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Anna Sims Bartel
Cornell University, annasbartel@gmail.com

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Why the Humanities Are Necessary to Public Policy, and How

by Anna Sims Bartel

When we are claimed by citizenship or called to citizenship it is not in the language of maximizing our utilities favored by so many policy wonks but of hopes for a fairer, freer, more decent, just, and, yes, beautiful world. (Elshtain 2011: 5)

Forming the civic imagination is not the only role for literature, but it is one salient role. (Nussbaum 1997: 88)

If public policy exists to guide and govern human behavior so that we can live together in freedom, interdependence, and sustainable productivity, then policymakers need certain things: skill at critical self-reflection; the responsibility and capacity to understand systems of the natural and human-made world; some sense of the common good and our mutual interdependence; sufficient respect for research, science, and knowledge to explore human welfare using these tools; deep ethical commitments to equity, fairness, and democracy; command of the technical aspects of crafting policy, seeing it adopted, supporting its implementation, and studying its impacts. Lastly, they need a “narrative imagination”: “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself; to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story” (Nussbaum 1997: 10–11). Public policy is, after all, a prime shaper in the development of our durable futures, so it demands imagination, creative problem solving, and a capacity to foresee, choose, and build toward those futures. These demands do more than expose the dependence of our basic human and social capacities on the humanities; they point to the self-reflexivity, human solidarity, and basic empathy that are so often missing in current public policy.

The urgency of the humanities is already evident in policy circles: we have seen a significant rise in formal appreciation of humanistic understandings of the world in recent decades, with story, narrative inquiry, and case study playing a greater role in analysis and evaluation of

everything from marketing to banking practices to medical interventions. And we have seen the adoption of intersectionality as a concept in social science (though it remains poorly addressed in policy, with a few notable recent exceptions),¹ which is basically a refusal to strip humans down to a single component or perspective; in that sense, it is an effort to create a more human and humanistic understanding of, well, humans.

Work on metaphor has given us good reason to understand how deeply language affects our frameworks of understanding. Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) write that changing a single word recasts not only people’s understandings of a situation but their proposed policy solutions. Participants reading accounts of crime described as a “virus” sought more medical solutions (prevention, treatment, addressing symptoms), whereas those reading accounts of crime described as a “beast” sought punishment and confinement. In formal politics, our language (death panels) and myths (socialist medicine) drive wedges between us, forcing us to opposite policy positions despite shared interests in a whole and healthy world.

Furthermore, the humanities are not only connected to public policy; they gave birth to it. Core concepts and structures of policy and public life derive from the humanities: the whole notion of human rights, for example, “really derives from eighteenth-century literature, primarily from the novel” (Brooks 2009: 9). Even court systems and democracy itself were first designed based on the thinking and writing of philosophers. Many of our colleges, including Harvard, were founded as training grounds for civic leaders and were rooted in core humanities curricula because leaders need to understand peace and war, the common good, beauty, and persuasion. To forget that is to forget that ideas shape us, even as we shape ideas.

Some examples: three intersections of the humanities and policy related to climate change. In Florida, arguably the state most threatened by climate change, one policy response has been to ban the terms “climate

change” and “global warming”—an approach that surely overvalues the power of language. Here in Maine, Hayden Anderson argues that we don’t need more science: “What’s needed instead is a deeper and wider public understanding of the history and philosophy of science, a clearer picture of how scientific thinking works and how we non-scientists can make wise and rational decisions based on scientific findings” (*Portland Press Herald*, November 8, 2014). In other words, humanities. And at the University of Oregon, a course called “The Cultures of Climate Change” focuses on films, poetry, photography, essays, and a heavy dose of the mushrooming subgenre of speculative fiction known as climate fiction, or *cli-fi*, instead of scientific texts. “Speculative fiction allows a kind of scenario-imagining, not only about the unfolding crisis but also about adaptations and survival strategies....The time isn’t to reflect on the end of the world, but on how to meet it” (*New York Times*, March 31, 2014). If our fundamental ways of understanding the world are so limited that we can’t understand the world, or each other, then we are at an impasse that policy cannot begin to solve. We can no longer conceptualize the common good let alone craft or implement legislation that might lead us to it. Epistemology, then, philosophy, history, story, the humanities themselves, are essential to policy and to wise governance.

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SO WHY DON’T WE THINK OF HUMANITIES AS POLICY TOOLS?

