Aesthetic Policy

DONNA H. KERR

Bruised by brutal barrages of "prioritizing," "thruputs," "finalizing," "satisficing," and "action originations," the aesthetically sensitive person turns away, understandably, when talk of policy commences. It is by now a banality that, as examples of language at work, discussions surrounding policy decisions and even the very statements of policies wax inelegant, if not plain abrasive. And yet, notwithstanding their commonly tacky cloaks, policies can serve elegantly in the creation of social orders and artificial environments. Whether our social order and environment shall be aesthetically sound depends, I believe, upon the willingness of aesthetically sensitive persons to join policy discussions for the purpose of influencing policy decisions.

I present this paper as an invitation to the aesthetically sensitive to attend to the possibility of aesthetic policy. To the contemplative skeptic, I respond, nay: this paper does not issue a rallying call to galvanize the reflective into action. Where the paper draws attention to opportunities for action, it is framed not as an exhortation, but as a hypothetical "if-then" — if we are interested in pursuing aesthetic utopia, then we ought to.... To the action-minded skeptic, again I respond, nay: my intent is not to offer just another way to understand the world. Rather, my concern is to try to understand how a world shaped by policies might be reformed in an aesthetically felicitous direction. To that end, I offer (1) some remarks on the nature of policy, (2) a discussion of what might constitute aesthetic utopia, (3) a cursory exploration of potential loci for aesthetic policies, and (4) some remarks on the pragmatics of influencing policy.

THE NATURE OF POLICY

To understand what sense there might be in considering the possibility of aesthetic policy, let us first focus on the concept 'policy.' I offer

DONNA H. KERR *is associate professor of education at the University of Washington. She has published in* Educational Theory, Policy Sciences, *and* Pedagogische Studien, *and is the author of* Educational Policy: Analysis, Structure, and Justification. *In 1977 she was designated as a Spencer Fellow by the National Academy of Education.*

0021-8510/78/0100-0005 $1.60/0

my remarks not as a strict analysis of the concept,[1] but as a reflection on 'policy' as analogous to an art form and as a vehicle for pursuing aesthetic utopia.

Designs for buildings, statues in stone, and landscapes in watercolor appear not by nature's fiat, but by the doings of persons. Likewise, policies are born not as presentations of nature, but as human artifices. That policies are doings, rather than undergoings, is perhaps commonly obscured by the feeling one often has of undergoing or being subjected to policies.[2] But one undergoes a policy only in the sense that one undergoes another's work of art. If someone had not made the policy, the policy could not exist. Moreover, without the element of human action, policy would be inconceivable.

A doing, such as dancing or sculpting, cannot be of just any sort and still count as art. Whether studied or spontaneous, the doing must take form or establish order. Likewise, whether made with careful deliberation or with little forethought, a policy imposes order. And much as the "materials" of dancing and sculpting limit the means for creating order, so policymaking has intractable features: the policy's creator must *obligate someone* to take *action* of a particular description whenever *conditions* of a particular class occur. For example, the Federal Communications Commission might obligate its licensing board to deny a license to any television station that fails to follow FCC guidelines for children's television programming. Further, much as a person must possess physical abilities to be able to perform a particular dance or to sculpt, so one must possess political abilities to be able to make any particular policy. To obligate someone to take a particular action, one must have the relevant authority; e.g., for a legislature to make a policy that obligates curriculum boards of public schools to include art classes in the basic curriculum, the legislature must have the authority to so obligate the curriculum boards. To make a particular policy, then, one must be appropriately placed in the governance structure or hierarchy of jurisdiction.

The analogy between art forms and policy suggestively extends to the features of art objects or performances that are conducive to aesthetic perception or appreciation. By following the patterns in time and space, we are able not only to perceive individual movements as parts of a whole dance, but also to anticipate movements. In like manner, the structure of a particular policy enables us not only to understand individual actions as parts of larger wholes, but also to anticipate future actions. In some regards, though, the analogy breaks down. When we

follow an art performance, to some extent we accept (and even delight in) the unanticipated. But when we are following a policy performance, surprises offend, for they signal breaches of obligation, i.e., inappropriate capriciousness, arbitrariness, inconsistency. It does not matter whether we think art instruction ought to be funded as a part of the basic curriculum; if it is the state's *policy* to so fund art instruction and if, contrary to that policy, the state withholds financial support, the surprise offends us, for in making the policy the state granted us, the relevant public, a *right* to expect actions specified by the policy.

Whether the analogy misleads when we consider the purposes of art and policy hinges on what one considers to be the proper role of art in society. Only if we take the revolutionary view of the purpose of art can the analogy be sustained, for an essential virtue of policy is that it makes possible the systematic, collective pursuit of goals.[3] But to carry out the program of this paper, I shall neither take the revolutionary view of art as an instrument for pursuing social or political goals nor commit the discussion to any other way of casting the function of art in society. Instead, I shall treat policies as social and political instruments for pursuing aesthetic utopia. Policies which are instrumental in our pursuit of aesthetic utopia, I shall call *aesthetic policies*. (Throughout the paper, care should be taken not to confound the making of aesthetic policies with the having of aesthetic experiences.)

