2.   The politics of policy design
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INTRODUCTION

Determining where politics sits in scholarship on policy design might potentially start from first principles with three ontological questions: What is policy? What is design? What is politics? It should then be self-evident that given we are far from convincingly clear answers to any of these questions individually, answering them in combination presents a tricky task. In what follows, I try to pull apart how politics has been conceived in regard to policy design. I have also chosen to follow a conceptual approach because, in an important sense, policy design pertains to general questions about politics and policy in all their aspects (Simon, 1969; Peters, 2018). Therefore, the significance of policy design research is important beyond this one area of inquiry. There are three sections. In the first, I tease out six different ways in which politics has been conceptualized in policy design. Some of these approaches could easily be situated in more than one category, so I have not attempted to render them mutually exclusive. My aim is to identify the political dimensions of the approaches to encourage further conceptual reflection. Section 2 develops a heuristic for policy design, depicted in a two-vector figure that maps the field of scholarship along policy and politics dimensions, while also distinguishing orientations towards scholars from those aimed at practitioners. The final section considers potential routes for cross-fertilization between perspectives.

1.   CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF POLITICS IN POLICY DESIGN

The many approaches to policy design reveal that scholars have conceived of its relationship to politics in fundamentally different ways. In some cases, politics is explicitly theorized in regard to policy design, while in others it is only implicit and has to be inferred. I identify six different conceptualizations of politics in the policy design literature. Politics is present in all work on policy design, but differences arise primarily in terms of what politics means for the various authors, and how it relates to policy. For some, policy design and politics are discrete fields of activity in the policy process, while for others, politics is a way of acting that permeates policy design itself.

1.a   Policy Design as an Exercise Separated from Politics

The first approach conceives of policy design and politics as separate, or at least potentially so. It is associated with the earlier literature on policy design, as well as prior to this in longstanding conceptions of 'policy analysis' (Colebatch, 2018a). It is an ideal type, in which policy design can be conducted at a separate stage from politics, such that a planned programme for action can be devised and put into place, using tools of implementation, producing a designated effect to solve a public problem. Although few, if any, policy design scholars uphold a pure

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ideal of policy design as free from all political factors, this ideal type is important, because it underlies a general conception of policy design as external to politics, both as a rationality and a stage in a process. Here, we can see an iteration of the policy/politics ontological distinction at work. Along with this, the type relies on a neo-positivist conception of policymaking, in which political factors are not discussed amidst a preference for causal modelling and technical evaluation with little concern for value conflicts.

Over the years, advocates have modified their position, moving away from this retrospectively named 'old policy design' assumption of strict separation in design of technique and politics in practice (Howlett, 2019, p. 113). Nonetheless, the emphasis remains upon a somewhat technocratic ideal, in which politics serves as a limiting factor on what design 'is', such that non-design is marked by excessive attention to contextualized factors, involving log rolling, expediency, and interest-driven decisions, where 'designs are more or less irrational' (Howlett, 2019, p. 9). Howlett et al. (2015, p. 292) accept the critique of means–end rationality underpinning earlier versions of policy design, but insist that the instrumental model remains useful because it establishes a normative expectation of design as based on logic and expert knowledge, against (political) satisficing behaviour. Ultimately, it comes down to a question of the weight of politics in the design process, such as whether 'political gain or blame avoidance outweigh instrumental factors' (Howlett et al., 2015, p. 292). The separation of policy design and politics is supported through the question of 'when' is policy design, by reference to the stages model of the policy process. Policy design ideally occurs after a problem is recognized and an agenda is set, such that a design space can be used to rationally plan policy responses, as free from political constraints as possible, even if the process is iterative and there is no presumption of a benign, well-intentioned government (Howlett, 2019, pp. 95, 108).

