

Preface

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PRELIMINARY ANECDOTES ON KNOWLEDGE, POLICYMAKING AND LEARNING

Each book has a story to tell, and this book probably starts in 2002 when I was on a train to Vercelli, Italy. At that time, I was a bachelor student in Urban Planning and used to commute across paddy fields for a self-promoted project of urban renovation around the newly established university. I did not know Vercelli, and I did not have a specific interest there apart from experiencing how planning students can contribute to urban development. I set up a team of students like me, and we worked for a couple of years on that project. Today, I would say that I was a ‘policy entrepreneur’, since I was interested in experiencing urban renovation in practice without any political interest (cf. Mintrom 1997), yet I will come back to this later.

Paolo Fareri was my first professor of Public Policy Analysis during those years. He got interested in my projects in Vercelli, and my experiments relied heavily on his lectures. He spontaneously offered to guide me coming to Vercelli when we had the major events. We were all excited to have him on board, and his guidance was extremely helpful to us; however, at a certain point, he stopped guiding me. I was disappointed and asked him why. Inspiring as only good professors are, he argued that I had already learnt because I was promoting and leading the project, coordinating the group, and having contact with key stakeholders. Thus, his supervision was no longer needed. On the contrary, he was interested in those students who have not yet learnt all those things because those are the ones who really need a guide to become ‘good students’. Once they have become ‘good students’, a good teacher should move to work with those who have not yet learnt what he can teach. This is especially the case for students who have already ‘learnt how to learn’. I understood it was a very positive evaluation for me. However, I was somehow disappointed: learning on my own was difficult, I did not know anyone else doing the same thing. Touchy as I am, I turned to economics where I thought I had more to learn.

In August 2006, I was in Glasgow when I received a phone call informing me that Paolo Fareri had just died. I could not attend his funeral because I was too far away, but I have kept thinking about how much I learnt from him, about the fact that he was right: a good teacher should invest in mid-quality students to make them ‘good’ ones. I have kept on thinking that I never said thanks to him. That evening on the train back to Edinburgh, I understood that I ‘learnt to learn’ thanks to him. What was disappointing at that time is, in fact, one of the best lessons ever. This book is built on these lessons: how to learn ‘policymaking’? When I was working on this book, I found it somehow symbolic that the chapter on ‘policy entrepreneurs’ refers to Scotland (see Chapter 8), in some way closing an ideal circle with the sad news I received in Glasgow.

The second anecdote comes a bit later, in 2004–2005 when I was a student representative on the university council in Milan, Italy. Being a student representative is an awkward position: many efforts to be elected (especially in a university with about 35,000 students), once elected, you sit on a council where nearly 90% of the members are professors, and you have to deal with them.

During one of the council meetings, we discussed the implementation of the newly established rules for language tests for students, which were difficult for many Italian students, who had to provide evidence of mastering English, Spanish, French or German. I spoke up for the rights of the French- and German-speaking Italian minorities not to have to do those expensive and time-consuming tests because they are already native speakers. The Rector disagreed, arguing that, if they were native speakers, they would have no difficulties in passing the tests, whereas my request would have implied a heavy administrative burden. I replied that the Italian Constitution states the rights of those linguistic minorities. The Rector rejected my claim based on the limited interest in setting up a cumbersome administrative procedure for very few students and moved to the next issue. Later on, a professor came back pointing out the risk of being sued by those students for linguistic discrimination. After a consultation with his legal advisor, the Rector changed his mind acknowledging rights of those Italian linguistic minorities and accepting the extra administrative burden. This was one of the very few political victories I can claim as a student representative.

This anecdote taught me the importance of knowledge for policymaking. Despite having only two out of 26 members of the Council on my side, I won because I knew the law better than my Rector. In my university, French- and German-speaking Italian students were, nonetheless, such a small minority that this decision would never have increased my chance of being re-elected. On the other hand, my Rector was not pleased with

what I did. From a political viewpoint, I was standing for a cause without significant political returns from my constituency and somehow damaging my relationship with the Rector, who saw me as an opponent. Nevertheless, I learnt that my knowledge was able to change that small, minor, probably irrelevant policy because the key policymaker (i.e. the Rector) did not have a clear opinion on this issue. This anecdote would fit well with the importance of policy ideas under uncertainty, as already pointed out by Hecló (1974), although I did not know it at that time.

The third (and last) anecdote comes from the same period. As a student representative, I was often called to deal with students' issues in different fields, from building engineering to communication design. Coping with contents in disciplines so far from my field was difficult. Sometimes, I even had to speak on behalf of them on content-specific issues such as their job perspectives. While I quickly learnt to be evasive on content I was not familiar with, I also realised that I did not have real preferences on most of those political issues since they were too far from my expertise and interests. The most extreme case was a debate on the reform of the Italian justice system, where I had no clue of what to say (and to vote), and I merely repeated arguments taken from people I somehow trusted. I was the kind of politician who had to deal with a policy he does not understand, and I had no time (and no interest) in becoming an 'expert'. This challenge comes back to the first anecdote: how do you learn policy-making? Obviously, nobody can know everything, from urban planning to justice systems, and have definitive opinions on all the policy issues at stake. Later on, I learnt that this is called 'bounded rationality' (Simon 1991), while, at the same time, I understood the importance of acquiring a better understanding of policy issues to develop my own preferences and, if needed, mobilise my constituency to promote policy change. Finally, I learnt also the importance of an actor's techniques for dealing with such a situation (see, e.g., Johnstone 2012), though this probably goes too far from the focus of this book.

These anecdotes convinced me that knowledge matters for policymaking, and I turned this into a research field for three main reasons. First, policy can also be changed (i.e. improved) without being a politician, like in my case in Vercelli. In fact, politicians are not the only actors leading to policy change. Often, civil servants matter more than politicians when it comes to policy implementation (Maybin 2015), and I have identified also other profiles, such as scholars engaged in policy-relevant research (see Dotti 2018). Second, those able to change policy are often not the 'best students' who are already making policies, and many of them have not had any specific training on policymaking. On the contrary, many students can become 'good' ones by learning how to use their knowledge

for policymaking. This potential for having a policy impact – and this is the third leading reason – is related to the bounded rationality of decision-makers. Especially in a period of uncertainty, we do not know what to do, what we prefer, what works or what could work. Often the person that might know what to do is elsewhere. Thus, this leads to the question of how to learn policymaking ‘here’ and ‘now’.

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