



New Italian Perspectives on Urban Planning: A Policy Tool Approach

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Abstract

In the last fifteen years Italy has witnessed the proliferation of forms of public intervention in the field of urban planning and policymaking. Partaking in the European Union fostered structural institutional and economic changes (e.g. subsidiarity, concurrence) and more specifically the use of alternative and sometimes innovative urban policy tools. The traditional planning perspective generally assumes that new forms of intervention are techniques which better pursue a more or less broad set of goals, including urban regeneration, environmental sustainability, local economic development, social cohesion and others. This paper argues that Italian urban and regional studies have increasingly adopted perspectives and methods which are typical of public policy analysis, but that they have failed in coming to terms with the intertwined technical and political dimensions of the urban policy tool issue. In fact, a policy tool approach is proposed to focus on the multiple instruments used by governments to structure public action: regulation, government corporations and government sponsored enterprises, grants, public-private contracts, tax expenditures and others. Critically drawing on the existing international body of literature, this article envisions a theoretical and interpretative framework aimed at using the policy tool as analytical unit for reconsidering urban planning in Italy and abroad. It is argued that, at this stage, it is possible to pose specific technical and political questions about governing spatial transformations of cities and regions through policy instruments and that the policy tool perspective in this way can give innovative impulse to further research in urban planning and to policy making.

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1. Recent problems and instruments in Italian urban planning and policymaking

In the last fifteen years Italian urban planning and policymaking faced a number of technical and political problems and encountered new opportunities related to the use of traditional and innovative forms of public action. Due to the general rising degree of subsidiarity, fostered by partaking in the European Union, Italian public administrations recently faced significant pressure implied by the sharing of discretion in the production and use of urban and territorial goods and to the distribution of unearned benefits to local and national actors. Many voices in the Italian debate argued that, under current conditions, regulation alone is not adequate in guiding collective decisions regarding urban land use (Mazza, 2004; Mantini and Lupi, 2005), taking into account the frequent risk of regulator capture by particular interests and more generally the inefficacy of public intervention. However, the existence of viable alternatives or drastic reformulations cannot be taken for granted, since they could imply unbearable public costs or acute social inequality, or political costs that could impede the reform process itself.

Generally, a master or regional plan was believed to provide a synthesis, even if not a comprehensive one, caring coherence and coordinating public actions. Under current conditions, the public interests of a plural society imply articulated governance modes deriving from different institutional levels. In many Italian cases, this sometimes caused conflicting interferences among differentiated public sectors; major public interventions and projects, infrastructural policies, and more generally the provision of environmental and urban common goods are still at risk of paralysis, often due to impasses in public-public decision making (Urbani, 2001 and 2007). For the same reason, the introduction of private or third parties in decision making or the induction of competitive rationales for public administration have been more and more commonly legitimized in Italian urban planning.

Complex public-private mechanisms of land development rights or potentials were defined by regional and local governments (Micelli, 2004a and 2004b). The missed implementation or the failure of these attempts can be explained not only in terms of their formal features, but also with regards to the local institutional frame, the technical competences of the public administration implementing them and, at the same time, to modes of action of implied social actors.

Starting in the mid 1990's a number of competitive or noncompetitive grants were conceptually designed at the European level and redesigned or implemented both at the national and regional levels. The so-called "bandi" (e.g. Urban pilot projects and their national reissues, Prusst-sustainable urban development projects, Neighborhood Contracts and others) rapidly occupied the

urban planning debate and practices (Ombuen et al., 2000; Cremaschi, 2001; Palermo, 2002). The use of complex legal or managerial forms could be explained not only in terms of technical advancement. Observing the typologies of intervention (e.g. historic centers, deindustrialized area regeneration, areas that are adjacent to ports or train stations or that have significant public housing compounds) it is clear enough that new instruments were associated with the interests of specific public, semi-public or private actors both at national and local levels. Often these interests, although obtaining policy tool innovations, could not succeed in inducing significant urban effects through these new forms of public action. Furthermore, the European Structural Funds for economic development introduced competitive and goal oriented mechanisms, inducing important innovations, but facing a resilient political and managerial culture that sometimes impaired the impulse to local action and local development policies (Barca, 2006a and 2006b). The failure of several urban and regional programs was explained in terms of lack of contextualization or missed interaction between tools and the variety of Italian contexts (Donolo, 2003), since networks and local context directly influence, and sometimes determine, limits and opportunities for public intervention, not only in terms of social capital, but also regarding localized material and immaterial common goods.

Furthermore, the number of public private partnership experimentations has been rapidly increasing in the last decade, both in contractual forms depending on regional legislation or in institutionalized forms such as special purpose vehicles. In the case of urban transformation mixed enterprises (so called STU-società di trasformazione urbana), the attempt to import from European contexts and mechanically apply the same device to a differentiated set of urban problems and socio-political contexts dramatically lowered the innovative impulse of this new governance mechanism (Stanghellini, 1998).

Drawing a broader picture, interdependencies and feedback among these different types of public and public-private interventions have been interpreted as a central question for urban governance in Italy (Palermo, 2004). For example, in many Italian contexts, the multiplication of automatic derogation mechanisms in land use regulation is inducing the same dysfunctions (both in procedural and urban impact terms) for which these devices were adopted. Urban and regional transformation processes often occur incrementally. One reason for discontent towards project-oriented and reformist experiments in urban planning can be found in these continuous interactions and mutual adjustments in programming and implementing (Palermo, 1992; Mazza, 2004). The incrementalism

in public action tackling urban and territorial problems seems to require a critical and non-mechanical perspective of the different policy tools Italy has been experimenting.

