POLICY PARADOX:
THE ART OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

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Symbols

We talk of policy problems in words. How words are used to represent things is a subject usually treated in the domains of rhetoric and literature, but symbolic representation is the essence of problem definition in politics.

A symbol is anything that stands for something else. Its meaning depends on how people interpret it, use it, or respond to it. It can be an object, a person, a place, a word, a song, an event, even a logo on a T-shirt. The meaning of a symbol is not intrinsic to it, but is invested in it by the people who use it. In that sense, symbols are collectively created. Any good symbolic device, one that works to capture the imagination, also shapes our perceptions and suspends skepticism, at least temporarily. Those effects are what make symbols political devices. They are means of influence and control, even though it is often hard to tell with symbols exactly who is influencing whom.

Four aspects of symbolic representation are especially important in the definition of policy problems. *Narrative stories* provide explanations of how the world works. These explanations are often unspoken, widely shared, and so much taken for granted that we are not even aware of them. They can hold a powerful grip on our imaginations and our psyches because they offer the promise of resolution for scary problems.[1] *Synecdoches*[2] are figures of speech in which a part is used

[1] See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

[2] Pronounced *sin-ECK-da-key*.

to represent the whole. They are important symbolic devices in political life because we often make policies based on examples believed to be representative of a larger universe. *Metaphors* are sometimes held to be the essential core of human thought and creativity.[3] Metaphoric reasoning—seeing a likeness between two things—is essential to classification and counting. To make a metaphor is also to make a political claim: "There is a likeness that is important." This chapter, along with "Numbers" (Chapter 9), explores how metaphorical claims work in politics. *Ambiguity*, the capacity to have multiple meanings, is a feature of symbols, and for better or worse, of the human condition. While this entire book is about struggles for the control of ambiguity, this chapter focuses on the role of ambiguity in enabling coalition and compromise.

STORIES

Definitions of policy problems usually have narrative structure; that is, they are stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation. They have heroes and villains and innocent victims, and they pit the forces of evil against the forces of good. The story line in policy writing is often hidden, but one should not be thwarted by the surface details from searching for the underlying story. Often what appears as conflict over details is really disagreement about the fundamental story.

Two broad story lines are particularly prevalent in policy politics. One is a *story of decline*, not unlike the biblical story of the expulsion from paradise. It runs like this: "In the beginning, things were pretty good. But they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done." This story usually ends with a prediction of crisis—there will be some kind of breakdown, collapse, or doom—and a proposal for some steps to avoid the crisis. The proposal might even take the form of a warning: Unless such-and-such is done, disaster will follow.

The story of decline almost always begins with a recitation of facts or figures purporting to show that things have gotten worse. Poverty rates are rising, crime rates are higher, import penetration in U.S. markets is greater, environmental quality is worse—you have heard these all before. What gives this story dramatic tension is the assumption, sometimes stated and sometimes implicit, that things were once better than they are now, and that the change for the worse causes or will soon cause suffering.

[3] Jacob Bronowski, *Science and Human Values* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972).

The story of decline does not necessarily have to be about human beings to be gripping. Consider the accompanying article about government data from the *New York Times*, by a former director of statistical policy for the Office of Management and Budget, portraying the decline of federal economic statistics. (Go ahead, turn the page, and read the article. I'll get a cup of coffee while you read, and we'll continue when you're ready. By the way, can I get you a piece of cake?)

Like most pleaders for budget increases, Mr. Duncan tells a story of decline and doom. He tells us that things were once better by referring to the "high-quality statistical procedures and data bases that we have developed over the last 40 years." In the second paragraph, he uses six words in only 12 lines to connote deterioration: "undermining," "decline," "dissolved," "cuts," "reduced," and "failure." There we have the beginning of the story; the author has established a bygone era of well-being and placed us, his audience, on the precipice of decline. We are ready to roll.

From here to the last paragraph, the author presents examples of government statistical records and procedures that have not kept pace with economic change. In each example, he shows that some lack in the data prevents policy makers from making effective policy. The middle of this story, then, is a compilation of small steps in the direction of decline. The end comes in the final paragraph, with its prediction of doom: "Unless this potential crisis is addressed, the effectiveness of policy decisions will be severely undercut." (Not the worst crisis most people can imagine, I grant, but for analyst types, having your effectiveness undercut is the equivalent of 8.3 on the Richter scale.) And just in case we have so far missed the emotional tenor of the story, the author cues us by introducing the denouement with the word "Regrettably."

The drama of heroes, villains, and innocent victims is part of every problem definition, even though one sometimes has to read between the lines to find it. I selected the article on statistics as an illustration precisely because it has very little in the way of obvious human actors, feelings, motives, and morals, and yet it still has all the elements of a good yarn.

The story of decline has several variations. The *stymied progress story* runs like this: "In the beginning things were terrible. Then things got better, thanks to a certain someone. But now somebody or some-

ARE GOVERNMENT NUMBERS ACCURAT

The Economy Has Left the Data Behind

By JOSEPH W. DUNCAN

IT is fashionable today to blame economists for the confusion and contradictions in economic forecasting. But we may be ignoring a more basic source of error: the quality of Federal economic statistics.

A combination of factors is undermining the high-quality statistical procedures and data bases that we have developed over the last 40 years. The decline can be traced to deregulation, which dissolved regulatory agencies that had collected data; to budget cuts, which have reduced the flow of information from Government departments to statistical agencies, and — most important — to a failure to update statistical systems.

For example, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, which provides data used to compile the gross national product, still uses statistics that are heavily weighted toward the manufacturing sector, even though an estimated 70 percent of total employment is in service industries.

This lopsided emphasis also is reflected in the Standard Industrial Classification system, which is crucial for tracking activity in specific industries. The system has 140 classifications for manufacturing companies but only 66 for services.

The lack of detailed information on services has profound implications. The strong dollar has produced a tremendous influx of less expensive foreign goods that compete with domestic products. While this puts strong and well-documented pressure on domestic manufacturers, the benefit of increased imports to domestic service businesses, such as the warehousing, finance, distribution and retailing industries, is unmeasured.

How is Congress supposed to make informed policy decisions on economic and trade issues when it is, at least to some extent, groping in the dark? Without accurate information, decision-making becomes arbitrary.

Statistical policy has not kept pace with the restructuring of the economy. In 1982, the Office of Federal Statistical Policy recommended that Standard Industrial Classification group 7392 — management, consulting and public relations services — be divided into six new industries. The revision was never made. Now, it is difficult to confirm evidence that large corporations are using outside technical services rather than rebuilding their staffs.

Such information is crucial to Federal policy makers. Employment regulations are intended to encourage hiring of permanent workers, who usually gain tax-subsidized benefits packages. Yet there is evidence that some companies may be hiring temporary workers solely to avoid Federal employment rules, such as unemployment compensation.

Dated industrial codes for the financial sector inhibit accurate appraisals of the impact of deregulation on banking services. Automated teller machines, for example, are rapidly replacing bank clerks. But without detailed data, the impact of such technological developments on inner-city employment, future demand for skills and other trends is difficult to determine.

The deterioration of Federal statistics has become particularly evident during current efforts to revise the nation's tax code. For example, one of the key features of the Reagan Administration's proposed revision concerns business taxes. Current government statistics show that, in 1984, corporate profits and non-farm proprietors' income totaled $402 billion, or 11.2 percent of total G.N.P., down from 12.2 percent in 1979 and 14.6 percent in 1969. The decrease is especially perplexing because of the recent reduction in corporate taxes.

Interpreting the decrease, however, is not an easy matter. The size of the Internal Revenue Service's corporate sample declined from 105,000 companies in 1969 to 93,000 in 1981. This, coupled with the fact that the I.R.S. estimated that the total universe of companies increased by 75 percent in the same period, means that the actual sample has been cut in half, from 6 percent to 3 percent of the total universe of firms.

WHILE improved sampling design and estimating methodologies may have reduced errors caused by smaller samples, there are no studies that have gauged the effect smaller samples may have on measuring long-term trends or trends by industry or size of company. Both of these factors are crucial for accurately evaluating the potential impact of the proposed new tax laws.

Measures of personal savings also have been clouded by a lack of data on participation in the four-year-old Section 401(k) programs, under which employees may defer income. Although there may be as many as 2 million workers participating in such programs, there are no statistics on either the extent of the coverage or its impact on reported income.

Personal savings, as measured by the B.E.A., is simply the difference between total reported income and calculated personal consumption expenditures. Currently, income deferred under the 401(k) program is not included as reported income. As a result, the nation's overall savings rate is probably understated by between 5 percent and 10 percent.

We are currently faced with a number of major policy challenges, such as evaluating the impact of imports, stimulating savings and investment and revising the tax code. Regrettably, the quality of the statistics on which we will base our decisions on these issues is deteriorating. Unless this potential crisis is addressed, the effectiveness of policy decisions will be severely undercut. ■

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Source: Joseph W. Duncan. "The Economy Has Left the Data Behind," *New York Ti*[illegible]ne 30, 1985.

thing is interfering with our hero, so things are going to get terrible again." This is the story told by every group that wants to resist regulation. In the 1970s and 1980s, the American Medical Association, fighting government cost-containment efforts, reminded us about the days of plagues, tuberculosis, and high infant mortality, and warned that government restrictions on the profession would undo all the progress doctors had brought us. Biotechnology firms, through their trade association known as "BIO," told a very similar story to fight President Clinton's medical cost-containment plans in the 1990s: biotechnology had brought us miracle medicine, but Clinton's planned regulation and price controls threatened the very survival of the nascent industry.[4] Manufacturing concerns, such as automakers, steel companies, and textile firms, tell a story of how minimum wage legislation, mandatory health benefits, and occupational safety regulations threaten to destroy America's once-preeminent position in the world economy. The CIA tells us that restrictions on its operating methods prevent it from maintaining the security it once could provide, and the Pentagon tells how budget constraints have undermined our once-dominant military position.

