

# Public Policies: Between Theory and Practice

[English Version]

Las políticas públicas: entre la teoría y la práctica

As políticas públicas: entre a teoria e a prática

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To question some of the approaches from the classical theory on Public Policies (PP) that do not consider contexts, interests and practices of current political systems and its improvement could increase the management's social benefit.

**Methodology:** an interpretative and critical reflection was made on the social phenomenon of Public Policies (PP); thus, the analysis of some issues from the classical theory on Public Policies that are widely available in the official discourse were

contrasted with the context, interest, and current practices of the political systems. This reflection was particularly focused on five issues proposed by the literature to help understand the rationality of PP and their performance: the actors, the contexts, the processes, the formal issues of PP, and the results. **Results:** PPs are political devices that were developed in late modernity to control both the tangible and the intangible resources of society, and, as such, they are administered by different subgroups in defense of their own interests. Unlike the aim of the official discourse, PPs are not always decisions made in favor of public interests, rather

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they are changeable expressions of social conflicts between antagonistic groups fighting for their own benefit. **Conclusions:** the contexts, interests, and practices of the political agents of PPs do not always coincide with current theoretical models. Beyond technical matters, PPs are political issues whose main characteristic comes from the particular interests of their defenders within specific contexts. Critical education and population mobilization could revert unfair effects of PPs and advance on their performance.

**Keywords:** Public Policy; Politics; State; Policy Formulation.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** cuestionar algunos enfoques de la teoría clásica sobre las Políticas Públicas (PP) que desconocen los contextos, intereses y prácticas de los sistemas políticos actuales y cuya superación podría optimizar el beneficio social de la gestión. **Metodología:** se hizo una reflexión interpretativa y crítica sobre el fenómeno social de las PP; para ello, se recurrió al análisis de algunos de los argumentos de la teoría política clásica de mayor difusión en el discurso oficial, los cuales se contrastaron con el contexto, los intereses y las prácticas actuales de los sistemas políticos. La Reflexión se enfocó, específicamente, en cinco aspectos que han sido propuestos por la literatura para comprender la racionalidad y el desempeño de las PP: los agentes, los contextos, los procesos, los aspectos formales de las PP y los resultados. **Resultados:** las PP son dispositivos de poder de la modernidad tardía para controlar los recursos tangibles e intangibles de la sociedad y, como tales, son aplicados por subgrupos en defensa de sus propios intereses. A diferencia de lo que propone el discurso oficial, las PP no son siempre decisiones asumidas en favor de intereses públicos, sino expresiones cambiantes de conflictos sociales entre grupos antagónicos, que luchan en su propio provecho. **Conclusiones:** los contextos, intereses y prácticas de los agentes políticos de la PP no coinciden siempre con los modelos teóricos vigentes. Más que cuestiones técnicas, las PP son asuntos políticos, cuyos atributos esenciales surgen de los intereses particulares de sus defensores en contextos particulares. Se propone que la educación crítica y la movilización amplia de la población, podrían revertir los efectos inequitativos de las PP y optimizar su desempeño.

**Palabras clave:** Política Pública; Política; Estado; Formulación de Políticas; Participación.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** questionar algumas abordagens da teoria clássica sobre Políticas Públicas (PP) que ignoram os contextos, interesses e práticas dos sistemas políticos atuais e cuja superação poderia otimizar o benefício social da gestão. **Metodologia:** uma reflexão interpretativa e crítica foi feita sobre o fenômeno social das PP; para isso, recorreremos à análise de alguns dos argumentos da teoria política clássica de maior difusão no discurso oficial, os quais foram contrastados com o contexto, os interesses e as práticas atuais dos sistemas políticos. A Reflexão enfocou, especificamente, cinco aspectos que têm sido propostos pela literatura para compreender a racionalidade e o desempenho das PP: os agentes, os contextos, os processos, os aspectos formais das PP e os resultados. **Resultados:** as PP são dispositivos de poder da modernidade tardia para controlar os recursos tangíveis e intangíveis da sociedade e, como tal, são aplicados por subgrupos em defesa de seus próprios interesses. Ao contrário do que o discurso oficial propõe, as PP nem sempre são decisões tomadas em favor de interesses públicos, mas expressões cambiantes de conflitos sociais entre grupos antagônicos, que lutam em benefício próprio. **Conclusões:** os contextos, interesses e práticas dos agentes políticos da PP nem sempre coincidem com os modelos teóricos atuais. Mais do que questões técnicas, as PP são questões políticas, cujos atributos essenciais surgem dos interesses particulares de seus defensores em contextos específicos. Propõe-se que a educação crítica e a ampla mobilização da população poderiam reverter os efeitos desiguais das PP e otimizar seu desempenho.