Given all that needs to shift in the world, why are we focusing so much on how policy can help the humanities rather than the other way around? Because the humanities are under attack, and we want to keep the horse before the cart. Because robust humanities means robust humans and human cultures. Because we need strong grounding in the humanities to create the cultural and individual preconditions for good understanding

and humane legislation. Most significantly, perhaps, we think of policy rescuing the humanities because the humanities, we assume, have no agency, no power. We think of policy as a tool and the humanities as objects of study. I suggest we flip that equation and imagine the humanities also as tools, for better understanding, fuller engagement, wiser problem-solving, deeper appreciation, richer living.

WHAT DO THE HUMANITIES OFFER PUBLIC POLICY, THEN?

Policy is a set of codes and guidelines to advance the common good, so we obviously need the humanities to imagine and explore the common good in general and to understand and address particular issues that obstruct it. There are four stages in the life cycle of public policy, each of which would be inconceivable without the humanities and powerfully enriched by better humanistic training: conceptualization; crafting; implementation; evaluation.

Conceptualization

Conceptualization of policy is perhaps the stage most dependent on the humanities. This early exploratory work is where we engage both inquiry and epistemology (what are the issues, according to whom, and how do we understand them?); ethics (what constitutes a problem, and for whom? who deserves better? who gets to participate in these decision-making processes?); and judgment (how do we decide what matters to us and what we think might work to address it?). Conceptualizing public policy draws on what Nussbaum calls narrative imagination: the empathy, curiosity, and humanity we develop through reading because we insert ourselves into the lives and consciousness of others in a way we rarely can or will do outside of books (or films). Furthermore, intractable problems demand innovative solutions that succeed by engaging creative capacities, as we see in highly effective prison improv programs and theatrical interventions in youth violence; “recognizing the citizen as artist promotes rhizomes or networks of civic effervescence” (Sommer 2014: 32). Perhaps most important, the humanities can help us to imagine good policy because they can help us to imagine a good, free, and peaceful life. Philosophy or Political Theory 101 might seem irrelevant in college, but where else can we seriously engage the thorny question of whether my right not to be shot trumps your right to carry a gun?

Which freedom is more important? These are not new questions, but we seem to forget that there are logically and historically sound ways to arrive at communal answers (indeed, this is what policy is all about, in theory). These core processes of envisioning, inheriting, discussing, modifying, negotiating ideals are humanistic processes, and ones we skip all the time. We are so embedded in positions that we often lose sight of interests, and the interests, the ideals, are the places we might actually overlap and thus find common ground for useful policy.

Crafting

The humanities also matter profoundly to the processes of crafting policy, to the historical, cultural, empathic, critical, rhetorical, and ethical capacities required to get and shape the information we need and to create from it workable solutions and alliances. Imagine if people running for office had to submit sample legislation to demonstrate their judgment, values, and writing in a concrete manner: would it change our votes? Debate, rhetoric, writing, philosophical argument, and of course the many forms of interpretive practice are all critical to the crafting of policy that is both powerful and easily understood. Furthermore, good policy depends on a culture of listening, interpretation, and self-reflection; a willingness to solicit and receive criticism; a capacity to reshape ideas and to translate between research and the public interest. Curiosity about others, understanding that there are multiple points of view in the world, and concepts of relativity, bias, fairness, humility, and inquiry are all crucial, because without these, we are just re-telling our own story, trying to build the whole world to match our personal experience, to the detriment of all of us.

Another notable humanistic skill we need desperately in the crafting of policy is the cultivation of common sense, otherwise known as ethical judgment. Consider the fracking debate: which do we need really need more, water or gas? Is it valuable to render land unlivable by the many for the short-term gain of a few? Whose land deserves to be rendered unlivable? California has just restricted water use of citizens, but not of fracking or oil industries. Where is the imagination and political will to apply those restrictions evenly, and/or to mandate that such businesses develop gray-water purification processes at the scale of their need? (And who is making these decisions? Are lobbyists crafting policy? Is corporate interest aligned with public interest?) Strategic

imagination can leverage existing problems to craft future solutions.

Policymakers would furthermore do well to adopt a problem-shed approach to social problems. The concept functions through metaphor, and the metaphor itself is powerful, demonstrating that problems, like water in a watershed, derive from and filter through a range of structures. And we can best manage them if we understand their origins, their journey, and the various influences on them. But it is also useful because of the concepts and practices it enables, like collective impact² and other participatory methods that reach across sectors and silos to empower communities to define and address their own issues.

