The Bridges Project

new expertise for policy in a world of uncertainty

COUNTERPOINT

The Bridges project aims to improve public policy outcomes by bringing vital insights from academic research into policy-making.

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New expertise for policy in a world of uncertainty

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The economic and political crisis in Europe presents huge challenges to public policy at every level of government. Policy-makers are struggling to respond to the dual test of budget cuts and angry publics. Their range of policy options is narrowing as politics turns ugly in many parts of Europe. Populists claim that self-serving elites and immigrants are responsible for the suffering caused by austerity, making it harder to maintain policies that support social cohesion. The rise in support for populist politics (particularly xenophobic populism) in turn undermines the values of open and tolerant societies, as well as the capacity and effectiveness of their institutions to protect the weakest and most vulnerable members of those societies.

The Open Society European Policy Institute and Counterpoint have teamed up to find new ways to preserve open societies in Europe that are suffering from the political fall-out of the crisis. We have collaborated on a series of studies on the nature and extent of populist influence in 12 EU countries[1] and in the European Parliament. We are now embarking on the Bridges Project, an ambitious effort to improve policy responses to the crisis and safeguard the institutions and policies protecting core values such as tolerance, justice, pluralism and inclusivity.

Our starting-point is to draw out new insights from recent research from a variety of academic disciplines that, although having direct policy applications, have not generally been applied to policy making. Policy-makers tend to listen to economists and statisticians for advice, but they rarely benefit from research in disciplines such as neuroscience, psychoanalysis, anthropology or architecture. The project aims to foster a deeper understanding of the 'hidden wiring' of the European crisis in terms of how citizens feel and behave. The ultimate objective of the project is to bridge the gap between new insights from the social and behavioural sciences and policy-making, which would enable policy-makers to respond more effectively to the publics' demands.

This essay sketches out the new battlegrounds for politics and policy. It takes recent populist surges as a sign of much deeper shifts in the tectonic plates underlying European politics. Populist politics is characterised by anxiety, pessimism, cynicism and anger at the seeming exhaustion of democratic institutions at a time of radical uncertainty. The renewed strength of populism shows how deep shifts relating to globalisation are being experienced by the public. Our aim is to encourage those in power to use these insights to formulate more effective responses to the challenges underpinning the growth of populism and, by doing so, re-invigorate the functioning of democratic institutions.

Radical uncertainty and the political management of anxiety

After 60 years of rising prosperity in much of Europe, the once successful economic models are now failing to deliver. And although the prospect for the single currency has slightly improved recently, the dominant narrative in the EU is one of long-term decline and stagnation. While elites sense that their privileged position is being eroded, the wider publics feel impotent vis-à-vis the disruptive effects of globalisation on their lives. Both feel powerless to adapt to a world characterised by deep interdependence and radical uncertainty. Power is fragmented and national sovereignty is no longer an exclusive prerogative of governments. The symptoms of radical uncertainty are clear too: falling trust in institutions, from parliaments to the media, and public protests about corruption and austerity.[2]

Risk means the anticipation of catastrophe. But risk has become incalculable – unknown unknowns. We live in a post-risk society, one of radical uncertainty.

Ulrich Beck, sociologist

Mounting anxiety is evident. We are not referring to the minor worries of everyday life, but to the surfacing of deep turmoil and apprehension in the face of an uncertain future whose contours are barely perceptible and thus increasingly frightening. One of the most important functions of modern political institutions has been the management of anxieties. This was achieved by creating predictable processes and agreed frameworks of references. Over time, these institutions created narratives that produced the kind of collective convictions that supported decision-making even in times of doubt or crises.[3] However these narratives today are no longer effective – because they are no longer convincing. As psychoanalyst David Tuckett put in a recent Bridges project meeting, 'a narrative that doesn't have the force to convince is useless.'

Institutions used to offer dependable patterns and predictable responses that helped citizens cope with change. Today, institutions cannot reassure people that reliable prosperity and effective politics will be restored. Their capacity to produce reassuring conviction narratives has fallen dramatically. As a result, a mix of frantic action and pervasive inaction creates an impression of inefficiency at best and deception at worst.

If politicians understood the nature of the anxiety – and its psychological and biological bases – they would be better equipped to manage it. Research in several academic areas offers hope against a background of growing populist politics and increasingly intolerant societies. Policy-makers need the right kind of information about the citizens they serve to regain legitimacy amongst vast portions of the public. And they should not feel narrowly bound by the limits of possible (or imagined) public reactions, because those reactions can be shaped and can change.[4] If a deeper and more accurate understanding of citizens' views and behaviour is developed, the range of policy options will widen.

The challenges of the new political reality

The recent surge in support for populist politics in many European countries is a symptom of the failure of the mainstream parties of both right and left to respond to mounting anxiety in the face of radical uncertainty. Populists are adept at turning anxiety into blame and blame into betrayal. Their stances are based on the political exploitation of deep emotional frustration in European societies. The roots of this anxiety predate the present institutional and economic crisis, but current circumstances seem to justify the populists' claim that elites – especially political elites – are not acting in the interests of the rest of society because they are either unwilling or incapable of doing so.

Populist parties and movements are not new. In previous decades, however, they tended to garner the votes and support of only a small proportion of the population. Today they are gaining electoral ground in many countries as people move from the centre to the fringes of the political spectrum — or, as another explanation would have it, as all parties try to capture the centre ground, leaving the rest of the spectrum bare. The populist appeal now goes well beyond committed supporters.[5] More widely, the logic of populist reasoning – mistrust in elites, cynicism about political institutions, variants of xenophobia, and demands for the exclusion of newcomers – is spreading to citizens who would not yet cast their preference in favour of populist parties, but nonetheless feel sympathy with their message.