**Palavras-chave:** Política Pública; Política; Estado; Formulação de Políticas; Participação dos interessados

## Introduction

If analyzed from the interactions that occur between the members of a group, all social systems behave like political systems (Easton, 1969) (Gómez-Arias, 2018). To this respect, each political system develops its own set of symbolic and normative devices that maintain it and generate it (Althusser, 1989; Francisco, 2007; Marx, 1973; Nunes, 1963) and that determine both the ways of thinking and the individuals' practices. The components of the ideological superstructure of every society reflect the prevailing interests and values in each historical moment, but they do not always behave homogeneously and coherently. (Althusser, 1989; Daldal, 2014).

Today, most political systems consider that Public Policies (PPs) are one of the best ways that the government can solve priority problems. However, the confidence in PPs, both shared in public opinion and academic settings, matches the daily news of a world shaken by violence, social inequality, and environmental damage. It seems that PPs had a limited scope to deal with public interests (Buse, Mays and Walt, 2005; Pérez et al., 2006; Roth, 2018). To that, what are the possible conditions that contribute either to the success or failure of PPs?

The literature on this issue is notably vast. Assuming, as a starting point, that PPs constitute a good opportunity to handle and resolve issues of public interest, this reflection paper raises some questions to idealized theoretical models in relation to five complementary components that help with understanding PP rationality and performance: the formal issues, the actors, the contexts, the processes, and the results (Walt, 1994a). However, as noted by the nature of the political process, these components are not always explicit or easily verifiable in practice, and in most cases mostly their characteristics are interpreted by those involved through their own ideological perspectives.

### Formal configuration of PPs as control devices

The formal aspects refer to the structure assumed by PP; that is, the theoretical conception that defines its scope and its formal structure as legal, administrative, and bureaucratic which is usually given to this type of device. In many social scenarios, including the academic ones, PPs are formally introduced as rational alternatives that neutral political leaders assu-

me for the benefit of the general community and thus materialize in legal and administrative acts. This notion, which is reflected in the first scholars of classical political theory, (Lasswell, 1936, 1948, 1951, Lindblom, 1991; Meny and Thoenig, 1992) is very interesting, yet it is also ideological and far from reality.

Although all political systems have used their own control mechanisms throughout history, PPs are indeed a distinctive type of political device that was developed in late modernity to control both the tangible and the intangible resources of society (Gómez-Arias, 2012). Thus, PPs must be analyzed in relation to power because of its essential condition as a political device (Walt, 1994a). For this, it is necessary to begin by pointing out how power is understood and its relationship with PPs.

Power is neither an abstract matter nor an object to be acquired or lost, and, therefore, it cannot be monopolized by a single individual. Power is a feature that manifests in all social relations by imposing its hallmark on human experiences (Foucault, 1979a; 1988, Foucault, 1976). Power creates a complex and changeable network that, although not always explicit, is effective and functions to mandate the life of the group, and to ensure its reproduction and survival. Through this, it is able to produce pleasure, suffering, and death. (Foucault, 1979a).