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Implementation

Implementation of policy also depends heavily on humanities-based skills. Marketing, public relations, advocacy, diplomacy, partnership-building, the fine arts of persuasion, all rely on cultural and historical knowledge and capacities that put ideas into practice with ethical judgment. Peter Brooks describes his horrified reading of the “Torture Memos,” released in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Justice: “These documents justified the use of torture by the most twisted, ingenious, perverse, and unethical interpretation of legal texts.... No one trained in the rigorous analysis of poetry... could possibly engage in such bad-faith interpretation without professional conscience intervening to say: this is not right” (Brooks 2014: 1). Amusingly, of course, his example posits that those who are engaging in bad-faith textual interpretation to justify torture might be at all sensitive to a concept of *not right* in any sphere.

Furthermore, implementation issues such as the judgment of when to trumpet victory, how to make humble amendments, and who to invite into the power circles are all vital components of strong policy. This stage also begs for better understanding of the very nature of knowledge: how can we make decisions

together when we can't decide what we believe or who we trust? Our ways of knowing, our capacities for judgment and assessment of evidence have never been more critical or less discussed. How we the people speak and interact together in public life matters deeply to the success or failure of policy: there is a significant difference, mapped by humanists, between civic discourse and civil discourse. "Civic discourse," David Cooper posits, is about the tough stuff: "We have a problem. We need to talk about it" (Mathews, MacAfee, and Charity 2002: 5). But we also need civil behaviors, modes of treatment that demonstrate respect, curiosity, and basic kindness. He urges "a capacious view of civic discourse, one that breaks down the convenient yet somewhat misleading distinctions we tend to enforce between civil behavior in the public sphere and the inevitable and welcomed agitations of civic exchange and churn in a healthy democracy" (Cooper 2014: 116). Do the civil discourse initiatives currently underway in Maine take this large view, or do they merely encourage politeness to gloss over unreconciled and powerfully structured differences? Surely civility is necessary to do the hard work of civic negotiation, but it is not sufficient. The humanities help us to recognize and address these issues, so that good policy, well-conceived and well-crafted, has a chance of moving forward to make change.

Evaluation

Evaluation is, of course, a vast field that boils down to the ethical practice of assessing and assigning value, usually through reductionist quantitative metrics. The humanities don't fit well in that mode. We are all being pushed toward modes of evaluation that foreclose valuation, a way of measuring the world that forgets the world it seeks to measure. We cannot afford this. Some things are harder to measure than others, but that does not mean we stop valuing the tough stuff; quite the opposite. As a humanist engaged in social-change work, I propose the list of critical unmeasurables includes hope, beauty, trust, faith, relationship, solidarity, curiosity, communion. We can push further and note that good evaluation is also a learning process, so the humanistic notion of inquiry as an ongoing process of *living the questions* can support continual learning and adaptation toward complex, emergent solutions. And we can point out that the humanities are the home of aesthetics and utilitarianism, both bedrock systems of evaluation. Last, we can and must use our humanistic imaginations to develop a richer understanding of evaluation, one

that clarifies without oversimplifying, one that acknowledges the fullness and complexity of human beings in human society. Policy derives from the social sciences, and those are reductionist in their view of humans, oversimplifying us down to an economic logic rather than complex beings of many motives. "One thing the humanities has to do with public policy, then, is to challenge its presuppositions at base: to take apart models that have become standard in policy circles. This is invaluable lest we lose sight of the human being in his and her complexity and, correlatively, of citizens in their civic capacities specifically" (Elshtain 2011: 5).

WHERE ARE POLICY AND THE HUMANITIES INTERSECTING IN MAINE RIGHT NOW?

There are a number of interesting examples of the intersection of policy and humanities in Maine in recent years. Poverty and attitudes about the poor have been topics of much discussion lately. Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP) is hard at work on issues of metaphor and human understandings of poverty, as they strive to create conditions of economic justice for all Mainers. They released a new report in the fall of 2014 about perceptions of people living in poverty, exploring the qualitative and narrative articulations of attitude. The assumption was, of course, that how people feel on an issue determines how they act; if poor people are considered bad people (e.g., drunks flying to Vegas to gamble on our tax dollars, to borrow from last fall's political ads), then policymakers and citizens can feel justified in treating them badly. But those attitudes rest largely on ignorance, of course: when the statistics around poverty are understood (minimum wage only half of living wage, for example; rates of bankruptcy due to medical issues; unaffordable housing costs), attitudes may change. But our current culture shies away from statistics, or mistrusts them, or spins them. As storyteller Andy Goodman (2015: 2) says, "jargon jars, numbers numb, and nobody ever marched on Washington over a pie chart." Novels, films, voices, human stories are what actually shape us, and their province is the humanities, as MEJP and others have wisely noted.