Another variant of the decline story is the *change-is-only-an-illusion story*. It runs like this: "You always thought things were getting worse (or better). But you were wrong. Let me show you some evidence that things are in fact going in the opposite direction. Decline (or improvement) was an illusion." Examples of the revisionist story are everywhere. Medical researchers tell us that the improved survival rates for cancer patients are really an artifact of measurement; it is only because we can now diagnose cancer at earlier stages that patients appear to live longer.[5] Child abuse (or rape or wife-battering) is not really on the rise; it only appears to have increased because we have more public awareness, more legislation, and more reporting.

The other broad type of narrative in policy analysis is the *story of helplessness and control*. It usually runs like this: "The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things." Stories about

[4]"BIO" stands for Biotechnology Industry Organization. See Peter H. Stone, "Lost Cause," *National Journal*, Sept. 17, 1994, p. 2133.

[5]Alvan R. Feinstein et al., "The Will Rogers Phenomenon: Stage Migration and New Diagnostic Techniques as a Source of Misleading Statistics for Survival in Cancer," *New England Journal of Medicine* 312, no. 25 (June 20, 1985): 1604–8.

control are always gripping because they speak to the fundamental problem of liberty—to what extent do we control our own life conditions and destinies? Stories that purport to tell us of less control are always threatening, and ones that promise more are always heartening.

Much of the analysis in the areas of social policy, health and safety, and environment is a story of control. What had formerly appeared to be "accidental," "random," "a twist of fate," or "natural" is now alleged to be amenable to change through human agency. For example, much modern economic policy—the use of government fiscal and monetary tools to stabilize fluctuations in the economy—is based on a grand story of control. In the 1930s, when national economies had lurched into rampant inflation and disastrous depressions, they seemed to behave more like the weather than like social institutions. Lord Keynes wrote a highly influential treatise whose central premise was that seemingly random fluctuations in economies are really manageable through government manipulation of spending and money supply.[6] The story of control governs in a vastly different policy area—public health—as well. Cancer, previously thought to strike victims unpredictably, now turns out to be related to diet, smoking, and chemicals—all things humans can control. Increasingly, cancer is linked to mutant genes, and though we cannot control our genes, the knowledge of genetic contributions to cancer can help us target screening and prevention programs, and may eventually help design genetically based therapies. Stories that move us from the realm of fate to the realm of control are always hopeful, and through their hope they invoke our support.

A common twist on the control story is the *conspiracy*. Its plot moves us from the realm of fate to the realm of control, but it claims to show that all along control has been in the hands of a few who have used it to their benefit and concealed it from the rest of us. Ralph Nader's famous crusade against automobile manufacturers was a story that converted car accidents into events controllable through the design of cars, and even willingly accepted by automakers. Advocates of industrial policy tell a story in which unemployment, thought to be intractable, is actually caused by "capital strike" (businessmen refuse to invest in new plants and ventures) and "capital flight" (businesses invest their capital in other regions or other countries). Conspiracy stories always reveal that harm has been deliberately caused or know-

[6]John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1936).

ingly tolerated, and so evoke horror and moral condemnation. Their ending always takes the form of a call to wrest control from the few who benefit at the expense of the many.

Another variant of the control story is the *blame-the-victim* story.[7] It, too, moves us from the realm of fate to the realm of control, but locates control in the very people who suffer the problem. In one recent analysis of homelessness, "it was the fact that unskilled women not only married less but continued to have children that pushed more of them into the streets."[8] Homelessness, in this view, is the result of women's knowing choice between two alternatives:

> Few unskilled women can earn enough to support a family on their own. For many, therefore, the choices were stark. They could work, refrain from having children and barely avoid poverty, or they could not work, have children, collect welfare and live in extreme poverty. Many became mothers even though this meant extreme poverty.[9]

There are many versions of the blame-the-victim story. The poor are poor because they seek instant pleasures instead of investing in their own futures, or because they choose to live off the dole rather than work. Third World countries are poor because they borrow too eagerly and allow their citizens to live too extravagantly. The sick are sick because they overeat, consume unhealthy foods, smoke, and don't exercise. Women are raped because they "ask for it." Workers succumb to occupational diseases and injuries because they refuse to wear protective gear or to act with caution. Just as the conspiracy story always ends with a call to the many to rise up against the few, the blame-the-victim story always ends with an exhortation to the few (the victims) to reform their own behavior in order to avoid the problem.

What all these stories of control have in common is their assertion that there is choice. The choice may belong to society as a whole, to certain elites, or to victims, but the drama in the story is always achieved by the conversion of a fact of nature into a deliberate human decision. Stories of control offer hope, just as stories of decline foster anxiety and despair. The two stories are often woven together, with

[7]The phrase became a byword in social science after William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Random House, 1971).

[8]Christopher Jencks, *The Homeless* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 58.

[9]Christopher Jencks, "The Homeless," *New York Review of Books*, April 21, 1994, p. 25.

the story of decline serving as the stage setting and the impetus for the story of control. The story of decline is meant to warn us of suffering and motivate us to seize control.

Policy stories use many literary and rhetorical devices to lead the audience ineluctably to a course of action. They have good guys and bad guys, even though nonhuman entities may be cast in these roles, and they have a moment of triumph. Look back at the article on federal statistics. The author starts right in telling us we have been pursuing the wrong villain ("economists") in our quest to find the perpetrator of the evil deed of "confusion and contradictions in economic forecasting." The real source of error is the poor quality of federal economic statistics. But these statistics are not the villain—they are the innocent victims of larger evil forces ("deregulation," "budget cuts," and "failures"). The heroes of this story are the struggling statistical agencies, such as the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Office of Federal Statistical Policy, who have been unable to carry out their own recommendations and to implement changes they know to be "crucial." The good guys have had their weapons undermined: the IRS has to make do with a smaller sample, the Bureau of Economic Analysis doesn't have enough categories, and Congress is groping in the dark. The whole story is a plea for Congress to come to the aid of the innocent victims (statistics) by strengthening the heroes (agencies) who could perform the rescue.

Let's look more closely at three of the most common and powerful literary devices in policy stories.

SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a whole is represented by one of its parts: "Ten thousand feet moved down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House." This form of symbolism is very common in politics, where examples are offered up as "typical instances" or "prototypical cases" of a larger problem. These typical cases then define the entire problem and frame the policy response.

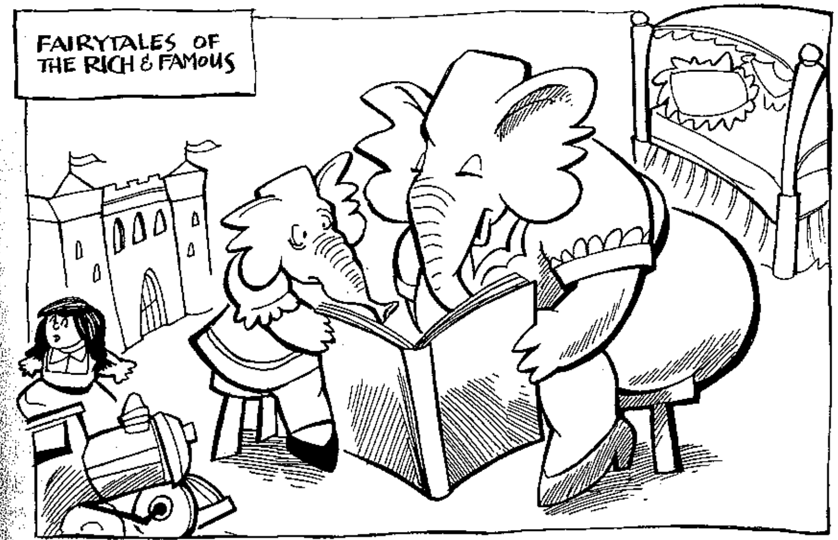
In the mid-1970s, Wisconsin passed a major reform of its divorce law. The reform was fashioned on the assumption that the problem with the old law was its treatment of the displaced homemaker, the woman who spent her marriage years as a housewife and mother and then received no economic assets in a divorce settlement. The reformers deliberately collected and publicized examples of the displaced homemaker to mobilize support. Because the displaced-homemaker image dominated policy thinking, the new law presumed there should be an equal division of property upon divorce. In doing so, it neglected other types of marital situations, such as women who were homemakers *and* income earners, and women who brought substantial economic assets to the marriage, perhaps from a business or a prior marriage. The "equal division" standard made it difficult for these women to get more than half of the marital assets at divorce. According to one scholar, the reigning image of the displaced homemaker and the horror stories that supported it "came to substitute for a more generalized articulation of the problems of women in divorce. . . . 'Displaced homemakers' became the exclusive measure against which reforms would embody the ideals of fairness or justice."[10]

It is common in politics that one part of a problem particularly catches the popular imagination and confines the policy response to that part of the problem. In discussions of welfare reform, the "welfare queen" has become the dominant representation of the problem. She is a mother of many children who has been on the rolls for ten or twenty years, and has adopted welfare as a way of life. In fact, only about a fifth of current welfare recipients have been on the rolls for ten years or more. If we look at all "spells" of welfare, that is, entrances and exits from the rolls, instead of at current recipients, only 14 percent of these spells last ten years or more.[11] A reform that is targeted to the long-term welfare recipient, then, will affect only a small part of the welfare population, and a small part of the welfare problem.