The ideal type has always emphasized policy tools or instruments (Hood, 1983; Linder and Peters, 1990). In the reframed 'new design orientation' (Howlett et al., 2015), following the exposure of limits to market policy mechanisms and the constraints of globalization, we see a renewed emphasis on complex mixes of policy tools and instruments aimed at solving complex problems (Howlett et al., 2018). But regardless of the stated distinction from the old policy design, it retains the instrumental-rational basis. To supplement the research agenda, with this orientation comes new research into what policy designers do and where they work. In this aspect of the research programme, more concessions are made to the integration of political and technical factors in the work of policy designers (Howlett, 2019, p. 113). They are recognized as working in communities, including being involved in advocacy coalitions, in which they must compete to have problem frames adopted (Howlett, 2019, p. 121). Nevertheless, politics remains a limiting factor upon design, which is also, or should be, a stage prior to politics in the policy process.

1.b   Policy Design as Rational Planning That Includes Politics

A second view maintains the validity of policy design, but includes politics within its activity, without the latter in any way swallowing the former. Politics is recognized as a part of policy design, and public administration in general, as carried out in the form of internal and external organizational conflicts and struggles (Peters, 2019). Indeed, Peters points out that suppressing politics from the conception of public administration is dangerous, because 'Attempts to eliminate politics often mean replacing overt, visible and accountable policies with more covert, and hence more insidious, forms of politics' (Peters, 2019, p. 470). Thus, this approach is dis-

tinctively different from the first view, even if some features are shared. It differs in declining to make a sharp ontological distinction between policy design and politics as unique spheres of activity. And the increased range and types of activity incorporated in this definition of policy design makes it much larger than the technical ideal, because it is argued that 'At some level, all policymaking is policy design' (Peters, 2018, p. 4). At the same time, there is still an idea that design could be best accomplished as a separate stage from the primary political field of action, which remains distinct.

Hence, policy design scholarship becomes a general approach to the study of policymaking, with one important distinguishing feature. This feature is that the metaphysical distinctiveness of policy design is articulated in terms of a theory of consciousness. Peters (2018, p. 5) defines policy design as the *conscious* application of thought and effort in regard to solving a problem. This is why the explicit intention to treat public problems, when it can be found in all efforts from all actors in politics, qualifies as a kind of design and the 'new design orientation' pertains to the inquiry into policymaking in general. At the same time, an ontological marker is also drawn up, in which 'non-design' is articulated not in terms of non-politics, as in section 1.a above, but as the relative absence of conscious cogitation – such as policy design by accident or strong path dependence – articulated along a scale of 'level' or 'designedness' depending on the degree of conscious thought brought to bear (Ingraham, 1987; Peters, 2018, p. 19, respectively). A notion of 'full design' is thus put forward, the ideal type reframed according to the principle of conscious thought, incorporating four elements: causation, instruments, values, and intervention (Peters, 2018, p. 21). Thus, this framework is a 'new design orientation', in which politics is incorporated into contextual analysis and rational planning for political actions, as far as this is possible, given the contingencies of planning for an unknown future. It aims to shift the field from thinking about designs as already completed substantive products to designing as a procedure, one which can be built into all sorts of policy processes and institutionalized operations.

This approach allows for politics to hold a stronger presence in policy design, insofar as it is explicitly available to the individual consciousness and amenable to rational articulation and strategic planning. This appeals to common sense because we know that political feasibility (Peters, 2018, p. 16), whether pertaining to party politics or the organizational politics of bureaucracies and policy networks, is live in the minds of policymakers everywhere. Failure to account for likely political reactions can be disastrous, with any policy design potentially falling foul of gatekeepers and immediately rejected before it escapes the first meeting room. The weight of political credibility hangs heavily over all designing actions, most pertinently for elected officials, but also for bureaucrats who, in drafting briefing papers, prepare policy options in regard to both ideology and the realpolitik of vested interests, even if these might go unstated. Bureaucrats who put forward policy designs too far outside mainstream thinking or the ideological frame of their political masters risk their reputation for failing to read the room. However, it is important to note that planning with politics in mind is not the same as conducting politics, which is a qualitatively different type of rationality and stage of activity in the policy process.

1.c   Policy Design as Democratic Politics

Attention to political ramifications leads us to a third conception of the politics of policy design, found in research that injects into design a qualitative democratic political process.