Let's Talk Local, a program of the Maine Humanities Council, recently invited community members across Maine to come together and identify an issue to explore. The purpose is not problem-solving, but rather opening the issue for richer, more diverse understandings. Our Lewiston group chose to frame the conversation around

“The Changing Face of Home,” responding to the anxieties surrounding demographic shifts in Lewiston-Auburn after recent decades of immigration and economic stagnation. For our common text, we chose to invite live storytellers, members of our communities who shared their sense of home and how they developed it (in refugee camps, in exile, in a small Franco-American tenement with a large French-speaking family, learning to speak English only in elementary school). These stories opened us to the complexities of our many and migrant lives; they clarified for us the basic humanity and common desires of our neighbors, new and old. They reminded us that we are stronger and richer and more creative together than we could be alone, and they invited us to meet one another and think differently with each other. This kind of event seems like a smart and compassionate response to anti-immigration furor, one that furthermore can bring clearer light and greater public investment to the issues facing immigration policy.

In another recent program of the Maine Humanities Council, I was privileged to facilitate open text-based dialogue about *Creating the Communities We Wish to Live In*. We began with Adrienne Rich’s beautiful poem “In Those Years”:

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible;
we were trying to live a personal life
and, yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and
plunged
into our personal weather
they were headed somewhere else but their
beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I

(Rich, “In Those Years”)

The conversations that followed were immensely diverse, raising questions of where we live, how we live together, who we take care of, how we imagine our needs versus those of others. A young man noted, at the end of a rich dialogue, that he had expected these

conversations to be about social science, but this was different. This was a whole new (old?) way to think about community, from the heart and the imagination first. Maybe that’s what we need most right now; after all, nothing else is working, and poetry can’t hurt.

CLOSING WITH HOPE

The most critical reason for the humanities to find better ways to speak to and with public policy is this: we have long tried to solve the same old human problems with the same old legislative tools, and by and large, it is not working. We need different tools. The humanities are good tools for the job. They help us think about the common good. They develop our imaginative capacities to design better approaches. Our paradigm of policy making is solving problems, of treating the symptoms, when the humanities might invite us for once to imagine the world without the disease. In Martin Espada’s brilliant poem “Imagine the Angels of Bread,” he offers an array of extraordinary images for our contemplation: trumpets and fanfare greeting new immigrants on the other side of the border; the food stamps of young mothers “auctioned off like gold doubloons.” And this, moving us beyond the world of problem and into the world of peace:

If the abolition of slave-manacles
began as a vision of hands without manacles,
then this is the year;
if the shutdown of extermination camps
began as imagination of a land
without barbed wire or the crematorium,
then this is the year;

(Espada, “Imagine the Angels of Bread”)

But that’s not how it works, is it, from a place of awareness and hope? We see slave-manacles, we revile them, we rise up in anger at the injustice and have a war. We never imagined a land without barbed wire, and we never tried. We fought to right a wrong, which is the American notion of good policy. And indeed, it’s better than not. But we have so much further to go, as our continuing struggles remind us. To quote Martin Luther King Jr. from the last civil rights movement, still brutally incomplete: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Light and love are products of imagination, of vision, of faith, of, perhaps, a particular view of

humankind. These are the lifeblood of the humanities. The truly radical notion is that they are ours, or should be, and apply to all people, or should. It seems not only possible but downright urgent for us to ask our policy-makers, our voters, our everyday everyone, to imagine the community they want to live in. And then to think together about what that means in practice, and then to build it. 🐙

ENDNOTES

1. Various federal departments are acknowledging and seeking to remedy the challenges of siloed approaches to social problems, adopting more of a problem-shed collaborative practice by yoking departments for cross-sector grants. The Partnership for Sustainable Communities (partnership of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) is one notable example.
2. Maine has seen recent developments in collective impact work that are making great changes; see Lewiston's Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, for example.

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Anna Sims Bartel serves as associate director of Cornell University's Center for Engaged Learning and Research. She has also worked at Bates College and at Wartburg College in Iowa,

always trying to make higher education ever more useful in the world.