One common genre, the horror story, is itself a form of synecdoche. Politicians or interest groups deliberately choose one egregious or outlandish incident to represent the universe of cases, and then use that example to build support for changing an entire rule or policy that is addressed to the larger universe. Horror stories are a staple in political fights against industry regulation, and against liability suits such as malpractice or product safety. Often these stories are not only atypical but also highly distorted. In early 1995, as the 104th Congress rushed to dismantle much of the safety and environmental regulation of the seventies and eighties, antiregulation crusaders claimed the Occupa-

[10]The story of Wisconsin's divorce reform is from Martha L. Fineman, "Implementing Equality: Ideology, Contradiction and Social Change," *Wisconsin Law Review* 1983, no. 4 (1983): 789–887; quotation is on p. 866.

[11]Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 29.



"Once upon a time there was a wicked Welfare Queen who had the power to destroy entire economies with one AFDC check. . . ."

tional Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had abolished the tooth fairy (by requiring dentists to discard any baby teeth they pulled), and had required all buckets to be built with holes in the bottom. Such absurdities could be counted on to generate hostility to regulation, but they grossly distorted the actions of the agency. OSHA never required disposal of baby teeth, only that dentists protect themselves and their assistants from blood-borne pathogens when handling the teeth. As for the leaky buckets, it turns out that about fifty babies drown every year by falling into large plastic buckets—the kind left over from construction projects that people often save for use around the garden or house. OSHA suggested that the buckets be redesigned to tip over if a child fell in, but left it up to industry to make a voluntary effort.[12]

As with other forms of symbolic representation, the synecdoche can suspend our critical thinking with its powerful poetry. The strategy of focusing on a part of a problem, particularly one that can be dramatized as a horror story, thus is likely to lead to skewed policy. Yet it is often a politically useful strategy. It is a good organizing tool, because it can make a problem concrete, allow people to identify with someone else,

John H. Cushman Jr., "Congressional Memo: Tales from the 104th: Watch Out, or the Regulators Will Get You!" *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1995, p. A20.

and mobilize anger. Also it reduces the scope of the problem and thereby makes it more manageable. The extreme version of this strategy is reducing a large-scale problem to a single instance. This happens, for example, when the president makes a plea for a donated liver for a single child in need of transplantation. The plea, and the joy we all feel when it succeeds in turning up an organ, makes invisible the rest of the people who need organ transplants.

METAPHORS

Take another trip down memory lane to recall that a metaphor is an implied comparison. It works by using a word that denotes one kind of object or idea to describe another—for example, "Clinton blasted the press;" "Industry is being strangled;" "We live on spaceship earth." Metaphors are important devices for strategic representation in policy analysis. On the surface, they simply draw a comparison between one thing and another, but in a more subtle way they usually imply a whole narrative story and a prescription for action. Take this example:

> One of the most pervasive stories about social services diagnoses the problem as "fragmentation" and prescribes "coordination" as the remedy. But services seen as fragmented might be seen, alternatively, as autonomous. Fragmented services become problematic when they are seen as the shattering of a prior integration. The services are seen as something like a vase that was once whole and now is broken. Under the spell of the metaphor, it appears obvious that fragmentation is bad and coordination good.[13]

Merely to describe something as fragmented is to call for integration as an improvement, without ever saying so. The jump from description to prescription in policy metaphor is what Martin Rein and Donald Schon have called the "normative leap."[14]

Buried in every policy metaphor is an assumption that if a is like b, then the way to solve a is to do what you would do with b. Because

[13]Donald Schon, "Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem Setting in Social Policy," in Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[14]Martin Rein and Donald Schon, "Problem Setting in Policy Research," in Carol Weiss, ed., *Using Social Research in Public Policy Making* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1977).

policy metaphors imply prescription, they are a form of advocacy. The claim that "a is like b" takes on political importance in another way as well. In a culture where the common understanding of fairness is "treating likes alike," to claim a likeness is also to posit an interpretation of equity and to demand equal treatment.

Metaphors are pervasive in policy language. Once you are sensitized, you will find them everywhere. One common metaphor is to see social institutions as *living organisms*. Communities or groups are said to have a "life of their own" and organizations have "goals." The image of "life cycle" is used to explain why political issues seem to experience periods of rapid growth and then decline, why regulatory agencies go through periods of fervent reform-mindedness and then passive acceptance of the status quo, or why elected officials seem to follow predictable patterns of popularity and behavior in their terms of office.[15]

The assertion that something is like an organism is implicitly a claim that it must be viewed as a whole whose importance is more than the sum of its parts. To see something as an organism is to assert that it is "natural," which in turn implies that however it is, that is "the way it is supposed to be." (In fact, the word "natural" is a good hint that there is an underlying metaphor of organism.) Deliberate human interference with it then becomes artificial and perhaps even futile. The normative leap in the organism metaphor is usually a prescription to leave things alone, and it is often used by those who want to resist change. They argue that tampering with any part of an organism (community, neighborhood, family) will upset a delicate balance, destroy the whole, or interfere with nature.

One common and potent variant of the organism metaphor is the idea of *natural laws* of social behavior. Many famous social scientists have claimed to discover laws that govern the social world and that set limits, and even total barriers, to the changes humans can bring about through deliberate policy.[16] Two influential nineteenth-century sociologists, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfred Pareto, argued that all societies

[15]See Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue Attention Cycle," *The Public Interest*, no. 28 (Summer 1972): 38–50; Marver Bernstein, *Regulating Business by Independent Commission* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955); Paul Light, *The President's Agenda* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), especially pp. 36–52.

[16]This paragraph draws on Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 3, "The Futility Thesis." This is a brilliant book about deep stories in policy argument.

were naturally and inevitably divided into rulers and the ruled, elites and nonelites, so that democratic reforms such as expanded voting rights could not possibly bring about real change. Another sociologist of the late nineteenth century, Roberto Michels, formulated the "iron law of oligarchy," according to which all organizations, no matter how participatory and egalitarian they begin, inevitably evolve toward a concentration of political power among a few leaders. George Stigler, a contemporary economist, has postulated a "law of public income redistribution," according to which any attempt at redistribution toward the poor inevitably takes money from them and redistributes it to the middle classes. Albert O. Hirschman groups these kinds of stories under the heading "futility thesis," because their common underlying story is that it is futile for people to attempt social change (of the democratic and redistributive sort). They are all stories about the impossibility of human control.

Undoubtedly, the most influential "law" of social behavior in contemporary public policy is Charles Murray's "law of unintended rewards": "Any social transfer increases the net value of being in the condition that prompted the transfer."[17] In plain English, this law says that helping people who have problems (such as poverty, illness, homelessness, or drug addiction), especially giving them money or services, actually *rewards* them for having the problem and *creates an incentive* for them to stay or become poor, sick, homeless, or addicted. Therefore, it is impossible to mount any kind of social welfare programs that don't simply perpetuate or even increase the problems they purport to ameliorate. Though no one in Washington or the state capitals is going around quoting Murray's law, the equation "helping hand equals incentive to be needy" is the driving force in today's social policy debates.

Machines and mechanical devices form the basis of many policy metaphors. Eighteenth-century political thought, from which our Constitution is derived, conceived of a political system as a machine with working parts that had to be kept "in order" and "in balance." Thus, "checks and balances" are central to our way of thinking about how political power should be allocated. The idea of balance also appears in international relations, where a "balance of power" is thought to ensure international peace. With the advent of nuclear weapons, strategists talk of a "balance of terror," where mutual fear

[17] Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984, 2d. ed. 1994), pp. 215–16.

prevents either side from taking action. The very term "balanced budget" implies that either revenue surpluses or deficit spending would be bad, when of course most people believe that saving for the future, or borrowing to invest in education or business, is a perfectly sensible (and even virtuous) strategy. The metaphor of balance implies a story about the decline from balance to imbalance and prescribes addition of something to one side or subtraction from the other.

Wedges and inclines (think of a rubber doorstop) abound in political language. Government regulation is often portrayed as a wedge: Once they get their foot in the door, the regulators will be pushing through with more and more. (An animate version of this metaphor is "the nose of the camel in the tent.") The image of a wedge suggests that a seemingly small beginning can have enormous leverage. The image of an incline suggests that once something starts on a downward path, it will be irresistibly drawn further by gravity. Metaphors of wedges and inclines thus contain stories warning of future decline, and the implied prescription is that policy should avoid the "first move" in order to prevent the inevitable "slide" or "push" in an unwanted direction.

From the metaphor of the incline comes a very common and potent genre of policy argument, the "slippery slope." Much argument over behavior seen as immoral is based on the slippery slope: a drink, a cigarette, a lapse from a diet, a white lie, or a small bit of cheating are seen as the first step down the slippery slope. The "twelve step" metaphor of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs promises to counteract the unbroken slippery slope by reconstructing it and dividing it into steps with firm footing.

