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# **The Use of History as a Tool of Policy-Making**

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## **Policy Makers and History**

This paper argues that policy-makers have a lot to benefit from reading history when they make everyday decisions. This should not be interpreted as a suggestion for history instrumentalization (e.g. the writing of a practical history). On the contrary, the historical research agenda should be set by the historians themselves but the fruits of this research can be enjoyed by non-historians as well. In the process of making a decision, policy-makers can benefit from reading history in at least three ways:

- Identify the (historical) root of an issue (problem).
- Generate and process historical data in order to understand and interpret contemporary issues. This includes the empirical evaluation of past policy implementations.
- Expand the set of ideas or use old ones in order to formulate new policies.

In what it follows, these three ways are briefly discussed. In the last section of this paper, examples of the historical research presented in this history conference are examined in their usefulness to a Greek policy-maker.

The issue of history's role in policy-making has not been widely analyzed by non-historians with the exception of the second area of using historical statistical data. Rennie (1998) has argued that history has a role to play in the policy-making process. In addition, three more articles were identified that reviewed the role or non-role of history in specific contemporary policy settings: Berridge (2003) on drug policy in U.K., Dovers (2000) on Environmental Policy in Australia and Marcuse (2001) on housing policy in the United States.

### **The Historical Root of a Policy Problem**

This might be the most important contribution of history to policy decision-making process. The policy making process involves a number of steps. The first step is the identification of a policy problem. The second step should be the identification of the duration of the problem. For example, youth unemployment in Greece has been a major problem. How long has this problem been around? An a-historical, purely statistical analysis of the issue would reveal that this is a problem of the 1980s and 1990s. However, a careful historical analysis would reveal that this problem has a very deep root and it existed even before the 1980s but it did not show up in the official statistics because the solution was emigration. In the 1950s and 1960s the problem of youth unemployment in Greece was ameliorated greatly because other countries, such as Western Germany, USA, Canada and Australia, absorbed the excess supply of young Greek workers. In the 1980s, this emigration was not a viable alternative any more for various reasons, primarily because the

hosting countries were facing economic slowdowns and unemployment. Thus, the problem of youth unemployment always existed but in the first historical period there was a possible solution that does not exist anymore. It is only historical research that can shed light on the identification of the root of contemporary policy problems. In our example, an historical analysis reaching back even to the period before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War might show that the true cause is the inherent inability of Greece's economy to offer employment to all young people.

### **Cliometrics: The Art of Analyzing Historical Data**

Cliometrics is a form of historical research that has been imported to the discipline of history from the social sciences, particularly economics. Economic policy has used historical data extensively to analyze contemporary policy issues. All scientific economic journals accept cliometrics (econometrics using historical time series) as an appropriate method of research. Policy-makers use these studies and maintain historical data banks in order to understand, design and evaluate policy alternatives. They have also re-created history by performing simulations on historical data.

There are many studies that use cliometrics. For example, Hanes & James (2003) examine the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. history of nominal wages. Their results are very useful for all policy makers who deal with policy issues of the labor market. Another example of such historical research is by Davis & Engerman (2003). They looked at the lessons history can provide for the success of economic sanctions. Data from 1914 demonstrate that economic sanctions were not very successful.

### **Old Ideas and New Ideas**

Historical analysis can provide policy makers ideas of how to solve a contemporary policy problem. However, policy-makers should be very careful when they attempt to present old (historical) ideas as new ones. Such historical transplanting should respect two basic principles:

- The principle of historical analogy
- The principle of spatial analogy

The first simply says that what worked or did not work 50 or 500 years ago does not necessarily imply that could or could not work today. It is very common in policy-making boardrooms for someone to react to a proposed idea with the response that that 'there is nothing new' or 'it has been tried before but failed'. Both persons, the one that proposed the idea and the other that rejected the idea on historical grounds, have in most cases little or no

knowledge of the exact historical circumstances that can explain the success or the failure of a policy intervention idea.

Many Ministers, apart from the traditional one for Foreign Affairs, who have always used history for policy-making, have understood this necessity for historical knowledge. Rennie (1998) notes that the French and English governments have established history offices within their individual ministries in order to investigate the historical analogy of old ideas to proposed ideas of tackling a contemporary policy issue.