This varies according to whether one focuses on the procedural or substantive elements of policy design. Policy design can be more or less democratic in terms of its processes – depending of course on contested definitions, from the minimalist view of democracy as electorally legitimated power (Schumpeter), to the more qualitatively demanding participatory democracy (Habermas, 1984–7) – or its substantive outcomes. Hence, a policy design process could be weakly democratic in procedure but strongly democratic in outcome, and vice versa. Of course, this becomes more murky when we take in different types of polity. An authoritarian government can argue, as did elite theorists of the past, that top-down designed processes produce better outcomes for citizens. This raises the awkward implication that the best form of policy design could be one in which democratic procedures are best excluded in favour of maximum efficiency (see section 1.a, above). Therefore, advocates of procedural democracy argue that they have a deontologically superior mode of policymaking, which is more legitimate.

I want to reflect on such distinctions by calling attention to the ideal type of policy design, of design as (potentially) separate from politics, which is criticized by normative democratic theorists, as nonetheless containing an assertion of democratic value. In the ideal type, described above, public problems would be dealt with by regard to the evidence. This echoes the ambition of key modernist thinkers, such as Dewey (1927), who regarded the purpose of scholarship to be democratic and oriented towards concrete public problems, rather than abstract and ephemeral concerns, and Comte, who through positivism envisaged a better world in which knowledge would be based on scientific evidence, not religious or ideological dogma. Echoes of this vision continue to resonate throughout public policy practice, e.g., Evidence Based Policy Making. The core element of this idea is that sectional interests would be kept out of the design procedure, with the emphasis on problems, goals and instruments to effect them, in a logical and rational process. So, while the ideal type of policy design might be 'neo-positivist', we nonetheless see that it can be argued to uphold a democratic norm insofar as a disinterested analysis best serves the public interest (notwithstanding interpretivists' critiques of the links between positivist methods and elite power). The same democratic norm is found in the second model, based on conscious intention, for instance in Peters (2018), who retains democratic value in the problem focus and link between intentional design, action, and policy solutions. In such a formulation, it is the *substantive* result that matters most.

A second conception of democracy takes us away from a strong focus on substantive outputs to one that links procedure with good policy design substance. Here, policy design is recognized as a pluralist process, one which would benefit from the inclusion of the target groups in the design itself. Co-production (see Durose and Richardson, 2015 and Chapter 25 in this volume) is argued to be beneficial because it can incorporate more knowledge, uses a wider range of evidence, and is therefore more reliable because it obtains data directly from the actors targeted by a policy invention. Labelled by Richardson as 'participatory positivism' (2013, p. 497), the claimed benefit is that rational policy design remains in place, but is performed better and produces better results. In other words, procedures are not democratic for their own sake, but a democratic orientation in favour of citizens produces better designs.

A third conception of democratic procedure takes a strong view of the procedural dimension of design. It emerges from interpretivism and the epistemological position that fact and value are intertwined in knowledge production (Fischer and Forester, 1987).[1] If social facts are accepted as value-laden, then a plurality of values should be incorporated into policy design procedures so as to critically subject them to scrutiny and to generate legitimacy around the

process itself. Participatory democracy recognizes that legitimacy is just as important as policy decisions, and argues that procedural legitimacy is the best way to generate policy legitimacy. This can go so far as to establish deliberative democratic procedures in which opposed validity claims might be brought into contact with one another and adjudicated by democratic procedures and mutual recognition (based on, for instance, Habermas, 1984–7). The procedural norm is argued to overcome the inherent limitations of scientific 'designs' – which tend to exclude alternative value positions through the formulation of fixed problems and hypothesized solutions – in which conflicting value positions are not robustly encountered. In deliberative policy analysis, the role of experts is not to design policies themselves but instead to facilitate deliberation by citizens (Forester, 1999; Fischer, 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003) via procedures that incorporate attention to value conflicts and multiple problem frames, in an iterative hermeneutic activity (Dryzek, 1982). A robust deliberative mechanism is also able to question the knowledge presented in support of policy designs, which, given the partiality of knowledge, is rendered 'argumentative' (Majone, 1989; Fischer and Forester, 1993; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012). However, when deliberation is extended to include 'rhetoric' (Gottweis, 2006; Turnbull, 2013), it undermines the idea of 'design' altogether (see section 1.f, below).