Slippery slope arguments have a common form.[18] They begin by acknowledging that the phenomenon (a law, a proposal, a rule, a program, a drink) is not in itself wrong or bad or dangerous. But then they proceed to declare that permitting the phenomenon would inevitably lead to situations or cases that *are* wrong or bad or dangerous. For example, opponents of laws permitting physicians to assist terminally ill people with euthanasia usually concede that euthanasia is justified, and even desirable, under certain conditions. Then they shift ground, claiming we still should not permit euthanasia, even under conditions where it is justified, because it might be carried out in the wrong circumstances. Slippery slope arguments are usually used in this

[18] See Fred Schauer, "Slippery Slopes," *Harvard Law Review* 99, no. 2, (1985): 361–83; and Wilbren van der Berg, "The Slippery Slope Argument," *Ethics* 102 (1991): 42–65.

fashion, to resist changes even when the opponent can't find any good reasons against the change itself. Philosopher Dan Brock has called slippery slope arguments "the last refuge of conservative defendants of the *status quo.*"[19]

Herman Kahn's early and well-known theory of the arms race, *On Escalation,* uses the metaphor of a ladder, yet another form of incline. Kahn portrays possible "steps" in international crises as rungs on a ladder. He says that the purpose of the ladder metaphor is to show that "there are many relatively continuous paths between a low-level crisis and an all-out war, none of which is necessarily or inexorably to be followed." Explicitly, he reassures his readers that "there is no necessity that one inexorably go up the ladder—rung by rung. One can go down as well as up, or even skip steps."[20] The metaphor, though, conveys another story: we all know the urge to climb a ladder, the sense of being drawn from one step to another, the increasing scariness as one ascends, and the overwhelming temptation to go up against one's better judgment. Kahn's metaphor is emotionally compelling because it tells a threatening story in between the lines of the more reassuring formal narrative. The ladder metaphor, too, evokes an uncertain narrative about control; it makes us ponder whether we really can or will do anything but climb.

Another set of policy metaphors is based on *containers* and the idea of a fixed space. The problem might be that a space is overfilled; thus, for example, Mexican workers "spill over" the borders into the United States. Or, a container is underfilled, as when journalists declare a "power vacuum" when a politician "vacates" an important position. If a container has holes there will be "leaks" (e.g., of information) or "seepages" (e.g., of power). Foreign policy in the 1950s was dominated by the image of "containing communism." If a container is not big enough, there might be "spillovers" which require "mopping-up operations." Or too much "pressure" might develop, leading to "outbursts" and "explosions," as people seek "outlets" for their frustrations. The "dense" cities were always "exploding" in the 1960s.

The solutions to such problems are varied, but appropriate to the metaphor. One can "drain off" some of the contents of the container ("draining off the opposition") for example, by transferring disgruntled employees to another location or appointing them to low-level management positions where their loyalties will be split. One can allow a gradual release of pressure through a "pressure valve," such as letting enraged community residents or agency clients "blow off steam" in public hearings or grievance procedures. Some scholars have argued that what often appear as acts of resistance by the relatively powerless in a society are really just "safety valves" consciously designed by elites to maintain their position of dominance.[21]

Disease, especially the contagious variety, forms the basis for many policy metaphors. Cults, communism, crime—in fact any behavior or set of ideas one wants to condemn—are said to "spread." Members and advocates "infect" others with their ideas. Teenage pregnancy, unwed motherhood, and high school dropping out are declared "epidemics." Universities and slums are "breeding grounds" for all kinds of troubles. We talk almost unthinkingly about "healthy" economies, businesses, and institutions, and from there it is a short step to diagnosing "urban blight" and "dying industries."

Disease metaphors imply a story about deterioration and decline, and about struggle for control between humans and nonhuman "germs." The disease label discredits opponents and implies the moral rightness of treating them as less than human. If a social process is conceived as contagion, then a "cure" of any single infected entity will not stop the phenomenon, and harsh measures may be needed to isolate the carriers and "stamp out" the disease. Some banks use a policy of "redlining," or marking off poor areas in cities where they refuse to write mortgages and homeowner insurance, almost as if they are quarantining a part of the city.

Perhaps the most pervasive disease metaphor in social policy is the image of the poor and disadvantaged as having some pathology. The dominant social science interpretations of poverty, homelessness, teen pregnancy, drug addiction, and illegitimacy view all of these problems as outcomes of personal problems and deficiencies. In fact, the psychiatry profession has converted many a social problem into a mental disorder by creating a name and a set of associated symptoms in its official diagnostic manual. Thus, for example, the manual lists "antisocial personality disorder," whose symptoms are "significant unemployment," "repeated absences from work," and "abandonment of

[19] Dan Brock, "Voluntary Active Euthanasia," *Hastings Center Report,* March–April 1992, pp. 10–21, quote on p. 19. The euthanasia example is from Brock.

[20] Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (Hudson Institute, 1965; rev. ed., Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968). The quotations are from pp. 37 and 40, respectively.

[21] For an extraordinarily insightful (and skeptical) analysis of safety-valve theories of social control, see James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), chap. 7.

several jobs." Other symptoms are not obeying social norms, failing to plan ahead, traveling from place to place, and not having a fixed address for at least a month.[22]

As you might begin to suspect, this set of symptoms makes homelessness into a mental illness. Like all metaphors, this one creates political resources. For psychiatrists, the metaphor empowers them to diagnose and treat the problem of homelessness. (Other metaphors might empower construction businesses or labor economists to treat the problem.) For homeless people, the illness metaphor enables some of them to receive cash and health insurance from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability program.[23]

The metaphor of *war* is ingrained in policy language. We wage "war on poverty," suffer the "invasion of privacy," declare "war on cancer," and go on "campaigns" against drunk driving or illiteracy. When something is portrayed as an invasion, the invader is foreign, and therefore not a citizen whose rights have to be respected or whose life is to be valued. When we are at war, survival is at stake and so we ignore the costs of waging war. (In medicine, for example, the military metaphor justifies an obliviousness to costs, and in the words of one commentator, a "technological arms race" among medical centers.[24]) If our government is at war, be it against poverty or fraud or crime, then we are traitors if we do not support the cause. The symbol of war is an obvious tactic used by leaders to create support for their policies.

Organisms, machines, containers, diseases, and wars are some of the most frequent and overarching metaphors in policy. But in all policy discourse, names and labels are used to create associations that lend legitimacy and attract support to a course of action. A liberal columnist chides conservatives that when government helps the private sector, the process is called a "partnership"; when it helps the middle class, through block grants to states or Social Security programs, it is called "spending." And when it helps the poor, the unemployed, and the

[22] Antisocial personality disorder is listed in the American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), p. 345. This example comes from David Wagner, *Checkerboard Square: Culture and Resistance in a Homeless Community.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 92 and 95. Chapter 1 provides an excellent analysis and critique of the pathology metaphor in social science.

[23] Wagner, op. cit. (note 22), p. 89.

[24] George Annas, "Reframing the Debate on Health Care Reform by Replacing Our Metaphors," *New England Journal of Medicine* 332, no. 11 (March 16, 1995): 744–47.

disabled, it is called "a giveaway."[25] A conservative might well retort that to the liberal, aid to a private firm is a "bailout"; aid to a government agency imparts "fiscal stability"; aid to the middle class is a "stimulus to the economy"; and aid to the poor is a "moral duty." What is a "gasoline tax" to one side is a "user fee" to the other. What is a "Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act" to the Republicans is a rollback of the New Deal regulatory state to the Democrats. Thus, the very labels in policy discourse evoke different stories and prescriptions. In the world of politics, language matters.

Problem definition in the polis is always strategic, designed to call in reinforcements for one's own side in a conflict. Since it is always the loser or weaker side who needs to call in help, strategic problem definition usually means portraying a problem so that one's favored course of action appears to be in the broad public interest. When George Pataki proposed drastic budget cuts for New York's Medicaid program, the state hospital association took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with the message "Cutting Medicaid Cuts Your Health Care, Too." The ad detailed how all patients, not just the people on Medicaid, would be hurt by cuts in equipment and staff, and warned: "You [readers of the *New York Times* who are probably not on Medicaid] won't be able to escape the pain."[26]

When business asks for tax breaks, foreign import protections, or special favors from state or local government, it always casts consumers or workers as the beneficiaries, rather than its stockholders. Why, though, would business, arguably always the stronger side in any social conflict, want to expand the scope of conflict and appeal to a larger public? A contemporary Marxist interpretation of this phenomenon holds that since capitalists are far outnumbered by workers, they need to make the interests of business—such as higher investment and profits and lower wages—appear to be the interests of society as a whole.[27]

Strategic definition also means manipulating the scope of a conflict by making some people seem to be affected by it and others not. Certain symbols, such as individualism, freedom, privacy, private enterprise, localism, and states' rights, are calculated to restrict the scope of con-

[25] Alan Lupo, "High Tech Cry Babies," *Boston Globe*, June 22, 1985, p. 19.

[26] Advertisement by Greater New York Hospital Association, *New York Times*, March 9, 1994, p. B5.

[27] See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

flict, while others, such as equality, justice, and civil rights, are calculated to expand it.[28] For example, under the banner of "racial equality," black minorities have called in the help of federal courts in school integration; under the banner of "neighborhood schools" or "local control," white majorities have attempted to split blacks from their outside allies.