Populists, of whatever sort, challenge mainstream politicians by questioning their relevance and legitimacy. They claim to represent the public against political elites, whom they lump together regardless of party differences. For policy-makers, the challenge of relevance is really one of effectiveness: can they implement policies seen by the public as legitimate and effective? Part of the answer lies in their capacity to understand the nature of the public's political demands.

When faced with anxiety and mounting distress, people, organisations and institutions retreat into practical tasks.

Andrew Balfour, psychologist

The focus of the Bridges project is on policy-making rather than politics, with the aim of offering tools to understand better the concerns, anxieties and beliefs that lie behind citizens' demands. Better insights into this 'hidden wiring' of societies would enable policy actors to offer intelligible, effective policies which in a context of radical uncertainty could provide a measure of reassurance.

The challenges for politicians

1   **New political divides are undermining traditional party structures**. In most of Europe, left and right no longer structure politics as they used to. But they offer very similar economic policies, especially in a euro-zone dominated by austerity. Socialists and conservatives differ in terms of the desirable size of the state and the importance of national identity. Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, they also present broadly unchanged foreign policies and world views. But new issues are appearing around which traditional parties are either uncomfortable or undecided – such as migration and integration, ageing populations and climate change. The reluctance of many mainstream parties to address and offer solutions to these problems makes them look out of touch and irrelevant.

2   **Lack of trust in political elites**. In many countries, the public increasingly mistrusts elites to govern in anybody's interest except their own, whether they come from the right or the left of the political spectrum. It is difficult to persuade the public to make sacrifices or invest in long-term solutions when they fundamentally mistrust those in power.

The challenges for policy-makers

1   **The questioning of government competence and capacity**. Conditions of radical uncertainty make it more difficult to gain public support for long-term measures. Policy-makers know that they have to deal with 'wicked problems': problems characterised by the intricate interdependence of their causes and the unpredictable consequences of any solution. Moreover, these problems can appear

to be so complex that it would be difficult to consult citizens about their preferred outcomes. As a result, policy-makers come across as peremptory in their unilateral decision-making – and sometimes as incompetent. Paradoxically, despite the need for predictability, the public is increasingly unwilling to trust those in authority to make difficult choices and long-term investments that would make the future more certain.

2   **The erosion of trust in experts and expertise**. On what and whom can decisions and policy be based? The Internet, through which everyone has access to information, is becoming the terrain of political engagement. As a result, the legitimacy of decision-makers has to be rooted in a different form of expertise that cannot be based exclusively on privileged access to information, education or research. Having lost the monopoly of access to information, experts struggle to defend bold policy decisions. In the future legitimacy will need to be based on understanding the public and engaging with people, rather than on claiming to know more than them. In order to do this new forms of shared expertise will need to serve as the basis of this understanding..

3   **The impact of generational asymmetries**. An important new asymmetry in European societies is the divide between generations. Most Europeans have experienced rising prosperity and life chances for more than a century. For several generations, parents have expected their children to live better than they had. Now the reverse expectation is becoming the norm: today's children will not enjoy the job security or pensions that their parents have, they may struggle to secure affordable and comfortable housing, and they will feel the effects of climate change within their lifetimes. Representative democracy is ill equipped to deal with inter-generational injustice because future voters have no say in decisions made now and the grey vote will grow in proportion over the decades to come. This time-delay adds to distributional asymmetries and uncertainty: the policy-makers of today cannot tell the public exactly when and on whom the costs and benefits will fall in the future, and are subject to increasingly powerful interest groups.

Managing anxiety and coping with uncertainty: new solutions from unexpected sources

Policy-makers tend to listen to economists, statisticians and occasionally to sociologists. However, the behavioural and social sciences – from neuroscience to psychology and psychoanalysis – can greatly contribute to the capacity of policy-makers to understand the way people make decisions, cope with uncertainty, and choose to behave and relate to others. If they better understood human behaviour, their policies would succeed more often.

Insights from these sciences and academic disciplines offer hope for democracy too. A new kind of responsive politics could address the anxieties that fuel populist attitudes, manage expectations and respond to people's needs. This is not about political communication or marketing. Rather, it is about increasing understanding of human motivations, something that is essential for a more accurate perception of current political demands. That in turn develops the capacity to engage with voters at a deeper level, which makes policy success more likely. The insights with the most obvious policy implications are:

1   **No attitude is unchangeable: humans are not hard-wired and their attitudes change throughout life**
Recent research on brain plasticity has changed the understanding of the relationship between biology and behaviour in new and positive ways. In particular, research in pharmacology and neuroscience points to the fundamentally adaptable nature of our neural system. This is crucially important because it can help politicians rebut the claim that xenophobia and racism are natural, 'hard-wired' reactions.[6] Research in neuroscience demonstrates that even where there is an innate biological basis to discriminate (i.e. an automated reaction), that bias can be altered. In fact, people modulate their automatic reactions all the time.[7] Daniel Kahneman's work shows that while we need to concentrate in order to do this, we can easily modulate our reactions through concerted thought. Scientists refer to this as 'enhancing cognitive control': **when humans have time to think about their reaction before acting they construct a better response and behave in open and generous ways.**[8]

We may have an innate tendency to discriminate, an automated response, but those responses can be controlled – through time, repetition and strong norms. Experiments in neuroscience show that minds can change.

Christoforos Tsantoulas, biologist

For example, experiments designed to explore attitudes to racial difference show that the longer the reaction-time allowed to partici-pants, the more likely they were to react in ways consistent with social norms that they themselves had set out as important before the experiment. In other words, they acted in accordance with their values. The shorter the exposure to a stimulus and the shorter the time allowed to react, the more haphazard and inconsistent the reaction it produced. The time-period to 'make up one's mind' is vital to process information and develops new neural pathways.