In Italy, established bureaucratic bodies in environmental, landscape and heritage preservation often diffused, through legitimate political pressure, an interpretation of local governance problems consistent with the types of intervention preferred by the bureaucracy itself (e.g. direct government intervention or regulation), which tended to exclude the effective introduction of alternative forms of intervention (e.g. private or nonprofit agencies, tax expenditure or other) with limited regard to the technical evaluation of these alternatives. Vice versa, several tools promoted by the European Union and the national government, such as competitive grants, public-private partnerships or special purpose vehicles, have been introduced in several episodes of emulation and diffusion of isomorphic mechanisms in many urban and regional policy sectors, without disposing combined technical and political evaluations for these urban policy tools.

Traditional Italian planning and administrative approach did not successfully inquire into or reformulate such problems. Even if the most traditional branch in urban planning argued that it has to be technique that guides the choice of the most adequate instruments due to the nature of public problems and goals, prominent voices in the Italian debate have constantly given attention to interactive and political processes socially inducing urban problem setting and potential solutions (Crosta, 1984; 1990; 1995; 1998). In the last fifteen years, the urban policy analysis approach suggested shifting attention from the public or private agency to the study of whole programs or broad sets of plans and interventions including multiple actors. However, these positions of great interest could not always thoroughly penetrate at the operational level. The fine mechanics of these processes and their urban effects generally remained neglected.

As brought forth in international public policy studies, the adoption of the concept of policy tool or tool of government as an analytical unit, instead of whole programs or isolated procedural details, allow us to investigate the specific mechanism involved in the sharing of once exclusively public discretion with a broad set of actors while facing public problems and opportunities. This perspective touches both technical and political aspects in the Italian urban planning and governance field, where the proliferation of different policy tools is currently structuring complex public action but has not yet been studied thoroughly.

2. A view of urban policy analysis in Italy

The international urban planning debate has sometimes oversimplified Italian perspectives and means of intervention, including them in a generic Mediterranean area. Several evolutions in the second half of the twentieth century maintained, to a certain extent, the peculiarity of the modern heritage, nonetheless there are recent reflections and relevant experimentations, similar to Anglo-Saxon and American urban policy studies. It is currently possible to highlight critical issues, both at theoretical and practical levels, that remain unresolved and that are common to many, and not only European, countries.

The modern root of Italian urban planning developed functional prescription and the design of physical interventions in a fairly traditional way, interpreting them as legitimate techniques allowing the public administration to shape and provide contents for cities and regions, autonomously from actual and manifesting interests (Astengo, 1966). The importance of confronting social and economic interests and of the potential stimulus that could be derived was recognized by so-called “reformist urbanism” (Campos Venuti, 1991), which had differed from the traditional trends, by questioning the operative administration of public intervention and the effective guidance of urban and local transformations as well (Campos Venuti, 1967). One can find other innovative Italian responses to modern planning problems. The structural elements of the territory and the potential relationships between plan and project have been interpreted as explorations of the opportunities for a city to effectively pursue a change (Secchi, 1989 and 2000). However, these perspectives consider urban planning as public choices adopting techniques and instruments that are mainly defined unilaterally by the public sector and in the end are legitimated because they are supposed to pursue the collective interest.

By opposing these modern approaches, the study of public policy anticipated and stressed interest in observing the actions of the public administration and of a larger set of actors formally or informally tackling public problems (Dente, 1985 and 1990a; Cotta, 1989). Together with this perspective, methods and experiments criticized the problem-solving oriented trends in policy analysis and developed analytical concepts to inquire into actors and modes of interaction, immediately arousing the interest of planners and arguing that the success of urban plans and programs consists in the capability of producing wanted effects of urban transformation and change (Palermo, 1991 and 1992; Balducci, 1991). In this sense, criticizing several aspects of the reformist approach, urban planning was reconsidered not only as a field of formal public intervention, but as a complex field of publicly perceived effects that are related to cities and space (Crosta, 1990). Urban

policy, which was the analytical unit in these studies, was intended as a construct representing processes and sets of public actions regarding the transformation of cities and regions, in which the central and critical question was coordinating multiple public and private actors (Crosta, 1995). Beginning with this theoretical and methodological framework, this school has been studying governments' actions in terms of the processes of decision making and implementation of policies, programs, projects and whole plans (Dente et al., 1990; Bolocan and Pasqui, 1996).

The development of urban policy studies in Italy highlighted the nexus with British and American implementation research and how the categories of policy analysis were useful to comprehend urban problem management and its efficacy (Balducci, 1991). Through the years the modern approach which interpreted planning as a technique of prescription or as urban design was forced to admit that plans, projects and complex urban programs are defined and managed through a social and political process (as noted, among others, by Mazza, 1997; Karrer, 1998; Gabellini, 2001; Palermo, 2001). Public policy analysis enjoyed fast-growing expansion in urban and regional studies, touching experimental and orthodox circles as well (among others Bolocan et al. 1996; Avarello and Ricci 2000; Avarello, 2000). Assuming this perspective several kinds of research projects and assessments for plans, programs and policies multiplied and diversified in the urban planning field in the intervening period (among others: Ombuen et al., 2000; Cremaschi, 2001; Palermo, 2002; MIT, 2002; Palermo and Savoldi, 2002; Clementi, 2004; Savoldi, 2004; Pasqui, 2005).