Problems, then, are not given, out there in the world waiting for smart analysts to come along and define them correctly. They are created in the minds of citizens by other citizens, leaders, organizations, and government agencies, as an essential part of political maneuvering. Symbols, stories, metaphors, and labels are all weapons in the armamentarium (to use a metaphor).

This strategic concept of problem definition does not mean there is a conspiracy or that every policy argument we read and hear is an attempt to dupe us. There is, after all, a long distance between strategic behavior and venality. Symbolic representation is a fundamental part of all discourse, political or other, and by conveying images of good and bad, right and wrong, suffering and relief, these devices are instruments in the struggle over public policy.

Symbolic devices are especially persuasive and emotionally compelling because their story line is hidden and their sheer poetry is often stunning. "Spaceship earth" stops your mind for a minute and makes you conjure up an image of cozy but fragile interdependence. When Senator Phil Gramm promises to make the 40 million people who have been "riding in the wagon get out and help the rest of us pull," we can practically feel our burdens lighten.[29] Often a metaphor is so much a part of our cultural way of saying things that it slips right by us, normative leap and all.

For these reasons, it is worth cultivating some skill in recognizing symbols and questioning their assumptions. What is the underlying narrative? Does it make sense? Does the metaphor tell a different story from the one the author purports to tell? Does the metaphor seem to obviate the need for evidence, or does it bias the kind of information opponents might bring to bear on a conflict? Does a symbol offer a

[28] E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (Hinsdale, Ill.: Dryden Press, 1960), p. 7.

[29] This was Senator Gramm's famous and oft-repeated characterization of welfare reform during the 1994 congressional election campaign. See Bob Herbert, "In America, Scapegoat Time," *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1994, p. A16; and "Welfare Helps Kids, Moms," *USA Today*, Nov. 16, 1994, p. 12A.

"pig in a poke," and might we want to inquire into substance before lending support to the symbol? These are the questions one is led to ask in a symbolic analysis of problems.

AMBIGUITY

The most important feature of all symbols, both in art and politics, is their ambiguity. A symbol can mean two (or more) things simultaneously: "equal opportunity in education" can mean giving everybody a tuition voucher for the same dollar amount, as well as providing extra resources for those with special needs. A symbol can mean different things to different people: "religious freedom" means organized vocal prayer in public schools to some people and absolutely no prayer in public schools to others. And a symbol can mean different things in different contexts: pictures of alligators conjure up very different images on Izod knit jerseys than on T-shirts for the National Wildlife Federation.

Ambiguity is a source of richness and depth in art. Symbols call forth individual imagination, wish, and experience, and draw the observer into the work of art as an active participant. For these very reasons, ambiguity is anathema in science. Crucial to the scientific method is that experiments should be replicable over time and by different observers. The interpretation of events should remain constant and unambiguous, unaffected by the identity of the observer. Politics is more like art than science in that ambiguity is central. Some people think that is a good thing; others, a bad thing. But whatever one's assessment, a type of policy analysis that does not make room for the centrality of ambiguity in politics can be of little use in the real world.

Why is ambiguity essential in politics? What role does it play? Ambiguity enables the transformation of individual intentions and actions into collective results and purposes. Without it, cooperation and compromise would be far more difficult, if not impossible. As Charles Elder and Roger Cobb say, symbols provide the vehicle through which diverse motivations, expectations, and values are synchronized to make collective action possible.[30]

Ambiguity allows leaders to aggregate support from different quar-

[30] Charles D. Elder and Roger W. Cobb, *The Political Uses of Symbols* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 28.

ters for a single policy. For example, a president might succeed in unifying advocates and opponents of foreign military intervention by asking for a congressional mandate allowing him to send troops "only if American interests are threatened." Congressional representatives will agree to that phrase, even though they have very different ideas about what constitutes a threat to American interests. "Defending American interests" is an ambiguous idea around which everyone unites.

Similarly, ambiguity allows leaders of interest groups and political movements to bring together people with wishes for different policies. The postwar women's movement was initially portrayed in terms of equalizing the rights of women and men, a portrayal that seized on the common identity and interests of women. Later when specific policies were at issue, such as requiring employers to provide maternity leave benefits, old coalitions fell apart as subgroups coalesced around new symbols such as "mothers" and "small business owners." In their role as small business owners, many women did not see their bread buttered on the same side as women in their role as mothers or employees. As this example shows, the ambiguity so beneficial at early stages of a movement usually masks internal conflicts that will become evident as the movement seeks concrete policies.

Ambiguity can unite people who would benefit from the same policy but for different reasons. In California some people sought construction and development restrictions to preserve natural resources and wildlife habitats, while others supported the restrictions to preserve the low-density, high-priced, and exclusive character of their neighborhoods. On the national level, environmentalists from southern and western states found ready allies among northeastern members of Congress, because strong environmental controls on new industries hindered Sunbelt economic growth and helped the ailing Frostbelt industries to remain competitive.[31] These different groups would probably find themselves opponents on a variety of other political issues, but the symbol of "environmental preservation" united them around a common vehicle for preserving different things.

Ambiguity enables leaders to carve out a sphere of maneuvering hidden from public view, where they can take decisive action on a problem. Legislators can satisfy demands to "do something" about a

[31] Bernard Frieden, *The Environmental Protection Hustle* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1979); and Robert W. Crandall, "Environmental Ignorance," *Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 1985, p. 28.

problem by passing a vague statute with ambiguous meaning, then letting administrative agencies hash out the more conflictual details behind the scenes. For example, when the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) was formed in 1887 to deal with the problem of balancing the interests of railroads, manufacturers, and farmers in the setting of freight rates, it was given a congressional mandate to set "just and reasonable rates." Everyone could agree to "just and reasonable," although what the phrase meant to farmers, shippers, and railroad magnates certainly differed. Railroad owners were able to control the Commission and its rates, but the ICC stood for a long time as a symbol of scientific, impartial rate determination.[32] This particular use of ambiguity in American politics has been roundly criticized as a vehicle for moving political decisions into arenas where strong special interests dominate.[33] But it is also a feature of politics that allows highly conflictual issues to move from stalemate to action, for whatever that is worth.

Ambiguity allows policy makers to placate both sides in a conflict by "giving the rhetoric to one side and the decision to the other." The Federal Communications Commission, for example, is charged with "protecting the public interest" by regulating the monopoly franchises it creates for radio broadcasters. "Nowhere does [it] wax so emphatic in emphasizing public service responsibility as in decisions permitting greater concentration of control in an area, condoning license transfers at inflated prices, refusing to impose sanctions for flagrantly sacrificing program quality to profits, and so on."[34] By portraying a decision one way in press releases, speeches, preambles, or surrounding language and yet executing it in another, leaders can perform the magic of making two different decisions at once.

Ambiguity facilitates negotiation and compromise because it allows opponents to claim victory from a single resolution. In negotiation, both sides must feel they are better off with an agreement than without, or a settlement will not occur. Since most aspects of a settlement—such as redrawing of boundaries or monetary payments—have sym-

[32] James A. Morone, "Representation Without Elections: The American Bureaucracy and Its Publics," in Daniel Callahan and Bruce Jennings, eds., *Legislative Ethics* (New York: Praeger, 1985).

[33] The best-known critic is Theodore Lowi in *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969).

[34] Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 39.

bolic value as well as material consequences, opponents can invest them with different meanings. For example, one party might accept a far smaller payment than it wants or thinks it deserves, but still claim victory by portraying the payment as an admission of guilt by the other side.

Negotiators can turn even seemingly unambiguous numbers into ambiguous affairs. That is what happened in the 1995 U.S.–Japan trade negotiations over automobiles, allowing both sides to claim victory. U.S. officials said they had gotten agreements that Japanese automakers would purchase more American-made parts and autos. The evidence? The U.S. trade representative, Mickey Kantor, wrote some hard numbers into the deal—for example, Japan would increase the number of its dealers selling American cars to 200 by the end of the year, and to 2,000 by the end of the decade. Japanese officials told their citizens that Japan had won, because the agreement didn't require Japanese businesses to do anything different from what they were already doing. The evidence? The agreement contained a stipulation by the Japanese government that "any purchase estimates were not formal commitments, did not carry government backing and were not enforceable."[35] Moreover, the Japanese trade minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, and Mickey Kantor released a joint announcement saying, "Minister Hashimoto said that Ambassador Kantor's estimates are his own and neither shared by minister himself nor the Government of Japan."[36] In these negotiations, the two negotiators were clearly cooperating in constructing an ambiguous agreement for the sake of being able to come to an agreement. Both sides wanted an accord rather than a trade war, an alliance rather than a split, and both sides were willing to fudge to get there.

Ambiguity helps individuals reconcile their own ambivalent and inconsistent attitudes so that they are capable of giving sustained support to leaders and policies. Most people do not have a coherent and logically consistent set of beliefs about policy issues and choices.[37] Opinion surveys are chock-full of seeming inconsistencies where people subscribe to a principle but not to an action that embodies the principle.

[35] David E. Sanger, "U.S. Settles Trade Dispute, Averting Billions in Tariffs on Japanese Luxury Autos," *New York Times,* June 29, 1995, pp. A1, D6.

[36] Ibid.