Deliberative design is argued to be more realistic and even necessary for a complex world, in which policy designs can be proposed by actors outside the state, in civil society, and even outside the nation-state. However, the argument against analytical policy design from the fact of complexity has been criticized by Howlett (2019), which seems reasonable given that design is not precluded per se by complexity, not to mention the penchant of large governments, such as the European Union (EU), for producing rigidly designed and legalistic policy frameworks covering large areas of activity across multiple countries. Therefore, the validity of the deliberative-hermeneutic-argumentative model relies more on epistemological claims from constructivism (see Barbehön, Chapter 6 in this volume) along with normative claims about procedural democracy. Here, we see the difference from co-production, which can be concerned with democratic procedures, but does not necessarily entail the same epistemological and normative assumptions.

1.d   Policy Design as Social Power

When we think explicitly of politics as an entity in its own right, rather than in regard to its difference from 'policy', we usually think of 'power'. Without going into the complex debate on theories of power, one set of theories highlights its *relational* property, i.e., it ontologically encompasses relations between one or more actors. In this reading, power is more than a simple capacity ('power to'), it is a dynamic that describes the mediation of a social relationship ('power over') (Dowding, 1996), for instance, power relations in the labour process (Marx). Given that policy design aims to use the political system to generate social change, such as the behaviour of individuals in regard to one another or the relative distribution of goods between them, then it affects relations between actors and uses the power of the state to do so. Therefore, it make sense to conceive of policy design as a relational political construct that effects social power.

At a bridging point between analytical and social power approaches is the recent advent of (critical) realist studies in policy design (Fontaine, 2020; Fontaine et al., 2020). This rejects the strict causality of the mainstream approaches described above in favour of multi-conditional process tracing, which incorporates politics and design activities. It situates design as an

activity set in a political context, but retains an orientation towards giving explanations of design outputs, in a mid-level theory. A second approach heads more down the path of tackling politics as intrinsically part of policy. This has been insufficiently taken up in policy design research, given its conceptual depth and linkage of policy design to the field of political sociology. The research agenda set out by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) situates the study of policy design in the relationship between the governors and the governed. They criticize much policy design literature as 'functionalist', insofar as it fails to see that this primary relationship is at stake in all policymaking, including the use of tools and instruments. In contrast to the view that an instrument's value exists independently of its feasibility, and that design can be uncoupled from decision making (Linder and Peters, 1990), they argue that policy instruments are not neutral techniques because they also bear values and are selected to effect power relations between state and society (see also Tupper and Doern, 1981; Salamon, 2002). The argument follows on from that raised above on the dangers of depoliticizing public administration, in that focusing on the power dimensions of instruments reveals the invisible, depoliticized dimensions of public policy, which are otherwise hidden by the neutral depiction of instruments (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, p. 17). The scholarly benefit of studying instruments in this way derives from conceiving of them as *institutions*, as coordinated sets of rules and procedures governing the behaviour of actors. Following Peters, they argue that researchers must look first at the interests present in instrument choices (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, p. 9). Comparative analysis can then examine types of instruments and the political power relations, and legitimation regimes, that they enact.

Also emphasizing social power in policymaking is a third approach, 'policy work' scholarship. It is distinctively different from sections 1.a and 1.b, above, in that it rejects the 'cognitive' analytical framework. Those first two approaches associate policy design with conscious, intentional action, and suppose that policy designers are or can be people employing mainly conscious designing efforts, even when the historical, institutional, and political contexts in which they operate are taken into account. In the 'policy work' perspective (Colebatch, 2006, 2010; Colebatch et al., 2010; Hoppe and Colebatch, 2016; Colebatch and Hoppe, 2018), habituated responses are just as important as conscious ones, and it is not supposed that the two can be separated. Rather than 'policy' being that which both defines the objectives and informs the activities of designers, this approach conceptualizes policy workers as people engaged in governing practices, in which policy is a *mediating* concept – individuals and organizations are working 'for' policy (Colebatch et al., 2010). Hence, all sorts of intuitive orientations and responses, built on personal, organizational, institutional and cultural experience – for instance, political 'nous' (Rhodes, 2015) – are involved in work in and around policy, as well as conscious intentions. Policy work concerns the general governance of problems, in the course of which policy workers must work collectively and thus also mediate political conflicts.

