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Introduction: New Directions in Policy History

The state of policy history is good. This is a dramatic change from only four years ago, when I started an article in this very journal about the evolution of policy history by asserting: "The future of policy history remains unclear."[1] At the time, my statement reflected the sentiment shared by many fellow policy historians who did not feel that professional opportunities had fully caught up with the intellectual vitality of the subfield.

But by the year 2004, the quality and the volume of scholarship have reached unprecedented levels. *The Journal of Policy History* and *Studies in American Political Development* offer innovative articles on a large variety of periods, issues, and actors. The lists of prestigious university presses that are publishing work on the evolution of domestic and foreign policy continues to expand at a brisk pace. Since it was founded in 1999, the Policy History Conference has become a routine trip for those in the subfield as it has been jam packed with exciting interdisciplinary panels.[2] Top graduate programs are filled with students interested in the relationship between state and society. Many scholars in sub-fields that were born out of the social history revolution have now turned their attention back to the public-political realm. As a result of this interest, there has even been a notable spike in the number of departments hiring political—often defined as policy—historians.

The road to success has not been easy. Policy history emerged in the 1970s through a group of maverick historians who sought to produce scholarship that would influence the decisions of government officials, the training of policy experts, as well as the historical profession. The founding generation included academic historians who were disenchanted with the move of their profession away from the study of government and formal politics. The founders likewise consisted of public historians who were seeking to write scholarship that appealed to those outside the academy. Many of these scholars came together at a conference at the Harvard Busi-

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ness School in 1978, convened by Professors Tom McGraw and Morton Keller. This landmark conference was the first time that practitioners came to see themselves as part of a distinct sub-field. Since then, policy historians have written about such issues as the institutional and cultural patterns that effected policy over time, the soundness of conventional assumptions about the past, the influence of political culture on public policy, and the evolution of the policymaking process.[3]

There have been many landmark moments since the 1970s. In 1984, for instance, Tom McGraw won the Pulitzer Prize for his book on the history of economic regulation in the twentieth century.[4] Professors Ernest May and Richard Neustadt taught one of the most popular classes at Harvard University's prestigious Kennedy School of Government that focused on the applied uses of historical policy analysis. Based on their class, their book entitled *Thinking In Time* inspired many students and teachers to appreciate how historical analysis had practical value to public officials.[5] In 1987, Donald Critchlow announced the formation of *The Journal of Policy History,* which became the premier outlet for this research. By the early-1990s, there were numerous scholars whose work made policy central to their study.[6]

Despite these accomplishments, members of the sub-field confronted obstacle after obstacle. During their first two decades as a sub-field, policy historians were unable to secure a foothold in the mainstream of any profession. Most policy schools did not employ historians in the 1980s and early-1990s, because their programs generally privileged economics and organizational studies. Policy historians did not help matters by abandoning the applied spirit that animated their founders.

The historical profession, moreover, maintained its emphasis on studying social life and popular culture from "the bottom up." Government elites, institutions, and public policies were of marginal concern. In this atmosphere, the major historical publishing outlets such as *The American Historical Review* and *Journal of American History* only accepted a minimal number of works related to policy. Attendees at the Organization of American Historians or American Historical Association Conferences were more likely to see panels on the formation of working-class communities, gender roles, or the struggles of marginalized groups than discussions about the history of health care, tax, and public housing policies.

These changes were not unwelcome. The field of American history diversified significantly as it started to include a much richer canvass of subjects and issues being studied. Without any doubt, the field was much stronger and inclusive by the 1990s than it had been in the 1950s. The pluralization of historical studies is a change that will not be reversed. But there was a cost for the study of the political past, since the initial

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decades of the social and cultural history revolution were treated as a zero-sum game: the sub-field of political history was downplayed in order to make room for the new areas of intellectual growth.[7]

The sub-field of policy history only survived because there were historians willing to specialize on these subjects despite the professional costs they incurred. The sub-field also benefited from scholars in other disciplines, such as political science and sociology, who were stimulated by the new historical institutionalism to explore how institutions structured, and restructured, policies over long periods of time. Historical institutionalism gained an organizational base within the American Political Science Association following the formation of the History and Politics section of the association in 1988.