[37] For the classic political science statement of this proposition, see Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

So, for example, most Americans agree that citizens should be able to "influence public policy," but nearly half would not allow people to circulate a petition for the legalization of marijuana, and many would deny black militants the right to hold a demonstration.[38] Asked about "government spending on welfare," 48 percent think it should be cut, but asked about "spending on programs for poor children" (who comprise, incidentally, two-thirds of welfare beneficiaries), 47 percent think it should be increased.[39] Sometimes, by emphasizing the symbol instead of the practice, politicians can get support for a policy when people hold contradictory views.

Sometimes entire policies gain their support from the ambiguity of their symbolism. Shelby Steele has argued that affirmative action is an "iconographic public policy—policy that ostensibly exists to solve a social problem but actually functions as an icon for the self-image people hope to gain by supporting the policy."[40] People can point to the mere existence of affirmative action programs as evidence of white social virtue and growing black power, even though in practice, according to Steele, affirmative action has benefited white women more than anyone else, and has done little to improve the situation of poor blacks. This kind of symbolic policy is particularly powerful because "you cannot be against it without seeming to be against what it purports to represent."[41]

In summary, the ambiguity of symbols helps transform individual strivings into collective decisions. Symbols allow coalitions where pure material interests would divide people. They enable leaders to assemble broad bases of support for particular policies. They facilitate negotiation. They permit policy makers to retreat to smaller, less visible arenas to get things done. They quell resistance to policies by reassuring at the same time as the actual policies deprive. In all these ways, politics obeys the laws of poetry rather than the laws of matter: a program or policy or speech, unlike a physical object, can be two things at once. But if symbols are the invisible hand of politics, it is not because there is any overall force coordinating individual decisions, but because they enable us as individuals to "read ourselves into" social programs and collective actions.

[38] Elder and Cobb, op. cit. (note 30), p. 119.

[39] Jason DeParle, "Despising Welfare, Pitying Its Young," *New York Times,* Dec. 18, 1994, p. E5.

[40] Shelby Steele, "Affirmative Action Must Go," *New York Times,* Mar. 1, 1995, A19.

[41] Ibid.

SYMBOLIC DEVICES IN PROBLEM DEFINITION

Stories	Narratives with heroes and villains, problems and solutions, tensions and resolutions. The most common are: • Stories of decline, including the story of stymied progress and the story of progress-is-only-an-illusion. • Stories of control, including the conspiracy story and the blame-the-victim story.
Synecdoche	A small part of a policy problem is used to represent the whole—for example, the horror story.
Metaphor	A likeness is asserted between one kind of policy problem and another. Common metaphors in politics include organisms, natural laws, machines, tools, containers, disease, and war.
Ambiguity	The ability of statements, events, and experiences to have more than one meaning. Ambiguity is the "glue" of politics. It allows people to agree on laws and policies because they can read different meanings into the words.

Policy stories are tools of strategy. Policy makers as well as interest groups often create problems (in the artistic sense) as a context for the actions they want to take. This is not to say that they actually cause harm and destruction so they will have something to do, but that they represent the world in such a way as to make themselves, their skills, and their favorite course of action necessary.

7

Numbers

One common way to define a policy problem is to measure it. Most policy discussions begin with a recitation of figures purporting to show that a problem is big or growing, or both. Although numbers have a preeminent status in our scientific culture, measuring is only one of many ways to describe. Literature describes with words, painting with pigments and brush strokes, and measurement with numbers. And just as there are infinite ways of describing a single object in words or paint, so there are infinite ways of describing with numbers. Numbers are another form of poetry.

Suppose I hire you to measure an elephant. That may sound like a pretty straightforward job description, but think about it for a minute. Do you measure its weight? Height? Length? Volume? Intensity of its color gray? Number and depth of its wrinkles? Or perhaps the proportion of the day it sleeps? In order to measure this creature, you need to select one or a few features from many possibilities. That choice will be determined by your purpose for measuring, or rather mine, since I hired you. If I were manager of a railroad freight department, I would need to know the elephant's height, length, and weight. But if I were a taxidermist, I would be more interested in its volume and wrinkles. As a trainer, I might care more about the proportion of the day it sleeps. As a producer of synthetic animal skins, I would want to know its exact hue of gray. You, sensing a chance to stay on the payroll, would probably insist that I can't understand my elephant without knowing the seasonal variation in its body temperature.

There are many possible measures of any phenomenon and the choice among them depends on the purpose for measuring. The fundamental issues of any policy conflict are always contained in the question of how to count the problem. The unemployment rate, for example, is designed as a measure of people wanting work, or the need for jobs. People are counted as unemployed if they are older than 16, have previously held a job, are available for work, and have looked for work within the previous four weeks. The official method of counting unemployment (which, make no mistake, is the official definition of the problem), leaves out a host of people who fit somebody's notion of unemployed but not the official definition: people unwilling to take available jobs because the jobs are too dangerous, unpleasant, or demeaning; people who can find only part-time jobs but would rather work full-time; people who quit a job to search for something better, but are still searching; people who are willing to work but can't find child care; or workers on strike. Should any of these count as unemployed?

The very question highlights the critical issue in numbers: Counting always involves deliberate decisions about *counting as.* To count peas, one needs to decide first which things in the world are peas and which aren't. Counting must begin with categorization, which in turn means deciding whether to include or exclude. We categorize by selecting important characteristics and asking whether the object to be classified is substantially like other objects in the category. Categorization thus involves the establishment of boundaries in the form of rules or criteria that tell whether something belongs or not. (If it's green and round and small, it's a pea.) Only after categorizing does mere tallying come into play. Tallying, by the way, is what arithmetic is about.

All that may seem a terribly abstract description of counting, but notice how political the language sounds. It is impossible to describe counting without talking about inclusion and exclusion (terms that in themselves suggest community, boundaries, allies, and enemies); selection (a term that implies privilege and discrimination); and important characteristics (a term that suggests value judgments and hierarchy). Remember, too, that it was impossible to talk about the goals of public policy without using the language of counting. Who should count as a recipient or what should count as a relevant item in equity issues? What use of resources gives the most for the least in efficiency issues? What should count as a harm or a need in liberty and security issues?

Counting resolves questions like these by assigning things to one group or another. When children learn to count, they learn that things

are either peas or beans and must be assigned to a pile. In arithmetic, there are no borderline cases. In that sense, numbers are the opposite of symbols—they are not ambiguous. Something is either counted or it isn't. But ambiguity—the range of choices in what to measure or how to classify—always lies just beneath the surface of any counting scheme. Before a decision is made, things could go either way.

NUMBERS AS METAPHORS

The resolution numbers offer is nothing more than a human decision about how to "count as." Numbers, in fact, work exactly like metaphors. To categorize in counting or to analogize in metaphors is to select one feature of something, assert a likeness on the basis of that feature, and ignore all the other features. To count is to form a category by emphasizing some feature instead of others and excluding things that might be similar in important ways but do not share that feature. To count as unemployed only people who have looked for work in the past month is to see unemployment as active job hunting. That vision excludes from the unemployed people who desperately want to work but are unable or too discouraged to pound the pavement.

Because counting requires judgment about inclusion and exclusion, counting schemes are always subject to two possible challenges. The first asserts a real likeness where the measure finds a difference, and insists on inclusion of something the measure excludes. Claims that the unemployment rate should include "discouraged workers" and "underemployed workers" pose this kind of challenge. Counting the homeless population offers another example. Social scientists and government agencies usually count as homeless only people who sleep on the streets or in bus stops, doorways, train stations, and the like. Some count as homeless those people who sleep in shelters for the homeless. But advocates for the homeless believe the concept and the count should include people who are in jails, detox centers, and mental institutions who would have no home if and when they were released, as well as people who crowd into the living spaces of their family and friends but really have no private space of their own.[1]

Challenges of this sort are inevitable in policy politics because the need for clear rules drives policymakers to establish thresholds as

[1] My discussion draws from Christopher Jencks, *The Homeless* (Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 1.

dividing lines. Agencies, legislatures, courts, and officials must decide who will receive benefits, loans, contracts, budget increases, jobs, fines, and penalties. For many policy purposes, we make fairly arbitrary classifications by setting a cutoff point or threshold on a numerical scale—law school admissions on the basis of LSAT scores, welfare eligibility on the basis of income level, or drinking and voting rights on the basis of age. But thresholds are always subject to the challenge that they differentiate among people or situations that should be considered the same. Is there any significant difference between the person earning $10,000 and the one earning $10,001, or the person aged 20 years and 364 days and the person aged 21? The commonsense understanding that numerical thresholds mask underlying similarities leads people to conceal, fudge, and bend the rules at the borderline.

The second kind of challenge asserts a real difference where a measure finds a likeness, and insists on exclusion of something the measure includes. This kind of challenge is possible, indeed inevitable, because no matter how small and precisely defined a category is, it still masks variety among the objects or people or events it includes.

The second type of challenge can be illustrated with the problem of counting beds. In the late 1960s, amidst belief that the country had too many health care facilities, there was a movement to plan health services by allowing new construction only where it was needed. "Need," in turn, was defined primarily by the ratio of hospital beds to population in a community. The bed ratio seemed a sensible measure of a community's capacity to provide health care, since beds are the places in hospitals where patients can be put, and they are manifestly easy to count. (If it has four legs and a mattress. . . .) But it soon became obvious that all hospital beds are not the same. A bed might be an iron cot or an electric multiposition unit. It might include a cardiac monitor and emergency equipment at its station or it might share equipment with a whole corridor of beds. It might be supported by a staff of four hundred specialists or fourteen general practitioners. It might be within five miles of its client population or within forty. Needless to say, health planners who denied applications for new facilities were besieged with protests about how they counted beds.

