. First, which drugs should be the highest priority for enforcement action?[31] This issue had important implications for the overall style of the organization, because DEA confronted quite different kinds of supply systems and had to develop different strategies for controlling the supply to illicit markets.[32] Some drugs (such as barbiturates, amphetamines, and tranquilizers) had legitimate uses, and large domestic industries. To deal with these, DEA had to act like an effective regulatory agency establishing reasonable production quotas, imposing reporting burdens on legitimate suppliers, and so on. Other drugs (such as heroin, cocaine, and marijuana) had no legitimate uses: the supply systems were wholly illicit—most of them with international connections. To deal with these drugs, DEA relied heavily on criminal enforcement procedures such as informants, wiretaps, and undercover operations.

A second crucial issue was where to attack the illicit distribution systems.[33] Each strategy had its own advantages and disadvantages. Enforcement efforts in foreign countries would be "near the source," but "host countries" were of uncertain reliability. Some could not control areas dominated by drug dealers. Others were corrupted by drug money. Interdiction strategies might "stop the drugs at the border" and could exploit the special search and seizure powers that exist only at the international boundary. But how could the enforcement agencies cover 25,000 miles of unprotected borders and sift through millions of tons of imported goods in search of a ton or two of heroin? Domestic enforcement efforts "on the street" could attack drug distribution systems when they came into the open, but did not seem to make any lasting difference in the overall supply of drugs to illicit markets.

A third important strategic issue was what tactics and what sort of cases were most effective in immobilizing illicit trafficking networks. Traditional methods relied primarily on the use of informants and undercover buy operations. Newer approaches tried to make greater use of intelligence analyses and electronic surveillance, and to prosecute on the basis of conspiracy charges rather than the substantive offenses of sale and possession of narcotics.

In principle, the new organization, seeking a coherent and effective supply reduction strategy, could have usefully analyzed and debated these issues. It might even have conducted some planned experiments to find out what strategies worked. In practice, however, none of this was done because the organization had already decided on its mission. As one senior agent said during a major planning meeting, "As I see it, our job is simple: we put bad guys in jail." That characterization met with widespread agreement and obvious relief from the ambiguities of thinking about the issue in more complicated ways.[34]

Unfortunately, this formulation pre-empted all the other conversations and had a decisive effect on how they would be implicitly resolved. As it turned out, the drugs that received the highest priority were not

necessarily those that created the worst social consequences for users, but those that were supplied by the biggest and baddest dealers. In practice, this meant heroin and cocaine. Dangerous drugs such as amphetamines and barbiturates were ignored as beneath the dignity of a "crime-fighting" organization. The focus of operations were principally domestic, since it was there that one could put most bad guys in jail. Moreover, both foreign operations and interdiction efforts were conceived principally as devices for immobilizing major traffickers. Crop eradication efforts overseas were neglected, as was the possibility of involving the military in interdiction efforts, since that would work against the basic notion of locking up bad guys. As for investigative tactics, the use of informants, undercover purchases, and substantive cases with seized drugs to display as evidence continued to dominate intelligence analysis, electronic surveillance, and conspiracy cases. This too was consistent with a straightforward approach to putting bad guys in jail.

This version of a supply reduction strategy is not necessarily wrong. But important issues had been pre-empted by a powerful idea of the organization's mission and style that drove out any other considerations. A new organization, instructed to rethink the nation's basic strategy to reduce the supply of drugs to illicit markets, had been guided by an old and unexamined idea.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms: Revenue Protection and Crime Fighting

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) is a small unit within the U.S. Department of the Treasury, originally established to enforce Prohibition.[35] ATF's jurisdiction includes federal taxes and regulations covering alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and explosives.

Like DEA, ATF could have defined its mission in many different ways. Is its principal job to assure the collection of federal taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and firearms by monitoring the activity of federal licensees and suppressing those who do not pay appropriate taxes? Or should the central focus be on aiding the nation's fight against crime by using the bureau's regulatory powers and enforcement expertise to keep guns and explosives from dangerous people, and arresting those who possess these dangerous commodities illegally?[36]

A second major issue is the relative emphasis to be given to the various commodities under the bureau's jurisdiction. If revenue protection is the principal aim, then alcohol and tobacco are much more important than firearms and explosives. But if reducing crime is the aim, then guns and explosives seem more important than alcohol and tobacco, although the latter commodities are linked to crime as well.[37]

The overall style of the organization depends on its emphasis. If its primary goal is revenue protection, it will be largely a regulatory agency. Its staff will deal principally with federal licensees, monitoring activities and records. Most legal action will be through civil rather than criminal procedures. There will be little gun play. And, as it turns out, much of the organization's activities will be concentrated in the rural areas of the Southeast.

If the goal is crime control, on the other hand, the style of the organization will shift to criminal enforcement. Its staff will be largely agents who carry guns and have the power to arrest, rather than accountants and auditors. It will deal largely with those who are intentionally breaking federal law. It will rely on covert and aggressive methods to discover who these people are and to develop evidence against them. Finally, the work will shift geographically from rural areas of the Southeast (where federal salaries allow even midlevel federal officials to live like kings) to urban areas primarily in the Northeast, Midwest, and Far West (where federal salaries are far less appealing).

