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**Christopher M. WEIBLE & Paul CAIRNEY (Eds.),**  
*Practical Lessons from Policy Theories*

**Gaia Taffoni**

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## Book Review

### **Christopher M. WEIBLE & Paul CAIRNEY (Eds.), *Practical Lessons from Policy Theories***

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#### ***Practical Lessons from Policy Theories***

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Paul Cairney

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Weible, Christopher M., and Cairney, Paul (Eds.), Bristol University Press, 2021,  
228 p., ISBN 9781447359821. Hardback: £60.00; ePub: £21.59  
2021

The academic field of policy theory suffers from a rather common malaise: theories are not always translated into practical lessons, and they tend to produce work of limited practical relevance rather than cumulative and usable knowledge. This is the point of departure of the book edited by Christopher Weible and Paul Cairney. The authors recognize the problem of the siloization of theories and take on this challenge as they engage in translating policy theories into practical lessons. They do so with scholars from the field of public policy. The aim of this work, the editors explain, is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For this reason, the book is very much welcome, as it sets an agenda with the potential to reach theoretical fields beyond public policy. The work carried out by the authors is timely because, today more than ever, the complexity of social events and applied science that characterizes the policy process requires effective translations of theories into practical knowledge that can be used by policy makers.

In the opening and closing chapters the editors explain the purpose of the book, reflecting on and systematizing the practical lessons derived from policy theories. The central chapters are primarily focused on “making scholarly and practical sense of a different theoretical terrain” (p. 5). Prominent scholars in the field pull together a collection of theories that envisage the policy cycle as a dynamic process spanning from the power of persuasion, learning, participation and collective action. Moreover, the volume has the strength of giving space to cognitive and behavioral insights into the policy process. The contributions start from a review of the Multiple Stream Approach (MSA) applied to the politics of evidence-based policymaking (Cairney) in chapter 2, moving on to the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Crow and Jones) chapter 3, Cultural Theory (Simmons) chapter 4, Policy Learning (Dunlop and Radaelli) chapter 5, Institutional Collective Action (ICA) (Swann and Kim) chapter 6, Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) (Koski and Workman) chapter 7, Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) (Heikkilä and Andersson) chapter 8 and Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Weible and Ingold) chapter 9.

Each theoretical chapter covers a policy process theory in a very clear and understandable manner and provides practical points to help the audience make sense of the different perspectives analyzed. The edited volume culminates in the last chapter (chapter 10), which synthesizes all the lessons and typologizes them according to cognitive aspects; behavioral engagement and participation; public policy design, and governmental structure. In the first part of the last chapter, the editors engage in a work of synthesis that is extremely valuable because it pulls together the main lessons highlighting the relevance of each theory. Moreover, it includes tables that become very practical references easily read by policymakers, students and scholars navigating the policy processes.

The systematic nature of the last chapter in describing and synthesizing the lessons is not common to all theoretical chapters. While the book is surely set to bring relevance and clarity back to the academic track, it lacks homogeneity in the way practical lessons are described across the chapters. This is, perhaps, the book's only limitation and something that could be enhanced by the editors and the authors in future editions. That said, it must be acknowledged that some topics are, by nature, more suited to be translated into real-case scenarios than others.

The editors highlight an important challenge that they faced in their attempt to grasp the practical sense of policy theories. They argue that one obstacle is related to the jargon of the theoretical approaches that remains challenging despite the attempts to make them more accessible. Another issue is related to what it means to “draw lessons”. A risk one might encounter is that the push for clarity and relevance distorts or oversimplifies complex aspects. By address-

ing these issues, the editors make another very important contribution. Weible and Cairney state that theoretical approaches should help promote critical thinking and see the world from different perspectives and not simply explain what to do to influence a policy in a certain context. I find this point inspiring and worthy of reflection on the role of theories as “lenses” used to make sense of complexity.

The audience of the book may be divided into two groups. On the one hand, scholars, researchers, students, and all those with a background knowledge of the theories presented may find this book extremely useful as it helps to clarify intricacies. In this sense, the book is a real breath of fresh air for those studying complex theories such as Punctuated Equilibrium and Advocacy Coalition Framework. Practitioners, on the other hand, may find this book helpful to deepen their knowledge of the proposed practical lessons.

I believe that this book meets the aim of translating major theories of the policy process into practical take-away points. Scholars of public policy, students, and practitioners will all benefit from reading it. However, the strengths of the book go way beyond the translation efforts. As the editors state, given the complexity of the policy process, there are no easy solutions. I would add that this is another valuable contribution made by this book, namely the ability to make complex theories understandable without falling into the trap of oversimplification. Finally, the book should be commended for its reflection on the role of theories. Theories of the policy process are lenses through which to see the world and each theory accentuates a different aspect of a rather complex field, but together they create cumulative knowledge. In this sense, this volume makes a tremendous contribution in combining different insights and highlighting how these connections contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and invite more critical analysis.