The current accelerations in the institutional subsidiarity process now pose pressing questions about the capability of guiding urban and territorial development and change, about the modes of sharing the discretion that traditionally has been entrusted to public administration with parts of society and the market, about the actual mechanisms that governments can use to structure mixed and multilevel networks committed to tackling urban and regional problems. After years of experiments and studies in this field, today one can register criticisms and discontent, explicitly regarding operative implications and effectiveness in governing the processes of transformation occurring in urban and regional contexts (Cremaschi 2006).

There have been several attempts to overcome these limits in the Italian planning debate. The concept of governance, which was derived from Anglo-saxon literature, was initially adopted in relevant ways in Italian urban research as well (Dente, 1990b; Balducci, 2000; Pasqui 2001). However, the concept was applied to numerous and not always meaningful experiences, which up to now could not tackle the problematic technical and political questions of steering public action in

urban transformation. A convincing position, contrasting traditional and juridical-formalistic urban planning and developing innovative perspectives on urban policy analysis, is the so-called “governo del territorio” (Palermo, 2004). This theme gave preliminary attention to the instruments used in order to govern urban and regional transformations, not only as technical mechanisms, but as social and political processes of building programs having the objective of organizing cities and territories (Merloni and Urbani, 1977; Ceccarelli, 1978; Magnaghi, 1981).

In the urban planning and public policy Italian debate, we could not find studies concerning the different mechanisms that national and local governments have been adopting in structuring public action and to guide urban and territorial transformations. Responding to current modifications in urban planning and policy as well, recently Italian authors started to include paradigms which are partially different from the policy analysis ones (Pasqui, 2004) and that can interestingly explore new forms of the institutionalization of governing practices and of administrative cultures (Crosta, 2006). Nonetheless, these positions seem to deepen urban and regional questions with limited operative output in terms of public action and for the study of the technical-political linkage in territorial governance.

As previously explained, Italian urban planning and policymaking have witnessed a significant proliferation of policy tools: together with the attempts in changing traditional forms of direct intervention of the national, regional or local governments and regulative forms, several combinations and substitutions in the urban planning toolbox have been experimented with contracts among different institutional tiers or between public and private actors, with grants, special purpose vehicles, marketable building rights or potentials, mixed agencies, and many others. These instruments need to be explored with a scope and detail that the traditional categories adopted in public policy analysis cannot reach. The study of the tools that are deployed by government in pursuing public objectives can usefully be referred to an ample international debate, which up to now has not enjoyed sufficient attention in Italy and in most European countries.

3. Three national contexts and two generations of studies of government tools

In recent years public policy debate has shifted its focus from formal government activities and structure to the governance of public action. Salamon’s (2002) conceptualization of policy tools describes the variety of instruments available to policymakers to deal with complex problems: for example grants, contracts, loans, regulation and tax expenditure. Tool analysis has been widely applied to American and Canadian policies, but it also appears interesting in the European context,

where multilevel and mixed forms of government action have been developed (Lascoume and Le Gales, 2007) and for the analysis of culture-led urban policies. Having a long history of philosophical and political reflections, the study of governing instruments has seen a rapid expansion in the past decades, linking economic and social sciences, and developing autonomous paths in three national contexts: the U.S.A., Canada and the U.K. (Howlett, 1991). The vast literature cannot be adequately dealt with in this article. However, it seems useful to give essential references related to the theme of inquiry.

3.1 Tools of government action in the United States

Based on Dewey's pragmatic approach (1927 and 1935) and on the fundamental studies of Charles Lindblom and Robert Dhal of Yale University (Dhal & Lindblom, 1953; Lindblom, 1959 and 1965), referring to recent implementation studies (Hargrove, 1975; Pressman & Wildawsky, 1979), Salamon (1981) argued that the analytical unit to be adopted in order to understand government's action is a policy tool and not entire programs and policies promoted by the government. Anticipating the inquiry potentials of tool analysis, Salamon posed two questions that are still of central importance in the debate which goes beyond American political science: what factors influence the choice of policy tools, and what consequences does this choice have for the success of government's action. This focus has the premise that it is generally possible to choose and substitute potentially alternative tools and that some instruments can be used to face public problems more effectively than others.

3.2 Governing instruments in Canada

The seminal study in the Canadian school is *The Choice of Governing Instrument*, developed in 1982 by Micheal Trebilcock, Douglas Hartle, Robert Prichard and Donald Dewees in order to provide the Canadian Economic Council with indications regarding regulation measures concerning various matters. Having an economic, social and legal background, this research group argued that the Canadian Government was multiplying its regulative interventions in several economic and social fields, regardless of other possible mechanisms. In this way, the study brought to light the theme of choice and evaluation of different forms of action that a government could adopt in order to legitimately make use of its power and influence. Furthermore, the study clearly showed regulation to be a choice among others such as direct government, taxation or persuasion. Building on Salamon's groundbreaking work (1981), the Canadian group argued that once the public

problem and objectives are defined, not all instruments are equally useful, and that the government can consciously choose the more appropriate tools, once it is understood that they are theoretically interchangeable.

With his famous paper showing that public policies induce specific political interaction, Lowi (1972) influenced the first generation of policy tool scholars. In particular, *The Choice of Governing Instrument* of Trebilcock's group discusses the axiomatic supposition that instruments are chosen on the basis of technical matters and efficiency. In fact, in the Canadian scholars' opinion, the choices leading to the use of a policy mechanism were games that could be empirically analyzed, whereas decisions followed political schemes and the actors tended to prefer one instrument rather than another based on its electoral costs and benefits trade-off (Howlett, 2005). Games were often reduced to the interaction of three types of self-interested players: politicians, bureaucrats and stakeholders. In this sense the sprawling use of regulation was explained thanks to its low perceived cost and to the influence politicians had in the policymaking process (Hill, 2005). Nevertheless, two decades after Trebilcock (2005) recognized the weakness of this instrument choice approach opening the field to other theoretical hypotheses.