Between 1952 and 1978 these issues were fought out within ATF. Occasionally interest was shown by members of Congress and political appointees in Treasury or Justice. The balance of contending forces appears clearly in the statements made by ATF in the annual Congressional Appropriations Committee hearings. The table on the next page presents a chronology of the phrases ATF used to describe its basic mission. As one can see, the organization's mission moved toward crime control.

That shift seemed to reflect both external and internal factors. Crime was becoming a major national issue, and there was an increasing tolerance—even demand—for federal involvement in the fight against ordinary street crime. ATF leaders understood that this was a stronger current than any interest in improved tax collections, particularly since the taxes for which ATF was responsible accounted for a very small proportion of total federal revenues.

But the ATF leaders were also pushed by forces within the bureau. Over several decades, the enforcement side of the organization seemed to supply a larger and larger proportion of those who managed it.[38]

Overall ATF Mission Statements: 1969–1976

FY 1970 (1/8/69)	"The objective of the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax program is to *encourage the highest possible level of voluntary compliance with the Internal Revenue laws*. . . . The Permissive Program is concerned with the accurate determination and full collection of the revenue from legal activities. The principal function of the Enforcement program is to prevent the fradulent non-payment of taxes which results from the traffic in illicit liquor by the criminal community. An Enforcement function of growing significance is the investigation of violations of federal firearms control statutes." (emphasis added)
FY 1971 (1/23/70)	Same as above, but adds participation in organized crime Strike Forces as important features of enforcement.
FY 1972 (2/1/71)	Same as above, but adds, "The Enforcement function is directed [sic] toward suppression of the illicit manufacture, distribution and sale of distilled spirits without payment of tax, and curtailment of the illegal possession and use of firearms and explosives. . . . *in the nationwide attempt to reduce crime and violence*." (emphasis added)
FY 1973 (1/21/72)	Same preamble, but criminal enforcement comes first. "The *Criminal Enforcement Function* has three significant objectives: (1) to prevent manufacture, distribution and sale of distilled spirits produced illegally; (2) to monitor the activities of the legal firearms industry by a system of licenses and occupational tax stamps and to apprehend violators (or prevent violations) of federal firearms control statutes. . . . and (3) the regulation of explosives through a license and permit system and the prevention or investigation of illegal uses of explosives. . . . The *Revenue Control Function* is charged with accurate determination and full collection of federal revenue due from the liquor or tobacco industries. It is also responsible for the effective administration of the consumer-related controls of the Federal Alcohol Administration Act and those ecological features concerning liquor plants and permittee premises which are controlled by the Environmental Protection Agency but have been delegated to the Service. This function also assisted in the administration of Phase I of the Economic Stabilization Program as a routine part of inspections."
FY 1974 (1/19/73)	"The objectives of the Bureau are to: (1) achieve maximum voluntary compliance with laws under ATF jurisdiction: (2) assure full collection of the revenue due from legal industries;

	(3) suppress the traffic in illicit non-tax-paid distilled spirits; (4) eliminate illegal possession and use of firearms, destructive devices and explosives; (5) cooperate with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to reduce crime and violence; and (6) cooperate with federal, state and local governmental agencies in the areas of industrial development, ecology, and consumer protection."
FY 1975 (1/24/74)	Same as above.
FY 1976	Same as above except (3) changes to "detect and neutralize traffic in illicit non-tax-paid distilled spirits."
FY 1977 (1/9/76)	Same as FY 1976.
FY 1978 (1/14/77)	"The mission of the Bureau is to: (1) reduce the misuse of firearms, to reduce the misuse and the unsafe or insecure storage of explosives, and to assist other law enforcement organizations, federal, state and local, in reducing crime and violence in which firearms and explosives are used, through effective enforcement of the firearms and explosive laws of the United States; (2) ensure that all revenue due under the alcohol and tobacco tax statutes is collected, and to obtain, to the maximum extent possible, voluntary compliance with those laws; (3) suppress illicit manufacture and sale of non-tax-paid alcoholic beverages; (4) suppress commercial bribery, consumer deception and other improper trade practices in the alcoholic beverage industry through effective administration and enforcement of the Federal Alcohol Administration Act; and (5) assure compliance with the wagering tax laws through effective enforcement of the criminal and forfeiture provisions of the Internal Revenue Code."

Source: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Administration Services Division.

This trend preceded rather than followed the public interest in crime and was largely a reflection of the more aggressive, more flamboyant personalities of the criminal investigators. Since these characteristics were seen as attributes of leadership, managerial positions were more likely to go to enforcement agents than to those involved in regulatory activities. These managers quite naturally used these positions to

incline ATF toward its crime control mission rather than its regulatory mission.

The Environmental Protection Agency: Pollution Abatement

The Environmental Protection Agency was, like DEA, an organizational effort to enable the nation to deal with a stubborn problem that seemed to require a sharper focus and more effective coordination.[39] The organization was assembled from many different operating units within the federal government, and its leader, William Ruckelshaus, was invited to plan an integrated attack on the nation's environmental problems.