This is important for the politics of policy design because it construes politics not as a distinct type of activity but as embedded within policy work in general. It is indistinct from other dimensions of policy, such as the evaluation and use of scientific knowledge or the political and psychological factors at play in human interactions across organizations and policy networks. Hence, Hoppe (2018) proposes that policy design should not be based on 'tools' but a set of 'heuristics' for practitioners, aimed at guiding questioning in the context of uncertainty, multiple competing sources of information, and political exigencies. Because the policy work approach considers policymaking as collective sense-making (Hoppe, 1999),

it does not locate intelligent activity solely in the individual mind, but includes knowledge constructed between multiple actors. This is one basis of the reflexive, philosophical critique of policy design as a construct (see section 1.f, below). Given that policy design requires collectively interpreting, understanding and structuring problems, in a political context, it is inherently political. Puzzling, powering and participation are *integrated* in the governance of problems (Hoppe, 2010).

A distinguishing feature of the social power-focused approaches to the politics of policy design is that *order* is a central concern. That is, they do not take for granted a largely stable, advanced industrial democracy as a contextual background, an otherwise silent foundation underneath designing activity. Instead, they aim to articulate the interrelationships between policy design and the continuing regeneration of that order. Policy designs are built upon the power of the state and in turn reinforce that power to varying degrees. The ways in which policymaking mediates social relations flows between order and dynamism, from which it cannot be separated. Hence, state violence, internally via the police and the judicial system, and externally via the military, should be included in any set of policy design tools, as much as regulations or market incentives. So, these approaches are concerned with how ordering and powering are variably made explicit or suppressed within policy as the work of governing. In this manner, such analyses are more generally applicable than those restricted to normative concerns about democratic procedures. Nor are they limited to the study of democracies; illiberal and authoritarian states may be equally included in comparative research (Yassin and Hoppe, 2019).

1.e   Policy Design as Ideational Politics

Once we infer politicized meanings from policy designing procedures and outputs, we also find ideational politics. This is the political sociology – in the more conventional sense of electoral politics – of policy design, which articulates power relations through the study of political policy designs that target specific electorates. Found in constructivist analyses, and sometimes labelled 'symbolic' politics, policy design is, at least in part, a framing exercise, which constructs problems in specific ways to create political winners and losers (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Normative characterizations of the target groups of policy design are incorporated into instruments and accompanying language, with distinctive patterns observable in the allocation of benefits and burdens. Importantly, these are justified by different legitimation arguments that tie in to the symbolic construction of group norms and vary according to the social power and desirability of the target groups (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Failed policy measures can thus be sourced not in illogical designs but in the strategy of political targeting. Expert designers themselves are influenced by normative constructions of the target groups, even in non-political contexts (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, p. 345). Schneider and Ingram conclude that this research can promote a better norm for policy design to raise the level of discourse above discriminating language. Of course, one might instead conclude that policy design is not at all fouled by politics, but rather that design always expresses political goals and is therefore, by definition, successful if it does this well by rewarding key allies and punishing enemies. Thus, a stronger version of constructivism points out the highly politicized aspects of the very construction of target groups and the maintenance of hegemonic power (Barbehön, 2020).