3.3 Tools of government in the United Kingdom

Differing from the American and Canadian ones, British reflections over policy tools remained traditionally linked to public administration studies. Hood (1986) proposed simple categories that had some relevance in the international debate, but he summarized several questions of instrument choice in a partial model which did not take into account non-public actors' pressures. In fact, the model considers the governing resources (nodality, authority, treasure, and organization) but provides overly broad types of tools that fail to explain the actual mechanisms of government and that are sometimes contradictory. Generally, the proposed systemic approach is not coherent with the dynamics this paper intends to explore (Hood, 2006).

3.4 The first generation of political studies on the tools of government

The first generation of political reflection over policy tools concentrated on the relationship between the market economy and government, trying to inductively explain what was and still is deductively assumed by economists. Frequently, in economics one can find the assumption of market failures urging government's intervention, in particular consisting of regulation (among others: Stiglitz, 1989). In general, first generation political scientists refused the model imposed by

economists, and they suggested considering instruments not as fine-tuning elements for the market, but as critical junctions of the political processes. In some cases, it was explained that instruments were selected neither by following rational paths nor by aiming at maximizing social benefits. Nonetheless it is possible to observe the actual and sometimes contingent motivations leading the government to intervene through the use of instruments in order to provide public goods and services.

Despite the limits previously noted, the first generation of American and Canadian studies clearly started to explain that the tools of government are not neutral mechanics, instead they are a relevant part of the political process of defining public intervention: “Policy instruments are not politically neutral, and the selection of one instrument or another for a policy intervention will generate political activity, and have political consequences. More importantly, political factors and political mobilization affect the initial selection of instruments and the ultimate implementation of policy. Attempting, therefore, to assess policy outcomes without also considering the means to be employed to achieve those ends as well as the politics shaping tool choices is likely to result in potentially faulty policy decision” (Peters, 2002, 552). The fact that policy tools have in their choice and implementation forms, which are non-technical but typically political, seems the first step to specify how this interaction takes place and how it links distinctive features to a given tool and to the reasons of its choice (Peters, 2002). This is an important achievement of tool studies that has been expanded and deepened by the second generation of scholars.

3.5 Second generation perspectives

In recent years American and Canadian scholars have argued that the combination of the studies regarding tools and the ones regarding governance have given birth to a second generation of reflections with a clearer insight into the technical and political relationships between tool choice and implementation (Salamon, 2002a; Eliadis et al. 2005). They also suggested that multidisciplinary, integrated and systematic tool research should be combined with the contemporary design and management challenges of governing action in society. While the first generation focused more on direct and substantial effects (with the well-known preference for command and control or market regulation tools), the second is more sensitive to indirect and procedural instruments, i.e. the tools giving shape to mixed networks in order to tackle a public problem (Eliadis et al. 2005; Howlett, 2005). The second generation has a stronger insight into the political reality surrounding technical policy aspects. It paradoxically argued that, since the political

reasons for a tool to be chosen are ultimately intended to favor or to disfavor social actors or groups, the preferred tool might be technically inappropriate to reach the public goal it is meant for. Furthermore, the second generation tends to cross national frontiers, at least under the profile of scientific debate, and several differences have become less marked through time. In the definition of instrument choice and in the understanding of their success we can therefore refer to the vast second generation literature.

3.6 The tools of government

The international debate revolved heavily around the theme of the tools of government, adopting diversified positions. Similar to what Vedung expressed (1998), Salamon argued that “a tool, or instrument, of public action can be defined as an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem” (2002, 19). This definition helps us to consider that each instrument has its own distinctive policy design characteristics, which tend to structure networks facing certain public problems (e.g. positioning actors on the basis of the advantages and disadvantages in undertaking given actions). Even fully taking into account that these characteristics cannot be intended as predictive devices, public action can be specifically understood in terms of tools of government: direct government, regulation, government sponsored enterprises or agencies, grants and many others.

There are important factors that the tool studies take into limited consideration although they seem to have explicative potential, such as the interests’ pressure, incrementalism, political ideas and ideologies that sometimes dominates the public scene, internationalization of policies or their contextualization. These factors seem to have explicative potentials that are not individually sufficient to exhaustively deepen the current changes in public action. We cannot take for granted that by aggregating these factors it would be possible to do so, and, in any case, this is not the aim of the present article. While reflecting on the future of instrument study, prominent scholars (such as Trebilcock, 2005 and Peters, 2005) proposed to adopt analysis based on multiple criteria that can be derived from different fields in the social sciences. It is plausible to develop the tool theory in order to better address the type of policy problems we are going to explore.

4. Reasons for choice and critical elements of policy tools

The interest in the Italian and European context finds only partial responses in the American and Canadian literature concerning governing instruments. It seems necessary to critically deepen this

theory. The analysis found in the international debate implicitly or explicitly assumed that a government authority generally can select an instrument among others, or, in given circumstances, can decide to substitute one tool with another (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). Several first generation studies and the large majority of current economics try to explain the instrument choice as a technical choice, made in response to already determined problems and only after objective evaluation of the functional characteristics of public intervention and its measures. In the idealized conditions of this theory the use of a governing tool is finalized to maximize benefits on the base of criteria and objectives of public interest or of the actors partaking in political decision. However, in the imperfect world where we operate (and, of course, where the Italian context is) this does not seem possible for unavoidable reasons, not only those related to transaction costs (Williamson, 1996), such as the extreme complexity of decision making processes, the asymmetrical distribution of information among actors, the presence of externalities which constitute sometimes the core of public action, the high degree of indeterminateness of policies' and programs' objectives, the dramatic ambiguity of public interest, the dependence to contextual factors and many others.