The basic approach could have taken many different forms. Ruckelshaus could have opted for a relatively long period of study and development, arguing that the basic science tracing the relationship between pollution, environmental degradation, and health effects of a degraded environment was then too weak to justify particular actions. Or he could have concentrated on a particular medium. For example, at the time he took office, there was more capacity to deal with water problems than with air, noise, or solid waste. Or Ruckelshaus could have been guided by the links between concern about environmental degradation and quite different concerns and values. Some people cared about environmental issues because of a broad concern for "preservation," in some cases tied to a long-range practical concern about the quality of the gene pool, in others to a sense that nature had rights against man that could not be ignored. For other people, the environmental issue was largely an issue of aesthetics. Rivers that burned and dirty smogs that blocked out sunsets deprived people of simple aesthetic pleasures. To a third group, the environmental issue was largely one of health. Rather than wanting to preserve the environment for its own sake or make it beautiful, these people hoped to minimize the risk that they would get cancer or some other disease as a result of poisons released into the air and water. Thus Ruckelshaus could have defined the mission of EPA in terms of preservation, aesthetic, or health goals.

In determining the mission of EPA, Ruckelshaus was not without advice and pressures. President Nixon had indicated privately that he thought the environmental issue was a phony one. Moreover, his natural constituency was with business, and he was therefore reluctant to impose demands on business for environmental cleanup. From him, then, Ruckelshaus sensed a preference for doing as little as possible. The Congress was, as usual, divided. In the House, Jamie Whitten's appropriations subcommittee would review EPA's budget. His principal interest was in making sure that farmers would be allowed to continue using pesticides. Apart from that, he seemed inclined to respond to broad pressures to do something about the environment. In the Senate, the principal player was Senator Edmund Muskie, whose Public Works Committee was responsible for much of EPA's authorizing legislation. Muskie was then a candidate for the presidency and had made a great deal of political hay, both in his own state and nationally, by championing the environmental movement. He was determined to see action on environmental cleanup and also to criticize the Nixon administration's efforts in the area.[40]

In the internal administrative world, Ruckelshaus seemed to face a vacuum rather than a powerful force. Two major operations constituted the core of his agency. One was the water program transferred to EPA from the Department of the Interior. It had a great deal of money to provide subsidies for new sewage treatment plants and a reasonable data base describing the current state of the nation's waterways. On the other hand, it was dependent on the states to create plans involving specific obligations on polluters to cut back. Initially the EPA water program had no independent enforcement powers.[41] The air program had been transferred to EPA from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Like the water program, it was dependent on the creation of state plans to establish specific liabilities on polluters. And very few of those state plans had been approved.[42] Over the medium term, these two programs would determine EPA's success, but in the short run they were remarkably weak. Scattered around these large programs were much smaller, more fragmented units that had not yet been effectively integrated into EPA. Indeed, the dominant impression of EPA at the outset was one of chaos and disintegration.[43] Finally, EPA seemed weak in some crucial functional areas. Its science base and capabilities appeared quite weak, as did its legal and enforcement capabilities.

Ruckelshaus's solution to the issue of EPA's mission was captured in a simple phrase. EPA's basic business, he said, was "pollution abatement."[44] This idea has several interesting properties. First, it seemed to balance the competing political priorities rather nicely. It reassured those concerned about economic growth, that there would

be an incremental approach to cleanup, focusing first on the most flagrant violators. To those concerned about doing something to clean up the environment, it promised action after a decade of neglect. And it seemed to express the general sentiments of the broader public—that those who were making the environment dirty and dangerous should begin doing something, with the aid and encouragement of the government, to clean it up

The idea of pollution abatement also seemed to provide some guidance as to how the organization should be set up, which areas had to be built quickly and which could go slow. The most obvious implication was that EPA had to develop and use its enforcement capabilities. To deliver on the promise to abate pollution, someone had to be effectively sued. Thus Ruckelshaus created a separate Office of Enforcement, and the first person he hired was the head of that office.[45] The idea also implied that the most urgent operational step was to translate the general obligation to reduce pollution into specific liabilities for individual polluters. This depended on the setting of federal standards and the approval of state plans. To achieve this, Ruckelshaus left intact the water and air programs he inherited. As a result his organizational structure was partly functional (enforcement, science, and administration) and partly programmatic (water and air). But he tolerated this loss in administrative tidiness because he was convinced that the best way to get the standards out was to keep the existing organizations working on the problem.

Third, the concept of pollution abatement guided Ruckelshaus on specific policy decisions. Within the first few months in office, he had to decide which polluters to sue, whether to ban DDT, what standards should be set for air quality, and whether to fine the auto companies for violations of pollution standards for motor vehicles.[46] While each decision had to be confronted on its individual merits, the pattern of decisions also had to be consistent with EPA's overall mission. And that gave Ruckelshaus an entering bias, if not an answer, to each of these decisions: that the targets should be notorious polluters who could absorb the costs imposed by cleanup demands; that DDT as the symbol of environmental dangers for a decade should be banned (particularly because better pesticides were now available); that air quality standards should be set even though the science was weak, in order to build momentum for environmental cleanup; and that the most flagrant of the auto companies' violations should probably be fined, and they should be warned with respect to the others.