1.f   Policy Design as a Concept That Represses the Political

A final understanding of the politics of policy design is the reflexive critique of the idea of policy design itself. Some scholars have cast policy design as a concept that represses political elements in its very formulation. This arises in several ways. First, design has been argued to be a modernist concept, just one incarnation of a longstanding, idealized vision of expert knowledge deployed to solve policy problems, using the powers of rational calculation and especially quantitative social science (Colebatch, 2018b).[2] Second, and relatedly, the impulse towards design is said to be typical of scientific reductionism, an analytical type of thinking in which the (political) noise of the world is factored out in order to generate a logical model and supporting technical apparatus (Turnbull, 2018). In these arguments, policy design, however much it is attenuated for political factors, tends to exclude the political. Such critics ask whether the concept of policy design is appropriate to the task of explaining the activity of policy workers and their organizations. Third, going further, Colebatch (2018b) argues that design language is not a description of empirical reality but an *account* of policymaking, and thus tends to play to the legitimating aims of governments and the state, which seek to justify their own internal activities for an outside audience in instrumental-rational terms. In this case, the policy design research programme is *itself* political, through a double hermeneutic effect (Giddens, 1984), becoming a venture that contributes to the real-world legitimation of political power by validating and propagating a political narrative of instrumental-rational problem-solving, i.e., it is a rhetoric of authority.
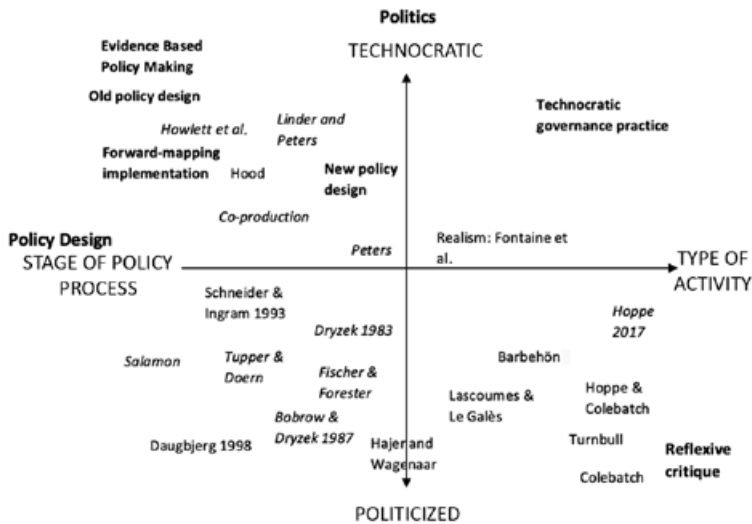
2.   A HEURISTIC FOR INTERPRETING THE POLITICS OF POLICY DESIGN SCHOLARSHIP

From these six different framings of politics in policy design, I propose a two-dimensional heuristic to map the field. The aim is to clarify conceptual differences in order to situate the various approaches in regard to one another and provide a basis for cross-fertilization. The previous section sets out how politics features in all theories of policy design, but differs according to how it is conceived, from technocratic to reflexively politicized extremities. It also touched on how design activity is itself construed, lying between the extremities of a discrete stage in the policy process to a form of activity in and of itself. Additionally, some research is more oriented towards advising practitioners, whilst other work is oriented towards scholarship.

The heuristic follows these dimensions in a simple strategy to classify variations on the conceptions of the politics of policy design. I use a two-vector model, which supports visualizing variation within basic categories. This is set out in Figure 2.1.

At the upper end of the figure is the most technocratic conception of policy design, while the left end of the horizontal dimension indicates perspectives that isolate design as a separate stage in the policy process. So, at the most technocratic and 'stageist' conception of policy design lies Evidence Based Policy Making. The 'old' policy design literature tends towards the top left quadrant because it situates policy design as an analytical activity that is, or is ideally, separate from political processes as well as being a goal-directed, instrumental-rational action. The new policy design remains in the same quadrant but is located more towards the centre, given its greater recognition of fallibility in reasoning and the reality of political bargaining.

Politics
TECHNOCRATIC

Evidence Based
Policy Making

Old policy design

Howlett et al.   *Linder and
Peters*

Forward-mapping
implementation   Hood   **New policy
design**

Co-production

**Technocratic
governance practice**

Policy Design
STAGE OF POLICY
PROCESS

Peters

Realism: Fontaine et
al.

TYPE OF
ACTIVITY

Schneider &
Ingram 1993

Dryzek 1983

Hoppe
2017

Salaman   Tupper &
Doern

*Fischer &
Forester*

Barbehön

*Bobrow &
Dryzek 1987*

Lascoumes &
Le Galès

Hoppe &
Colebatch

Daugbjerg 1998   Hajer and
Wagenaar

Turnbull

Colebatch

**Reflexive
critique**

POLITICIZED

Note: Italicized works are oriented towards impacts on practitioners, rather than academic theorizing.
Source: Author's own illustration.

