Christopher Pollitt: Lessons and Memories

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It was a great privilege yet with sadness that I was persuaded by the Editor of this journal to write these 'in memoriam' notes about Professor Christopher Pollitt. He was a colleague who contributed to so many disciplines, including not only evaluation, but also public management, comparative public policy and political science. I must therefore first explain to the reader where my observations and memories come from and the intent behind this piece.

I am a political scientist and public policy scholar rather than a professional evaluator, or university-based researcher intimately familiar with cutting-edge, forward looking debates on evaluation that this journal hosts. As well as drawing on his work I met Christopher Pollitt at conferences and at policy and governance related events at OECD giving me an opportunity to observe his distinctive professional stance at first hand. Thus, my memories of Christopher and the lessons I draw from his scholarly and professional work are coloured by my perspective as a social scientist living *near* the world of evaluation, but not within it. And perhaps this is a good point to start, because Christopher Pollitt was indeed someone who contributed to evaluation with a 360-degree vision. The vision for (and the analysis of) evaluation research we find in his work is anchored to a deep comparative understanding of policy processes, management reforms, and public organizations.

For me, Christopher Pollitt's first lesson is that evaluation and political science (broadly defined) need to learn from each other. The world of evaluation is the place where the debates on the ontology, causation, and outcomes of knowledge utilization have made considerable progress. Contrast this state of play within evaluation with the excessively abstract and indeterminate approach to ideas of most political scientists (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2018). At the same time, we cannot think of evaluation as a self-defined activity or task – we need to open up our peripheral vision to theories of the policy process – and on these theories political scientists have invested considerable intellectual energy (Weible and Sabatier 2017). Another remark: since the pioneering work of Carol Weiss, we know that evaluation research benefits from considering public organizations endogenous to its explanatory models, rather than looking at institutions as 'exogenous places' where the demand for evaluation appears. Here the immense scholarship of Professor Pollitt sheds light on how to 'endogenise' the political and administrative context, as well as pointing to deeply rooted of ideas about various variants of evaluation in reform paradigms such as the new public management.

Christopher was never content with simply saying that every social scientific enterprise (evaluation obviously being one) has to be situated in context. 'Context matters' is what most of us repeat every day in class and write in their articles. It has now perhaps become one of those platitudes that would make Christopher feel uneasy. In contrast, Christopher was one of the few who actually modelled context – and without having to go into too much abstraction. He did that in his famous comparative study of the new public management with Geert Bouckaert, where he modelled the political and administrative context in ingenious ways, suitable for comparative analysis. Some of Bouckaert and Pollitt's

contextual variables are classic (e.g., the administrative model, the level of centralization, and the executive government), but others are not conventional and seem to speak directly to the world of evaluators. I am thinking in particular of variables such as 'market for ideas and advice', 'horizontal coordination within government' and 'relations between mandarins and elected politicians' (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

After context comes the category of 'ideas'. The different ideas about different types of evaluations, such as appraisal, impact assessment, legislative evaluation and programme evaluation do not exist in vacuum. Sometimes they are nested in broader trajectories and narratives of governance and the reform of the public sector. Personally, I found it illuminating to reflect on the question whether the cross-national spread of regulatory impact assessment, typically studied within the rational choice framework of delegation and political control of the bureaucracy, isn't instead a late manifestation of the new public management (Radaelli and Meuwese 2009). Pollitt's lesson here is then to situate a policy instrument in its correct political-administrative context and relate it to its ideational origin – obviously without reducing evaluation to a residue or a manifestation of institutions and ideas, but making it the object of another layer of explanations and enquiries.

Indeed, Christopher was totally sceptical of the attempts to capture phenomena with slogan-type expressions like 'context matters' or 'good governance'. Many of us will smile, remembering how good Christopher was at gently taking a very popular concept, and showing with a delicately ironic prose its practical and scientific irrelevance, making it naked and void once reduced to its rhetorical shell.

He did this debunking job with the so-called 'agency fever' (Pollitt et al. 2011), 'convergence' (Pollitt 2001) and the 'magic concepts' we use to talk about government (Pollitt and Hupe 2011). The new public management as reform suited for a whole range of problems was of course another target of his irony and scepticism. Writing for a consultation exercise carried out by Nick Manning at the World Bank, he observed that:

> Big models, such as NPM or 'good governance' or 'partnership working', often do not take one very far. The art of reform lies in their adaptation (often very extensive) to fit local contexts. And anyway, these models are seldom entirely well-defined or consistent in themselves. Applying the big models or even standardized techniques (benchmarking, business process re-engineering, lean) in a formulaic, tick-box manner can be highly counterproductive. (Pollitt 2011: 15).