The lesson for policy is that **it is worth investing in measures that allow time for people to process information before acting**. Time to think allows reactions to change. In policy-making and politics, rapid reactions often work to the detriment of long-term success, particularly in times of crisis. When politicians and policy-makers themselves have more time to think and interact with the public, they are more likely to produce responsive and successful policies. For example, deliberative polls which consult the public (or even give them decision-making power) and allow contributors more time to look at the options and discuss them with their communities tend to lead to more support for long-term investments.

2   **Empathy can be cultivated through practice and training**
Research on empathy is perhaps amongst the most fertile fields of investigation. One of the most promising findings is that empathy is something that can be practised and learned. Humans' capacity to empathise can grow over time.[9]

This research should encourage politicians to **be bolder in their rebuttal of populist claims that racism or discrimination are natural reactions** against which it is futile to fight. Increasingly, scientists can demonstrate the opposite – that people are not slaves to their inherited biological reactions, but rather that those reactions can be shaped.

As for policy-makers, two lessons stand out: first, they should be **cautious about interpreting polling evidence**. What insights are surveys and polls really measuring? How well are they capturing the intricacies of a complex system of mental reasoning and emotional responses to the questions asked? And, whatever is being captured, how can policy makers and politicians affect perception and choice when creating policies? These policies do not have to appeal to basic instincts; instead, they can appeal to 'the better angels of our nature.'[10]

Second, they should invest in programmes that place the **development of empathy** at their core. If empathy can be developed then surely this is an argument that could inform a number of policy-areas. From education to housing, in all those areas in which trade offs are often difficult to justify: a key example might be housing attribution

on the basis of different needs and entitlements and the resentments these can generate between different populations and communities. The possibility of developing empathy militates in favour of more deliberative processes and forms of advocacy that use empathy as a way to diffuse conflict and grow understanding.

3   **Anti-prejudice norms are firmly embedded in many European societies**
Research on prejudice across Europe is corroborated by the insights of **social psychology on the role of social norms and their power**.[11] Rather than looking at neural processes, social psychology focuses on how people process information depending on how it is framed.

More specifically, recent research in social psychology points to the widespread approval of the anti-prejudice norm in European societies – in other words **tolerance and refraining from discriminatory practices are attitudes and behaviour that are deeply embedded in our societies**. These are continuously at work in allowing citizens to cope with diversity and change. Research shows that this is what prevents people from behaving in intolerant or prejudiced ways. These strong, internalised social norms create the motivation to avoid prejudice. They play a crucial role – but they need to be reinforced at every possible opportunity, like the neural pathways referred to above. This reinforcement happens through practice over time and clarity of message.

4   **Ambiguity from political leaders weakens norms of tolerance and equal treatment**
Recent research in political psychology also shows that **ambiguity weakens norms** and can create situations where prejudice and discrimi-nation are allowed to take over in the absence of a functioning norm.[12] This is **an argument for strong, positive narratives around diversity and immigration**. Politicians need to get the message that if they pander to populism, they will alienate other voters and undermine social goods – and potentially the very institutions of democracy on which they depend.[13] Research suggests in fact that this would prevent the long-term erosion of a strong narrative and norms that help to control prejudice.

There is widespread assent to the anti-prejudice norm, but ambiguous situations create the possibility of automatic prejudiced response. You need situational clarity.

Scott Blinder, political psychologist

5 The messenger matters

When people hear an opinion, their propensity to agree with it depends on who is speaking. People can be swayed into agreeing more readily with statements they would normally disagree with if these are attributed to people they respect. For example, research carried out by Compas in Oxford shows that people were more likely to agree with negative statements about Muslim faith schools if they were told that the statement was made by a mainstream party rather than by one with a reputation for racism such as the BNP.[14] This is convincing evidence that **mainstream parties bear a considerable responsibility for upholding anti-discrimination norms**. The implications for politicians and policy-makers are important: if they flirt with populist rhetoric, send mixed messages, and use loaded expressions carelessly, they will weaken anti-prejudice norms. The messenger matters as well as the message, so mainstream politicians need to be held accountable if they fail their responsibilities.

6 People cope with external uncertainty better when they have emotional support

Relationships with people, family, friends or neighbours, are people's most important source of emotional resilience, according to psychology and psychoanalysis.[15] These institutions are an essential support mechanism because they constitute systematised, ritualised and predictable sets of relationships. Their very predictability, quite apart from the function they fulfil, offers a measure of support and relief in the face of uncertainty. Sustained support to family relationships, couple relationships (especially older people), networks of friends and neighbours create resilience in the face of uncertainty and alleviate anxiety that crowds out reflection and controlled cognition. Supporting these relationships is a crucial public investment.

Conclusion: a new politics based on new expertise

Confronted with massive public anger, mainstream politicians are tempted to acquiesce to populist claims. From easy promises to 'get tough' on migrants and minorities, to pandering to narrow interest groups that claim to speak for the people, to the deferring of tough decisions that might be unpopular with particularly vocal groups. Populism creates an atmosphere unconducive to dealing with complexity. Yet a different response is possible. A deeper understanding of human motivations would enable decision-makers to address public concerns more effectively.

Enhanced knowledge about how people think and the foundations of their emotional resilience should inspire policy making today.

The language of choice and control used by both left and right is out of date. What needs to emerge is an alternative language as effective as the populist rhetoric in eliciting from people a reaction of conviction – that is, of both reason and emotion together.

Radical uncertainty and deep anxiety will be a persistent feature of our era. Yet the reality of interdependence and the necessity of participation are rarely explained in political debate at national level. European policy-makers need to draw systematically from experts in domains that may be out of their comfort zones. To do so, they will need to recast expertise as more collaborative and in more devolved ways and devolved goods.[16] With greater expertise in understanding the 'hidden wiring' behind how European citizens are thinking and behaving, the range of policy options available would widen.

