Landmarks of Policy Sciences

This article is the second in our series of Landmarks Studies in the Policy Sciences


Harold Lasswell was the first to identify William Ascher’s 1978 appraisal of forecasting techniques as a landmark. In the introduction to the volume, Lasswell said, ‘Professor Ascher’s volume will become a classical contribution to the field of forecasting’ (p. xi). It has taken the rest of us a bit longer, but better late than never.

Ascher’s volume is a classic primarily because of two ideas that went against the tide of that era. He thought it useful to apply the Lasswellian concept of appraisal not just to the outcomes of implemented policy but also to the inputs of the policy-making process. And, above all, in doing so, he demonstrated that the key to a successful forecast is to know what you are talking about—and to have refreshed your knowledge quite recently. In Lasswell’s more formal words: ‘Perhaps the most striking demonstration is that core assumptions are more important than technique’ (p. xi).

For those of us who have spent the interim quarter century using forecasts for such purposes as figuring out where troops should be committed or how hundreds of millions of dollars should be allocated, it can be a bit of a stretch to recall why such thoughts were path-breaking. In fact, at the time they were revolutionary, and were perceived as counter-revolutionary. The academic era in which Ascher wrote was obsessed with methodology, with technique, with tools that would make political science and sociology and economics and policy science into true science. Although nobody ever stated it so explicitly, the message to those entering the discipline was very clear: the way to advancement, the way to contribute to the discipline, was to concentrate on methodology. Ideally, of course, one wanted to be perfect master of both substance and method, but in an imperfect world where this was unachievable it was okay to put most of one’s effort into method but obsolete to put most of one’s effort into substance. Since this tendency recurs periodically, we still need Ascher’s forceful demonstration of its unfortunate consequences.

The sociology of forecasting

While most of the analysis in *Forecasting* is devoted to appraising forecast accuracy, another of Ascher’s important contributions, in this book and more elaborately in a sequel, was to emphasize that forecasting serves a variety of purposes and that for some of these purposes accuracy is not the most important value. (Indeed, in a later article he demonstrated that the decline in the
publication of unconditional forecasts has made the criterion of accuracy less and less applicable.) Forecasts may seek to help policy makers optimize some particular goal, in which case accuracy is the greatest need. But forecasts may also be used primarily for attracting attention to particular issues, for setting a mood, for establishing priorities, for achieving a particular result, or for enhancing the prestige of the forecaster. An exaggerated forecast might well capture attention better than a strictly accurate one, and an esoteric method might well contribute more to the prestige of the forecaster than a simple but more accurate extrapolation.

Given these diverse potential goals, one might also appraise a forecast in terms of how much attention the forecast received, how much revenue it generated for the forecaster’s business, how many votes the forecast shifted from one candidate to another, how explicitly the forecast was used by decision makers, how well it dramatized alternative outcomes and their causes, how decisive the forecast was in affecting policy, or whether the forecaster got tenure.

Ascher makes a considerable contribution to what one might call the sociology of forecasting as his dry but incisive prose reviews why various forecasting programs have been less successful or more. Forecasts are often better utilized in the private sector, where there is a consensus on the goal of maximizing profit, than in the government, where consensus on goals is rare. NRPB efforts at forecasting were rejected because opponents associated forecasting with planning and planning with totalitarianism (p. 27). The difficulties of the Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) of the Lyndon Johnson era show that, ‘The value of technical expertise is often ignored when weightier political issues preoccupy the participants of the policy-making process’ (p. 27). He demonstrates that natural resource forecasts are more likely to be heeded if they help policymakers to find sensible policy responses to scarcities than if they tie the policymakers’ hand by specifying precisely how much money should be spent to alleviate the scarcities. Conversely, referring to the successes of the Census Bureau, Ascher concludes that, ‘The fact that population projections are usually far removed from the point of decision means that they are less threatening to policy-makers guarding their own preferences’ (p. 30). As if to perversely highlight Ascher’s point, today the U.S. Congress is objecting to proposed Census sampling techniques precisely because in the meantime the population projections have moved close to the point of decision; today, unlike twenty years ago, better sampling will automatically increase the political weight of minorities and allocate more budget to them. He also highlights how the deeply flawed forecasts of the book Limits to Growth gained influence and fame by exploiting an aura of mysterious technique: ‘[M]odeling can enhance the promotion of the forecast by giving it the appearance of technical sophistication’ (p. 39).