In retrospect, then, the resolution of EPA's mission had several important effects. It allowed EPA to survive, even flourish, in a potentially dangerous political situation. It resolved some basic organizational questions that set the agency on a long-run course of development. And it gave a bias to some specific decisions. Perhaps most interesting, EPA's impact on the actual course of environmental cleanup was probably more indirect than direct. By successfully championing the cause of pollution abatement, EPA fostered a general social movement in the direction of environmental protection. This had *political* implications in that the environmental voices remained powerful in Congress and state legislatures. But it also had *operational* significance, for it encouraged voluntary efforts to clean up whose effects were probably well beyond what EPA could have enforced directly with its weak legal authority and fledgling legal staff.

Drunk Driving: The Rise of Moralism

One of the most powerful political movements of recent years has been the emergence of grassroots concerns about drunk driving.[47] It has been expressed politically in the commitments of political candidates to crack down on drunk driving and in the passage of new legislation mandating prison terms for repeat drunk driving offenders. Administratively this concern has been reflected in increased levels of enforcement through more intrusive techniques such as checkpoints, closer surveillance of judicial decisions in drunk driving cases, and investments in new programs of education, treatment, and community service within which to manage convicted drunk drivers.

These initiatives seem to be guided by a simple conviction that it is wrong for drivers to expose themselves and others to the risks of death and physical injury associated with drunk driving.[48] The assumption is that drivers are capable of deciding whether or not to drive after drinking, and that it is their moral responsibility to decide not to impose that risk on the society. The moral character of this view also seems to allow others to comment on the drinker's decisions. Indeed, an explicit part of the campaigns against drunk driving is to mobilize third parties such as parents, friends, and neighbors to help prevent people from driving while intoxicated. That is the force behind the adjuration that "good friends don't let their friends drive while drunk." Finally, the movement seems predicated on the notion that the community as a whole can effectively and justly make this demand on individuals

without worrying too much about the loss of liberty associated with the restriction.

It is difficult to assess how this idea gained such force. It was spread primarily by voluntary women's groups concerned about the safety of their children on the road. But why these groups should arise at this particular moment of our history remains unclear. The magnitude of the problem had not suddenly become worse. There was no new insight into the nature of the problem, no new technical invention that made it easier to detect drunk driving, no institution that suddenly needed drunk driving as a mission for itself. But whatever the mysterious origins of this idea, it seems that drunk driving has dropped, and with it many of the tragic accidents that drunk driving used to cause. While one can offer many different interpretations of how this effect occurred (including the incapacitation of drunk drivers, the general deterrent effects of the laws, and so on), it seems most likely that the grassroots movement changed many attitudes and practices of the general population. People attending parties seem more aware of the issue, and special arrangements are made to ensure that the people who drive are sober. In short, the idea that drunk driving is bad and avoidable has sustained a broad social movement that has changed the behavior of citizens.

Assessing the Impact of Public Ideas

It is one thing to observe that public actions are consistent with particular public ideas articulated by specific participants in the policy process. It is quite another to prove that the ideas are producing an independent effect on the public actions one observes. Indeed, the alternative hypothesis—that the particular ideas are nothing more than a smokescreen for the institutional and personal interests that are really animating and guiding action—has become quite familiar.

In principal, to determine whether and how public ideas influence public action, one would like to do a series of experiments in which public ideas that were more to less orthogonal to the play of interests were introduced into the domain of public deliberation and action, and measurements were taken of how often and to what degree the ideas shifted the nature of the discussion and the subsequent actions. But just to describe these conditions reveals the absurdity of a rigorous analytic approach to this question. There are many ill-defined terms in this analytic framework. And it is quite implausible that one could experiment with our own policy-making processes by systematically varying the character of the ideas available for discussion.

As a practical matter, then, one must rely on much cruder methods. My approach is to see whether this assertion—that so-called public ideas influence public deliberation and action—can survive a first-order skepticism based on the examples offered above. While such a method cannot produce anything like a proof, it may sharpen our perception of what the effect of public ideas would look like if it existed. The examples may show us the way.

Where Ideas Work: Ideas in Different Institutional Settings

One important lesson to be drawn from the examples is that public ideas have different kinds of influence at different stages of the policy process, and in different institutional settings. It is most natural to think of public ideas as being important in the context of policy debates—for example, within legislative committees, special task forces, or commissions, or more generally in the discussions among the "issue networks" concerned with specific policy issues.[49] The examples of alcoholism, selective incapacitation, and deinstitutionalization illustrate this kind of institutional setting. There is no specific organization whose entire mission is defined by these ideas. Instead, the ideas function as a broad mandate authorizing and guiding actions by many different organizations. Moreover, the focus is on deliberation and analysis rather than action.