Recently, however, conditions have improved as the professional opportunities are slowly catching up to the intellectual advances of policy history. As previously mentioned, the history profession has begun to open its doors to the study of public policy, political elites, and government institutions, at the same time that the publishing world has been offering multiple outlets for this work. Although policy historians have not been able to break into the realm of think tanks or government staff (and there are scholars who would prefer to avoid these venues altogether), more historians have gained national reputations in media venues that discuss public affairs. There are also a handful of policy historians who are currently employed in public affairs programs at institutions such as Harvard, UCLA, and Duke.

Policy history holds tremendous intellectual promise because it offers numerous ways for the new generation of political historians to chart a fresh intellectual path for their field. As political historians wrestle with the challenges of reconstituting their subject matter without recreating the problems or weaknesses of previous scholarship, many are finding that policy constitutes an ideal focal point. One of the biggest advantages of policy history is that it can result in the formulation of fresh chronological frameworks for understanding political development. In recent years, younger political historians have been struggling to break free from the traditional time frames used in political history, ranging from presidential centered accounts, to the cycles of liberalism, and conservatism, to the modernization schema that claimed the turn-of-the twentieth century to be *the* central watershed moment in America's political evolution.[8] While those older time frames have much to offer, political historians are eager to experiment with different approaches to organizing political time—a central goal of the historical profession—and testing to see whether the existing scholarship has missed watershed turning points or historical patterns. Importantly, policy does not fit into most existing chronological

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structures. Indeed, different public policies have different timelines, something that makes the subject enormously challenging. As policy historians delve into different policy sectors, they are starting to perceive more complex chronological structures of political history than previous historians had suggested. For instance, a recent history of tax subsidies that provide social welfare has revealed that the period of greatest state expansion took place between the 1970s and 1990s, decades that are usually characterized as being dominated by the anti-government conservative movement.[9]

Policy history also allows historians to incorporate a broader range of actors into narratives than previous generations of historians have been able to do. The tension between scholars who study elite politics and grass roots politics quickly dissipates when policy is made the center of inquiry. After all, public policies are crafted by government officials in alliance with, and in response to, other social and political actors. Federal, state, and local policies influence—and are reshaped by—all types of social actors and institutions. A history of diplomatic policy during World War II, for instance, can encompass everyone from the White House officials who made the final decisions to go to war to the citizens whose lives were forever altered as a result of combat. A history of social welfare, moreover, must span from the committee rooms on Capitol Hill where legislators hammered out compromises about who should or should not be included in federal provisions to the poverty-stricken homes of northern urban families where individuals were deeply affected by the government monies they received. Social and cultural historians have looked at how race and gender has influenced the formation of public policy, and how in turn, policies structure social relationships throughout the country.[10]

Recent work in policy history has thus started to accomplish what many scholars have been talking about in abstract theory for years: breaking down the once-rigid barriers between state and society through the use of policy as the object of study and not locating scholarship in any single social realm. Policy likewise encourages historians to examine institutions that are often overlooked by historians, such as the mass news media, local government, and the non-profit sector.

Comparative and internationalist scholars can also rejoice over the focus on policy history. Regardless of the unique institutional and cultural configurations that exist in different countries around the globe, every nation deals with a common set of policy problems. As Peter Baldwin reminds us, different nation-states handle common problems—poverty, war, health care, urban decay, taxation, and more—in different ways. Unlike many subjects in political history (such as the presidency, for example), public policy provides scholars with an opportunity to see how

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countries deal differently or similarly with common problems and how policy challenges have been handled through international networks.

Finally, policy continues to offer historians an excellent opportunity to contribute to contemporary public debates—an animating motive of the founders of the sub-field. This vision has remained unfulfilled. Since the 1970s, policy historians have tended to write for an audience of fellow scholars while policy analysts have not enthusiastically embraced historical research. But the promise of this sub-field—to break out of academia and influence the public realm—remains alive and historians who often clamor to make their scholarship more relevant beyond the classroom have an opportunity to provide advice and insights about problems that nation's currently face. Historical debates, for example, have been raging at the front and center of public discourse throughout the war with Iraq in 2003 as well as during the post-war reconstruction.

