

Zombie Ideas: Why Failed Policy Ideas Persist.

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“Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist”

John Maynard Keynes

“A misconceived theory can kill”

Amartya Sen

“As a dog returns to its vomit so does the fool repeats his folly”

Proverbs 26:11

The choice of public policies reflects a number of influences of the actors charged with making those difficult choices (see Peters, 2016; Chapter 2). Policies often reflect the power of interests in the society, especially business. Policy choices are also influenced by the nature of the institutions within which they are made, and the interactions of those public sector institutions with other social and political institutions. Increasingly policy choices are influenced by the international environment and the pressures of both global markets and global governance structures. And at times policy choices may be a matter of the individual preferences of actors within the process.

In this paper, however, we will focus on the role of ideas in shaping public policy choices. While the influence of ideas on actual policy choices may at times be difficult to track, no policy can exist without ideas. There must be some underlying idea first that there is a policy problem (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994) that requires action, and second that there is a means of solving that problem. The process of policy formulation (Jordan and Turnpenny, 2015) or policy design (Peters, 2018) involves bringing ideas to bear on policy, first in the conceptualization of the problem and then in the conceptualization of the solution.

Indeed, most policy formulation or policy design will involve several levels of ideas about solving the underlying problem. There must be some idea about a general approach to the problem—perhaps thinking in terms of Christopher Hood’s (1984) familiar NATO categories. Then a more refined and precise set of ideas will be required to address the problem. There may

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be some agreement that “Treasure” based instruments are appropriate, but then a choice must be made among subsidies, or tax-based instruments, or grants. And then that choice must be refined even further. All of those choices involve an idea of how the economy and society function, and how best to intervene.

And policy analysis also involves applying values to the outcomes of the policy process. Are those outcomes good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, and on what basis are they to be evaluated? This type of normative analysis involves the use of ideas (see Campbell, 2002; 23-5). Sometimes those ideas are not very explicit, as in the utilitarian assumptions underlying cost-benefit analysis (McIntyre, 1992). But in policy evaluation (Vedung, 2007) the ideas being used to assess policy are generally quite explicit. Policy analysis is, even with all the development of statistical and formal techniques, still a normative enterprise involving ideas and values.

This paper is not about how bad ideas are formed in the first instance. There is already an extensive literature on the existence of bad ideas in a number of policy domains. The prevalence of faulty ideas perhaps has been clearest in foreign policy (see Walt, 2005) but there has been no shortage of poor ideas in domestic policy as well. Nor is that paper a condemnation of ideas that persist just because they persist. Some of those political ideas are essential for governance, and especially democratic governance (Lacorne, 2016).

This paper will first discuss briefly the literature on policy ideas and their influence on public policy. We will then develop the concept of “zombie ideas” to describe policy ideas that, although largely unproven in practice, tend to survive and to be adopted again and again (see also Krugman, 2019). This discussion will also to some extent discuss the provenance of bad policy ideas more generally, although much of the literature on ideas and policy tends to be more positive (see Mehta, 2011). And finally, we will discuss the logic for the persistence of these zombie ideas, even in an era in which evidence-based policymaking is meant to be the norm in the public sector.

I. Policy Ideas and Public Policies

We do not have the space available here to rehearse the extensive literature on the role of ideas in public policy. As Lord Keynes argued some years ago, however, ideas do have an influence and they may persist long after their utility has waned, and the sources of the ideas have themselves become defunct. In this discussion of policy ideas, we will accept Beland and Cox’s (2011, 2) conception of ideas as “causal beliefs”. This conception is especially useful in thinking about policy design because it points out that any policy design is making an assumption about causation, whether implicitly or explicitly. Further, the idea may not have a strong empirical foundation but can be a belief, a point to which we will return later.

Ideas come to play in policy analysis in a variety of ways. One of the more common of these is framing, in which an observed problem in the society is framed in a certain way in order to make it amenable to solution. That framing involves the use of ideas, or perhaps the creation of ideas, in order to shape the problem in a way that can be processed by the political system and

processed in the ways desired by the framers. Problems do not really exist, in policymaking terms, until they have been framed, and the way in which they are framed will determine the type of solution which is likely to be applied to the problem (see Pierce, et al., 2004).