In such institutional settings, ideas seem to guide public action in the same way that Kuhn's "paradigms" guide "normal" scientific inquiry.[50] The ideas define the conventional wisdom in the area, set out the questions for which evidence is necessary, suggest the alternative policies that are plausibly effective, and (most important), keep alternative formulations of the problem off the public agenda. Thus, for example, the concept of alcoholism effectively kept the issue of policies affecting the supply of alcohol off the government's agenda. No one seriously debated substantial increases in alcohol taxes, since it was obvious to them that higher taxes would not affect the consumption of alcoholics. The concept of selective incapacitation diverted attention from the issue of what should be done with the many minor and accidental criminal offenders who constituted the bulk of the criminal justice system's caseload.[51] And the concept of deinstitutionalization survived despite the absence of alternative means for dealing with juvenile offenders.

Perhaps "keeping ideas off the agenda" is too strong a formulation. But dominant ideas have certainly relegated competing definitions of the problem to relative obscurity. Those who advanced these alternative conceptions—that is, those who urged that public policy should be directed at occasional drinkers, that a portion of the crime problem was caused by accidental offenders, and that the society had not yet figured out how crime-committing juveniles could be properly supervised—often felt they were not only risking their reputation for knowledge in the area, but also trying the patience and tolerance of their audience.

Public ideas may also be particularly likely to exercise influence in organizations seeking to define their basic strategy or mission. In the case of DEA, the concept of "putting bad guys in jail" guided the organization's strategic and tactical thinking. The same was true for the concept of pollution abatement within EPA. In the case of ATF, the organization's mission was gradually shifted from revenue protection to crime fighting, and its focus shifted from alcohol to guns and bombs.

In this institutional setting, the public ideas give coherence and meaning to the work of the organizations and guide their investments for the future. Thus the idea that EPA was in the business of pollution abatement unified the diverse parts of the organization and indicated the crucial importance of establishing specific liabilities for reducing pollution and building the capacity for enforcement. Similarly the idea that ATF should join a national effort to control violent crime gave that agency a new raison d'être and justified a major shift in attention from alcohol taxation to pursuit of those who possessed guns and explosives illegally. The idea that DEA "put bad guys in jail" stunted the development of regulatory activities, foreign crop control programs, and intelligence analysis.

Note the difference in institutional setting between the policy and organizational strategy contexts. Policies are debated outside the context of particular organizations. The issue of an organization's basic mission, in contrast, is debated largely internally, with the occasional participation of oversight agencies in the executive and legislative branches.

There is only occasionally an exact one-to-one relationship between policies and organizations. Sometimes an organization is part of a policy—the part that implements a specific program. Other times, a policy is part of an organization—the specific way an organization chooses to carry out its broad purposes. "Issue networks" seem to work on policies. Organizational leaders seem to work on statements of organizational mission. Policies may make claims on parts of many organizations. Organizational missions seek to guide all activities within an organization.

A third institutional setting in which policy ideas seem to be important is in the mobilization of private individuals and agencies to help pursue public purposes in situations where no public organization can really command their actions. Examples include the cases of EPA and drunk driving. The concept of deinstitutionalization might also fit since it clearly generated some substantial responses from individuals and organizations outside the government. The problem was that, for a time at least, the response was too small.

In these settings, the public idea not only authorizes and guides governmental organizations, but animates private individuals and agencies. The concept of pollution abatement was important not only as an organizational mission but also as an invitation to many others, including polluters and those immediately affected by pollution, to join the cause. Similarly the idea that drunk driving is socially unacceptable allowed hosts, bartenders, parents, and friends all to discourage drunk driving with more self-confidence and conviction than they could when the issue was viewed as a matter of individual choice without moral significance. In short, the ideas may have generated social movements and new public norms guiding private actions.

The generation and support of social movements is probably the most interesting and least obvious context in which ideas might be powerful. Yet government acts principally through the actions of private individuals, and many policy problems are concerned with the question of how the government can motivate or encourage millions of individuals to do something differently in their lives. This is the issue in promoting voluntary compliance with the tax laws, in discouraging alcohol and drug abuse among teenagers, in eliminating racial bias from housing and labor markets, perhaps even in securing safer work places for the nation's workers.[52] It is also the context in which the effects of ideas are most clearly independent, for such ideas produce widely decentralized effects. So this third context is a particularly interesting one in which to see the potential power of ideas and to investigate ways of harnessing the power for specific public purposes.

The context of policy debates and forums has been well examined

by political scientists who have studied the policy-making process.[53] The context of organizational mission has been explored by those who write about corporate strategy or organizational leadership.[54] The context of normative social movements has been researched by historians, sociologists, and social psychologists.[55] So far, however, these separate literatures have not been integrated in an effort to discern the independent effect of ideas.

The point of examining these different institutional settings is to prevent too narrow a search for the impact of public ideas. Ideas influence actions as well as deliberations. And their effect on actions is not restricted to their role in guiding particular organizations: significant public movements are sometimes stimulated and sustained by public ideas.

How Ideas Work: Ideas as Contexts for Social Action

Although the contexts within which ideas might produce material effects are different and offer different kinds of leverage to efforts to use ideas to guide public action, our examples suggest that ideas generally become influential in the same way: by establishing the context within which public policy is debated and executed. That is, the ideas simultaneously establish the assumptions, justifications, purposes, and means of public action. In doing so, they simultaneously authorize and instruct different sectors of the society to take actions on behalf of public purposes. The ideas create a reason for someone to take action by setting out the public value or necessity of the act and by giving the action a social meaning that is accessible to both the person who takes the action and others who are its audience or object. In this way ideas both motivate and direct action.

