



A Novelty on the Book Market?

A Review of the Volume

***Közpolitika (Public Policy)* by Barna Bodó
Cluj-Napoca: Scientia Publishing House, 2011**

SZÁSZ Zoltán Alpár

The volume about which one may rightly ask whether it is indeed a novelty or not on the book market is Barna Bodó's textbook on public policy. Of course, the expression book market should be interpreted not on a global, but on a much smaller scale such as the Hungarian book market, the Romanian book market or the Hungarian book market in Romania. In what concerns the Hungarian book market, three manuals and a reader have already been published. In Romania, a somewhat greater number of Romanian language publications have been issued as well. However, in what concerns the Hungarian language readership in Romania, the book is the first of its kind and it deserves to be written about even if it were a novelty only in this sense. However, in my short review I will try to show that it is innovative in other respects as well, at least in what concerns the three book markets considered thus far.

First of all, I deem the book a novelty because the topic it addresses is rather new for the Hungarian readership on both sides of the Hungarian–Romanian border. The volume itself draws attention to the fact that the concept of public policy has been imported to European political science from the other side of the Atlantic and, thus, has been dealt with to a lesser extent on the old continent. Moreover, in Hungary, it became known in the last decade only – initially by specialists and later on by a more general readership, too. Taking into account this state of affairs, the author adopted a maximalist approach and tried to include in his textbook as many aspects and topics connected to public policy and policy-making as possible.

The textbook starts with a personal interpretation of public policy as a set of possibilities or the art of rendering what is necessary feasible. In a modern world and under the circumstances of mass society, public policy means in rather general terms positive tasks to be fulfilled by the state as the *contents* of the political or administrative *process* – the focus being, as the author himself stresses, on administrative processes perceived as political ones and on their contents; instead of

institutions, procedures and actors as in the case of other political scientific disciplines. Nonetheless, as the next chapters of the book show, there are several ways of interpreting and defining public policy as there are several philosophies underpinning public policy and the policy process. This may be so because we speak of an inherently multidisciplinary field of study, which is oriented towards problems and tasks and is also normative in nature.

With regard to the multidisciplinary character of the subject matter, the author lived up to the challenge because he managed to write a book organised around a linear conception while being able to tackle the many ramifications and facets of the topic. From the table of contents one can glean the following guiding principle: in presenting the subject matter in textbook form – Bodó might argue – it is most appropriate to start with definitional and general theoretical matters in order to focus next on the individual building blocks of public policy and the policy process. The last chapters, though, reveal something about the author's identity as a political scientist. He has always been puzzled and attracted by normative issues, hence, a field like public policy involving choices between sometimes competing values and also ethical, philosophical considerations is a natural choice of topic for him. These considerations are present at the end of the book as are two rather pragmatic questions as well: local public policy and public policy in the European Union, a signal that local and regional policy within the frames of the European Union also feature among the author's interests.

As a textbook, the work stands out because of its multifaceted nature. The author chose to delve into many related fields of study, as well as many streams, strands and schools of political science. All of them are thoroughly treated from the point of view of the history of political and social science. On this basis, he builds a rich and solid theoretical grounding for the manual itself, which is often illustrated with well-crafted empirical examples. The language is always clear and understandable not only by students of the social sciences, but by a more general readership, too. Of particular importance are definitions and illustrations of concepts, phenomena and processes. In an Anglo-Saxon textbook, the publisher would have opted for boxes. This manual uses fine print for this purpose – but this solution also sets these inserts apart from the main argument, which is particularly helpful. This style of compiling and drafting a textbook is another novelty, at least on the Hungarian language book market in Romania.

Last but not least, the author presents a topic, which is well-established in Western scientific and political culture. In Western Europe, it is commonplace to judge the performance of a cabinet through the effectiveness and efficiency of the policies they pursue. In other words, 'public policy' means a set of more or less systematic responses given by the government to a set of social problems. It represents the manner in which their political vision and programme is converted into daily measures in order to achieve necessary changes affecting – and, hopefully, improving – people's lives.

The manner how this is done is described in detail in this book, since it introduces the vision underpinning public policy and the basic elements thereof – such as its definition, the main actors and tools, as well as the policy process and its functioning, that is, the way in which public policy is made and implemented as a result of various

interactions between political actors, individual and group interests, and value judgments made by civic organisations and individual citizens. Apart from its undeniable theoretical merits, the book is partly practically oriented in the sense that it also suggests techniques of making and carrying out public policies. Thus, it may represent a useful reading not only for students, but for persons active in the public sector as well, particularly people who wish to be involved in making and implementing public policies as managers of public service providers, representatives in municipal councils or leaders of civic organisations. Nonetheless, any interested reader who simply cares to better understand the manner in which decisions in public matters affecting her/his life are made and have an impact on her/him may find the book interesting and full of lessons to be learned.