In the same paper, Christopher concluded that a core yet unsung virtue in public management reforms is humility, recalling his piece in one of the early issues of this journal, where he criticized the tendency to justify the NPM reforms by faith rather than evidence (Pollitt 1995). It's not difficult to see why we are often seduced by faith and abandon the notion of evaluating on the basis of evidence: bubbles of political attention, fads or epistemic drifts generate a surge in interest for an approach, a type of reform, a concept. International organizations, governments, consultants have to offer products that are seen as desirable and legitimate, hence they are objectively pushed to find and diffuse something that 'works'. The suppliers of that product have no interest in exploring the scope conditions under which the 'bright new idea' may fail, neither do they want to dig into the economic and political negative side effects. Thus, that 'thing' becomes a standard,

something to aspire to, a policy norm, or a cross-national governance performance indicator. Or it simply ends up disciplining in the wrong way how researchers think about public policy, making us prisoners of the 'magic words'. Christopher would then start his minority battle to turn every possible stone, and reveal what was underneath under the 'next big thing'– often very little, sometimes a tension between logics (Pollitt 2013), other times an agenda that could be questioned on efficiency and legitimacy grounds. This is a precious gift we should cultivate in our own practice, instead of reinforcing the bubbles we are surrounded by. It is a lesson about making sure we define our concepts correctly and question the shorthand expressions that although necessary in political narratives, invariably hinder the search for socio-scientific knowledge.

This observation allows us to open up another area on which Christopher cast a light: the model of the intellectual engaged in the profession and beyond. Especially at times when expertise is criticized by some as anti-democratic and technocratic, or just un-necessary to public reason, we must be able to answer the question 'what is an evaluator / a policy analyst / a social scientist good for'? What is our mission within society? Christopher had his own answer – and I believe this was a very valuable answer: the value of a social scientist lies in the socio-scientific community of discourse that collectively re-orients the policy debate – for example, as we have just seen, by casting doubts on grandiose narratives of 'reform' and 'governance'. But here I wish to stress the awareness of the collective dimension of the enterprise, as opposed to the idealistic notion of the individual social scientist who changes the world.

When dealing with policy-makers, Christopher deployed his huge skills in transferring the results of a group of social scientists into messages for his non-academic audiences. Whilst most political scientists think about their impact on policy processes and policy-makers using the first person ("I did this, I did that", see Dunlop 2018), Christopher was essentially speaking as a member of academic discourse coalitions. In the conversation with policy-makers, Christopher saw his role as one of reinforcing, specifying, clarifying, adding a personal note to what a distinctive group of researchers were finding at the time – for example, on independent regulators, agencies, benchmarking and drawing lessons from the international experience. It is the awareness and the ability of being inside a discourse coalition that makes a policy researcher useful to society. In this, Christopher was a perfect manifestation of Lindblom's vision of usable knowledge and an incarnation of Weiss's 'percolator model' of knowledge utilization. Today we would include Christopher within the emerging *translational* social sciences (Weible and Cairney 2018), that is, social sciences whose value lies in their portability and potential usage by actors other than academics. To get there – this is the lesson – drop the capital-I narratives of what we are doing and think more about our role within engaged, open, cumulative evidence-based discourse coalitions.

This brings me to the last observation about the end users of the social sciences. On this, the scholarship of Professor Pollitt could not have been clearer. He told us in many different ways that the researchers are socially meaningless unless they are very clear and explicit about their end users. These end users are not necessarily (and, certainly, not always) the bureaucrats and the non-elected regulators – instead, they are the citizens and those who represent them in democratic bodies. He complained in this journal that "Thus evaluation, performance measurement and performance audit remain conversations among experts,

technocrats and managers, not a significant feature of *democratic* governance." (Pollitt 2006: 52, emphasis in original). He then indicated the way ahead by adding in the same piece: "A strange feature of this situation is that research into the use of performance information by politicians and citizens should not, in principle, be so hard to do" (ibid.). This is a very exciting agenda for the new generation of evidence-based policy research and the translational social sciences, and for everyone who, inspired by Professor Cristopher Pollitt's legacy, cares about the present and future of the social sciences at a time when both democracy and the scientific enterprise are questioned and even risk losing their appeal to citizens.

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