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How Tools from the Discipline of History Can Improve Public Policymaking

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Executive Summary

- History is a resource that offers material from which any person or collective can derive constructs and claims – even without these being properly unarticulated.
- The use of history in policymaking, in particular, inevitably triggers questions such as 'whose history', 'which history', and even 'why history'. While these questions are fundamental and important in their own right, they inevitably, or essentially, target the contents (the 'what') of history – and often end, or kill, conversations.
- There are a few possible conceptual 'tools' used by historians which policymakers would do well to integrate into their craft for the benefit of the public good. Five tools are discussed herein, namely (1) patterning time, (2) weaving context, (3) analysing relations, (4) integrating evidence, and (5) persuading audiences.
- While not avoiding or preventing the rise of fundamental questions on 'whose', 'what'/'which', and 'why', these tools centre on History as process, and revolve around the question of 'how' the 'disciplinary' practices of historians can be absorbed into public policymaking. In that sense, these tools can serve to keep conversations, knowledge, and understanding flowing about the past and its relevance to contemporary governance.

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Introduction

The past contributes strongly to the present and the future. Furthermore, it is an important resource for memory creation for any person or collective.

Embracing disciplinary history in policymaking, in particular, inevitably triggers questions about '*whose* history', '*which* history', and even '*why* history'. In the end, these questions inevitably target the *content* (the 'what') of history. There are, of course, inspirational benefits that come from history as a discipline (e.g., the ability to trace, explain, define continuities and changes in time; to differentiate between contingency and causality, or between superficial changes and fundamental ones; to uncover 'deeper' issues at play; and to recognise alternatives lost in preferences for short-term explanations.

This article lays out a few conceptual 'tools' used by historians which policymakers can and should integrate into their craft for the benefit of both public policymaking and the larger public interest. The tools are (1) patterning time, (2) weaving context, (3) analysing relations, (4) integrating evidence, and (5) persuading audiences. While not avoiding or preventing the rise of the fundamental questions of 'whose', 'what'/'which', and 'why' of history, these tools centre on the question of 'how' history can be integrated into policymaking. These tools can serve to deepen conversations, knowledge and understanding about present realities, and make public policies more efficacious.

1. Patterning Time

While many disciplines are concerned with time (from Archaeology to Geology to Astrophysics), History foregrounds repeated patterning and re-patterning, organising and re-organising, imagining and re-imagining, and defining and re-defining, the past. The historical enterprise is largely about continuous discerning and revising of sequences and the connections that exist between "discrete phenomena over time" (Green 2016, 67).

Beyond History as preface, illumination, or understanding, Neustadt and May, for example, point out in their now-classic *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (1986) that History's patterning of time can shape and inform the practice of policymaking. It fosters in the policymaker abilities such as (i) identifying the right 'story' or narrative based on knowns, unknowns, and

uncertainties; (ii) plotting the key timelines, trends, and events of the policy issue at hand; and (iii) identifying the "potential incongruities" between different "courses of action" (235-6). The historian's tool of patterning time (iv) is helpful in articulating and clarifying the objectives and the desired future of a policy; (v) encourages continuous reflecting upon the past, contemplating the present, and forecasting the future; (vi) injects greater agency into policymaking by contextualising and assessing past phenomena; and (vii) integrating different forms of evidence (e.g., objective, subjective, contradictory, ambiguous) into a coherent framework.

2. Contextual Mapping

'Context', to the historian, is more than 'setting', 'environment', 'milieu', or 'background'. Rather, it conditions the interpretation across time and space of a policy matter, the identification of change and continuity, the validity of distinctions and comparison, and the authentication of accounts. In short, it acts as guidance to our intellectual efforts in *general*.

To take the Map as metaphor, 'contextual mapping' is the visual representation of relationships, interactions, and behaviours, as well as the scale/significance of – and between –the 'parts' that relate to a particular issue, as well as the relevant terrain. This includes understanding the salient public and institutional ecosystem, and the major actors.

Contextual 'intelligence' also entails sensitivity to (actual or potential) change in a given policy environment– and, thus, ascertaining the limits and conditions for exerting influence and affecting change. Integrating history-as-process in policymaking turns contextual mapping into a methodological tool that is particularly relevant for identifying the different possible futures – i.e. the scenario-based planning' conceptualised by Kees van der Heijden (2005) – which proceed from the policy options adopted. In other words, contextual mapping opens opportunities for 'thought experiments' into the diversity of outcomes generated by different policy proposals.

3. Relational Analysis

The third tool that the historical method brings to policymaking is that of comparing – entailing contrasting, contextualising and clarifying – between the familiar and the unfamiliar. As Jürgen Kocka (2003) has pointed out, the tool of comparison can take four aims and consequences, namely, as

- a descriptive tool that clarifies;
- a heuristic tool that explains and identifies questions and problems;
- an analytical tool that breaks down and determines the extent and nature of causal relations within a policy issue; and

- a paradigmatic tool aimed at 'de-provincializing' a policy issue and identifying the similarities and differences between issues across time and space.