If it is hard to count beds because they can mean so many different things, imagine the difficulties in counting jobs for purposes of employment policy. Should unionized, secure, well-paying jobs be counted as equivalent to low-paying, high-turnover jobs? There are dead-end jobs and jobs with built-in career ladders, blue-collar and white-collar jobs, seasonal jobs, short-term jobs (elected officials), long-term jobs (midlevel managers), unpredictable-length jobs (political appointees), and virtually permanent jobs (civil servants and tenured professors). There are jobs with pension, health and life insurance benefits, and jobs without; there are make-work jobs and essential jobs. A job is simply not a job, and debates about employment, retraining, and welfare programs often hinge on the tremendous ambiguity lurking behind counts of jobs. For example, in 1994 the *New York Times* reported good news for workers, saying that most of the new jobs created in the past couple of years were in categories with higher than average pay. In fact, most of the new jobs *were* in the category officially called "managers," but that category includes both corporate managers with six-figure salaries and assistant managers at McDonald's, with starting hourly wages in the low one-figure range. Most of the job growth was at the low end.[2]

Debating the size of a phenomenon is one of the most prominent forms of discourse in public policy. Although the debate often appears to be about the tally—whether things were added up correctly—it is usually about categorization—how the different sides "count as." There are, to be sure, occasional conflicts over the actual tally, such as when candidates for public office ask for a recount of votes, or cities ask for a recount of the census. Almost always, however, the conflict in policy is over what legitimately counts as what, and numbers are invoked to give an air of finality to each side's opinions.

Every number is an assertion about similarities and differences. No number is innocent, for it is impossible to count without making judgments about categorization. Every number is a political claim about "where to draw the line." Projections, correlations, simulations, and every other fancy manipulation of numbers all rest on the decisions about "counting as" embodied in their numbers, so they, too, are claims about similarities and differences. And similarities and differences are the ultimate basis for decisions in public policy.

NUMBERS AS NORMS AND SYMBOLS

Like metaphors, numbers make normative leaps. Measures imply a need for action, because we do not measure things except when we want to change them or change our behavior in response to them. The reason we try to predict rain, after all, is to decide whether to carry an umbrella.

[2]Bob Kuttner, "Inequality Sours Economic Recovery," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 24, 1994, p. 13.

To call for a measurement or survey of something is to take the first step in promoting change. In the 1930s, amidst the Great Depression, Congress wanted the administration to begin a full-fledged unemployment census. Until then, the Bureau of Labor Statistics had collected data on employment, from which business and labor organizations as well as economists had tried to estimate unemployment. President Roosevelt did not want a formal unemployment census, because the mere presence of official unemployment figures would put even more pressure on him to lower them. Roosevelt eventually did create the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to provide jobs for the unemployed. The WPA began its own monthly survey of unemployment in 1939, first to dispute the administration's lower figures, and later to convince Congress of the continuing need for the WPA after World War II had begun to stimulate new jobs.[3] Everyone—first Congress, then Roosevelt, and then the head of the WPA—saw that unemployment figures could be a force in politics.

Not only does measuring a problem create subtle pressure to do something about it, but some level of the measure usually becomes a norm. In 1946, Congress passed the Employment Act, mandating that the administration should collect data on unemployment levels and also provide "full employment." The old WPA monthly survey was taken over by the Census Bureau. Since the survey revealed rather persistent rates of unemployment, those rates came to be seen as normal and inevitable. During the 1950s and 1960s, when unemployment averaged about 4.6 percent, economists defined full employment as an unemployment rate between 3 and 4 percent. (If that sounds like a contradiction, that's because it is. This is the political language of numbers.) In the early 1970s, unemployment climbed to more than 6 percent, and Nixon administration economists began claiming that employment should really be considered full at around 4.5 to 5 percent unemployment. With average unemployment rates of more than 7 percent in the 1980s and more than 9 percent in 1982 and 1983, Reagan administration economists began to define full employment as about 6 percent unemployment. The economics profession obliged politicians with textbook theories of a "natural rate of unemployment," below which inflation would inevitably accelerate. Paul Samuelson's best-selling textbook declared in its 1970 edition that full-employment was about 3.5 percent unemployment; by the time of its 1985 edition, the natural rate of unemployment had grown to around 6 percent.[4]

As norms, numbers are part of a story of helplessness and control. The administration is held responsible for the state of the economy, and much of the president's support is contingent on his seeming to be in control. So presidents weave a tortuous path between invoking numbers to prove they have reduced a problem through intelligent policy and invoking numbers to prove that some part of the problem is beyond human control. The unemployment rate, the prime interest rate, the inflation rate, the size of the budget, the GNP and the deficit are all characters in the drama of presidential control and failure.

The norms established by measures are sometimes ambiguous. In 1985, the U.S. Navy reported that it had saved $2.5 billion in shipbuilding costs over the previous three years. At first glance, savings would seem to be a good thing, and the navy ought to be proud. But navy officials were not sure whether to brag about the savings or conceal them. The secretary of the navy wanted to brag, thinking that the $2.5 billion saving showed thrift, successful use of competitive bidding, and good management. The vice admiral in charge of buying ships, on the other hand, thought the savings might be interpreted by Congress as proof of "fat" in the navy's budget, and he wanted to play them down.[5] Savings turned out to be a double-edged sword.

In politics, many measures are double-edged swords; that is, it is good to be high on the measure but also good to be low. This is another aspect of ambiguity in numbers, and it occurs when the things we measure are symbols, not just objects. Saving, for example, symbolizes both present thrift and past waste. Thus, far more important than the actual number of a measure is how the measure is interpreted. When measures have a double meaning, the people being measured are put in a double bind. The political fight then shifts from the correctness of the tally or the categorization to a struggle over the interpretation of the symbol.

[3] Judith Innes De Neufville, *Social Indicators and Public Policy* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1975), pp. 75–76.

[4] David Gordon, "Six Percent Unemployment Ain't Natural: Demystifying the Idea of a Rising 'Natural Rate of Unemployment,'" *Social Research* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 223–46. For an argument that letting unemployment fall below the supposed natural rate does not bring about galloping inflation and might even be good policy, see Robert Eisner, "Our NAIRU Limit: The Governing Myth of Economic Policy," *The American Prospect*, no. 21 (Spring 1995): 58–63.

[5] Richard Halloran, "Savings by Navy Posing a Problem," *New York Times*, March 24, 1985, p. 32.

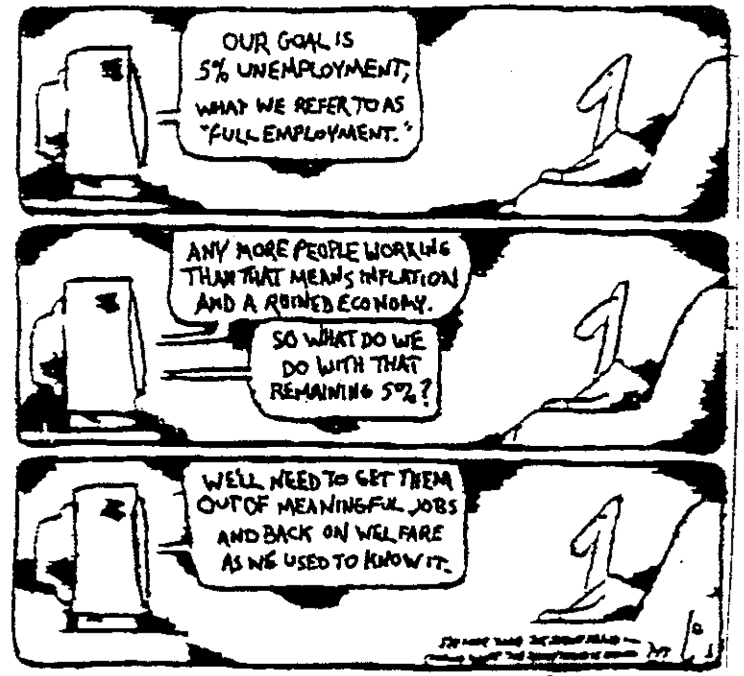
Another double-edged sword is cost. We usually think of high costs as bad. All things being equal, it is better to pay less for something than more. That is the ideology of efficiency. But for many types of goods and services, high cost is itself a symbol of high quality (think of doctors' and lawyers' services) or prestige (think of designer clothes). To some extent, we all use cost as a proxy measure for quality ("It's so cheap it can't be any good"). In policy debates, measures of cost are often double-edged. Is a costly national defense system waste-ridden or extra secure? Does a high price tag on defense convey a certain toughness and strength to our enemies, independent of the system's actual military capability? Reformers tend to emphasize the waste side of cost, while people in the system trumpet the quality side and the symbolic benefits of high cost.

Cost is a double-edged sword in another way as well. A cost to buyers is income to sellers. Thus, the high cost of medical care for patients and insurers is simultaneously new job opportunities and higher incomes to health care providers and medical supply firms. The high cost of fighter planes to the Air Force represents more jobs and higher wages to contractors. Costs are always income to somebody else, so there is always a constituency for high costs to battle the one for low costs.