At this moment it is possible to consider a set of reasons and critical elements that occur in defining the adoption of a policy tool and its success: the tool features, actors' interests, public problem setting, public action incrementalism, integration among instruments and their contextualization, the institutions and cultures tools encounter. This set has not been discussed altogether in the international debate, nonetheless the organic and critical consideration derived from social sciences allows us to elaborate an analytical and interpretative grid, which is sufficiently articulated and suitable in order to enter into the study of the tools of government adopted in Italian urban and regional planning and its emerging problems, which can interest other fields of public policies and other national contexts.

4.1 The tool features and dimensions

The idea that the choice among alternative tools and their success depend on the tools' own identifiable features is widely accepted (Salamon, 1989). On the contrary debate is still open regarding the most relevant characteristics and to what extent it is possible to infer from these aspects, which could vary from one enactment to another and which therefore cannot be generalized. The extensive and systematic work of the most prominent international scholars guided by Lester Salamon of Johns Hopkins University (2002a) proposed and deepened in several fields and contexts an exhaustive analytical and interpretative set. In tool analysis and evaluation the

characteristics of effectiveness, efficacy, equity, manageability, legitimacy and political feasibility are of primary importance so that each tool can be described and evaluated. It is difficult to sustain the idea that these characteristics are determined solely by tool features. Although the mainstream tool analysis argues that likely impacts of each tool are largely predictable, in complex policy fields, these criteria cannot always be thoroughly analyzed and considered fully normative in the enactment of a policy tool (for example because the effects are ambiguous or interpretable following different actors' perspectives, because efficacy could be largely undetermined since the governmental costs do not consider the costs of the number of social actors involved and collective benefits have multiple forms, because equity sometimes takes into account limited population, because a number of variables other than the tool ones are simultaneously changing and coming into play).

It is not likely to expect a strong causal determination between governmental mechanisms and effects on the social conditions for which public intervention is meant (Peters, 2000). Furthermore, other key tool dimensions regard its degree of coerciveness, directness, automaticity, and visibility of the tools. Tool features and dimensions do have an analytical, interpretative and predictive capacity that, as proposed in the following paragraphs, can be "better tempered" in accordance with a wider set of questions regarding tool choice and implementation.

4.2 Social actors' interests in tool choice and implementation

The necessity for the study of mobilized interests is commonly recognized in tool analysis (Peters, 2002a). The politics of tool choice is evident in the advantages and disadvantages that an instrument typically displays in a tool network and in social groups of policy takers. Since the beginning of the study this topic, Salamon (1981) expressed a paradox which is essential in explaining the ongoing evolution in the tools of government: the public management paradox explains why the types of tools which are easiest to implement are the hardest to enact and vice-versa the easiest to enact are the most difficult to carry out because of the complexity of the network and procedures. The share of government's legitimate discretion with third parties is difficult to manage but it typically provides political consensus to support the selection of the preferred tool.

In social networks it is possible to find, for each actor or group, objectives and expectations, economic, political, symbolic costs and benefits partaking in the decision and the implementation of a specific instrument. Through the study of examples and processes along a given period of time, it is possible to trace the decision making process backward, highlighting the expected and actual

distributive effects, and eventually the gap between the two, as well as considering unexpected consequences that occurred. In some cases, it could be interesting to let direct and indirect links between actors and specific tools emerge, keeping in mind that these forms of interests can be of a second or third order (Peters, 2002a).

4.3 Public problem setting

A significant part of literature and assessment practices interprets the tools of government as mechanisms which are adopted once the problem which public action must face has been defined. The most rational stream in policy studies, assuming that the characteristics of public problems are objective and knowable by all the actors involved in decision making, stated that technique should determine the choice of the most adequate tool for the nature of the problem and to achieve public goals. On the contrary, Trebilcock (2005) showed that considerable incremental dynamics, which are incomprehensible for a linear decision making model, affect instrument choice. The participation of multiple actors in democratic and civil life implies a certain degree of political influence regarding the definition of public problems carried out by representatives of both individual and collective interests (Lindblom, 1990). The preference for a plurality of actors in choosing and following given courses of action can radically influence the public debate over a problem, also by circulating ad hoc information and by purposely elaborating particular strategic or interpretative frames (Stone, 1988). Tools are a means to comprehend the political reasons leading to the definition of a public problem and that imply mechanisms and techniques to pursue its solution (Peters and Hoornbeek, 2005).

Once it is certain that the use of given tools are firmly related to a particular definition of a public problem or opportunity, we can note that with a policy there are solutions searching for problems (Cohen et al, 1972; March and Olsen, 1976; Olsen, 2001; Peters, 2002b). In particular the study of Doern and Phidd (1983) shows that the policy process can be variously linked to instruments. In fact each tool implies a set of actors, defines rules that influence public participation and the affirmation of democratic values, having an effect on the definition of public problems and policy objectives.