Despite all of its promise and potential, however, policy history still has a long way to go before the sub-field realizes its full potential. Having reached a critical point when the intellectual vitality of the sub-field is thriving and the professional opportunities are expanding, policy historians must re-think the types of questions that we ask, improve our analytic and methodological strategies, and broaden the range of issues that we consider. In the words of the popular television chef Emeril Lagasse, it is time to "kick it up a notch." In doing so, it is essential that we connect our discoveries to larger historical narratives and political science debates. More importantly, we need to reexamine our basic analytic assumptions and move beyond artificial sub-field boundaries that have inhibited us from expanding the horizons of our research.

The contributors to this volume tackle these challenges by anticipating new directions that policy history is likely to take in the coming years. As the second generation of policy historians launch their careers, the time is right to reflect on the foundations of the sub-field. Since policy history has always been inter-disciplinary, the contributors include political scientists, historians, and sociologists. Each contributor looks at policy history through a distinct disciplinary lens to discuss how the sub-field should evolve.

Two of the authors, Peter Baldwin (History) and Paul Pierson (Political Science), focus on some the biggest overriding questions confronting the sub-field by re-examining the analytic and methodological foundations that have guided policy historians since the 1970s. Baldwin challenges the basic comparative assumptions that have been used when analyzing policy history. Embracing an ideal model of the state, most scholars have explicitly or implicitly accepted a hierarchy that separates "strong" from "weak" states (usually, with the United States as a model of the weak

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state and countries in Northern Europe as shining examples of strong states). This hierarchy has served as the focal point for historical narratives as they have sought to explain how the policies of countries fall at a particular point in this continuum. Surveying recent research, Baldwin reveals that the hierarchy masks more than it reveals. Research has made it abundantly clear that each nation-state handles different kinds of policies in different ways. Some nation-states that look non-interventionist, for example, have a very strong influence on civil society when one opens up discussion to include a broader range of government interventions. While direct social welfare spending has been relatively low in the United States, when compared with other industrialized western democracies, the federal government spends a vast amount of money indirectly by offering tax incentives and tax breaks to select groups of citizens. The U.S. has also developed a vibrant system of private sector welfare that is often subsidized—and works in tandem with—government programs.[11] These are just some examples of how characterizations of "weak" states fall apart when historians take a more nuanced look at what constitutes policy. At the same time, allegedly "strong" states have refused to intervene in certain areas. Sweden, for example, has maintained a regressive tax system.[12] Britain, Germany, and France, moreover, have adopted a laissez-faire approach toward public health issues such as smoking and alcohol consumption. European countries lagged behind the United States, rather than vice versa, with regard to the protection of individual privacy or the rights of the disabled.

In the end, Baldwin urges policy historians to retain a comparative framework while avoiding the hierarchy that is based on ideal notions of the state. Baldwin posits that we should understand historically how and why states handle similar problems in multiple ways and how conceptions of the state vary throughout the world. Most important, Baldwin argues that the "multiplicity of policy styles" should itself be the focus of scholarly inquiry.

Whereas Baldwin encourages us to think in new ways about the analytic assumptions that we use to understand policies in different nations, Paul Pierson embraces a complicated challenge that few historians have been willing to tackle: explaining why studying policy historically matters at all. Most historians would tend to answer this question by simply asserting that the past is crucial. But for policy historians to seriously engage other disciplines in the social sciences, we need to think more self-consciously about what they are doing and why it is important analytically. Pierson offers several rationales for why policy history is significant in contrast to other social scientific approaches. Pierson argues, for example, that policy must be understood as an unfolding process. Scholars who de-

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velop a "snapshot" portrait of public policy, which focuses just on the moment of enactment, frequently develop inaccurate hypotheses. When looking moments of policy reform, for instance, it is essential to follow reforms after they have passed Congress to understand which reforms stick and which implode. Another contribution of policy history, Pierson argues, is to reveal the effects of policy over time. The greatest impact of policies can be to reshape political interests or reconstitute institutional configurations, effects that are hard to glean without temporal analysis. Furthermore, the pressure behind policy change is usually the culmination of a long period of incremental developments. "'Snapshot' views of major policy events often focus on the immediate sources of change—the catalysts," Pierson explains. "They will often have a hard time identifying the role of structural factors. These, by their very nature, will typically show little variation within a limited period." Scholars who focus on a limited time-period when developing their explanations about public policy are thus likely to miss the broader forces pushing policy change that take decades, if not centuries, to accumulate such as demography or technology. Historical studies of policy likewise move beyond the functionalist explanation of politics that has been so prevalent in the social sciences for decades. Pierson shows that the long-term effects that policies have are often the result of broad historical social and political processes rather than the result of individual choices.