Figure 2.1   A heuristic for the politics of policy design

Co-design also sits here, insofar as it is a design stage rather than primarily expressing a nor-mative preference for a democratic political process. Politics is an element recognized in policy design, but is either preferably minimized or specifically planned for, in advance.

The lower left quadrant sees a variety of more 'political' works on policy design, which still locate design as a stage in the policy process, but which conceive of it as necessarily involving politics. For instance, policy design can be a political process that targets various audiences according to their political power (Schneider and Ingram). In general, this is where 'policies with publics' designs are located (May, 1991). Also in this quadrant are the variety of analyses that view policy design as a politicized process, which can be emancipatory if pursued via inclusive, democratic procedures which have deontological value.

The upper right quadrant concerns policy design as a type of activity encompassing a range of quasi-analytical processes, but which are not clearly goal-driven and/or detached from problems. This is where we would find sociological critiques of government as a technocratic social practice, deriving from Weber's (1979) concerns about the proliferation of bureaucracy for its own sake. Technocratic design processes proliferate in unfocused policy fields, with no invested public audience or sets of beliefs to structure design; 'policy without publics' (May, 1991). Towards the centre is the realist conception of policy design scholarship (Fontaine et al., 2020), which produces contextual explanations of policy design processes, without the pre-vailing instrumental, problem-solving assumptions of the old policy design, but nevertheless oriented towards explaining policy designs and supporting systematic evaluation (Fontaine, 2020).

Finally, the lower right quadrant is occupied by perspectives that consider all policy action, including policy design, to be a form of intrinsically political activity and not a discrete stage in the policy process. In this quadrant are reflections on policy tools as political institutions and constructivist research that aims to understand design processes as legitimating hegemonic ideologies. At the outer limit is the reflexive critique of policy design as a depoliticizing terminology, in which 'policy design' designates neither an ontological phenomenon nor a stage in the policy process, but is rather a label for policy actions that act as legitimating accounts of the policy process.

3.   AN AGENDA FOR ADVANCING RESEARCH ON THE POLITICS OF POLICY DESIGN

What emerges from the literature is a general view that policy design research should do more to incorporate politics in theory and practice. What directions might be followed to advance research by incorporating more politics content? Before this, it should be acknowledged that significant differences remain in the literature, which are unlikely to be resolved, because they originate in the ontological questions flagged in the Introduction; how one conceives of politics itself and consequently the distinction between politics and policy design. Based on the arguments outlined in section 1.f, above, critical 'reflexive' scholars will always hold reservations about the policy design research agenda, and vice versa. Key differences also remain in regard to how scholars conceive of social action more generally, between the cognitive-analytical and social practice models. In the former case, policy designs can be consciously articulated, such that political concerns in regard to policy, for instance the institutionalized reality of formal politics, can also be at least explicitly recognized, measured and designed-in. In the latter case, the political is present in the habituated and routinized qualities of social practice, such that isolating a conscious intention towards policy formulation, design or designedness is futile and, worse, implicitly excludes aspects of the political in its ontological assumptions. This approach does not reject the idea of conscious action in policy design, but given that it accepts the dual presence of intentional and habituated consciousness – not to mention the embedded contextual frames of policy practitioners and the politicized use of knowledge for policymaking – authors prefer terms such as policy 'work' rather than 'policy design' or 'formulation'. Most recently, a thorough account of the essential conflicts between the various methodological orientations to policy design has been articulated by Fontaine et al. (2020), including a realist alternative to the instrumental-rational and reflexive framings.

Setting aside these disputes, how might the various ideas about the politics of policy design be brought together to extend policy design studies? First, benefits might be obtained from comparative research on the effects of polity structure on policy design (Fontaine, 2020), in both its procedural and substantive aspects. By exposing how political considerations impose themselves on policy design, we might better understand the contextually limiting factors of policy regimes (May and Jochim, 2013) and governance institutions upon policy design. Policy design could also be integrated much more with political sociology, examining how policy designs aim to create winners and losers, with electoral payoffs (see Bertelli and John, 2013).