Ideas about public policy may exist at a variety of levels. Some reflect the existence of large-scale ideologies such as Marxism or neo-liberalism that are attempts to provide meaning for, and solutions to, almost the entire spectrum of political problems. Ideas may also exist at a meso level, for example the difference between Keynesian and monetarism as solutions for economic issues. And finally, policy ideas may exist at a micro level. For example, individuals and organizations may have commitments to particular policy instruments as the best way to solve almost any policy problem (see Linder and Peters, 1989)

As we think about the role of ideas in policy analysis it is important to consider how they interact with other possible explanations of policy choices. For example, ideas may simply be a form of rationalization or justification of self-interest (Rodrik, 2014). Expressing blatant self-interest is somewhat unseemly, so some justification must be developed to justify the pursuit of that self-interest. And policy ideas are the obvious source for those justifications. One can not say that a tax cut will help me and my rich friends, but one can say that tax cuts will increase economic growth or increase economic freedom.

Also, we must remember that ideas can be an impediment to effective policymaking, as well as a boon. This is especially true when there is a need to coordinate policies and those policies are based on different ideas (Schön and Rein, 1994. See also Bardach, 1997). When individuals have deeply held policy beliefs, they can find working with others who do not share those beliefs difficult. And even more difficult if the second party also has different beliefs. Thus, while ideas may give guidance for policy choices, they can also make bargaining and compromise, almost inevitable features of the policy process, more difficult.

II. What do We Mean by Zombie Ideas?

As we mentioned above by zombie ideas, we mean ideas that will not die, no matter how often they are disproved. That is a rather strong statement, given that it is difficult to say that any idea has failed, unequivocally, and indeed there are questions about what actually constitutes policy failure (McConnell, 2010). But it is also clear that some ideas continue to return to the active policy agenda with little evidence to support them, and at times even after very poor performance of policies designed around them.

We will give several examples of these zombie ideas in this section of the paper. These are drawn to great extent from the American and German experiences, but some have infected policymaking in other settings as well. Further, this sample of ideas is drawn largely from the political and ideological Right, but there are certainly some from the Left that could be mentioned as well. And, as we will point out below, some of these ideas may just be justifications for self-interest on the part of the individuals advocating them, but the ideas are still important given the extent to which they may influence policy choices.

A) *Tax Cuts Produce Economic Growth*

Perhaps the most enduring zombie idea in American politics is that tax cuts will easily produce economic growth. The usual way in which this idea has been expressed in practice has been a “trickle-down” approach in which tax cuts for the wealthy and to corporations will lead to their spending more money which in the long-run will produce economic growth that will help the less affluent in society. Even the Kennedy tax cuts in the 1960s was somewhat like this, even though they were more equitable than those of Reagan and Trump.

There are at least two codicils to this general idea. The first and more famous is the Laffer Curve. Propounded by the economist Arthur Laffer³, the argument was that tax cuts will pay for themselves by creating enough economic growth that even lower tax rates will produce as much government revenue as before the cuts (see Peacock, 1989). This claim resurfaced in the discussions of the Trump tax cuts, although the soaring federal deficit seems good evidence that the notion is as wrong now as it was for Ronald Reagan.

The second codicil to the general argument that tax cuts produce economic growth is the notion of supply-side economics, or in George H. W. Bush’s term, “voodoo economics”.⁴ While Keynesian economics largely depends upon manipulating demand, supply side economics, as the name implies, depends on manipulating supply. That is, it depends on investment that results from tax cuts and which will in turn produce more jobs and higher income for workers. As is true for this general line of argument, there are seemingly faulty behavioral assumptions on the supply side.⁵ It appears, for example, that much of the Trump tax cut for the wealthy has gone to consumption by individuals and stock buy-backs by corporations (Coy, 2018).⁶

B) *Work Requirements on Social Programs Move People into More Productive Lives*

Another neo-liberal zombie idea has been “workfare” or more politely “welfare to work” programs (see Quaid, 2002). These programs have the requirement that individuals receiving social benefits engage in some form of productive activity, and preferably in paid employment. These programs have been implemented in a number of countries, including some that have been historical champions of the Welfare State. They have also been evaluated extensively, with the general conclusion being that at best they have minimal effects other than reducing the level of participation in the programs (Greenberg and Cebulla, 2008).

The German Hartz IV reform serves as a point to illustrate this argument. Since it came into force in

³The story, perhaps apocryphal, is that the idea was first propounded on a napkin at lunch with some economic advisors to President Reagan.

⁴It is the rare academic paper that can include both zombies and voodoo.

⁵The supply-side version of economic policy has a long history, in the United States and elsewhere. See Campbell and Allen (2001).

⁶ For a general discussion see Schmidt (2016).