One can discern the effects of an idea by seeing which sectors of the society are motivated to take action or make investments guided by the idea. Like a spotlight, an idea illuminates and animates the particular parts of the world on which it focuses. When attention is directed to some possibilities for action, other possible modes are inevitably left in the shadows. But it is precisely that fact which reveals the power of a particular idea. When ideas become dominant in policy debates, when an organization develops a strong sense of mission, or when a social norm mobilizes private actions on behalf of public purposes and suppresses other possible approaches, ideas demonstrate their power to provide a context for public debate and action.

Some standard objections are often raised to the proposition that ideas produce material consequences in the world. It is worth reviewing these objections to refine our understanding of how ideas might be influential, as well as what sorts of proof about the independent power of ideas can be offered.

Post Hoc Rationalizations or Ex Ante Guides?

It is often asserted that ideas come after the fact as rationalizations rather than before the fact as guides. There are three possible answers to this objection.

Perhaps the most satisfying rebuttal is to find historical evidence that an influential idea existed in the minds of key actors before it became well known. Often such evidence is available. For example, the idea of selective incapacitation was explicitly set out and advocated by an important criminal justice researcher. The leaders who guided ATF toward "crime fighting" discussed that move with me as an explicit strategy. So did Ruckelshaus with respect to "pollution abatement." So there are often people who can plausibly claim authorship of an idea before it assumed a powerful institutional existence. (Of course, similar evidence might be available for many ideas that never became influential.)

Even if there is no evidence that key actors self-consciously adopted an idea before it became powerful, an influential idea may have been implicit in the minds of those who eventually gave it a powerful social existence, even if they never articulated it. In effect, they were able to express the idea only after it had appeared in the world, though in retrospect it is clear they were implicitly influenced by the idea all along. This seems to have been the case in DEA's strategy of "putting bad guys in jail." The problems with this explanation as an intellectual matter are its ad hoc quality and the difficulty of basing predictions on such a hypothesis. The proposition that people are influenced by implicit ideas is not necessarily wrong, but it is hard to prove it right.

A third rebuttal to the argument that ideas are mere rationalization is to concede that the ideas come after policies are adopted, but to insist that it is at this stage that the idea becomes powerful.[56] In essence the argument is that once an institution self-consciously adopts an idea, that idea then begins to exercise influence by preventing, delaying, or changing the form in which new ideas can emerge. The idea does not usher in or organize a set of activities, but sustains the current ways of doing things. Its influence supports the current pattern of activities and delays new developments and adaptations, rather than changing activities. None of our examples illustrate this point. But that is not necessarily surprising since it is easier to see the moment when things change than the moment when they should have changed and didn't.

A Mere Mask for Institutional Interests?

Even if one can produce evidence that a self-consciously developed idea gradually became influential, a second objection can be raised. This is the argument that ideas become powerful not because of their intellectual properties, such as accuracy, utility, or novelty, but because they balance competing political pressures. In this conception, a large, if not infinite, number of ideas is circulating at any given moment; the one that prevails is the one that can balance competing political and bureaucratic interests.

It would be foolish to deny that the success of an idea is related to the play of interests. Given the way the world operates, the power of an idea is inevitably linked with the power of the institutions whose interests it favors. The example of alcoholism suggests the potent role of institutional interests in sustaining a policy idea. So do the examples of DEA and ATF.

But what does "balance" mean? In one conception, political forces are competing but relatively static. In this world, the idea that becomes powerful is the one that ratifies and maintains the stalemate, exactly reflecting the relative power of the claimants. A more dynamic and fluid conception of political forces and the balance among them is also possible. As some forces wax and others wane, an idea may appear that disturbs the balance or rebalances the political forces. Such an idea would be connected to political forces but would not necessarily replicate their current balance exactly; it could exert influence by strengthening one emergent force at the expense of another. This seems to have been the case at both ATF and EPA. It also is an important part of the story of deinstitutionalization, which substantially changed the balance of political forces in the domain of juvenile justice.

The logic that guides the world of ideas is slightly different from that governing the world of political forces. Thus there is not always an idea available that accurately reflects the current balance of forces—or at least not one that has no important tensions and anomalies as an intellectual idea. Consequently, ideas cannot always be found to buttress the current arrangement of political forces. In this sense, our politics are often incoherent. As part of the armament of political contests, ideas can unbalance and rebalance political forces as well as keep them in alignment. Even though ideas must connect to political forces to become powerful, they are not necessarily slaves of an existing political balance. They can become active agents in reshaping the politics of particular issues.

Summary

Ideas matter because they establish the contexts within which policy debates are conducted, organizational activities are rendered coherent and meaningful, and people's actions are animated and directed. Ideas nominate particular people to do particular kinds of work and give them support for doing the indicated work. As the ideas change, the locus and nature of the society's work changes. The ideas are not always self-consciously known in advance, but once expressed and articulated they can have substantial power to continue one line of activity and investment and discourage others. Although related to existing political forces and institutions, they seem to follow a logic of their own, which sometimes unbalances or rebalances existing political forces.