Furthermore, it must be noted that several instruments are aimed at influencing problem setting (Bemelmans-Videc, 1998). Government's activity is partially devoted to the dissemination of information regarding social problems and their potential solutions. Specific tools of information and persuasion inducing effects in the policy agenda, and even manipulating public problems

themselves have been studied (Schneider and Ingram, 1990; Vedung and Doelen, 1998; Weiss, 2002). In some cases, government's influence can lead to the creation of stable constructs of meaning which are perceived by particular social groups or to the institutionalization of a perspective for public action in relation to a problem.

4.4 Beyond functionalism: the limits of policy design and the incrementalism of tools

Despite the government's commitment, actual problem solving processes are adaptive and incremental, frequently moving away from what was established in the design phase and not mechanically implementing the function that were expected to by the government and the involved social actors (Bressers and Klok, 1988). The gap between what was defined in the enactment of a law and what one can empirically analyze in the implementation sometimes shows unexpected and paradoxical effects, in terms of feedback on public intervention and on the stimuli of the network of mobilized actors as well (Boudon, 1985). This happens not only because of scarce or insufficient knowledge, or because the elimination of unwanted side-effects is economically or politically too costly (Boudon, 1982), but also because the policy impacts, the social costs and benefits are conjunctly induced and because the effects are technically ambiguous if observed after the implementation process has taken place (Stone, 1988 and 2002). By the same token, a longitudinal study of the use of a policy tool can highlight both how the networks and the individual actors evolve through time (Hirschman, 1970 and 1982). This fact deeply affects the mechanics of government and can be easily observed: e.g. continuous privatization or nonproftization of organizations and public agencies, inasmuch as their autonomy requires the creation and implementation of new tools.

Regarding this point it is not clear how concrete the expectations of developing tool knowledge which is immediately operative and applicable to policy management and public administration are. On the basis of the current international state of the art it is not always given that the selection of one tool among different alternatives is based on technically determined effects, although several tool design adjustments are possible and often experimented. To be sure, we can exclude that there is a solely functional correlation between ends and means in terms of government and public action induced by a tool (Ringeling, 2002b).

On the more politological side of the debate the main limits in policy design were considered in terms of specific local context and existing institutional forms. Pierson (2000a) noted that a mechanistic approach to policy studies, grounded on actors' rational capabilities in defining optimal

solutions for already set problems, does not allow one to understand course of action inducing effects which are broader than the ones considered by traditional policy analysis. These consequences can sometimes have a feedback that helps to explain choices through time, actors' behaviors and effectiveness of public action (i.e. the induction of effects). In sum Pierson (2000b) indicates three main limits to rational design: actors may not be instrumental, the decisions made may not be optimizing in a long term perspective and their action may imply unintended effects which are very significant. However, in tool analysis, as in other fields of the social sciences, the soundness of deterministic, mechanistic or functionalistic approaches seem to be at least in doubt. As said before, the position working on contextualized interaction, on incrementalism and on the inclusion of unwanted or unexpected consequences of public action are currently the most convincing. Incrementalism, which was developed in a period of over fifty years by Charles Lindblom (1959; 1965; 1980; 1990) and others, seems to respond to the conceptual challenges raised by the implementation of tools of government in democratic and pluralistic contexts. At the same time, the most recent evolutions of the same author developed a general frame work also useful in the critical interpretation of the use of market forms in delivering public goods and services (Lindblom, 2001).

4.5 Poli-instrumentalism and integration, multilateralism

Governments rarely decide to utilize a single and exclusive instrument to pursue one goal. On the contrary, when dealing with multiple mechanisms of action with the same public policy, sometimes mixes or packages of tools are developed (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). The two generations of instrument studies also diverge regarding this point. Instead of referring public action to single tools, the second generation seeks combinations or suites of different mechanisms under specific conditions and in specific contexts (Salamon, 2002c). Prominent Canadian authors have recently been specifically studying tool mixes (Howlett et al., 2006).

The key point here is poli-instrumentalism and integration among different tools, which can explain the concrete ways in which public actions take place. Nonetheless, the newborn and perhaps weak international references limit the analytical and interpretative expectations we can entrust to this concept. Certainly, for each instrument we can observe the interrelations with others, as well as formal and procedural compatibility (Howlett, 2004 and 2005; Webb 2005). Beyond tool design matters, which can be based on administrative data, it seems possible to proceed by studying combinations, degrees of coherence, synergies or contrasts, and to observe the variety of effects that

can be reasonably connected with specific tool mixes. The current theoretical limits and the scarcity of empirical evidence in the study of tool integration do not allow for further extension of such a complex theme.

There are further relevant questions that have not been considered yet in the international debate that could be labeled as multilateralism of policy tools (not only government's tools). Public action involves multilevel networks in which, besides usual political interaction, multiple public, private and nonprofit actors adopt tools in order to structure other actors' course of action. These tools are technically knowable. One can observe this not only within the interventions where the government's authority is not required such as for incentives or information, but also typically in public instruments such as regulation, which is more and more negotiated with non-public actors (so called soft regulation). In this sense the distinction between public and private policy tools could be of little interest in explaining the mechanisms shaping public action. Currently the use of tools by non-public actors in the supply of public goods and services is a little explored frontier (Salamon, 2002c; Peters, 2005a).

The direct observation of composition effects and of integration modes are of particular interest and require further theoretical development.

4.6 Tool contexts and networks

American scholars have demonstrated that the tool analysis approach can consider the relevance of local context in structuring public action (Linder and Peters, 1989; 1990a and 1990b). In other words the contextualization of instruments can analyze the tool network acting in a spatial frame, its characteristics (number of involve actors, density of the links among them, modes of interaction) and of the interactive resources it has or can produce in terms of social and institutional capital (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993 and 2000). The tools of government have relevant impacts in this dimension, by defining the resources, structuring networks and positioning actors (e.g. by including or excluding certain typologies). However, at the same time networks are influenced by local context conditions since the presence of social capital and typical interactive modes can influence the choice and implementation of policy tools.