The second principle, that of spatial analogy, relates to the geographical dimension of historical research. What works or worked some years ago in some countries does not necessarily imply that the same can work in another country. This principle of spatial analogy applies to the current debate on the European Social Model. Four such models have been identified based on the historical developments in four different geographical areas of Europe: Anglo-Saxon Model, Continental Model, Scandinavian Model and the Southern European-Mediterranean Model.

If there is an area that history students can find gainful employment it is in assisting policy-makers to avoid the mistake of violating the principles of historical and spatial analogy. Of course, policy-makers themselves can learn to avoid such mistakes by reading history.

### **What a Greek Policy-Maker Can Learn from this History Conference?**

As a policy-maker myself for more than ten years, I have dealt with a number of social and economic issues in which this history conference could have been of great help. Since not all papers to be presented were available at the time of writing this paper, I restrict myself to those that I had the opportunity to read. The general conclusion from my reading this historical research is that a policy-maker can learn a great deal. There is not even a single paper that a policy-maker cannot relate to a contemporary debate either in Greece or in the European Union. The question is what did I learn that could be considered useful from a policy perspective? Time forces me to be selective in answering this question. The answer is structured along the lines of the three areas of the decision making process that a policy-maker can benefit from by reading history.

One of the issues that concerns Greek policy in the last 30 years is the role of the church *vis a vis* the Greek state. The society has been divided between those that believe that the state and the church should not be independent because "Greekness" is taken to mean "Orthodox Religion" and vice versa. The church supports this view. On the other side, politicians from the left support the idea of separation of the church from the Greek state. Reading the

paper of Assistant Professor Justin Stephens from the University of West Georgia on John Chrysostom's *Understanding of the Christian Empire* to be presented in this conference, I learned two things: First, the issue has a long history (root). It goes back fifteen hundred years. This might explain why modern policy makers cannot solve the problem and many attempts that have been made have failed. One reason could be the a-historical approach that has been followed. Second, the church itself was not always in support of a close relationship with the state. As Professor Stephens demonstrates, John Chrysostom, an important saint of the Greek Orthodox Church, had a different view from modern day Greek Church leaders. Chrysostom thought that the church was better off without state support. It would be of great interest to this current debate to have an historical review of church-state relationships since the beginning of Christianity, and to identify the historical costs and benefits of these relationships. Then, an informed decision can be taken.

Cliometrics deals with historical measurements. It is a method of historical analysis based on numbers (quantitative data). I found the work of Professor Edward M. Anson (2006) to be a contribution to cliometrics. His paper deals with the question of how many people can effectively hear a speech without any mechanical amplification. He presents empirical evidence on the size of an army in Ancient Greece that can hear the commander's voice in pre-battle situations. His paper is an inspiration for modern times management. If I may paraphrase the title of his essay I would say that a policy-maker doesn't need a loud voice, but brains. Reading history might be one way of obtaining brains. However, a more traditional example of a contribution to cliometrics is the paper by Apostolides & Apostolides (2006) that deal with the history of Cypriot agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Examples of ideas useful to policy makers can be found in all the papers to be presented in this conference. Just to give some examples. The paper on Urban Structures from Antiquity to Middle Ages in Croatia by Professor Jurkovic would have been very useful in the Athens Urban Policy debate before and after the Olympic Games of 2004. The paper on Athenian Democracy by Professor Haas should give modern day Athenian Policy-Makers many ideas for deciding on various policy issues. Professor Haas' statement that "the hallmarks of Athenian democracy included freedom of speech and shared governance" is exactly the role of the policy-making Greek institute of which I am the head.

My point is that history could be very useful to contemporary policy-making, even though historical research has no such purpose. The discovery of the extent of this role is the duty of policy-makers. Professional and not necessarily academic historians could become the vehicles to make history a useful tool of policy making. I would suggest that policy-makers should read history and some historians should attempt to carve it so that they make

history an additional tool of policy design and evaluation. I strongly believe that the discipline of history but especially the practical field of policy-making can benefit from the study of history.

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