2005 welfare benefits and unemployment insurance have been discussed extensively. This reform was introduced by a coalition government led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 2003. When you lose your job you are required to attend meetings with advisors, have to prove that you are looking for a new position, or enroll in trainings. If you deny a job offer, your advisor can stop the support, if you miss a meeting your benefits may get cut. The German welfare system now provides a socio-cultural minimum for living. Hartz 4 is designed to nudge recipients of social welfare into employment, even if the job doesn't match a recipient's qualification or is poorly paid. Since Hartz 4 entered into force Germany's unemployment rate was low and reached its lowest level since 1949 in 2016. But the reform is criticized. Accordingly, "the coercive provisions of Hartz IV are seen as a way of humiliating the unemployed and squeezing the poor" (see Zimmermann, 2017). Ironically, a social-democratic and pro-labor party paved the way for one of the most controversial and neoliberal reforms in the last decades.

While the "welfare to work" programs may have had some virtues as a means of gaining job experience, the extension of Medicaid under the Trump administration (KHN, 2019) represents a policy idea that has clearly lived too long.⁷ The evidence concerning the population receiving Medicaid is that a limited number of the individuals on Medicaid who are not working could work with any significant economic benefit. A large proportion are elderly or children, and many of working age are disabled. And most of the remainder are already working, albeit for low wages and for employers who do not provide health insurance. Leaving aside whether the program might actually motivate the few people who could work, the program is designed more to make a political and ideological point rather than to actually shape health policy.

C) Privatization of Public Services

The New Public Management reform movements in the global context were decisively influenced by the municipal budget crises of the 1980s and 1990s, which also led to demands for structural and control changes. In this context, the first Kohl government in 1982 in Germany also played an important role. The loss of the SPD's chancellorship meant a move away from social-liberal politics and towards more conservative-liberal policies (Wollmann, 2002). In the neo-liberal style of Thatcher and Reagan, Kohl proclaimed in his first government declaration a reorientation of the public sector and declared "to return the state to its original and real tasks, while at the same time ensuring that it can fulfil them reliably" (Jann and Wewer, 1998: 229). On the same token, financial consequences of the reunification have had a lasting influence on the budgets of West German municipalities because of the need to support East German municipalities.

Röber (2009) distinguishes six kinds of privatization. Only the material one is crucial for this paper. The so-called material privatization occurs, when state owned enterprises are moved from the public to the private sector, selling of state-owned properties to private interests. Private businesses carry out public goods and become important social actors. Popular examples can be found in the UK, US, Germany, and many other states. Among the most popular cases in the UK under Thatcher were the

⁷Medicaid is medical insurance for the indigent. The income limits for eligibility are determined by the states, but most of the funding is federal.

privatization of Britoil, British-Gas and regional water authorities. The question became whether the service "has to be provided itself" or whether it can be carried out by a private actor.

Throughout the 80s, 90s and early 2000s Germany has faced privatizations on the national, federal and local level. On a national level Deutsche Bahn or Bundespost illustrate this trend. Shifting the perspective towards the local and municipal level various examples can be found. Local water authorities and electrical utilities, public transport, or even public housing associations were sold out to the private sector. Such trends emphasize the idea that privatizations will increase both, a government's efficiency and its quality, shrink the size of government and reduce taxes in general. Accordingly, citizens benefit from privatizations, because of the profit-seeking behavior of private managers. Such behavior is supposed to increase customer satisfaction and decrease costs for customers.

Yet, after years of reform euphoria there is a certain disappointment over the possibilities of management-oriented reforms within the public sector. Much rather there is a trend towards a re-municipalization of privatized tasks. Berlin for instance followed a popular vote and bought back its electrical utilities and power generation. Accordingly, private managers were not acting in public's interest, prices were rising, and customer satisfaction was low. Many more examples can be found in Germany, pointing out, that privatization is not panacea and won't solve all problems. Privatization incorporates various problematic aspects that need to be taken into consideration. And even though we have learnt that the hard way, the panacea named privatization is still proclaimed and demanded by practitioners and scholars.

D. The Market is the Solution for health care problems, especially cost.

The assumption of the political right in the United States, and somewhat also in other countries (Schut and Van de Ven, 2011; Homedes and Ugalde, 2005) is that the solution for problems in health care, and especially health care costs, is more competition. The diagnosis is that because of professional licensure and the domination of large providers and large insurers, the health care market functions as an oligopoly and more competition would solve the observed problems of high costs and limited access.

The fundamental assumption undergirding this policy idea – that health care is a market like all others – is perhaps the fundamental source of the enduring nature of this zombie idea.⁸ This assumption has prevailed even though health care has few if any of the features of a competitive marketplace. Entry into the market for providers is limited, for example.⁹ Further, information is asymmetric and therefore genuine consumer choice is limited. Indeed, when consumers can choose, they often seek the highest price option, assuming the quality of the treatment will be superior. And health care has some characteristics of a public good, e.g. for vaccinations, so that simple market ideas will not be

⁸In the United States, to the extent that the Republican Party has developed an alternative to Obamacare, it is based on enhanced competition and consumer choice.