This is not about political manipulation or about manoeuvring people into positions they do not naturally agree with. Rather, it is about factoring in how human beings really process information and making sure that they are given every chance to react authentically from their deeper values and norms rather than simply as a result of anxiety. If politics becomes more reflective, citizens will react based on their own reasoning: this offers the best hope for reinvigorating political institutions across Europe.

The essays that follow summarise some of the insights gleaned during our IdeasLab in June. They are intended to give a flavour of the contributions that have shaped some of our thinking and have guided us toward the next set of discussions.

Notes

1   Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the UK

2   See the *European Social Survey, Exploring Public Attitudes, Informing Public Policy – findings from the first three rounds* http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/findings/ ESS1-3_findings_booklet.pdf. Or *Eurobarometer* surveys and studies address major topics concerning European citizenship: enlargement, social situation, health, culture, information technology, environment, the Euro, defence, etc. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/ step1.cfm#786

3   'Action [in uncertain contexts] depends on agents being able to develop *conviction narratives* made up of different components (...) in such a way that a story is completed so that the creator feels comfortable enough to act, or to permit others to act on his or her behalf. The vital function of such conviction narratives, it is suggested, is to create the support for action when no one approach is clearly correct and to manage the inherent contradictions faced by agents in uncertain contexts.' David Tuckett *Irreducible Uncertainty and its Implications: A Narrative Action Theory for Economics* INET lecture, Hong Kong, April (2013).

4   Research on the different types of supporters of populist parties, as well as on those whose views are increasingly influenced by populist claims, tends to show that a significant portion of these citizens are amenable to thinking otherwise.

5   See *Recapturing the Reluctant Radicals: How to win back Europe's populist vote*, (Counterpoint, 2012): http://counterpoint.uk.com/reports-pamphlets/recapturing-the-reluctant-radicals Most of the voters for these parties are now 'reluctant radicals' who previously voted for mainstream parties. An even bigger group are 'potential radicals', who are tempted to vote for non-mainstream populist parties for the first time, but have not yet done so.

6   A.G Greenwald, D.E McGhee & J.L Schwartz, 'Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: the implicit association test', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1464-1480 (1998).

7   Patricia G. Devine, 'Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their Automatic and Controlled Components', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56(1): 5-18 (1989).

8   E. A Plant & P.G Devine, 'Internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 75, 811-832 (1998). Xiaojing Xu, Xiangyu Zuo, Xiaoying Wang, and Shihui Han, 'Do You Feel My Pain? Racial Group Membership Modulates Empathic Neural Responses', *The Journal of Neuroscience*, July 1, 29(26):8525– 8529, (2009).

9   Olga M. Klimecki, Susanne Leiberg, Claus Lamm and Tania Singer, 'Functional Neural Plasticity and Associated Changes in Positive Affect After Compassion Training', *Cerebral Cortex*, 23, 7, 1552-1561, (2012).

10   Scott Blinder, Robert Ford and Elizabeth Ivarsflaten, 'The better angels of our nature: how the anti-prejudice norm affects policy and party preferences in Great Britain and Germany', *American Journal of Political Science*, first published online on 7th April, 2012, pp. 1–17 (2013).

11   Christian S. Crandall, Amy Eshleman, and Laurie O'Brien, 'Social Norms and the Expression and Suppression of Prejudice: The Struggle for Internalization,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(3): 359-378 (2002).

12   Scott Blinder, Robert Ford and Elizabeth Ivarsflaten, op cit.

13   Ivan Krastev, 'In Mistrust We Trust: Can Democracy Survive When We Don't Trust Our Leaders?', TED Books 2013.

14   Compas http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/research/citizenship/immigration-attitudes-in-british-electoral-politics/ See also, Scott Blinder with Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Robert Ford, 'The Anti-Racism Norm in Western European Immigration Politics: Why We Need to Consider it and How to Measure it', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 20: 421-445 November, (2010).

15   See for example here for a discussion of the impact of families on the UK riots of summer 2011 Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) Troubled Families — http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/troubledfamilies and the Tavistock response http://www.tccr.ac.uk/policy/policy-briefings/303-troubled-families-tccr-policy-briefing. See the work of Andrew Cooper at the Tavistock and Portman Trust on the link between relationships and public policy http://www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/Tavistockpolicyseminars

16   On this see C. Fieschi, 'What is Real Knowledge for the State?', *Global Brief*, June 7th, (2012) http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2012/06/07/what-is-%E2%80%98real%E2%80%99-knowledge-for-the-21st-century-state/

2

Uncertainty, evidence and the power of narrative

How can policy-makers make decisions in a time of radical uncertainty? David Tuckett, an economist, medical sociologist and practising psychoanalyst, argues that what can help is a narrative powerful enough to assuage anxiety. But these narratives can only be useful if they are based on curiosity and in a genuine interest to understand and use information. Then a 'conviction narrative' can help provide the necessary emotional support to act. In the absence of time and space to process information we can fall into the comfort of symbols and short-sightedness.

How far can knowledge of the past and the present give you a calculable knowledge of the future? In radical uncertainty you have to accept that it may not.

In most academic disciplines this problem is transformed into one of probability – implying that in some way the data we have about the past can be used to predict the future, provided we select it properly using probabilistic concepts such as Bayes law. Clearly, probability like Randomised Controlled Trials, which suppose that observations in one past situation will predict new future situations, is a powerful tool. On the other hand, attempting to predict things that have not yet happened and so may be unforeseen, that for me, is 'radical uncertainty'.

Yet, to make long-term decisions you must imagine the future and be aware that this is what you are doing. There are usually two aspects to this imagining: picturing the future path of the entity that immediately interests you – project X, (e.g. Counterpoint, the future of the business etc.) – and imagining the future paths of other entities interacting with each other and project X. This is true complexity.