The ideas that become powerful as contexts for public action are sometimes too simplistic and moralistic to provide useful guidance in addressing society's problems. These deficiencies pose an important normative challenge for those who would like to influence public policy by creating good and useful ideas.[57]

The Sorts of Ideas That Matter

In examining what sorts of ideas become influential public policies, it is useful to distinguish between their intellectual and contextual properties. The intellectual properties of an idea have to do with the differentiation between ends and means, the quality of the anlysis and evidence that lies behind the idea as a normative conception of how the society should deal with a particular problem, and perhaps even the methods used to produce the idea. The contextual properties of an idea have to do with how it fits within an ongoing historical discussion of a particular problem and how it accommodates or challenges the current

politics of a given issue and the new interests that are advanced or retarded by the idea. Policy scientists and analysts generally focus on the intellectual properties of policy ideas. Sociologists and historians look more closely at their contextual properties.

Many ideas that become powerful lack the intellectual properties that policy analysts hold dear. Most such ideas are not very complex or differentiated. There is no clear separation of ends from means, of diagnosis from interventions, of assumptions from demonstrated facts, or of blame from causal effect. All are run together in a simple gestalt that indicates the nature of the problem, whose fault it is, and how it will be solved. These features are most obvious in the examples of alcoholism, selective incapacitation, and drunk driving.

Moreover, it is not clear reasoning or carefully developed and interpreted facts that make ideas convincing. Rather, ideas seem to become anchored in people's minds through illustrative anecdotes, simple diagrams and pictures, or connections with broad common-sense ideologies that define human nature and social responsibilities.[58] These connections cannot be dissolved simply through facts and logic. On the other hand, fact and logic can reinforce other sorts of connections to strengthen the hold of an idea. The example of deinstitutionalization illustrates this characteristic.

Turning to contextual properties, one intuitively feels much closer to the source of ideas' power as guides to public action. The ideas that become influential resonate with significant historical experiences. Alcohol policy, for example, was profoundly influenced by the society's understanding of the "lessons of Prohibition."[59]

Almost as important, the idea should have some obvious link to a current pressing problem. "Pollution abatement" was a particularly important idea in a world where rivers burned, beaches were blotted by oil slicks, and smog made people cough. "Dangerous offenders" would be a less potent idea in a world with plenty of prison space.

The particular way an idea balances political forces and identifies where blame is to be placed, and responsibilities for additional work created, is also quite important. The concept of "joining the nation's fight against crime" was quite welcome to ATF's criminal investigators, who felt stifled by the Treasury's concern about tax compliance and indifference to the opportunity to arrest bad guys. The concept of alcoholism was embraced by both the industry that claimed to know how to treat alcoholics and the alcoholic beverage industry, which used it to ward off increased regulatory efforts. The concepts of dangerous offenders and drunk driving were welcomed because they allowed the society to focus its attention (and wrath) on targets that were easy to attack.

Thus, to the extent that ideas distinguish heroes from villains, and those who must act from those who need not, and to the extent that these distinctions fit with the aspirations of the parties so identified, the ideas will become powerful. If powerful people are made heroes and weaker ones villains, and if work is allocated to people who want it and away from people who do not, an idea has a greater chance of becoming powerful.

This review suggests that the contextual properties of ideas are much more influential than their intellectual properties. Indeed, the intellectual properties that matter are those that qualify the idea in political and institutional terms, not scientific and intellectual terms. Those who would like policy ideas to meet intellectual tests may deplore the "irrationality" of a world that does not respond to the particular logic with which analysts are familiar. An alternative, more constructive, response would be to think about how one might enhance the contextual properties of ideas initially distinguished only in terms of their intellectual properties. How might ideas be self-consciously developed and used to improve the quality of public policy?

Creating Useful Policy Ideas

It is quite possible that ideas cannot be self-consciously produced and used to guide public action. It is almost certain that they cannot be produced single-handedly by an individual without reference to the existing institutional context. Yet it appears that some self-consciously developed and promoted ideas eventually produce significant effects on public policy. This is perhaps most evident in the context of defining an organizational strategy, where specific individuals—the organizational leaders— are expected to produce an idea that can motivate, direct, and explain their organization's purposes. In the context of policy deliberations too, ideas are explicitly invited and debated. This potential is perhaps least evident in the context of emerging social norms, though examples can be found even here. (I am thinking of Martin Luther King's dogged pursuit of voting rights, Ralph Nader's crusade for auto safety, and the "moral majority's" drive to "put God back in the classroom.")

If influential ideas can be produced, those who would shape public policy would benefit from knowing how to interact effectively with this world of ideas to enhance their quality and value. Our discussion suggests several rules.