In sharing choices and actions with a contextual network of actors, government can make use of the information and (sometimes local and tacit) the knowledge the mobilized actors have or can interactively generate to solve a public problem.

4.7 Institutional dimensions of policy tools

This theoretical framework has to come to terms with tools choices' critical gaps in relation to ends-means rationality in organizational fields, to the importance of the logic of appropriateness constructed and maintained by institutions through time (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983 and 1991). Furthermore, multiple factors socially constitute the reality in which these decisions are made, as sets of norms and values, symbolic systems, ideologies, and cognitive scripts, influencing political dynamics by making sense of actions and defining actors' expectations towards policy mechanisms (Atkinson and Nigol, 1989; March and Olsen, 1989). In this sense, the analytical and interpretative contribution of neoinstitutional approaches to tool studies is considerable in organizational, social and historic terms (Hall and Taylor, 1998; Peters, 2005b).

In fact, the neoinstitutional perspective explains the consensual norms directly or indirectly which allow regulating choices and behaviors, regarding tools of government as well. The critical juncture disclosing new paths and subsequent continuity periods can be studied in a historic perspective (Pierson, 2000a and 2000b). The path dependency concept is useful in highlighting how certain decisions and effects in critical historic junctures induce increasing returns for certain groups that could consolidate a specific course of action over time (Pierson, 2000a; Pierson and Skocpol, 2002). This concept explains the economic, political and knowledge costs derived from migrating from the use of an original policy tool to another, costs that partly descend from the adaptation of actors' expectations and the framing given by the use of the original tool. Detecting long term trajectories of tools and of their (expected or unexpected, actual or perceived) effects can help comprehend the resilience of inadequate tools, or the substitution of others despite their success. In this sense, two analytical concepts are of particular interest: institutionalization of a certain course of action and imitation of instruments that were experimented in other contexts (institutional isomorphism, Radaelli, 2000). In this perspective, tool study can explore processes of local, national and supranational institutional transformation over time, such as those regarding subsidiarity, privatization or Europeanization.

4.8 Cultures matter

Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky proposed a theory which seems useful in dealing with cultural aspects of policy tools. Douglas (1990) argued that public choices are made within a frame of knowledge, values, and ideas influencing evaluation and decisions. In this sense, the legitimacy of certain actions, their interpretation, their rootedness are social processes that can be guided or

manipulated in a particular cultural dimension (Wildavsky, 1987). In recent years, a complete cultural theory has been developed in order to explain the relative autonomy of this dimension and its impact over political and social organization decisions (Thompson et al., 1990; Ellis and Thompson, 1997).

It is evident that political administrative and technical cultures matter, at least in limiting the set of instruments that are legitimated in a field of public intervention. Certain tools can make some cultural features more evident than others and at the same time they can show the effects induced on the governing actors (Linder and Peters, 1989). This bidirectional relationship between tools and cultures can be examined in the symbolic and cultural dimension of policy.

Even if the influence of ideas and culture can be noted, it seems more difficult to find and verify a causal nexus (Peters, 2002a), also because tools refer to broad strategies and meaning frameworks constructed by governments and public action, sometimes in implicit or bland ways (Eliadis et al., 2005).

5. New Italian perspectives on urban planning: A policy tool approach

Moving from the interest in the concept of policy tools applied in urban planning and policy making in Italy and in Europe, the study of policy instruments allows the theme of territorial governance to be reformulated, including making use of the critical contributions observed in this article.

Despite greater attention currently given to indirect policy tools, it is useful to study more traditional instruments, e.g. the State's direct intervention in expropriation for eminent domain and land use regulation, not confining research only to their technical aspects or in the mobilized public and private interests, but also highlighting the historic and political reasons that determined their use or dismissal, reform or resilience. This new perspective can reinterpret the Italian experience in the second half of the last century.

The accurate and integrated study of the policy tools adopted in guiding urban and regional transformations can make technical and political questions clearer, regarding the relationship between the definition and evolution of a territorial shared vision and the set of mechanisms deployed to pursue it, mechanisms that are evidently not limited to regulations, public interventions or incentives, but also more indirect forms.

For more than a decade several forms of partnership linked public and private actors, inducing criticalities that cannot be examined only from a technical-financial or a juridical-organizational point of view. Probably the importing of international mixed entities or contracts did not always

take into consideration the adequacy related to the types of intervention with regard to local and institutional contexts, nor to the political and administrative habits that absorbed them. Furthermore, contracts could not always lever the needed capabilities and competencies, both on the public and the private sides, to make the fine mechanics of partnership work. Adopting the policy tool approach, the programming and operative challenges posed by these indirect forms of government are more evident.

One of the most discussed innovations in European urban policymaking and local economic development programming was the grant tool, issued by central and local governments to induce public, private and nonprofit entities to perform certain actions or exhibit certain behaviors. In Italy, this innovation was interpreted as the milestone of a new phase of public policymaking in the 1990s (so called “nuova programmazione”). It raised high expectations both substantially (the goals of territorial grant mechanisms vary from urban regeneration to environment sustainability, from economic development to social cohesion) and procedurally (in terms of changes in institutional responsiveness, and generally in political and administrative culture). After fifteen years, reflecting upon this important experience seems necessary and the policy tool perspective can develop a critical and proactive analysis and evaluation.

