INCREMENTALISM: A CLASSROOM EXERCISE

Philip Ryan

"Reform implies form," declared G.K. Chesterton (1990, p. 105). This certainly seems like common sense: if we want to change something it must be because we have "a particular image" of how that thing should be, an image "that we see already in our minds." To be more specific, if we want to reform a policy or an institution, it must be because we have a sense of how that policy or institution can better fulfill its fundamental purpose.

Common sense tells us this. Common sense also tells us that the Sun circles the Earth. Copernicus overthrew the latter piece of common sense, and incrementalism challenges the former: "It is not irrational for an administrator to defend a policy as good without being able to specify what it is good for" (Lindblom, 1966, p. 269). The corollary is that it is possible to agree on changes to a policy or institution without any agreement, or even discussion, regarding the ultimate purpose. Possible, Chesterton might answer, but surely not rational! But, is he right?

The following exercise helps students reflect on this issue. I begin by telling them: "Imagine that the President of the university has asked you to make

DOI: 10.1002/pam.10123

recommendations for possible changes to the institution. I want you to brainstorm for 15 minutes, make a wish list of suggestions, and don't stop to reflect critically on them." The students head off into small groups and afterward we list all the suggestions on the board.

Even were we to stop at this stage, the exercise would have great value for professors who want to keep their ear to the ground. This is a good way to find out what's bugging students in university life. In my experience with the exercise, the range of issues is vast: there is the occasional proposal to improve the intellectual quality of their education, but many of the proposed reforms relate to ancillary aspects of student life—the quality or cost of food on campus, parking, transit service, and so on. There is also, always, some proposal meant to address the shoddy treatment they feel they have received from some professors.

We don't discuss the proposals at this stage. Instead, I tell them: "Now imagine that the President has *not* asked for your suggestions, and never will. Instead, imagine that you are a committee of the Student Council, trying to decide what issues you want to fight for in the coming year, from the list we have drawn up on the board. Keep in mind that the political resources at your disposal are finite and that some of your major proposals—the abolition of tenure, for instance—will provoke significant resistance. So your choices should take into account the potential opposition from established interests. You have 15 minutes."

It is essential not to give the students a lot of time for this stage. You want them to experience what time pressure does to the decisionmaking process. When the students report back, you will generally find that most of the larger issues have dropped off the table. Now the question for general discussion is: To what degree have the students thought "incrementally," and to what degree "synoptically," in accordance with the "rational-comprehensive" model? To think "synoptically," the students would have begun by defining the fundamental goals of the university, then inquired into a wide range of possible ways of meeting those goals, considering the costs and benefits of each general strategy, and so on. ("You only gave us 15 minutes!," someone usually shouts at this point.)

Let's focus just on the first step. Did any of the discussion groups address the fundamental goals of the university? The answer is almost always no. And why not? "It just didn't come up," is a typical answer. And this answer is very revealing. We cannot pay attention to everything, and so we focus, usually in light of our practical needs—"Unless he is a physicist, one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get into motion. And he does not need to know. He is satisfied that he may 'count' on the behavior of the streetcar, and he orients his conduct according to this expectation" (Weber, 1958, p. 139). As Berger and Luckmann note, "Typically, I have little interest in going beyond this pragmatically necessary knowledge as long as the problems can indeed be mastered thereby" (1967, p. 43).

But note the proviso, "as long as the problems can indeed be mastered thereby." Our attention, our sense of what it is important to know, shifts when we run into unanticipated difficulties. And this is precisely what tends not to happen with the students. They generally share, I think, a tacit assumption that the primary purpose of the university is to give them a decent education. Since the reform proposals they generate in the first stage of the exercise rarely challenge this tacit assumption, it is not brought to light.

And so the students tend to proceed in the second stage of the exercise just as incrementalist theory suggests they will: they take the current state of the university as their starting point, and propose relatively marginal changes to the

institution.[1] Is this rational? It is, because it flows from the eminently rational pragmatism described above by Weber and Berger and Luckmann. It is rational to call one's tacit assumptions into question only on an "as needed" basis, because to do otherwise would leave one with no natural stopping point in one's critical reflection, each assumption being dependent upon others, leading to an infinite regress.

Now, had each small group included a professor, we can be confident that the outcome would have been different, not because professors are wiser, but because they would have opposed many of the students' proposals, and some discussion of the purposes of the university could well ensue from the confrontation of the opposing viewpoints. We can, unfortunately, also be confident that the group would not be able to produce a consensual decision in the time allotted, which helps explain the real-life popularity of incrementalist decision processes involving a relatively homogeneous selection of people.

REFLECTIONS

I wish here to draw a very general point from the exercise just described, before addressing the distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of incrementalism. First, a very common assertion today is that we live in a world without "foundations." We cannot ground our ethics, or even our science, in bedrock certainties. This perspective is often labeled "post-modernist," though in fact it is much broader.[2] One of the recurring criticisms of this position is that it saps the will. After absorbing Foucault's dissection of human values, charges Jürgen Habermas, one is left with the question "why fight at all?" (1987, p. 284). This debate left the confines of continental philosophy and hit the newspapers after September 11. Post-modernism, suggested writers such as Edward Rothstein (2002), leaves us without a "transcendent ethical perspective." All we have with which to confront the assassins of September are our own "competing claims." This leads to our "relativizing" the claims of the West, and "qualifying condemnations of the opposition."

I am not personally qualified to judge whether there are firm "foundations" out there, either in science or in morals. But incrementalist theory, and our humble classroom exercise, do suggest that what is at stake is less dramatic than Habermas or Rothstein believe. My students are able to identify things that they think need changing, even in the absence of certain foundations for their proposals. More generally, people regularly become involved in political matters, fight injustice, and so on, without a philosophically unquestionable vision of The Good, or The Just Society.

"Politics without foundations" is entirely possible. So is, *pace* Chesterton, reform without a vision of form. This does not mean it is always desirable. Incrementalism captures how decisions are often made, not how they should be made. To return to our example: any significant decision regarding the university that does not take account of the many purposes it is expected to fulfill will be a poor decision. A competent answer to the deceptively simple question, "Who should bear the cost of a university education?," to take one example, requires serious thought to identify the range of benefits a university provides, both to individuals and to society as a whole.[3]

[1] Note that I am sprinkling the account with qualifiers: "tend," "generally," "rarely." It does happen from time to time that the exercise yields a quite different outcome—one or more of the small groups generates sweeping proposals and reports having discussed fundamentals. This itself is cause for discussion. How precisely did the group break free of the typical constraints of decisionmaking?

[2] I would hesitate to label Max Weber or Karl Popper post-modernists, but they both took as given a world without foundations.

[3] Such reflection is not simply necessary for a just answer: an "economically rational" answer requires identification of the externalities produced by the university.

Yet time pressure will never go away. Society will always need timely and viable decisions and will always need decisions informed by a broad vision of the matters at hand. To help society balance those two requirements is perhaps the greatest challenge for policy studies.

PHILIP RYAN is an Associate Professor, School of Public Administration, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada.

REFERENCES

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1967). The social construction of reality. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books.

Chesterton, G.K. (1990). Orthodoxy. New York: Image.

Habermas, J. (1987). The philosophical discourse of modernity. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lindblom, C. (1966). The science of muddling through. In Golembiewski et al. (Eds.), Public administration. (pp. 293–304). New York: Rand McNally.

Rothstein, E. (2002, July 13). Moral relativity is a hot topic? True. Absolutely. New York Times. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com. Accessed: July 13, 2002.

Weber, M. (1958). From Max Weber: Essays in sociology (H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.