Rules for Constructing Policy Ideas

The first rule is to diagnose what is already there. Those who would influence the world of ideas must understand both the intellectual and contextual properties of the ideas that are already in the field when they begin their work. Generally this involves an analysis of the intellectual history of the issue; an exploration of the intellectual properties of the new idea to see which values, facts, and policy approaches are emphasized and which neglected; and an analysis of the political and bureaucratic terrain to determine which concrete interests of politicians and bureaucrats are favored by the idea and which are neglected.[60] A particularly important part of this diagnosis is assessing the levels of conflict and fluidity in the institutional setting, since that will be a clue as to intellectual weaknesses in the prevailing ideas, as well as an indication that a new idea might be both feasible and necessary.

The second rule is to respect existing ideas and policies. A policy entrepreneur should give due regard to the value of the established ideas operating in a particular area. They are there for a reason, and sometimes the reason is a good one and still valid. Those who value ideas often emphasize the novelty or accuracy of an idea rather than its effectiveness in organizing the society's activities. But the old ideas may be accomplishing a great deal of social work by keeping policy debates, organizations, and the society in general focused on an important task. Thus it is important to think in terms of the utility of an idea. An idea that is old, somewhat confused, and not well worked out or supported is not necessarily a bad policy idea. Such ideas should be evaluated in terms of the useful social work they stimulate.

The third rule comes into effect only after diagnosis and evaluation reveal that the old ideas are significantly limited—for example, that some important value is not reflected in the old conception, that some new opportunity cannot be exploited, or that some emerging social problem is not effectively addressed by the old idea. Now the issue of how to construct a better (i.e., more useful) idea comes to the fore. A sound diagnostic analysis will already have suggested the many dimensions along which policy ideas in a particular area might be formulated. Imagining this "logical space" is a necessary part of seeing the limitations of the current idea.[61] So much of the hard intellectual work of imagining alternative formulations of the problem will have been done in the diagnosis stage.

The crucial remaining intellectual task is to shrink the complexity down to a relatively small number of dimensions. There is no intellectual rule that provides useful guidance on how to do this. Indeed, all the important intellectual standards, which require completeness and internal rigor, deplore the necessary simplification. Thus in deciding how to simplify the policy idea, one must turn to the standard of usefulness in a particular institutional context.

In judging the utility of alternative simplifications, one must consider their likely impact on patterns of thought, the location of responsibility, and the new activities and inventions that will be produced as the idea highlights areas not previously (or at least not recently) examined. The more potential value there seems to be, the more important the idea. Recognizing that the alcohol problem was not identical with the problem of alcoholism, for example, seemed to give the society new potential to explore alternative approaches. The concepts of dangerous offenders and selective incapacitation had less potential because they offered less room for social invention in dealing with the crime problem. Indeed, one had to work hard to keep this idea from *narrowing* the society's approach to crime.

In addition to gauging the potential value of the new opportunities created, one must judge the capacity of the policy idea to challenge the existing orthodoxy effectively. Can the new idea resonate with some forces and currents in the existing institutional context? If the idea is too exotic to be taken seriously, its value is essentially nil. On the other hand, an idea that does not challenge current patterns of thought and activity in useful directions is also without value. So there is an optimal distance from current conceptions that depends not only on the logical possibilities introduced by the new idea, but also on its ability to exploit or mobilize political and institutional forces.

Implications for the Practice of Policy Analysis and Design

Traditional ideas of how to analyze and design policies have emphasized clarity in the definition of problems and rigor in determining the optimal policy intervention.[62] They have also emphasized objectivity and distance from the existing political and institutional contexts. The ideas offered here would change the emphasis in crucial ways.

First, intellectual effort and power would be focused on imagining and systematically arraying alternative possible definitions of the problem, rather than reaching a conclusion given a definition of the problem. Abstract and rigorous thought would be valuable in enlarging the analyst's ideas of what the society has at stake and the various ways it might approach a particular policy issue.

Second, instead of encouraging a lofty indifference to the institutional context within which ideas are formulated, debated, and implemented, the concepts developed in this chapter would counsel a deep immersion in the institutional context. This immersion is a practical necessity, to make sure that the idea is formulated in a way that gets a hearing; in addition, the history and current tensions will provide important clues about the *intellectual* structure of the problem as well as its *institutional* structure. A political conflict is often the telltale sign of an important neglected value. A narrow bureaucratic capability can be interpreted as a sign of what the organization likes to do, knows how to do, or has learned to do through a long process of experimentation; this information may shed light on feasible program technologies and costs. Thus the institutional arrangements give analysts substantive information they need to do their analysis.

Third, the concept of policy analysis suggested here would deemphasize the traditional criteria and focus instead on a new idea's value in challenging the society to perceive and deal with a problem differently, shifting the focus of responsibility for solving the problem or suggesting the potential of a different set of policy instruments and programs than are now employed.

I am not sure that all of these implications are correct. But if the essence of public policy is ideas that guide public action, and if my professional experience has not misled me as to what kinds of ideas can do this job, then we must change how we think about producing and evaluating policy ideas. Instead of thinking of ideas as scientific conclusions, we must recognize them as society's effort, groping in the dark, to help itself deal with intractable problems. To assist in this enterprise, we must not only sharpen our own vision of problems and possible approaches, but stay close to the society and its current understandings. Otherwise our ability to pose useful challenges will crumble into academic irrelevance.