Power is exerted in at least four different ways: domination, submission, resistance, and cooperation. These appear in different types of interactions, meanings, and material resources that compose power devices and allow individuals to relate politically (García, 2011; Gómez-Arias, 2012b, 2018). Throughout history, political agents have used multiple devices to exert their influence over groups. These devices include the use of physical force, alliances, knowledge, and language as well as legal, administrative, customary, and moral regulations. (Gómez-Arias, 2012b, 2018; Restrepo-Ochoa, 2015). Each political system develops and adapts its own devices.

The role of the PP is, in itself, a relatively recent political device. It appears in the first half of the XX century as a set of guidelines issued by the State to solve public interest matters. Basically, this form articulates two notions that break with the individualist tradition of liberal democracies. Firstly, it assumes confidence that the State's political system acts as a competent agent to intervene and regulate the lives of the people. Secondly, it recognizes the existence of the public as a sphere of interests which transcends the individuals as a whole and whose protection is also the State's responsibility.

These two relatively new conditions clash with the State's previous understanding. Since the independence of the United States and the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie in the power had implemented a minimal laissez faire State in harmony with the principles proposed by the fathers of liberalism (Hobbes, 1982; Locke, 2003; Smith, 1776), whose responsibility was limited to guaranteeing individual liberties and militarily ensuring the direction of the market.

This model operated in the majority of liberal regimes until the mid-twentieth century with the Great Depression of the 1930s and the post-war crisis when capitalism faced one of its worst crises. This situation allowed for the recognition of the State's regulatory capacity to intervene in matters that were previously considered to be private but were soon to be deemed public affairs (Gómez-Arias, 2016, 2012; Gonzalez, 2008; Parmet, Goodman and Farber, 2005; Restrepo-Ochoa, 2015). The international political system was reorganized to overcome the market crisis, and those in power decided to strengthen the role of the State as a regulatory agent and an administrator of resources. It was in this period that the classical theory of public policy was developed (Lasswell, 1936, 1948, 1951; Lindblom, 1991; Meny and Thoenig, 1992), and PP were assumed as the set of technical decisions that oriented the State's management of public resources.

The classic approach to public policies is not an issue that is out of the blue. It arises from the crisis of the previous model, and, although the ideologues of the new interventionist model recognize the need to strengthen the regulatory capacity of the State through mandatory guidelines, they strive to preserve the orthodox foundations of capitalism, especially in terms of securing private property, individual rights, and freedom of commerce. In this regard, interventionist States did not set out to regulate markets as socialist countries did, rather they redirected resources towards improving consumption and protecting the liberal ideology from the communism threat. As a political device, these were its central objectives (Villasana, Gómez-Arias and DeVos, 2018).

Basically, the classic role of public policies developed within the framework of the Keynesian model and protected the orthodox concept of capitalism, which considers the State as a necessary evil that is dangerous for business and should be responsible just for securing individual liberties and the market arrangement. Its size should be reduced to the minimum. In any case, capitalism's crisis was so deep that economic groups had to reluctantly accept contrary proposals to the liberal market which instead

strengthened the regulatory capacity of the State turning it into a resource administrator, a responsible agent for the needs of the population, and a resource equipped with tools for the service of public interests.

Despite its heretical character, the Roosevelt and Keynes proposals achieved their purpose and not only saved the markets in crisis but also gave rise to what some authors call the golden age of capitalism (Gough, 1982, 2007).

Between the 40s and 80s, public policies became trendy in the West as a strategy for economic salvation and overcoming poverty. In European countries at that time, the Keynesian States understood well-being in terms of an increase in the consumption of goods and services, channeling the economic resources so that the markets were reactivated. Money flowed back to cities in ruins, capitalism recovered, wealth was concentrated rapidly in a few hands, and the social crisis in the great powers was becoming a distant memory.

Based on the previous scenario, this paper questions some theoretical issues that conceal the practice of public policies and whose improvement could increase the social benefit of management. The results of this reflection are focused in relation to development of public policies through the expansion of Keynesian States.