⁹Some extreme advocates of the market model have argued to change this, and for allowing unlicensed practitioners and untested remedies to be available.

effective. Despite those problems the idea of health as a market persists, as does the more general approach of privatization mentioned above.¹⁰

E. *The Military and Defense Ideas.*

The military have been a bountiful source of zombie ideas over the centuries. Generals are often accused of fighting the last war and using old ideas that are soon shown to be outmoded in changing circumstances and with changing technologies. The horrors of World War I have been attributed in part to the failure of generals to understand the capacity of the machine gun, and later the tank, to fundamentally alter the nature of wars (Ellis, 1975). And later the military in many countries were slow to abandon the lessons from World War I and to embrace newer technologies, notably the airplane (Hurley, 1975).

One of the dominant ideologies in the American defense establishment has been the capacity of air power—and especially strategic bombing—to substitute for “boots on the ground” in winning conflicts. This ideology grew up during World War II and has been a standard tenet of the military establishment since that time. This has been true despite the absence of reliable evidence to support the idea. To some extent the absence of reliable evidence has been the result of the strength of the belief in the theory and the failure to perform objective assessments (Gentile, 2001).

The use of analogies has been a particular manner in which zombie, or at least suspect, ideas have survived in foreign policy. The most notable analogy for the past three-quarters of a century has been Munich, and the dangers of appeasement (Houghton, 1996). Politicians in a number of countries, but especially the United States and the United Kingdom have used, or been used by, this analogy to pursue military interventions when more diplomatic routes for resolving international conflicts might have been available. During the Cold War period the “domino theory” was an important codicil to the appeasement argument (Hastings, 2018).

F. *Summary*

At the extreme, advocates on both the political right and the political left are arguing that many, if not most, of the policy ideas we currently follow are in the zombie category (see Judt, 2010). In environmental policy Extinction Rebellion and climate change deniers both oppose contemporary environmental policies, albeit in very different ways. And deficit hawks on one side and economic expansionists on the other both reject contemporary budgetary policies. We are adopting a less extreme position on the viability of existing policy regimens, but there are still many ideas in effect and being advocated that appear to be surviving after their utility has been exhausted.

¹⁰In addition. Cashore and Natan (2019) find that market driven environmental policies in less developed countries may have perverse consequences for governance in those countries yet continue to be advocated and implemented.

III. Why Do Zombie Ideas Persist

With some idea of the nature of policy ideas that persist in the face of evidence, even strong evidence, that they are not valid, we now proceed to consider why these ideas do survive. There is no single reason, and we can not necessarily relate any particular reason for persistence to a particular failed policy idea. Several scholars in policy studies and related fields have also wondered about the ability of poor ideas to survive and even thrive. For example, Jeffrey Pfeffer (2005) has considered why poor ideas, especially those based on economics, persist in management. And many scholars of foreign and defense policy have lamented the continuing use of ideas such as the domino theory (see Hastings, 2018).

Much of the discussion of the persistence of policy ideas revolves around the role of institutions and organizations in preserving these ideas as a “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen, 2011) for their actions. This explanation may anthropomorphize organizations, it does point to the importance of mission statements (Goodsell, 2011) and other organizational ideologies in shaping policy. Organizations and institutions use those ideas to socialize their new members and also use them in their political battles with other organizations and with their sponsors over budgets, policy and survival (March, 1996).

A. Levels of Explanation

What will follow is something of a shopping list of possible explanations for the persistence of zombie ideas, but those explanations can be classified into several large categories. At the end of the aforementioned shopping list we will develop several hypotheses about the ways in which these levels of explanation are linked. These hypotheses are, of course, preliminary and perhaps extremely difficult to test in any definitive manner, but they may be a means of structuring further research on the survival of ideas (bad and good) in public policymaking.

1) *Elites*. The first level at which zombie ideas gain some sustenance is from elites. These elites are primarily political, but they can also be policy experts who have commitments to certain ideas. In some ways experts may be a more significant source of zombie ideas than are politicians, in part because experts tend to have policy ideas. But that expertise can also lead to hubris and a failure to consider alternatives to the conventional advice that has been and continues to be given. As Berger and Luckman (1966) point out there is a social distribution of knowledge and the failure to consider sources other than experts may produce failure, and continuing failure (Koppl, 2018).

But political elites usually can not be absolved of blame for continuing policy failures from poor ideas. They choose experts that will support their political preferences and use those preferences. They create the demand for policy ideas, zombie or otherwise. And having latched on to an idea that has been successful politically (if not substantively) in the past then they are likely to continue using that idea. Political parties may have some of the features of Groupthink (see below; for a lament see Dodson, 2019) so elections may be the major remedy for the persistence of elite ideas.

