The Feasibility of Social Policies*

GIANDOMENICO MAJONE
University of Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT
The notion that, given sufficient ingenuity and resources, any social problem can be solved, in a manner consistent with the announced policy objectives and with the accepted institutional framework, has been a major source of failures and frustrations. This paper suggests that policy analysis should concentrate on the investigation of the conditions of feasibility of public programs. Feasibility is defined in terms of all the relevant constraints: social, political, administrative, and institutional, as well as technical and economic. The emphasis on the pure logic of choice and optimal decision rules, so characteristic of normative theorizing in decision theory, management science, and welfare economics, has tended to obscure the fact that in the field of social policies, the range of feasible choices is severely limited by a variety of constraints. Most "bad" decisions are not just suboptimal; on closer examination, it usually turns out that they were not even feasible at the time they were made. Only by understanding the reasons why, under certain circumstances, a given goal cannot be achieved, can we hope to gain better knowledge about the working of social institutions. Just as the essence of the scientific method is the critical analysis and refutation of proposed theories, rather than the accumulation of evidence in favor of pet solutions, so the most important task of policy analysis consists in submitting plans and objectives to the most stringent tests of feasibility. Also in analytic case studies, the search for constraints that were ignored by the decisionmakers has considerable heuristic value, as I try to demonstrate with a critical discussion of some aspects of the British National Health Service.

In any field of human activity, nothing separates more clearly the amateur from the professional than the knowledge of what, under given circumstances, cannot be done in principle. Great amounts of misplaced ingenuity have been devoted in the past to problems which the further progress of science has shown to be insoluble.

Today, we know that the wheel described by the Marquis of Worcester in 1663, could not be kept moving by the succeeding descent of the weights attached to its rim, since its conception contradicts the law of conservation of energy. The squaring of the circle, or the trisection of an angle by ruler and compass are still a challenge for some people, but the number of these naive enthusiasts is rapidly decreasing. And with the advance of economic knowledge, the once prospering breed of monetary cranks seems on its way to extinction.

But when social policies are being discussed, many otherwise competent and reasonable people tend to equate the desirable with the feasible. In fact, the thesis advanced in this paper, that policy analysis should primarily concentrate on the investigation of the conditions of feasibility of public programs, is likely to be opposed by two very different groups of people: the technocrats and the doctrinaires, so to speak.

For those who favor a normative approach (in the sense in which this term is today used in decision theory, management science and some branches of economics) to policy analysis, the property of feasibility is too weak to justify policy recommendations. A feasible alternative can still involve an inefficient use of resources; analysts should strive for optimal or, at least, efficient solutions.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, one finds a great reluctance to discuss the very idea that a social task may be unmanageable. Social institutions, it is argued, are manmade, and can therefore, be freely manipulated to bring about any desired result. Failures in the implementation of the blueprint for a better society are explained by ad hoc arguments, “flagging revolutionary spirit” or sabotage by internal and external enemies, for instance, rather than by objective limitations to man’s power to remodel his social environment. For, as the founder of “scientific socialism” writes (in *Critique of Political Economy*) “mankind sets itself only tasks which it can solve”, since “the task only arises, where the material conditions for its solution are already available, or at least, in the process of formation.”

The approach advocated here differs from both versions of what Hayek has called rationalist constructivism. I shall argue that, just as the essence of the scientific method is the critical analysis and refutation of proposed theories, rather than the accumulation of evidence in favor of pet solutions, so the most important task of policy analysis, consists in submitting plans and objectives to the most stringent tests of feasibility.

This parallel between policy analysis and the critical testing of scientific hypotheses is more than a mere analogy. Policies are, in fact, tentative theories—about the nature of social processes and the working of social institutions—and policy analysis should accordingly develop as an organon for the critical evaluation of proposed solutions.

The main points of our discussion are summarized here. Because of intrinsic limitations of optimization models, and of the particular nature of government decisionmaking, feasibility, rather than optimality, is a realistic goal for policy analysis. Feasibility should be defined in terms of all the relevant constraints: social, political, administrative, and institutional, as well as technical and economic. When all these constraints are taken into consideration, the range of feasible choices turns out to be much more restricted than it is usually assumed. Constraints are compact summaries of the empirical knowledge used in decisionmaking; they are also important heuristic devices for learning, prediction, and problem solving. Some constraints, called policy constraints in this paper, result from prior decisions or conventions. They can be quite useful in decisionmaking, for instance, to reduce the number of alternatives to be considered, but must be handled with great care, and with full realization of their opportunity costs. For instance, quality standards for environmental control, and many other norms used in social policy, cannot be justified in purely technical