## Methodology

An interpretive and critical reflection was made about the social phenomenon of public policies. For this, we resorted to the analysis of some issues from the fundamental theoretical perspectives on the subject such as the original sources on which this reflection was based.

This study focused specifically on five aspects that help to understand the rationality and performance of PPs. This includes the formal aspects, the actors, the contexts, the processes, and the results (Walt, 1994a).

To support the theoretical concepts promoted by the official discourse, reference was made to classical authors and other sources that describe their contributions. The reflections are based on the postulates of the critical theory that emphasizes the importance of valuing knowledge from social contexts and the transforming capacity of praxis (Habermas, 1987).

## Results

It was found that in many social scenarios, including academic, Public Policies are introduced as technocratic options that political leaders assume neutrally and rationally for the benefit of people. Although this concept is very interesting, it is ideological and far from reality. PPs are political devices that were developed in late modernity to control both the tangible and the intangible resources of society, and, as such, they are administered by different subgroups in defense of their own interests. Unlike the aim of the official discourse, PPs are not always decisions made in favor of public interests, rather they are changeable expressions of social conflicts between antagonistic groups fighting for their own benefit.

The formula for public policies also reached the colonies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. However, the conditions were very different in these regions. The concentration of wealth and the structural exploitation of the population was deeply rooted in the history of the region, and it is not merely overcome by State planning. The political elites, protective of their ancestral privileges, resorted to military coups and repressive devices in the majority of the countries.

In this regard, several authors consider that in Latin America there were not absolute welfare states like those found in Europe. (Castles et al., 2010; Fleury, 2017). On the contrary, policies focused on strengthening military and repressive devices (warfare state) (Villasana, et al., 2018), and education was limited to training the workforce for basic economic production.

In the mid-1980s, capitalism strengthened in the northern hemisphere; the interventionist State had fulfilled its function of removing itself from the crisis. The owners of capital then discovered that public goods and services constituted the great business of the 21st century: energy, drinking water, communications, health, education ... what human being can live without them? However, there was a major problem with these resources; they belonged to the welfare State that capitalism itself had strengthened to overcome the crisis. Under the Washington Consensus and with the support of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the North American Government, the political agenda changed direction. It was not about strengthening the State but weakening it and divesting it from its social responsibilities so that they are managed by private agents with market criteria (Llistar, 2002).



The new guideline, issued by economic groups, ordered governments to return to the orthodoxy of a minimalist State which was limited to the protection of individual privileges and the safeguarding of the market arrangement. For the ideologues of the reform, the State must be reduced since it is corrupted and inefficient by nature unlike markets whose management is essentially more efficient, agile, and better quality.

This economic and social paradigm called Neoliberalism has spread throughout the world since the 1990s, dismantling welfare States and their management model. PPs changed their objectives and strategies and focused on ensuring the payment of debt owed by governments, dismantling welfare States, collecting broad-based taxes, and delivering public goods and services to the private sector. This is the sector that, in the future, shall be responsible for selling these services and goods to those users who require them.

The political strategies used by the neoliberal model are not always explicit, but this does not imply that they are not effective. For example, to privatize public goods, it is enough for governments to cut the budgets of the State sector by arguing fiscal discipline. The budget cut policies ensure that things do not work and the annoyances of people are used as an excuse to weaken the state and transfer resources to the private sector.

In Latin America, the neoliberal policies of decentralization and privatization dismantled precarious democracies, fragmented public management, weakened the regulatory capacity of the State, segmented the population with market criteria, transformed citizens into customers, and converted public services and goods into profitable goods. (Arias, 2009; Escalante, 2016; Navarro, 2004a, 2004b). In the new economic and political context imposed by neoliberalism, the people should no longer turn to the State to respond to their welfare. Rather, they should turn to private agencies that supply gas, energy, water, health, and education.