2) *Organizational*. Most elites do not function alone, but are members of organizations, and those organizations will have commitments to policy ideas. These may be the familiar standard operating procedures of organizations, or Allison and Zelikow's (1999) organizational process model of decision-making. Organizations develop routines in responding to issues in their policy domains and most of those routines have some justification through policy ideas. They can, of course, be justified through zombie ideas. Further, those zombie ideas may be used to rationalize organizational self-interests.¹¹

Organizations are, of course, composed of individuals, and we should not anthropomorphize them too much, but organizations may replicate their ideas and their biases as they socialize new members and pass along the commitments of the organization. The normative version of institutionalism (March and Olsen, 1989) emphasizes the extent to which organizational and institutional socialization tend to perpetuate ideas, good or bad, that are the foundations for the "logic of appropriateness" within the institution.

3) *Society/ Individual*. Finally, zombie ideas are likely to finally die if there is no popular support for them. This is obviously true in a democratic regime, but over time may also be true in non-democratic regimes. If elites who are using zombie ideas for electoral purposes, or for purposes of political mobilization do not find a receptive audience, then the ideas will wither away. This withering away may take some time—there are still some political elites who would like to return to the gold standard—but without the capacity of the ideas to find support in society they would have little impact on policy.

The role of society in the preservation of zombie ideas should not be underestimated. If members of the society are not receptive to the policy ideas that are being advanced, then those ideas are unlikely to survive. The political elites will not be passive and can engage in information or propaganda campaigns to advance the ideas, but if not successful in inculcating the idea into the minds of the public they are unlikely to be successful in advancing the policy. Obviously, this is more important for democratic regimes, but may be important even in less democratic regimes (see Tang, 2016).

B. Sources of Survival for Ideas

1) Simple Path Dependence

The simplest explanation for the persistence of ideas is the logic of path dependence, now associated with historical institutionalism (Sydow, Schreyögg and Koch, 2009). The logic is that an institution—once created—will tend to persist until there it is replaced by another, usually through a rather extreme punctuation. Later versions of change within the historical institutionalism (Maloney and Thelen,

¹¹When used consciously to promote organizational self-interest the ideas come closer to Allison's bureaucratic politics model. Indeed, the use of ideas—zombie and otherwise-- was evident in his analysis of the Cuban missile crisis.

2010) have identified less dramatic forms of change, in which the institutions—or in our case ideas¹²—would be transformed while still retaining some elements of the original idea. Or alternatively a policy domain may be characterized by several layers of ideas, with older ideas that are perhaps no longer viable continuing to have some influence despite the presence of newer policy concepts.

The path dependence argument is especially important for understanding policy ideas that have been successful at some point in their history but later began to fail. That failure may be the result of changing politics, or more likely changing socio-economic conditions, but a policy idea simply becomes outmoded. But if we adopt Pierson's (2000) arguments about path dependence for institutions, some actors in the policy process have been receiving positive feedbacks from the idea and will continue to utilize it until sufficient evidence, or political power, accumulates to alter their behavior. Or, as Sarigil (2017) argues, policies simply become habits and are adopted with very little conscious thought.

2) Beliefs and Ideology

Second, as already noted, policy ideas are based on beliefs. Those may be simple beliefs about the efficacy of a particular approach to public policy or they may be broader, ideological belief patterns. In either case the policymaker is making his or her choices based on beliefs that may be justified more by faith than by evidence. In addition to the general difficulties imposed by the power of beliefs on policy, we also need to recognize that many of these beliefs have poor, or virtually non-existent, micro-assumptions. That is, many of the zombie ideas mentioned above are supported by firm beliefs but little else. For example, the famous Laffer curve has been investigated by economists from conservative think tanks and appears to work, if at all, only under severely constrained and somewhat unusual circumstances. Likewise, the motivational effects of work requirements appear weak, so that the success of the programs may be simply in saving money because potential clients are excluded.

Persistent patterns of belief may be individual, but as noted above organizations also play a major role in the persistence of ideas. Groupthink has been identified as the tendency of small groups not to challenge the conventional wisdom within the group (Janis, 1972). This can be seen as a manifestation of the power of collective beliefs over policy. This approach to decision-making argues that groups develop internal beliefs that they use to justify their actions and to maintain internal cohesion within the group. While the principal interest of Janis was in the group dynamics involved, ideas are important elements and the availability of a set of agreed upon ideas is important for the ease of creating concurrence within the group (see 't Hart, 1990).