Policy historians also need to rethink some core assumptions that have been used when explaining the trajectory of American policy history. For example, Jill Quadagno (Sociology) and Debra Street (Sociology) challenge the common use of "anti-statism" to explain America's allegedly laggard welfare state. The argument about a laggard state in America, they say, has been a "staple across all historical eras." While acknowledging that anti-statism is one ideology that some Americans believe and that in some areas of policy America has trailed behind other nations, Quadagno and Street offer the outlines of a very different story. Looking at several policy domains, they argue that the causal link between anti-statism and public policy is tenuous. Moreover, in many areas of government, the American state resembles—rather than differs from—comparable countries. Quadagno and Street show how Americans have often been willing to allow the state to expand in its power, as has been the case with pensions and health care since World War II. Writing about health care for the elderly, for instance, the authors argue that "provider payment policies in Medicare to control costs have empowered the federal government in ways remarkably similar to policies adopted by other countries." Rather than a rigid ideological consensus, Quadagno and Street

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say that anti-statism has been a rhetorical tool that is tactically employed by interest groups in their battles against the federal government.

Eileen Boris (History) analyzes how historical scholarship on race and gender has significantly challenged—and frequently undermined—conventional narratives about policy history. The literature has accomplished several objectives. First, following the "policy turn" which pushed these scholars to look at public-political power, the work on race and gender in the 1980s and 1990s has revealed how marginalized groups played a significant role in the expansion and character of the federal government. Moreover, post-modern analysis in the 1990s opened up the categories of race and gender, revealing how they were not fixed or timeless. Indeed, government policies influenced how these social relationships were experienced and how they fit within the parameters of citizenship at any given point in history. Historians have also found how conceptions of race and gender were imbedded in public policies and the language used to define those programs. Boris concludes by stating that the evolving categories of race and gender—and, more importantly, the relationship between them, racialized gender—must be incorporated into public policy history.

Another finding of this volume is that policy historians, particularly those who study the United States, must broaden the range of issues and subjects that they focus on. Policy history has been in an "internalist" phase, common to most fields and sub-fields when they start, in that scholars focused on their own subject matter and did not do as much as possible to connect their findings to other literatures. With all the advances of policy history, the sub-field has remained isolated from several other critical areas of historical study where there are important connections that must be addressed. For example, Robert McMahon (History) examines why diplomacy has remained so marginal to policy history since both sub-fields shared such a common set of interests and professional challenges. Ironically, diplomatic and policy history both took form as independent sub-fields, just as the profession lost interest in those subject matters. Rather than uniting into a common front, policy and diplomatic history—despite a similar focus and shared methodologies—kept their distance by trying to build individual, autonomous base or to link up with more sub-fields that had a better potential to broaden their popularity. The result was unfortunate since each sub-field developed insights that would be useful to the other, and each tackled an area of policy (with policy historians generally focusing on domestic policy) that was closely linked to the other. In recent years, both sub-fields have been enjoying a renaissance and McMahon argues that this is the time the sub-fields should consider joining forces and building on their collective strengths. "Scholars of the domestic and foreign dimensions of policy . . . have far more in

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common than most of them recognize." His essay points to ways that scholars of diplomacy and war could benefit from the work being produced on domestic policy. For example, the increased attention by diplomatic historians to internationalist history (breaking free of the nation-state as a defining parameter for studying policy) can help policy historians jettison the bias toward American Exceptionalism. McMahon also argues that this partnership will push historians to look more closely at the interconnections between domestic and diplomatic policy rather than treating them as separate entities.