It is undeniable that certain local and national public interventions in Italy have been aimed at normalizing ungoverned urban transformations. The amnesties for building and urban regulation infringements occurred without impacting on such behaviors. Despite these clashes with the policy tool theory, these experiences raise interesting questions that can be explored in the theoretical framework developed in this article.

As can be shown from a research perspective, the study of government’s action through policy instruments can explain both technical and political reasons for public policies (or of their absence), it highlights the influence of privatization, internationalization and isomorphic processes in urban and regional policymaking. The analysis of mechanisms and related interests make government’s role clearer and more accountable for public opinion. Of course, this perspective requires further theoretical work regarding the core elements of governing through instruments, such as integration and multilateralism.

The tools of government perspective differs from the Italian studies in urban planning and policymaking, which were mainly referred to Anglo-Saxon and American implementation research. In this regard, Lester Salamon argued that there is a significant gap between studying public action by focusing on entire programs or by adopting the policy tool as and unit of analysis: “The major

shortcoming of current implementation research is that it focuses on the wrong unit of analysis, and the most important theoretical breakthrough would be to identify a more fruitful unit on which to focus analysis and research. In particular, rather than focusing on individual programs, as is now done, or even collections of programs grouped according to major “purpose,” as is frequently proposed, the suggestion here is that we should concentrate instead on the generic tools of government action, on the “techniques” of social intervention” (Salamon 1981, 256). This perspective is largely diffused in the American and Canadian debate, which moved from policy analysis towards tool analysis.

In conclusion, the analytical and interpretative shift from processes towards tools does not concern a change of scope or the obvious observation that public policies use instruments and therefore can be interpreted as a combination of policy tools. The study of tools’ distinctive features, the selection process, implementation and the triggered political and social mechanics, not solely economic benefits and costs, management and legitimacy challenges implied by the selection and implementation of a given set of tools, the historic evolution and the other issues raised in this article establish the basis for the study of urban planning and policy tools to be posed and to contribute to overcoming current limits in knowledge and action. The policy tool, as an analytical unit, gives the opportunity of deepening both the political and technical dimensions of planning and programming problems regarding urban and regional transformations.

On the basis of the proposed perspective, the study of urban planning and policy tools in Italy can contribute to the international debate. Greater interest can be raised if one considers tracing the main transformations in urban and regional policies in the last decades in different national contexts and considering how to contribute to reforming current government activities.

Appendix

Definition of the category of policy tool in the international debate

In international political and social science the study of policy tools has often enjoyed relevant arena and debate. The concept of policy tool, if not interpreted in a solely mechanical sense, calls into play the variety of relations between the government and the governed, and between political authority and citizens or organizations. The specific form in which power is exercised can explain how public authority acts in guiding society (Bemelmans-Videc 1998). In the scientific literature, the interpretations of the policy tool category are numerous and it seems useful to discuss the most widespread and relevant ones for the study of urban planning and policymaking.

Diffusely, the metaphors used in distinguishing different tools have tended to oversimplify the question and have not satisfactorily specified the tools' political and technical characteristics. The concept of the government punishing behaviors that are not acceptable by the political community has been reduced to the "stick" image. Vice versa, the rewarding of a virtuous action corresponded to the "carrot". This incentive/disincentive dichotomy has often been coupled with the concept of "sermons", i.e. persuasive or informative actions the government undertakes to educate the governed (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998). Furthermore, this oversimplifying perspective suggests that generally citizens or specific parts of society act in response to certain positive or negative incentives or beliefs (Schneider and Ingram, 1990). Certain dichotomies are used to explain certain forms of public action (the most typical is state/market, see: Wolf, 1993), but are often a vehicle for general evaluation without sufficient evidence. The comprehension of the relationship between government and the governed requires a more complex conceptualization that refers to the actors involved in public policy not only in functional terms (Bressers and Klok, 1988), and not assuming exclusive unidirectional power used by government towards the governed.

Despite the fact that in the scientific literature multiple terminologies can be found, the most influential authors adopt a variety of terms to express the same concept: tool of government, policy tool or policy instrument, governing instrument, mechanism and others. This article adopts this custom, although some authors proposed further specifications, which in any case are marginal in the debate.

It must be noted that current Italian planning debate uses the term tool or instrument ("strumento") to indicate plans, programs or policies. This use does not acknowledge the meaning developed in the economic and political international debate. The international perspective the policies, plans and

programs the Italians would label as “strumenti” are in fact mixed sets of more or less integrated policy tools.

Prominent French authors have developed the study of government tools in terms of “dispositif” or a device imposing in shaping social action, even without a specific intention of the government of structuring public action regarding specific public problems or opportunities (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007). In this sense it is useful to distinguish the French concept of disposal or instrument of public action, that refers to the observation of social practices and to the dimensions of political sociology, from the policy tool or tool of government, regarding the mechanism of governing and of pragmatically structuring public action in relation to problems explicitly faced by policies. In order to study urban and regional policy tools, adopting the heterogeneous category of disposal without any distinction from the one of tool could be misleading, especially if disposal could mean, at the same time, techniques, quarters, urban projects, cartographies, and administrative procedures such as regulation or taxation (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2004b; Estèbe, 2004; Pinson, 2004).

The reference to Salamon (1989 and 2002b) for defining the concept of tool as an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem alludes to the peculiar features of instruments and permits an exhaustive classification that defines a framework suitable for addressing the raised questions regarding urban planning and policymaking.

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