If we were to limit our dreams or goals to those that could be achieved by whimsical choices and disjointed, sporadic efforts, then we would have no need for policies. And, to be sure, policies are not always appropriate. When hiking alone, I never want my decision to stop and marvel at the delicacy of an alpine lily to be decided by appeal to some policy. If, at the moment when I see the lily, I want to linger, then that is exactly what I shall do. In the matter of hiking, lilies, and me, policies are inappropriate. But if we alter the scenario from a description of choice in a strictly personal space to choice in a social space, policies seem more appropriate. If, for example, the alpine ecosystems cannot survive if too many hikers traverse the terrain, then a *policy* may fit the bill — a policy, for example, that places an upper limit on numbers of hikers per season. If a choice regards common purposes and if deliberate, sustained, systematic action is required to serve those purposes, a policy is clearly appropriate.

Policy thus provides an escape from social chaos, but not the only escape. Habits, customs, and mores acquired and perpetuated by social osmosis, and so never deliberately chosen, also to some extent order our

actions. Only when we choose to pursue rationally our visions of better worlds do we require policies. Whether our choice of rational pursuit of goals is occasioned by social and technological change, by natural disaster, or simply by new understandings, policies hold a clear advantage over customs and other habitual patterns of behavior, for they call for deliberate invention of means tailored to desired ends.[4] The next step, an argument in favor of making policies whenever they are appropriate, rests on the premise that our actions, no matter how well or ill considered, in fact shape our world. About cause and effect we have no choice. Therefore, we might as well design policies that can shape our actions into systematic pursuit of our best dreams.

As vehicles for pursuing our dreams, policies are unsurpassed in their organic wholeness. Their structure allows the very best (both that we ought to want and that we know) to be brought to bear in action. An analytic way to display the richness of opportunity for bringing our best moral and scientific knowledge to bear is to "factor" a policy proposal into component propositions that, if true, render the policy justifiable.[5]

The desirability proposition:	The goal of the policy is desirable.
The effectiveness proposition:	The means are likely to achieve the goal.
The justness proposition:	The means are just.
The tolerability proposition:	The side effects of the means are tolerable, given the worth of the goal.

Support for the *desirability* proposition requires that we appeal to some shared view of what constitutes the good. Any demonstration of the *effectiveness* of the policy candidate must be grounded in empirical evidence. The *justness* test can be passed only if appeals to what is right show that the means are not unjust. Finally, the *tolerability* proposition requires both an empirical test (what are the likely side effects?) and an appeal to a shared vision of the good (on balance, are the anticipated outcomes desirable?).

We do seem to take more or less seriously the opportunity to bring our empirical knowledge to bear; witness the plethora of *ad hoc* empirical studies to inform policy decisions regarding school closures, highway construction, and automobile design, but note also the failure of federal agencies (e.g., the National Institute of Education) to be properly funded for and dedicated to basic research. And we do seem to take more or less seriously the opportunity to bring to bear our rules and principles for just action. The last two hundred years have been

especially notable for our interest in civil rights, but also notable is the preponderance of strictly legal-rights arguments, almost to the exclusion of appropriate appeals to moral or human rights.

The structure of policy also presents an opportunity for bringing our aesthetic sense to bear. Perhaps we have failed to take seriously the opportunity, because we have failed to notice it. If aesthetic values and visions are worth anything to us, then we should ask not only whether a considered goal is morally desirable, but also whether it is aesthetically desirable; not only are the means just, but also can we conceive of more aesthetic, yet just means? And finally, should we not consider the aesthetic effects of the proposed policy, as well as its economic and moral costs?[6] In spite of economic retrenchment, *must* the new wing of the hospital, the school, the bank be a barren concrete block? Even though we evidently value free enterprise, *must* highways from Route 1 to Route 99 be lined with visual chaos and cacophony? *Must* our duty to teach knowledge, skills, and values to the young for their full participation as citizens under the Constitution *preclude* our attending to their development as "discerning percipients?"[7]

Of course, many aesthetically sensitive persons do raise such questions. My point is twofold. First, such questions must be raised as part of policy deliberation if they are to be brought to bear on policy decisions. To bemoan aesthetically unfortunate aspects of the world we create without addressing those persons or agencies that have the authority to initiate or change the relevant policy is to scatter our energies to the wind. Second, to promote aesthetic purposes without a shared concept of aesthetic utopia is to misunderstand the essentially social nature of policy. Without a shared vision of the general outline of political and moral utopia, we lack grounds for deciding how to interact, as well as grounds for policies regulating our interactions. Indeed, well-developed visions of political and moral utopia pervade the history of the Western world. But, as far as I know, we lack systematic considerations of what might constitute aesthetic utopia. I wish to suggest not that we foolishly convince ourselves that utopias are achievable, but that, without a vision of the ideal aesthetic world, we shall have no rational basis for aesthetic policy, for we shall not know in what direction to head.