While McMahon suggests points of convergence with diplomatic history, Reuel Schiller (Law and History) reminds readers that the law is an integral component to public policy that has been overlooked by most policy historians. As a result, legal and policy history have been moving in two very related directions, but they have rarely communicated. In his essay, Schiller takes aim at some major works in the social sciences, such as Dan Carpenter's book on agency autonomy, to argue that ignoring the law leaves major holes in causal explanations about why institutions and policies take the form that they do.[13] Schiller offers several examples of how to forge a better relationship. In particular, he stresses the relationship between the courts and federal agencies. Schiller argues that we can learn from how the courts have constrained agency autonomy. According to Schiller, the law has been a powerful force in twentieth century statebuilding, and not just an obstacle as it has been portrayed by many scholars since the progressive era. Courts have inscribed their values into the modern government by imposing certain rules and ideals on agencies. Understanding the role of administrative law in policy history, helps answer big questions about why the government took the form that it did and the boundaries of action that have faced policymakers. This course of study, according to Schiller, also helps us see the evolution of legal values and to understand how those values are informed by broader social and cultural norms.

In other areas, the task is to start bringing together vast amounts of scholarship that have already been written on specific topics: the goal is no longer knowledge accumulation, but rather, to develop greater analytic rigor, synthetic interpretation, and to raise new types of questions. Since the 1990s, scholars have written an extensive body of work on the growth of the welfare state, with particular emphasis on issues such as race, gender, business power, and hidden government benefits. Jacob Hacker (Political Science) argues that "while work on the American welfare state has dramatically improved our understanding of U.S. social policy development, there is a real risk that the stories that emerge will read like 'one damn thing after another'—study piled upon study, fact upon fact,

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without adequate integration, explanation, or advancement." Moving through each body of literature, Hacker points out key advances and persistent analytic flaws, such as the tendency to conflate the effect of policies with the intention of those who create the policies. After providing an insightful critique of each group, Hacker points out specific questions that should be central to all works on policy history, regardless of the policy domain or country they are studying. For example, Hacker urges policy historians to better understand the relationship between intensions and effects by focusing on social policy development, rather than any particular stage of the policymaking process: "scholars should trace the unfolding historical development of specific policies across long periods of attention and inattention, action and inaction." He also calls for a more systematic analysis of the historical evaluation power in social welfare policymaking and politics by thinking more clearly about how we gauge and define power in this realm. Echoing Paul Pierson, Hacker urges policy historians to do a better job of historicizing history in making a stronger and more explicit case about why history matters.

Therefore, this is a volume that points to the promise and potential of policy history. While the sub-field faces many challenges in the future, one of the primary objectives of policy historians from all disciplines must be to intensify the flow of intellectual blood throughout the sub-field so that the new generation of policy historians, who are entering the profession with the foundation having been established, can move in new directions with this subject matter and so that the sub-field continues to evolve. The essays are also aimed at all students of history who want to know want to know where this sub-field came from, where it has gone in recent years, and in what directions it is now moving.

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Notes

1. Julian E. Zelizer, "Clio's Lost Tribe: Public Policy History Since 1978," *Journal of Policy History*, 12 (2000): 369.

2. In this essay, and other work, I define policy history as a sub-field of political history rather than a separate field.

3. For a history of policy history, see Zelizer, "Clio's Lost Tribe"; Hugh Davis Graham, "The Stunted Career of Policy History: A Critique and an Agenda," *The Public Historian* 15 (1993): 15–37.

4. Thomas McGraw, *Prophets of Regulation: Charles Francis Adams, Louis D. Brandeis, James M. Landis, Alfred E. Kahn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

5. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York, 1986).

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6. See, for examples, Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York, 1989); Brian Balogh, *Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945–1975* (Cambridge, 1991); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York, 1994).

7. There is no shortage of articles tracing the professional difficulties policy historians encountered within the history profession. See, for example, Steven M. Gillon, "The Future of Political History," *Journal of Policy History* 9 (1997): 240–55; Joel H. Silbey, "The State of American Political History at the Millennium: The Nineteenth Century as a Test Case," *Journal of Policy History* 11 (1999): 1–30; Brian Balogh, "The State of the State among Historians," *Social Science History* 27 (Fall 2003): 455–63.

8. Julian E. Zelizer, "Beyond the Presidential Synthesis: Reordering Political Time," in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christopher Agnew and Roy Rosinweed (Oxford, 2002), 345–70.

9. Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, 1997).

10. See, for examples, Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York, 1994), and Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (New York, 2003).

11. Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (Cambridge, 2002); Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, 2003).

12. Sven Steinmo, *Taxation and Democracy: Sweden, British, and American Approaches to Financing the Modern State* (New Haven, 1993).

13. Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Branch Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, 2001).

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