On its behalf, the State, fragmented and weakened by constitutional and administrative reforms, became a modulating intermediary between the population and the economic agents and became limited to guaranteeing individual privileges, public order, and free competition among private agents. Once the State ceases to directly administer the resources, those public policies, previously focused on collective well-being, lose prominence with respect to guidelines focused on commercial treaties, the contracting of public works, concessions to the private sector, protection of intellectual property, and regulation of taxes. Additionally, the States are assuming the administrative paradigms of the private sector that value interventions based on efficiency (Andrisani, Hakim and Savas, 2002).

## The political agents

PPs are the result of human activity, and this also deserves reflection. According to the Aristotelian tradition, Western culture usually defines human beings as rational animals (Aristóteles, 2006, García, 2009). This concept is promoted by academia and widely spread among common people. It has exerted a profound influence on the technical literature that usually conceives the management of policies as an eminently rational and neutral process that occurs in an orderly cyclical manner.

In this same line of thinking, analysts generally refer to decision makers as rational agents who rely on the information available, weigh options according to the public, and then make the best decision. Moving away from this perspective, authors like Walt have questioned the rationality of political decision-makers by arguing that policies are the result of conflicting processes where agents confront each other's interests and decisions (Walt, 1994a; Walt, et al., 2008).

Aristotelian rationalism introduced two great misunderstandings in the comprehension of social processes. The first being that it does not give a good account of the anthropological understanding of Aristotle himself, who also defines human beings as political animals. He highlights with this characteristic that, due to its essentially social nature, all people influence others and are continuously influenced by them throughout their life for good or for bad in pursuit of their motivations (Aristotle, 2006).

The relation established by Aristotle among reason, politics, and ethics is complex and exceeds the aims of this paper. Suffice it to say, however, that these dimensions do not always fit together and that not every human decision is reasonable nor does it conform to ethical principles. The traditional emphasis on the rationality of human beings also clashes with the advances of psychology in the understanding of human motivations and how decisions are made. In particular, the psychoanalytic current has relativized the role of the rational sphere in decision making which usually derives from drivers and forces unknown by the same individuals (Dasuky and Muñiz, 2011).

The rationality of power has also been analyzed by Foucault. According to him, power is not an acquired or lost object. Instead, it is an essential component of the social dynamic that permeates and characterizes human experiences (Foucault, 1976) through shaping a complex and changeable network of interactions that are not always explicit but are effective. This

in turn determines the life of the group, ensures their reproduction and survival, and generates in their wake pleasure, suffering, and death for one another (Foucault, 1979a). In the opinion of this author, all power generates a knowledge that legitimates and naturalizes society (Foucault, 1979b, 1988, 1992). It would then be a mistake to say that politicians always lie. Most of the time, what they do is to serve as a sounding board for an imposed knowledge through the political system and that they repeat because it suits them to a greater or lesser degree. The arguments cited in the previous paragraphs make it necessary to distrust the simplistic arguments that support the management of PPs in its explicit rationality.

Another usual argument in the literature shows political agents as neutral decision makers who operate technically in favor of public interests (Fontaine, 2015). In this regard, country leaders usually prided themselves on including officials of high technical quality in their cabinet which asserts to the population the neutrality of the government and the success of PP. This argument deserves to be looked into with caution. It is possible for a technician to succeed as a politician, yet both conditions are independent and do not necessarily go hand in hand.

Additionally, political confrontations usually demand personal characteristics from politicians that are independent of professional training. These characteristics include astuteness, leadership, negotiating skills, and an equivocal handling of language that presents and hides the facts at their convenience. The majority of the most influential politicians in recent history coincide with the ideas of Machiavelli (1999), von Clausewitz (sf) and Sun-Tzu (2003) even though they have not studied their texts in depth. On the other hand, it should be considered that the skill and knowledge of the technicians constitute a very strong support of the management, and, for that reason, they are usually manipulated by politicians (Walt 1994a; 1994b). Although, the former often do not realize it.

Now, the fact that technicians become agents and political agents would also require reconsidering the training that professionals receive in relation to political dynamics and how knowledge is managed in society. In other words, a professional training capable of contributing to social development should not be limited to training in technological techniques or in the generation of economically profitable interventions.