Given radical uncertainty then, when you make decisions about the future, and in particular, the *further out* you go, you put yourself in a position where you would be wise to acknowledge that at some level, you can't know what the outcome will be. But nonetheless many decisions require long-term thinking. You must then engage with uncertainty in a way that is bound to have emotional effects; you can be attracted (excited) by an idea of what is to come and/or *be anxious about potential loss*. What I call a conviction narrative is what you need in order to convince yourself that there are more reasons to do this, than not. Decision-making in this view is both *cognitive* and *affective*. It is about looking at evidence and dealing with the anxiety that this evidence might produce. In times of radical uncertainty, that anxiety may be heightened.

Coming to action in radical uncertainty
The combination of the cognitive and affective impacts of uncertainty are a significant problem that has not been taken account of in economics, and has also been left unaddressed within nearly all the decision-making sciences.

In referring to how long-term investment is made, Keynes talked about the 'urge to action'. The entrepreneur has preferences and choices but, everything, ultimately, is about *coming to action*. This is a version of the problem that policy-makers face in radical uncertainty. How do you manage to take action in radical uncertainty?

In an integrated state, you take decisions in a state of mind in which you are curious about the information in front of you and have a genuine interest as to whether this is going to work. Curiosity implies an open mind, a state of not knowing, and so an interest in both negative and positive information and anxiety about outcomes. But you accept the anxiety. And one way of getting over that anxiety is to rely on a 'conviction narrative'. This 'conviction narrative' supports action by providing an emotionally valid set of reasons for the action and ways of dealing with doubt that would otherwise prevent you from acting.

But, given uncertainty, the temptation is to make decisions in a divided state (a key concept) in which, although you have some kind of information that things can go wrong, this information is not properly processed or investigated. The dot com boom – during which people had pages of information on why things would go wrong, but took no notice for a very long time – or financial derivatives, are examples of this. If you enquire into the pricing of derivatives and accept that there is no way of knowing what will happen, you will be very cautious. If you don't enquire and take outcomes on trust, then you can allow long documents and statistical shorthand to perform a symbolic function to support the divided state, replacing the need for curiosity (e.g. rating agencies or in policy, polling).

In a divided state, an idealised solution can appear, something that may seem to be the solution to all your problems. This type of solution is otherwise known as a Phantastic Object.

The emergence of 'Phantastic Objects'
Various totem poles such as the *fail-proof policy*, the *cast-iron polling result*, or the *infallible policy leader*, become Phantastic Objects supposedly supporting decisions that need to be made. Thus, where evidence is used not for thinking, but rather to feel comfortable, we see tokenism. The uncertainty linking of the present and the future is again not taken into account.

Group situations, such as policy affairs in government, create pressurising atmospheres that may make it easier or more difficult to raise problems. Mislabelling radical uncertainty as some sort of calculable risk will be a serious problem if radical uncertainty is relevant. To prevent really large failures we have to tolerate the feelings that come from looking out all the time at what may go both right and wrong. Perhaps, the current epidemic of short-termism is a product of our difficulties in facing radical uncertainty.

3

Behaviour, happiness and policy

Recent policy has drawn heavily on behavioural research. Core to behavioural arguments is the idea that we are driven by largely unconscious and automatic psychological forces. How can policy-making use these forces in order to shape individual behaviour in a way that is collectively beneficial? Paul Dolan, Professor of Behavioural Science in the Department of Social Policy at LSE, explains.

Every policy involves changing behaviour. Most economists and policymakers design behaviour change interventions on the assumption that we are creatures who respond to information and incentives just as they intend us to. But we are not wired like Mr Spock from Star Trek. Information and incentives often have unintended consequences that make things worse than doing nothing at all.

Behavioural science has taught us that we are heavily influenced by the contexts within which we act: in fact, most of what we do is not much thought about; it simply comes about. Whether you buy that big bar of chocolate has more to do with whether it is on sale at the till than with a conscious decision to devour a kilo of chocolate.

Behavioural science has taught us that we are heavily influenced by the contexts within which we act: in fact, most of we do is not so much thought about; it simply comes about.

We[1] have gathered the main contextual drivers of behaviour into a checklist called *Mindspace* for use by policymakers. Mindspace is deliberately in the form of a checklist; the evidence on the effectiveness of checklists in other areas is compelling, e.g. fewer planes crash and doctors kill fewer patients in surgery.

Here are the elements:

Messenger	We are heavily influenced by who communicates information
Incentives	Our responses to incentives are shaped by mental shortcuts
Norms	We are strongly influenced by what others do
Defaults	We 'go with the flow' of pre-set options
Salience	Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us
Priming	Our acts are often influenced by unconscious cues
Affect	Our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions
Commitments	We seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts
Ego	We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves

The contextual influences on us are largely unconscious and automatic and so we cannot get at the unconscious drivers of behaviour by asking conscious questions, as used in market research.

We need to be less like David Letterman and more like David Attenborough, observing the human animal in its natural environment, ideally when it does not know it is being watched. Natural field experiments are randomised controlled trials in the real world and are providing us with some important insights into how people really behave rather than how they think they will behave.

We need to create an environment where we 'test and learn' – and also accept that we won't get it right every time, so that we can learn lessons from what goes badly as well as from what goes well. How should success be judged? Ideally by looking at the impact of policy on how people feel. This requires us to measure happiness and suffering directly. Ideally we should do this by finding out how pleasurable, painful, purposeful and pointless people feel about the things they do on a day-to-day basis. How we use our time is something we have some control over and something that policymakers can affect.

Using different happiness measures, we are now able to place monetary values on the range of benefits brought about by policy, thus enabling us to calculate benefit-cost ratios for all the good and bad uses of public money. We would all be happier if we spent more time with people we liked, so I'm hoping that this project makes me – and you – happy.