The positive reinforcement in path dependence mentioned above also may be a function of beliefs rather than more substantive feedbacks such as organizational or personal success. The use of a familiar idea to justify a policy may make the individual involved “feel good” when his or her views are validated within the group, or by the policy choices of that group and other elites. And from an organizational perspective, this also supports the existing organization given that its current standard

¹²Although phrased in institutional terms the historical institutionalism was to a great extent based on ideas. See, for example, Hall (1988).

responses to policy problems are confirmed and therefore their budget can be maintained or even expanded.

3) *Politics, and Power*

For political scientists perhaps the first explanation that comes to mind for why poor ideas would persist in policymaking is politics and power. Ideas are a means of justifying self-interest, and of clothing political power in a more acceptable garb (see Hay, 2011). Just as the individual's self-interest may be relatively stable, so too may the ideas that are employed to justify it politically. Therefore, unless there is some significant evidence to refute the existing patterns of belief and practice, the old ideas will continue.

The zombie ideas that are being used to maintain and enhance political power can not stand on their own. They must, as we noted above, have an audience that accepts at least some of the logic of the ideas. For example, the various market-based ideas mentioned above that have been capable of surviving past their normal life span have done so because a significant portion of the population believes in free market economics, albeit in a somewhat unstudied manner. In particular, the analogy between the economy of the household and that of a nation state has tended to pervade popular thinking about fiscal policy. If it is not good for an individual to owe thousands of dollars then certainly it must be awful for a country to owe trillions.¹³

When we follow the core idea of elitism, there is an ongoing debate about the source of power. It might stem from an economic or social base or because an élite has occupied major positions in the military force or in political offices. Winters and Page (2009) for instance argue that the American political economy is both, an oligarchy and democracy. In this context, oligarchy is understood as the politics of wealth defense. The authors introduce the Material Power Index and show how money can be translated into political power. Accountants, lawyers and wealth management consultants form *magic circles* which leads to an unequal influence in the hands of a small group. An elitist would argue that Zombie Ideas prevail, because they serve the interest of the few, who are on the one hand capable of defending their own policies and on the other hand rich and powerful enough to kill conflictual policies.

Two structural features of political regimes may also influence the preservation of ideas that may have outlived their utility. One is the consensual nature of politics identified by Arend Lijphart (2012) in many European systems. As the name implies a consensual political system has some basic agreement among the parties and major actors about the course of public policy. In contrast to majoritarian systems in which there is some alternation of policy ideas, the consensual system will facilitate the maintenance of policy paths once established. These consensual systems have, however, been coming under some attack over the past several decades as an increase in populist mobilization has questioned the underlying assumptions and policy ideas being implemented (Schumacher, and Van Kersbergen, 2016).

¹³There is, of course, J. Paul Getty's adage that if you the bank \$100 you have a problem. If you owe the bank \$100 million then the bank has a problem.

Corporatism is a second structural feature of government with a potential impact on Zombie Ideas. In corporatist systems privileged groups gain access to government decision-makers. They become incorporated into the “extended state” and are supposed to guarantee a rather risk-free policy implementation (Gill, 2014), while demolishing political conflicts. The ‘age of corporatism’ and ‘tripartism’¹⁴ (during the 1970s) with organized interests of ‘capital’ and ‘labor’ gaining preferential access to political decision-making processes at the national level, thus allowing for macro-economic stabilization without having their interests harmed (Streeck and Schmitter 1985) explains why certain policy ideas prevail. For an illustration of this well-structured relationship, we can point to the Austrian model of ‘social partnership’¹⁵ (going hand in hand with approaches to economic planning known as Austro-Keynesianism (Mitter and Wörgötter, 1990)

4) Filtering Information and Ideas

The world of policymaking is very complex and contains a great deal of information and numerous ideas. Likewise, there is no shortage of ideas about policy, and no shortage of policy entrepreneurs willing to “sell” those ideas. The problem is that some of those entrepreneurs are really hucksters, selling poor or disproved ideas to an unsuspecting set of potential clients-policymakers. On the face of it, discerning the gold of policy ideas from the dross is difficult. The hucksters may come from seemingly respectable organizations and have proper academic qualifications, but the “evidence” they are selling for evidence-based policy is weak or faulty (see, for example, Sherman. 2003).

Therefore organizations (and individuals) responsible for making policies need to exercise some filtering to minimize the negative effects of the “blooming, buzzing confusion of the world”. Thus, we encounter one of the paradoxes of policymaking. While bounded rationality (Jones, 1999) and the associated filtering devices is crucial for minimizing decision-making costs in the public sector, it can also be a source of error, and the persistence of zombie ideas. The organization places limits on the range of ideas and information considered and, in the process, may perpetuate poor solutions.