Another issue that deserves careful analysis refers to the potential neutrality of political agents. Unlike what the official discourse proposes, PPs are not always decisions made in defense of public interests but, rather, changeable expressions of social conflicts between antagonistic groups that fight for their benefit. More than technical issues subjected to the

rationality of science, PPs are political devices applied by different sub-groups in defense of their own interests (Walt, 1994b) and whose essential characteristic comes absolutely from such interests. These interests are not always explicit, easily identifiable, or publicly recognized by the agents themselves even though they play a fundamental role in the formation of political groups and in the development of the political agenda. As stated by Walt's, the particular interests of agents are key to the political process (Walt, 1994a).

Political agents do not behave like a homogeneous group either; in the light of their particular interests, they differentiate among themselves and elaborate their own conception of the problems and actions that they deem most appropriate as a solution. The subjectivity of these conceptions occurs in all political agents, left or right, in that they all behave as social agents influenced by their environment (Buse et al.2005). From this observation, the importance of strengthening public debates and making them accessible to the common people is understandable. This is not always possible in a globalized world where the ownership of the media has been concentrated in the same groups that rule State.

Since they assumed power in the French Revolution, liberal thinkers confer great value to individualities. In defense of this principle, their ideologists propose that power is distributed throughout society between different groups competing for the rights of their interests, without any of them in particular holding absolute power. This conceptual model, which is called pluralism, also assumes that the State's role is to act as a neutral arbitrator or intermediary (Buse et al., 2005). Pluralism can be a very convenient argument to legitimize the imperfections of current democracies and their markets, but this is far from reflecting the reality since certain groups have historically concentrated the control of power devices to compete with the rest of the population, and they control the State as a device in favor of their own interests.

The ideological conception of the State as a neutral arbiter is also naive, to say the least. In any society, the State is and has always been a political device and, as such, has been at the service of the groups that control it, no matter their tendency. This does not mean that the elites entirely control the political system. In every historical moment, contradictions and conflicts emerge to make society more dynamic and thus force the hegemonic groups to rethink their strategies. Particularly in Latin America, it is difficult to talk of a neutral State when a small number of families have maintained political control since the colonization and increasingly

concentrated social resources. In the same sense, no matter how uncomfortable State control is for the elites, it is ambitious to expect that they will entirely eliminate it. In the globalized world, for example, the accelerated concentration of wealth requires capitalism to have strong central States to defend the interests of the elites, particularly the concentration of wealth and private property.

Political agents also differ in their interests and in their ability to influence the behavior of other agents. The latter ultimately depends on their access to power devices specifically the availability of economic resources, the degree of organization of their group, physical strength, and the information and position in the social structure among others (Buse et al., 2005; Dente and Subirats, 2014). In any case, access to economic resources provides political agents with access to other control devices.

According to the previous questions, we should ask ourselves if the participatory democracy that defends itself is capable of resisting the pressures of the minority subgroups that concentrate wealth. In this regard, the decisive protection of political plurality which responds to the essentially diverse nature of society could also be considered as one of the most valuable legacies of unfinished Modernity.

### **The global context of Public Policies**

Political agents do not operate without basis; their interests and power devices emerge and cover specific contexts that determine their scope (Buse et al., 2005). In a global world separated by profound social inequities, the PP context becomes increasingly complex. However as an expression of an expanding neoliberal model, the PPs that have been applied since 1980 bear the undeniable stamp of the Washington Consensus, multilateral organizations, and transnational organizations (Arias, 2009; Escalante, 2016; Navarro, 2004b; Villasana et al., 2018). Subjugated by the concentration of capital in a few hands, local political systems have been progressively weakening with respect to the economic powers of the core (OXFAM International, 2015, 2017), whose headquarters are placed in industrialized countries and in tax havens that are protected from the public eye and social control.