Notes

[1] Paul Dolan, Professor of Behavioural Science in the Department of Social Policy at LSE; Michael Hallsworth, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Government; Dr David Halpern, Director of Research at the Institute for Government; Dominic King, Specialty Registrar in General Surgery and a Clinical Research Fellow at the Department of Surgery and Cancer at Imperial College London; Ivo Vlaev, Senior Lecturer in Psychology in the Faculty of Medicine at Imperial College London.

4

The role of norms and values in shaping citizen perceptions of migration

How can we make sure that the public is not swayed by racist or xenophobic arguments? Recent research in the psychology of politics suggests that we should be optimistic because xenophobia is systematically countered by strong social norms that override any xenophobic sentiment. Scott Blinder, Acting Director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, explains how this works and why it is important.

My research argues that attitudes toward immigration and minority integration are informed by competing impulses: some negative gut-level responses to 'out-group' members on the one hand, tempered by a widespread social norm against prejudice on the other. In certain circumstances, anti-prejudice norms limit the appeal of anti-immigrant parties. At the macro-level, the strength of anti-prejudice norms can help explain why many anti-immigration parties – particularly those who don't benefit from a mainstream, clean image, i.e. those without a 'Reputational Shield' against accusations of racism, such as the BNP in Britain – fail to mobilise many voters, even in societies where anti-immigration sentiments are prevalent. They are simply seen as working too directly against the anti-prejudice norm to be 'frequentable'.

Controlled cognition can override automatic responses if the two conflict...

The research is based on a well-validated underlying social psychological framework, the 'dual process' model of attitudes, which says that attitudes are jointly produced by automatic and controlled responses to stimuli. Automatic responses are gut reactions

based on accumulated experiences, similar to a Pavlovian, conditioned response; controlled cognition reflects more conscious, 'impression management' goals that may involve conformity to a social norm or to one's own personal motivations. In the case of the anti-prejudice norm, some people may want to act in a normatively-approved manner as a signal to others, while others may have internalised the norm and are motivated to act in keeping with it.

Thus, it is a mistake to think that all individuals have one single attitude toward immigrants or other groups of people.

Rather, they have both automatic impulses and controlled opinions, which may well be in conflict with one another. Which version prevails on opinion polls—or ultimately at the ballot box—then becomes a key question for social science and, of course, for policy-makers and politicians. In certain circumstances, controlled cognition can override automatic responses if the two conflict.

My co-authors and I find that anti-immigrant political choices are less likely (a) among individuals who are internally motivated to avoid prejudice, and (b) in contexts that highlight the anti-prejudice norm, making people aware that their behaviour is likely to be taken as a sign of their prejudice, or lack thereof.

Therefore, the anti-prejudice norm functions as a political resource for those working against extremist movements or anti-immigrant policies. Many people in Britain are motivated by this norm and do not want to appear prejudiced, even to themselves. The anti-prejudice norm limits the appeal of extreme parties or policies that put one's anti-prejudice bona fides clearly at stake. The macro-level work of my co-author Elisabeth Ivarsflaten completes the story. She argues that the successful anti-immigration parties of Europe have almost always had a 'reputational shield' against accusations of prejudice, in that they started out with some other aim (e.g. a tax revolt, a defense of agrarian interests, Euroscepticism) and they can use their initial stance as a reputational shield against accusations of racism or xenophobia. By contrast, parties that formed as anti-immigration parties focusing only on the issue of immigration do not have a reputational shield and have been less likely to succeed. In Britain, the differing public responses toward the BNP and UKIP illustrate this difference. Ironically, by being less focused on immigration than the BNP (and more moderate in rhetoric), UKIP has been more successful in mobilising British voters' opposition to immigration.

5

Strategising, rule interpretation and crowd behaviour from a gaming perspective

Some industries (marketing, advertising, gaming) have been much quicker to understand how to shape complex human behaviour and choice. Gaming is one such industry in which the power of reward, story-telling and rule elaboration are starkly revealed. What lessons can policy-making draw? Tom Rees, a repentant games designer, has been trying to use his knowledge for good.

As a game designer, I build puzzles, stories, and worlds on which people spend their free time and hopefully get some enjoyment. The last thirty years have seen video games go from a hobby to a multibillion industry; the principles of their design have been studied and refined. Ultimately this is driven by money, but along the way we must provide compulsive experiences and encourage our players to cooperate.

Casual, mobile, and evil games are intrinsic to a natural evolutionary process that drives games to be more compelling, even addictive, than ever before. Companies are making a fortune from this: simple and well-established play mechanics are being recycled with Facebook and Twitter integration, pushing the player to volunteer more time and money to 'achieve' victory, deliberately pulling in as many of their friends as possible.

Research in behavioural psychology has helped game design. B.F. Skinner's experiments in 1930/1931 provided valuable insight into how best to give out rewards. He was a graduate student experimenting on rats in cages, but the results are surprising (even upsetting) in terms of how they translate to human behaviour. This underpins the design of every casino in the world, and explains why so many games inevitably ask you to open a treasure chest.

Games are very careful about how they hand out rewards; if done too frequently the player decides that the game presents no challenge. Too infrequently and we lose the player to boredom. Too predictably and the game becomes a 'grind' where the player feels they are being made to work rather than conquer a challenge. These factors must be carefully balanced to *engineer* the right level of motivation.

As technological barriers fall our games have become bigger, even simulating entire worlds and economies with up to 100,000 players interacting with each other (referred to in the industry as 'Massively Multiplayer Games'). The rules of the game grow closer to matters of public policy, inspiring backlash or protest when ill-balanced. It is a theoretically perfect platform, with computer-enforced rules that are impossible to violate. Yet cheating is rampant, and our jobs have never been more difficult.