Questions automatically arise whenever policymakers compare and contrast the policy situation at hand with problems faced elsewhere or in other times: What, and which cases should be compared? How should two or more cases be compared? Should the focus be on fixed moments, or in streams of time? There is also the intractable question of underlying political factors and dynamics tied to the cases chosen for comparison – and the related potential for 'mis-analogising', 'historical unreasoning', and the 'using-abusing' of the past for a political agenda.

How can disciplinary history inform policymaking in this regard? The expert historian would assert the critical need for careful comparison of analogies by analysis rather than by 'allure'. There has to be careful comparisons of likenesses and contrasts if confirmation bias is to be avoided. Policymakers must address how analogies tend to entail multiple levels and dimensions, i.e. as subjective, and fluid problems generated by the multitude of unarticulated or unacknowledged psychological values, norms and assumptions that parties involved – including policymakers themselves – bring to the table. The very significance or insignificance of an analogy depends on the policymaker's own assumptions and criteria for valuation: attention paid to clarifying the organising principles, political objectives, conceptual contours, and parameters of different historical phenomena. Among the possible resources inspiring policymakers towards novel or alternative solutions are the conceptions, perceptions, and responses of those involved in similar situations elsewhere in time or circumstance.

Yet, there is no escaping the use of analogies as a means of applying knowledge of previous or other cases to new or different situations. The only difference between the human tendency to analogise and the disciplinary tool of comparison is whether, and to what extent, it is indulged in through allure and not through methodological analysis.

4. Integrating Evidence

Like policymaking, History has to confront evidence that come in different forms. The 'mess' of History is due to it having to integrate eclectic resources and diverse sources—"letters, diaries and official papers to sketchbooks and statistics, films and field notes" (Green 2016, 79). Both the policymaker and historian are often confronted with a dizzying plethora of different, sometimes conflicting, data, ideas and perspectives, and broadly from the "economic, political, intellectual, cultural, climatic, geographic, demographic, scientific, technological, organizational" to the "psychological factors and concepts" (Ibid. 80).

However, this eclectic nature does not need to be treated as a weakness or as a diminishing of History's value to policymaking. The academic practice of citations, for example, can serve as guide for policymakers in deepening their 'historical imagination'. Citations suggest how the past and present can be bridged, and what types of materials and what alternative routes are available.

Another academic convention is that of the peer review. In the case of policymaking, however, the historian has to engage with non-scholarly 'communities of enquiry'. The diversity of 'evidence' in policymaking, and the messiness of data-gathering, -assessment, and -integration, is significantly complicated by the diversity of stakeholders. While the professional historian must exercise (self-)consciousness, reflexivity, and a critical approach to data (who produced it? for what purpose, agenda, or interests? with what tensions or accord?), the policymaker is faced with the onerous task of calculating the political and public feasibilities of policy options and managing various, sometimes conflicting, interests and aims.

5. Engaging Policy-Makers and Other Stakeholders as Co-Producers of Historical Research

The last 'historian's tool' proposed here relates to the preceding discussion, namely, engagement as the final stage in the process of employing-History-in-policymaking. Engagement with audiences and communities is as important as the research itself. Instead, one should consider that to be integral to, and representative of, the very process of research itself. The involvement of communities as active co-participants in, and co-producers of, research from the outset is now common among social sciences such as Anthropology.

Such a stance goes against the traditional position of academicians carrying out their work separately from those to whom they seek to disseminate their scholarly or research findings. Arguably, this betrays an older ideological tradition of downplaying (or denying) the embeddedness of the 'scientist', and of 'science', in their social, cultural, economic and political environments. Obviously, a fair and just position has to be determined to address the potential for abuse by stakeholders in a policy problem, while admitting all the legitimate interests present therein. This highlights the importance of close and continuous examination of the "working consensus" Green 2016, 85) between stakeholders and participants in the research and policymaking project.

Conclusion

Cross-disciplinary integration of policy with various academic disciplines is, of course, not new. The dominance of economic models and concepts in both policy-making and public discourse and practices are obvious to most people. In fact, this integration implicates even the religious domain, where debates are often reduced to arguments about the desirability/undesirability of one or other finding or conclusion. Lost on the political and popular imagination is the crucial and arguably more fruitful question of what conceptual and methodological tools are critical to addressing the issue at hand. It is usually overlooked that Islamic religious scholars rarely, if ever, debate with each other about the different conclusions which they might have reached on the questions posed to them. Rather, the literature is replete with scholars respectfully debating the merits and shortcomings of the

methods and tools by which they reached their conclusions. Similarly, much acrimonious and ultimately unconstructive (ab)use of History at the political and popular level is about the content (the 'what') of History, rather than epistemic process. It is no wonder that such debates diminish into accusations and counter-accusations of 'whose' history is right, wrong, or 'fake'. A more fruitful and productive tact would be to discuss the 'how' of history. On that, this paper has argued, the historian has many tools to offer.

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