Thus, trapped in the flood of powerful transnational guidelines that seem to come from everywhere, the local political agents must deal with both structural and current conditions (Dente and Subirats, 2014). These

conditions modify their individual interests and their capacity to influence others, and those following the guidelines imposed by the banks could cope much better.

### **The political process as a confrontation of interests**

With respect to the idealized classical conception, PP management tends to present itself as a linear, repetitive, continuous, and rational process able to harmonize and organize the actions of political agents that is called the policy cycle (Meny and Thoenig, 1992; Roth, 2018). This perspective also deserves a critical analysis. The policy cycle can be regarded as a didactic and simplifying metaphor, yet it does not reflect the complexity of a multiform, variable, heterogeneous, iterative, and conflictive process that is often unpredictable and not always explicit.

When accounting for the political process that is explicitly or implicitly imposed on the group, technical literature often uses euphemistic expressions such as power game and decision making (Lindblom, 1959, 1964; Subirats, 2001). These terms are also depoliticized and do not reflect well the struggles between groups with conflicting interests that are common in all societies and conceal the conflictive character of political interactions. Political struggle is far from being a game and does not refer to decisions made in the calmness of sea.

Recognizing that social dynamics are conflictive by nature (Walt, 1994a; Subirats, 2001) does not imply ignoring the value of the political processes. On the contrary, assuming that the management of PP is a dynamic and conflictive process, a scenario closer to reality is configured which forces interaction, dialogue, and reaching a consensus regardless of how difficult it may seem. In the end, the challenge posed by the conflict is neither technical nor rational. It is ethical, and it depends on the value that all political agents confer on their own interests and the interests of others.

Another issue of careful reflection refers to the conditions that allow people to exert real control over the decisions governing the crucial issues of any society. The participatory democracy that encourages political participation was one of the flags of bourgeois revolutionaries of the eighteenth century and liberal regimes spread throughout the world as one of the foundations of the state of law (Rousseau, 1999). However, from its very formulation, Rousseau warned that participatory democracy would

not work if the education of citizens was not previously ensured (Rousseau, 1999, 2000).

Recent experiences show that public opinion consulted at the polls can make profound mistakes when citizens have been misinformed by their leaders and do not have a clear conscience about the consequences of their choice. The rejection of peace in the Colombian plebiscite in 2017, the Brexit in England, and Trump's triumph in the United States could be examples of the consequences of consulting a public opinion manipulated by the hegemonic groups. It is not about simple rhetoric. History teaches that one cannot trust in the power of the ballot box until the political education of citizens is ensured. Additionally, the legal norms that govern citizen participation and define their real scope (who, how, when and what for to participate) are usually formulated by the elites for their own benefit. In countries like Colombia, it usually takes the form of a dead letter that does not find an effective support from politicians.

Knowledge is a very powerful resource not only in the social and economic fields but also as a political device whose application allows for protection, subjugation, manipulation, and extermination ... but also for production, creation, liberation, and humanization. For this reason, all political systems, since ancient times, have been careful to control it through different strategies. This involves the set of resources and actions carried out by individuals and groups to generate, disseminate, value, adapt, legitimize, and apply the knowledge in order to support social practices (RCIPS, 2009).

Many of today's governments seem to strengthen education and back their claims in budget allocations. However, the key to knowledge management really lies in its objectives. In the neoliberal context, knowledge is perceived as a resource to ensure economic productivity and as a commodity with variable returns in different markets. It is not strange then that intellectual property, which privatizes information, knowledge, and innovations, has become the pillar of international agreements on trade. In this way, a large portion of the population cannot access the required knowledge. This is a key element in the political process: educating the population to become a qualified labor resource is very different from educating it for democracy and, without this condition, it is very difficult to defend free and informed social participation.

The fact that the elites who control the political systems are interested in maintaining the status quo does not prevent them from taking on reforms when the facts or the pressure of the others involved forces them

to do so. In this case, they usually apply changes that do not depart much from the previous order, a process that has been described as incremental changes (Lindblom, 1959, 1964) and whose magnitude depends on the pressure exerted on political agents. On one hand, this concept illustrates the predominantly conservative nature of policies, something that is masked from rationalist perspectives. Whereas on the other hand, it shows the importance of opposition forces in a heterogeneous society historically subjected to inequality.