Second, a broader understanding of design as incorporating routine politics would support research on policy at the international level. Research on policy design in multi-level trans-

national governance systems could examine how design orientations vary according to level of government and political power, for instance in the EU and other international institutions. In the EU, distributed power among nation-states means that design involves extensive bargaining as part of the design process. And while its policy 'directives' are less strict than policy within nation-states, they can be considered nonetheless as 'designed' policies that bring order across the member states and mandate minimum outcomes, at least in terms of regulatory measures. Thus, weaker design in the EU might constitute the 'strength of a weak state' (Dobbin and Sutton, 1998), i.e., administratively weak but normatively strong. For example, EU targets on government borrowing ratios are often violated but nonetheless exert symbolic power. A similar design dynamic in the context of weak power exists in the human rights realm; while the human rights regime can easily be ignored by domestic policymakers, it carries normative force and is often translated into policy at domestic level (Risse et al., 1999). How is power best deployed; in authoritative, restrictive policy designs or 'weak' designs, which render implementation in a 'fuzzy' form and utilize more democratic means of co-production and citizen deliberation?

Third, following on from the perspective of policy design as a form of social power, theorizing the relational properties of policy design concepts might advance our understanding of its political effects. For instance, Hood's (1983; Hood and Margetts, 2007) NATO scheme offers a basic set of policy instruments, but each of these can be reframed in relational-power terms. Each resource denotes governing 'capacities' – 'power to' – but they also entail 'power over' (see Pansardi, 2012): *Nodality* is centralized power of information in a network; *Authority* over a territory is granted by power of law; *Treasure* is state financial power relative to other commercial actors; and *Organization* is internally relational among many individuals. The political-relational dimensions of these constructs are evident in the limiting factors as well (Hood and Margetts, 2007, pp. 5–6): nodal 'credibility' concerns acceptance by a public audience of government information; legal 'standing' is legitimacy in the eyes of the courts; 'solvency' is subjective belief by creditors in the state's capacity to honour debts; and organizational 'capacity' is the limit upon the ability to acquire and deploy organizational resources relative to other collective organizations. Relational political power is thus operationalized in design instruments and continuously negotiated over time. When it comes to the design of institutions (Peters, 2005), the relational inquiry into institutional isomorphism, initiated by DiMaggio and Powell (1991), could be revived to include policy instruments as institutions to excavate how social power generates pressures for instruments to be replicated in different political contexts.

Fourth, how might interpretivists and others take up the potential for 'critical policy design studies'? Under the influence of interpretivism, deliberative policy analysis and discourse analysis, deploying the reflexive, ideational and political sociology approaches could examine how governments have legitimated policy decisions, and expert knowledge bases, using accounts of policy designing. These might take the form of analyses of the policy rhetoric of instrumental rationality, or the depoliticizing effects of certain policy instruments, which have obtained normative hegemony. They could also engage in comparative interpretive analyses (Boswell et al., 2019) that examine how ideas and narratives have structured problems and contributed to the designing of policy responses. Alternatively, the normative approach might be used to study co-production in non-expert design processes, to take in the planning and conduct of participatory processes that constitute fuzzy policy designs in themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

In the new policy design, more attention is paid to politics in policy design research. The potential exists to improve and broaden policy design research by integrating politics more robustly. The six conceptualizations of politics in policy design identified in this chapter reflect the results of different theoretical conceptions of politics and the political. They express different assumptions about what policy design is, whether a stage in the policy process or a type of activity. These differences in the literature are based on ontological presuppositions about policy and politics, analytical versus synthetic theories about the policy process, cognitive theories of consciousness as against social practice theories, and assumptions about the degree of control policy designers can exercise over a complex, political world. How one conceives of politics, policy and policy design thereby has important implications for research. The research agenda could be advanced first by authors explicitly clarifying what is meant by politics in their policy design research, and second by seeking cross-fertilization between the various approaches.

NOTES

1. This could equally be included in subsection 1.e; however, given the strong normative emphasis on procedure of this literature in regard to the politics of policy design, I have included it here.
2. See, in general, Bevir and Rhodes (2010).

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