CREATIVE IMAGINATION AND APPROPRIATE ASSEMBLIES
Comment on Björn Wittrock's "Beyond Organizational Design: Contextuality and the Political Theory of Public Policy"

Uriel Rosenthal
Erasmus University
Rotterdam

It must be quite a thrill to inter-organizational theorists and bottom-up-ers to be confronted with nothing less than Lasswellian contextuality. Björn Wittrock's suggestion to recover the mood of the policy sciences may come right on time, when policy analysis seems to have lost some of its original pretentions of bridging the gap between empirical and normative orientations to politics and policy (Dahl, 1970). The restatement of the relevance of the policy sciences and their demand for macro-analyses of the fundamental issues of society may be even more important, since presently the mainstream of political science appears to be content with a neat division of labor between empirical and normative themes, as well as between intra- and international political questions. Lasswell's notion of contextuality may be a fruitful way, indeed, to broaden our scope and our frame of reference to more comprehensive social settings and to more encompassing time-spans.

However, there is a wide gap between Lasswellian contextuality and the less pretentious claims - and possibly the lesser demands - of inter-organizational theory and implementation structure analysis. As Wittrock stresses, Lasswell did have something in mind far beyond the bottom-up perspective on administrative discretion or the implementation structure analysts' redefinition of the proper unit of analysis. We should be very careful, then, in linking the grandiose design of the founding fathers of the policy sciences with the middle-range or sub-systems concerns of contemporary policy students.

This having been said, we may follow Wittrock's argument and welcome his attempt to use contextuality as a yard-stick for inter-
organizational theory, and for theory and research with regard to implementation structures. Firstly, if inter-organizational theory and the concept of implementation structure emphasize the dynamics of the policy process, Lasswell's tentative paradigm tends to push this perspective as far as to include Elmore's promising notion of a reversible logic of backward mapping (Elmore, 1980). One may only guess if Lasswell would have accepted our habit of talking "policy dynamics" and "policy process" without going through a fundamental conceptual discussion of time (cf. Hogwood and Peters, 1983). What is striking to the newcomer in the inter-organizational and bottom-up community is that it embraces the idea of on-going change, yet treats time as a primitive term. It should actually be one of the first priorities on this community's agenda to increase its understanding of such concepts as time, short-term and long-term processes, and - without falling into policy tactics - timing. O'Toole's example of a forty-year policy experiment makes one think about the relativity of time. How should we compare forty years of policentric rule and forty years of monocentric rule? Which are the time-based criteria for long-range versus short-range perspectives on policy evolution? How should we compare a one-year political process in a densely populated policy space and a twenty-year process in a nearly empty policy area (Wildavsky, 1979)? Is there a difference between four years of regulatory policy-making and four years of redistributive policy?

Secondly, whereas Wittrock underscores the permeability of the public-private boundaries and the continuing change in public-private linkages, Lasswell might ask for an effort to search for more relevant systems than those based on that perennial dichotomy between the public and private domain. Here Wittrock could have gone a bit further, joining recent efforts to get a clearer understanding of systems, boundaries and boundary-control.

Of course, there is something paradoxial in inter-organizational theory and in implementation structure analyses. They dissociate themselves from apparently superficial institutional concepts which remind us of the old Staatswissenschaft; yet they do not really reach beyond institutional answers to the old questions of who gets what, when and how, or of the authoritative allocation of values. It amounts to a shift in boundary-setting rather than in the conceptualization of policy. Inter-organizational theory does run the risk of self-indulgence, substituting one type of institutional analysis for another. That would be a pity. For inter-organizational theory seems to have the potential to pursue a more satisfactory answer to questions arising from the public-private issue.

In this context, cross-national analyses of inter-organizational policy structures and processes may be particularly rewarding. They could show the intricate differences in the way both