### **The PP change of form**

PPs are control devices materialized in different ways. The formal aspects refer to the appearance or material structure assumed by the PP and are expressed both in the symbolic and conceptual foundations that define its scope and in its formal legal, administrative, ideological and bureaucratic structure. During the boom of interventionist models, the State was considered not only responsible for solving the needs of the population, but also recognized as the legitimate administrator of public resources; in this context, the PP assumed administrative forms led by governments, which privileged legal regulation, normative planning, the technification of public management and the strengthening of state institutions.

The advance of the neoliberal model since the nineties has profoundly modified the management of the PP; following the Washington Consensus and promoted by the large transnational economic groups, the state has weakened and the PP have derived in ways compatible with unregulated competitive markets: the legal provisions are strengthened in terms of the defense of private property and individual liberties, but weaken in relation to social aspirations and the rights of employees; State management assumes the form of efficiency-oriented private management (New Public Management); the management of public goods is delivered to the private sector through contracts and concessions; unified planning leads to management by projects, fragmented production units that are carried out by private agencies but paid for with public resources; the state bureaucracy responsible for control is being dismantled because it is considered too expensive; and the mandatory state guidelines become guidelines that benefit the most powerful groups (Gómez-Arias, 2012).



## **How effective are Public Policies?**

PPs evaluators tend to focus on their results which could justify or reject their implementation (Feinstein, 2007; Gertler et al., 2011; Pawson, 2002). In this respect, at least two aspects should be considered: the expected exchange rate and the possibility of solving complex problems through unique interventions. Very often, the multiple results of the political process are not directly related to the explicit objectives; some of them, and usually the most important ones, could respond more to individual interests than what their own promoters keep hidden (Walt, 1994a).

A government weakened or forced to expand its electorate at all costs can invent an external enemy and introduce itself to public opinion as the defender of society. The observers will focus on the results of the national defense and the annihilation of the adversary through undervaluing the real interests of the promoters. After the transformation of the subsidies to the state's supply and demand, the explicit interest of the evaluators could focus on the impact on the consumption of services and ignore that the underlying political intentionality was to derive public resources from private intermediaries, which is a result that is often disguised. Finally, it is increasingly difficult to accept the effectiveness of singular and sectoral interventions with respect to structural social problems that involve diverse agents and require deep political reorganizations.

## **Conclusions**

PPs constitute a very interesting proposal to solve problems of public interest. Although, its performance may depend on technical processes of legal and administrative nature, it is mainly the result of certain political conditions of contexts and social agents that are not always explicit. That is, the power that the international and local elites have accumulated over the political devices, the control exercised by economic groups over the resources of the globalized world, and the current model of knowledge management that distorts the capacity of the population to understand public affairs and organize itself with respect to majoritarian interests.

This paper highlights the need to critically examine the conceptual foundations that are usually used in the management of PPs through contrasting their assumptions with the contexts and practices of the social agents. It is necessary to adopt a critical perspective with respect to the PP perspectives which are usually shared and defended through the official discourse. That is to say, the rationality and the neutrality of political agents, the advancement of participatory democracy limited by the vote, the supposed transparency of political processes, and the privilege of technical and formal aspects above those of the public interest.

These idealized concepts contrast with the real conditions of many countries where PPs are control devices developed by elites that, once elected, control the resources in favor of their own interests. To improve the performance of PPs, it may be important to better the education of the population with regards to citizenship, to conduct explicit and continuous public debates that encourage the public to be informed and to identify the hidden interests behind the PPs, and to strengthen spaces for organization and social mobilization related to collective interests.

highlighted The importance of promoting the education of the population in the exercise of citizenship is highlighted through explicit and permanent debates to help people get rid of misinformation and strengthen situations of social organization around collective interests.

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