Rules beget rules. In such large systems our players will swarm to the paths of least resistance, leading us to an *arms race* of rule-making. Chaotic systems are thrown wildly out of balance by small perturbations, and we find ourselves constantly adding new rules to maintain equilibrium.

The success of *Minecraft*, a game with almost no rules, was a shock to the gaming establishment and forced us all to re-evaluate our priorities. By allowing players to selectively disable rules and administrate their own game worlds, the authors tapped into a younger, more creative, less combative audience who effectively threw away the rulebook.

6

The Neuroscience of xenophobia — the importance of human emotion in everyday relations

Modern neuroscience and psychology frequently provide novel insights into the biological attributes of discrimination. We now possess a greater appreciation of the way human judgment is generated and how perception, past experience and expectations are influenced by context to fine-tune social decisions. Christoforos Tsantoulas, Post-doctoral Researcher in Neuroscience at University of Cambridge, explains how these insights have the power to revolutionise policy-making.

Addressing the problem: we are not just 'hard-wired'

State of the art imaging techniques have for the first time allowed scientists to visualise brain activity in real-time, while breakthroughs in genetic inheritance studies have uncovered the intricate interplay between genes and environmental factors. Careful appraisal of this valuable information and appropriate incorporation will be useful when shaping new policies, particularly when combined with conclusions drawn from social sciences.

Our multi-layered lives are dependent on synchronizing social interactions and duties, including securing a mate, child-raising, altruism, co-operation and competitiveness. Underlying these behaviours is an array of social cognitive or emotive processes, such as love, empathy, trust and morality.

Thus, there are specific brain areas that functionally correlate with complex affective traits like emotional contagion, empathy, sympathy, identification and subjectivity. These affective traits only play a role on the basis of interaction with others. The importance of human emotion in everyday relations is emphasised by psychiatric syndromes characterised by lack of empathy, such as autism and various antisocial personality disorders. Therefore it has become

evident that neuronal-encoded emotional responses are associated with the strong tendency of humans to form group relationships. For a long time, research results seemed to indicate that emotive susceptibility led to unconscious bias and exclusion of individuals from groups. Promising areas:

1   The malleability of neural pathways and how this can affect inter-group relations. Studies on the adaptive plasticity of the adult brain have provided very promising results. For instance, individuals are capable of training themselves to become favourably predisposed towards people who look different from them in the implicit assumption test (IAT), e.g. by watching black athletes triumphing in competitive races, by reading about Martin Luther King or by being exposed to diversity in mainstream public fora (TV, adverts, representative institutions). Therefore, emphasis should be given to promoting inter-personal links and enhancing the 'in-group' classification of others.

In policy, these findings can be used to minimise any expression of out-dated or dogmatic ideologies that may foster negative associations, particularly early in life during brain development. Such misinformed attitudes can often persist in cultures, through a process of sterile imitation. It is therefore imperative to reinforce positive influences that will assist the community reach that critical threshold of informed transformation.

Policy must also dynamically highlight the advantages of endorsing tolerant attitudes in multicultural societies.

Furthermore, since the positive effects of immigration on social progress are likely to be long-term, it is of key importance to minimise risk-aversion behaviours by providing incentives in a manner that emphasises gradual rewards. Ideally, this approach should be directed at both native and immigrant populations; the better the new members of a society familiarise themselves with the language, history and culture, the quicker they will be endorsed by the native population. In that sense, an extension of the British Citizenship Test or an equivalent requirement for immigrants could be beneficial for smoother integration in the community.

2   The promise of epigenetics. The emerging discipline of epigenetics (the study of how behaviours regulate gene dynamics) has revealed that certain behaviours manifested during adulthood can modify the genetic message and, unexpectedly, these adaptations can be passed on to children. We are thereby introduced to the concept of acquired inheritance, a blooming area of research that is expected to revolutionize the way we think about gene expression.

This phenomenon is particularly suited to explain how adverse experiences in early life can have persisting effects via epigenetic modulation of key brain structures.

Policy needs to create positive feedback loops that promote long-term inheritable changes towards equitable attitudes by fostering tolerance and reducing social stress.

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7

Applying psychology and neuroscience to policy making and good decision-making: the promise of empathy

How can research on the psychology of decision-making improve the transmission of political ideas to the public? How can progress in empathy research be used to strengthen notions of equality amongst citizens? Beth Parkin, doctoral student in Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London examines these questions.

Many of the concepts that are core to the Bridges project, namely preparing the public for trade-offs required to achieve equality, could be addressed by applying psychological knowledge of empathy. At a basic level empathy refers to an affective response to the directly perceived, imagined or inferred feelings of another person. Cognitive neuroscience research has shown that sharing the emotions of others is associated with activation of neural structures, which are also related to the first-hand experience of emotions. Part of this neural activation seems to be automatic. However other recent studies have explored how these vicarious responses are malleable. So how can understanding how empathy develops and whether it can be modified be useful to policy makers?

Compassion training is an obvious place to start. Leiberg et al[2] found that compassion training significantly increases long lasting helping behaviours and empathetic concern. The compassion training in this case lasted one day; it focused on fostering attitudes of loving kindness, emotional positivity, friendliness and a feeling of connectedness with others. Additionally this type of compassion training has been found to have self-benefitting effects such as positive mood, life reactivity and decreased reactivity to psychosocial stress. Should we not be investing in this if we truly want a more inclusive, accepting society?

Studies of empathy have shown that group membership (both racial group membership and experimentally allocated groups) affects empathic neural responses. In other words, group membership can get in the way of empathy, and act as a barrier to it. The implicit association test, a psychological tool designed to detect automatic associations between mental representations, shows, for example, that individuals have automatic preferences for whites over blacks, young versus old and men versus women – preferences which can be completely contradictory to overtly held views. Many of these preferences are thought to be a product of the stereotypes and prejudices that intrinsically shape our society and most worryingly, are present in our children from a young age. But psychological research has shown that there are pragmatic ways to reduce such prejudices. Intergroup contact initiatives that bring children together from different social groups have been shown to be particularly effective.