But information may also be overly filtered, especially within organizations that have a commitment to a particular set of policy ideas. The excessive filtering of information and ideas can also be manifested in the isolation of decision-makers from the realities of their policies “on the ground” (Thompson, 1977). One standard critique of organizations, whether public or private, is that the information held by the lower levels of the organization do not make it to the top and therefore poor policies will persist.

¹³ The Dutch Social and Economic Council is an example of a tripartite council, as it consists of the peak organizations of trade unions, employers and representatives of the national government. (Slomp, 1998).

¹⁴ The system of „Social partnership“ was established in Austria in the 1960s and defines the cooperation and coordination of interests of Austria’s federations. It is based upon the free will of the players and is characterized as informal and confidential. (Gilbert, 1987)

5) Biases—Disciplinary and Other

Following from the interest in filtering information and ideas, another source of the perpetuation of poor policy ideas is disciplinary bias. This has been most noticeable in the inroads that economic reasoning has made in many policy domains, as well as in many other social science disciplines themselves. For example, Pfeffer (2005) argues that the adoption of economic concepts has significantly impacted management sciences, both public and private, and not positively. And this is, of course, one of the standard critiques of New Public Management in public administration. The assumption with an ingrained disciplinary bias is that the discipline provides answers to a wide range of problems and hence can be used to address problems for which it may in reality be unsuited

Although it is easy to focus on biases held by academic disciplines, and the blinders they provide their adherents (see also Linder and Peters, 1989), the opposite can also be problematic for policy. That is, the failure of political elites to utilize expertise may help perpetuate the persistence of poor policy ideas as much as clinging to a single disciplinary truth about the possible solutions for policy problems. Much of this resistance to academic expertise comes from the rejection of the utility of “theory” about policy (Walt, 2005). Rather than listen to any alternative approaches policymakers may be happy to persist in their own well-worn paths of policymaking, albeit sub-optimal at best.

The biases that exist among disciplines and between academe and the world of practice represent additional important examples of the social division of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). No discipline has a monopoly on useful information and ideas, not do academics (as much as we would like to believe it) have the answers for the world’s problems. But managing an open and unbiased policy process is difficult, given the tendency of policymakers to seek closure and work “downstream” rather than “upstream” when considering problems.¹⁶

5) Absence of Alternatives

Failed policy ideas also may persist simply because there is no alternative available. Governments are frequently in the position of having to respond to policy problems when they lack the capacity—intellectual or physical—to do so effectively. In the case of policy ideas for addressing these problems, governments will simply have to go back to what they have done in the past, even if it were not very effective. At least with a well-known policy option the consequences of the actions may be more predictable (but see 1 above). It may be better to be able to anticipate the type of failures rather than cope with unknown, and potentially worse, failures.

Even when not operating *in extremis* governments may still continue to implement a poor program simply because there is no option readily available. In this case “available” may mean either that the alternative has not yet been developed, or perhaps there are no alternatives that are considered

¹⁶That is, they seem to find an answer rather than considering as full a range of problems as possible. This concept about decision-making comes from the policy design literature, especially the so-called “new design” (Peters, 2018).

politically or technically feasible. It may be perceived by a sitting government that it is better to perpetuate a familiar and enduring poor policy than to embark on a new course that has a significant chance of failure itself.

The best example of the absence of alternatives in contemporary policy may be Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act) in the United States. From a design perspective Obamacare is not a good program. It has too many moving parts, it depends upon too many actors in the public and private sectors—including citizens--doing what the program designers want, and it does not address many crucial health care problems such as high drug costs. But the Republicans, in and out of Congress, have not been able to develop a credible alternative, so the program persists and has gained grudging support from a slight majority of Americans.

While there may in reality be no alternative policies at hand, the absence of alternatives may be politically constructed (Séville, 2017). While Prime Minister Mrs. Thatcher became famous for her “TINA” (There is no alternative) statements about policy and used this to quell discussions about the course of her government. More recently as Chancellor Angela Merkel has been argued to have a political style that is “*alternativlos*”, using the absence of alternatives as a means of persisting in a policy and minimizing debate. This political construction of an exhaustion of ideas obviously is very useful for those wanting to maintain the status quo.

If we return to the discussion of the role of path dependence in the persistence of policy ideas, Peters, Pierre and King (2005) have argued that path dependence may be explained in large part by the absence of alternatives. Change in the ideas influencing policy choices tend to come about through conflict over ideas, while older (and perhaps poor) ideas can persist without the presence of conflict. While policymakers and organizations may filter out ideas that challenge the conventional wisdom, those ideas have to exist to be filtered, and still may have some chance of surviving in the face of proponents of the status quo.