Efficiency (getting the most output for a given input) and productivity (output per hour of labor) can be double-edged swords. The terms themselves are value-laden, and we generally think that the more efficiency and productivity, the better. But when physicians open clinics to process Medicaid patients quickly and efficiently, critics complain about "Medicaid mills." High output can symbolize both perfunctory work and a job well done. In services where the output of jobs is personal attention or custom design, efficiency is not always a virtue.

Middles and averages often become norms in politics, and because they are symbols as well as mathematical concepts, they can take on conflicting meanings and put policymakers in a double bind. Promoting a policy as "helping the middle class" is a standard strategy for gaining broad support, because surveys show that most people think of themselves as middle-class, even when they fall substantially above or below the median income.[6] Yet the social science truism that most people consider themselves middle-class collapses when survey takers change a few words. If people are given a choice among "lower-class,"

[6]John Aldrich, Paul Abramson, and David Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1984 Elections* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985).



"middle-class," and "upper-class," about 90 percent will say they are middle-class, but if a category for "working-class" is added as an option, about 45 percent say they are working-class, and only about 45 percent identify as middle-class. People who identify themselves as working-class tend to want a more activist government and more redistributive social policy. Thus, if almost half the citizenry thinks of themselves as working-class, promoting a middle-class tax cut may alienate those voters rather than attract them: a broad tax cut not only depletes revenues available for tangible benefits for the working class, but working-class families don't have enough income to benefit very much from tax cuts.[7]

Politicians exploit the ambiguity and positive connotation of the idea of "middle." Democrats and Republicans both try to present their tax proposals as middle-class tax cuts, but one party would cut taxes for families earning up to, say, $75,000, while the other would cut taxes for families earning all the way up to, say, $200,000. As the Reagan administration found out when it promoted a tax cut for middle-class

[7]S. M. Miller and Karen Marie Ferroggiaro, "Class Dismissed?" *The American Prospect*, no. 21 (Spring 1995): 100–4.

families, defined as earning between $20,000 and $30,000, the *political* middle class is not the same as the economic middle class. The typical people who lobby, write letters, staff campaigns, and make contributions, define themselves as "middle-income," even though they earn $50,000 to $60,000 and are in no statistical sense average.[8] The political middle and the economic middle turn out to be different groups, and it is hard to write a tax plan that pleases both.

THE HIDDEN STORIES IN NUMBERS

In policy debates, numbers are commonly used to tell a story. Most obviously, they are the premier language for stories of decline and decay. Figures are invoked to show that a problem is getting bigger and worse, or to project present trends into the future to demonstrate that decline is just around the bend. Numbers are also important in stories of helplessness and control. As we will see in Chapter 8 ("Causes"), statistics have become the predominant form of identifying causal relationships and thus of identifying agents and factors of control. In both uses, numbers are invoked to authenticate the story. The author or speaker tells the audience, in effect, "The numbers show that my story is true."

Even more important than the explicit stories numbers tell are the implicit ones. The acts of counting and publicizing a count convey hidden messages, independent of the actual numbers or the explicit stories.

First, to count something at all is to assert that the phenomenon is at least frequent enough to bother counting. The initial demands to count something formally, such as the demands for the unemployment census, grow from recognition that the thing is common enough to worry about. Counting says a phenomenon is common, regular, and expected, even when the explicit story of a count is to show how rare the phenomenon is. Counts of "parts per billion" in pollution or chemical exposure, for example, tell a story of extreme rarity at the same time as standards of permissible levels expressed in this measure tell a story of common occurrence. Counting moves an event from the singular to the plural.

Demands for record keeping often intensify after an apparent accident, and the impetus for counting is a suspicion that numbers will "prove" a connection between some controllable human action and the problem that was once thought to be pure natural accident. Thus, for example, when a few people in the same neighborhood or manufacturing plant develop cancer, a grassroots group will often demand that a public health agency or an employer begin to keep records on cancer occurrence. Their hope is to pin the blame for cancer on something government or firms control, such as chemical disposal or electric wires.

To count something is, second, to assert that it is an identifiable entity with clear boundaries. No one could believe in a count of something that cannot be identified, so to offer a count is to ask your audience to believe the thing is countable. That is no trivial request. In designing the first U.S. population census of 1790, James Madison argued for counting people's occupations. He wanted to have three categories—manufacturing, agriculture, and commerce—because he believed these categories represented the only important political interests to which congressmen should attend. (He thought the learned professions should not be counted in the census because Congress would not make policy concerning them anyway.) Samuel Livermore, a fellow congressman, opposed counting occupations, because he thought it impossible to distinguish the categories Madison set forth. A tobacco grower worked in both agriculture and commerce; or a man might be a farmer in the summer and a shoemaker in winter. Livermore said, in effect, you can't count something you cannot distinguish, and he denied that the political interests Madison wanted to represent were in fact distinguishable. Madison lost.[9]

Many contemporary policy debates involve the question of countability. In education policy, people argue over whether it is possible to measure aptitude for learning, and if so, whether current tests really measure it. Insurance programs worry about whether they can measure disability, and managers about whether they can measure productivity. Civil rights lawyers ponder how to measure "hate crimes." Early in every policy issue, there is usually a serious discussion of whether a phenomenon is measurable at all. Once a measure has been proposed, the debate centers on challenges to the measure as too inclusive or exclusive. But one should not forget that even in debates about the validity of a particular measure, both sides have already accepted the

[8] Alan Murray, "Reagan's Tax-Overhaul Plan Faces Criticism from Upscale, Politically Active Middle Class," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 1985, p. 50.

[9] This story is from Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 163.

underlying premise that a phenomenon is distinguishable and countable.

To count something is, third, to create a community. Any number is implicitly an assertion that the things counted in it share a common feature and should be treated as a group. Sometimes numbers represent members of what we might call natural communities or primary groups—people who actually interact regardless of whether they are counted. The population of a village, size of a family, or size of a school are examples. Other numbers represent artificial or statistical communities; they lump together people who have no relationship other than the shared characteristic that determined the count. Age groups, income classes, and mothers of young children in the labor force might be examples.

The distinction between natural and artificial communities is itself somewhat fuzzy, however, and most communities in the polis are somewhere between the natural and the artificial. The number of citizens in the United States expresses a statistical community in one sense (I have had more interaction with some French citizens than with most Americans) but a natural community in another (I grew up with the same history and culture as most Americans).

In the polis, counting is often part of a deliberate effort to stimulate creation of a natural community by identifying a statistical community in order to demonstrate common interests. Early in the issue of asbestos as a health hazard, for example, trade unions and physicians devoted most of their efforts merely to counting people who developed certain types of cancer and had been exposed to asbestos. That kind of counting created a community of "victims of industry" out of a mass of cancer patients. As cancer patients, people are tied together only by a common diagnosis but no human relationships; as "victims," they are tied together through common relationships to particular employers.

Counting, because it creates groups, is an essential instrument of political mobilization. To identify shared characteristics or problems among individuals is to draw people into a group, however artificial the group may be at first. When leaders of the women's movement talk of the "women's vote" and the "gender gap," they are counting up all women of voting age and asserting a similarity of interest among them. The task for women's leaders, as for leaders of any non-primary group, is to convert statistical members (ones who share important characteristics but have no real relationship with the group) into natural members (ones who actually participate).

A fourth hidden story is that numbers offer the promise of conflict

resolution through arithmetic. It is common wisdom among negotiators that irreconcilable demands can often be handled by breaking them up into smaller components and trading the parts off against each other. Numbers are a vehicle for dividing, weighing, and balancing, because putting a number on something makes it susceptible to arithmetical manipulation.

One of the most striking examples of this strategy is Justice Blackmun's majority opinion in the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade,* the case that established a legal right to abortion.[10] To supporters of a woman's right to have an abortion, motherhood changes women's lives in a quantum fashion, so that their future life course is qualitatively different, not just a little bit more or less of this and that. To opponents of abortion, a fetus is a living person for whom abortion means death, not just a little bit less of life. It is hard to find a compromise between such absolutist views. After all, pregnancy and abortion are all-or-nothing states; a woman can't be a little bit pregnant, nor can a fetus be a little bit aborted.

In his opinion, Justice Blackmun acknowledged the fundamental importance of childbearing to women's identity and acknowledged that the Supreme Court couldn't settle the debate about when life begins. Then he made two brilliant arithmetical moves. First, he imagined these concerns as bundles of "interests"—a pregnant woman's interests in her own life, on the one side, and a state government's interests in prenatal life, on the other. Once he had made this metaphorical leap of conceptualizing the two concerns as divisible bundles, he could assert that it was possible to "weigh" and "balance" them against each other. Next, he divided pregnancy into three trimesters (as medicine had been doing for a long time), and asserted that as a pregnancy progresses, the state's interest grows larger in comparison to the mother's. "These interests are separate and distinct," he wrote. "Each grows in substantiality as the woman approaches term, and at a point during pregnancy, each becomes 'compelling.'" Continuing with his metaphor of a balance, with bits of "interest" being added and subtracted from the two sides of the scale, he said that during the first trimester, the risk of dying from abortion was less than the risk of dying from childbirth if the woman carried her pregnancy to term, so the mother's interest was heavier, or "compelling" in legal language; thus, a state couldn't interfere with her and her doctor's decision to abort. By the beginning of the third trimester, the fetus had presum-

[10] *Roe v. Wade,* 410 U.S. 113, 93 S.Ct. 705.