This strand of reasoning, focusing on the presence or absence of alternatives, has obvious affinities with the Advocacy Coalition Framework model (Sabatier and Weible, 2014). This model posits the existence of several alternative ideas for policy, represented by different coalitions attempting to shape or to maintain policy. Thus, there is competition over ideas central to policymaking. In the absence of alternative conceptions, the existing policy regimen is likely to persist, albeit perhaps with the gradual changes now associated with historical institutionalism (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). But without alternative ideas there will not be the “punctuated equilibrium” characteristic of the earlier conceptualizations of historical institutionalism (Steinmo et al., 1992).

Similarly, the presence of alternatives can be related to the “frame reflection” as a mechanism for policy change and coordination (Schön and Rein, 1994). When policy ideas are entrenched in organizations, and those organizations have to find ways to work together, conflict is likely to ensue. But that conflict may also prevent moving forward with policy changes that can be beneficial to citizens. The process of reframing programs so that they can cooperate more effectively is clearly using ideas to shape policy, and it also potentially involves killing off some zombie ideas.

Thus, policy making is highly connected to uncertainty and ambiguity. Hofstede et al. (2017) refer to

March's term of uncertainty avoidance and develop the uncertainty avoidance index. They define it as the degree to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. Among other things this feeling is expressed in nervous stress and a need for predictability: a need for written and unwritten rules. When we look at those who design public policies, we need to take into consideration the organizational background of the designers. According to Jann (1983) Germany is characterized as a formalized regulatory culture that is classified as fragmented, detailed, complicated, immobile, attached to the quo, and formalized. Accordingly, policy ideas may persist, because the success of any alternative policies is too uncertain.

6) *What is a Failure? – What is the Evidence?*

Failure, like many other aspects of politics and policy, is politically constructed (McConnell, 2015). Many public policies have produced results that can well be described as ambiguous. The outcomes may appear positive in general but yet the problem being addressed is not resolved totally, and there may also be negative unintended consequences (Baart, 1991) that reduce the overall positive impact of the policy. Thus, when a policy is implemented the outcomes may, in eyes of the proponents be definite successes, while in the eyes of the opponents the outcomes may be failure. With that ambiguity the policy ideas can survive, especially if (as mentioned above) there is no clear alternative to the existing policy.

The ambiguity of policy results can be seen as a result of the political process that, even in authoritarian regimes, policies must be “oversold” as they are being legitimated by legislatures. It is not enough to say that we think this policy might work, or we hope it will. The policy must be put forward as *the* solution to the problem being addressed. This overselling of the policies creates a very high bar for success for a policy being implemented in a challenging and complex social setting. The standard becomes not amelioration but solution, and as has been demonstrated a number of times solutions tend to be short lived.

IV. Conclusion.

This paper is not about how or why policies fail, although it certainly has implications for understanding failures. Rather, it is about why policies and policy ideas that have demonstrably failed (leaving aside the caveats about such a bold statement) continue to reappear. Like the zombies of horror films, they can not be killed off and continue to stalk the policy world. These ideas are perhaps more numerous than we might imagine and appear in a number of policy domains in a number of political systems. But why do policymakers, and ordinary citizens, continue to assume the utility of old, tired ideas?

We hope we have made it clear that there is no simple answer to that question. Rather, the promotion and perpetuation of zombie ideas is a game that any number of actors can play. The persistence of weak or unworkable ideas is not entirely a function of the machinations of political elites or policy advocates. These ideas require support from the public especially in democratic regimes. If an idea

does not resonate with the voters then it is unlikely to survive very long, or at a minimum the politicians advocating this idea may have a limited political life expectancy.

Further, the reasons for promoting these ideas are even more varied than the actors involved in promoting the ideas. Sheer inertia often plays a role, especially when there is no ready alternative to continuing to make the same arguments again and again. But political power and the use of failed ideas to maintain that political power are also central factors in the preservation of ideas. Zombie ideas also are maintained through ideologies and beliefs that may be difficult to dislodge, even when not successful in producing the desired, and assumed, results.

Yet, we need to acknowledge that policies and their success depend on their environments. Environments and contexts change. For this reason, it is crucial to keep in mind that a policy, that has not worked out in the past, is not by default going to fail again. The survival of zombie ideas has positive aspects. It's about the competition of ideas, which is crucial for functioning democracies. And given the swinging of the political pendulum, both of ideas and political parties, between right and left it may be that ideas that we now treat with disdain may not only prevail but actually become effective in dealing with real policy issues.

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