Notes

17   S Leiberg, O Klimecki, & T Singer, *Short-term compassion training increases prosocial behavior in a newly developed prosocial game*, PloS one, 6(3), e17798, (2011).

8

The Relational State

For some researchers and practitioners, part of reconceiving policy-making entails re-evaluating the role of the state in our everyday lives. The idea of a 'relational state' that acknowledges the role of key relationships and uses them more effectively is both an attractive and a valuable one. For Susanna Abse, Director of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, supporting family relationships through policy-making is the best way of ensuring that human beings develop the capacity to engage confidently, to trust institutions and become resilient in the face of uncertainty.

The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity and the power of love...

Sigmund Freud (S.E. XXI.101)

The past few years have witnessed a growing re-assessment of New Public Management approaches (NPM) to public service reform and delivery. This questioning has sought to re-evaluate the role of the state and the way in which governments might organise their 'attitude' to governing. The concept of the 'Relational State' is an attempt to place human relationships at the centre of our thinking about the role of government.

So far many have asked[3] how the relational state might be implemented with regard to the economy, the organisation of labour, and the environment, in education and in the delivery of services. Largely absent, however, from these debates is a discussion about what kind of policies the relational state might want to develop in regard to families. This paper aims to begin to fill in that gap.

Central to the current debate is a key polarity: On one side is the technocratic state – a government that regulates and proscribes. Typically, in the case of the NPM this meant command and control management techniques and imposing targets. On the other side is the relational state – a government that facilitates and listens, to support community building and shared endeavour. At the heart of this conception of the state is a recognition that people (both the providers and users) are the key resource of public services. But is this polarity useful? Is all technocracy to be spurned? And is this a realistic proposition?

It seems to me that the state is always at heart technocratic. But not all technocratic activity is bad. Take regulation. Regulation is a necessity of life and it can either be in the service of good or in the service of control and domination. In its most creative form, regulation creates helpful boundaries to social life. Relationships, for instance, operate most fruitfully in the context of boundaries, boundaries that ensure fairness and respect, and in particular respect for difference. Linked to this is the need for continuity and tradition. Tradition is upheld in part by regulation, which can preserve ways of doing things. Tradition and preserving things has value and, whilst there is always a need to protect against becoming too rigid, there is also a need to recognise the fundamental human need for stability. In this respect a relational state can only be sustained if it gives itself the – often technocratic – means to give relationships the frameworks they need to flourish. In other words, the polarity between technocratic and relational is not helpful.

I am not surprised that one review of the evidence on interventions in the early years found that among the key characteristics of effective programmes, is that they are long-term in nature and sustained by committed funding.

Security breeds good relationships and ironically also the courage to explore and innovate.

Whilst the relational state has readily been understood as a way of community building, it has so far failed to fully articulate where families come into all this, but it is my view that community building arises out of family life. As attachment theories suggest, we need a 'secure base' to feel ready and confident to engage in cooperative activities.

So the technocratic state is not necessarily inimical to the relational state and that is particularly true where the technocracy supports families. As long as the state supports families and sees that one of its primary tasks is to provide the framework for families to thrive, the state even as 'technocrat' can be relational or anti-relational.

Because the notion of 'family' can be imbued with conservative notions of patriarchal structures, progressives have been reluctant to promote the family as the core social structure through which most people's ordinary lives can be enhanced and improved. And whilst it is true that families can be oppressive to the most vulnerable and powerless, it is the state's *relational* role to support families (in their broadest definition) to function as healthy creative structures, which protect rather than oppress the weak. For the poorest and most dispossessed in our society, the family is either the ticket out of disadvantage or their death knell. No government initiative to support children and young people can ever make as much difference to an individual's life chances as can a strong and supportive family.

Progressives have an important role in re-imagining the 21st century family as an inclusive, stable, democratic institution that fosters autonomy for the individuals within it. Developing and capturing the territory of the family as part of a progressive agenda through which the state fosters and supports families through an offer of services that strengthens the stability and autonomy of the family, is an urgent task.

The technocratic state can therefore be relational when it enhances a family's ordinary capacity to be autonomous (making work pay) or supports positive nurturing of children (through flexible childcare/shortened working hours) or punishes tyrannical relationships (through domestic violence legislation and programmes) or rewards stable adult relationships (through marriage or civil partnership tax breaks) or legislates against unfairness and discrimination (through allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry).

Creating a relational state is not a short-term project and the turning around of rampant individualism requires a determination to provide the means for parents to furnish their children with the experience of stability and sensitive care that leads to a belief in relationships and a desire for communality. In other words a relational state depends on families – from start to finish.

If policy makers want it in four words they are – 'through thick and thin'.

Notes

18   *One Nation: Power, Hope, Community*, edited by Owen Smith and Rachel Reeves, The Labour Party, (2013).

Glossary

Anti-prejudice norms: a social consensus that it is wrong to be prejudiced, where prejudice means holding negative beliefs about people solely because they are of a different race, ethnicity, gender, or other social grouping.

Bayes law (theorem): an eighteenth century mathematical theorem that is used to calculate probability, which provides the actual probability of an event, given measured test probabilities.

Coming to action: in referring to how long term investment is made, Keynes talked about the 'urge to action'. The entrepreneur has preferences and choices but how decisions are made is ultimately about coming to action and what narrative device enables that.

Conviction narrative: conviction narratives support action by providing an emotionally valid set of reasons for the action in a non-probabilistic way. Stories and related procedures which decision-makers faced with uncertainty enable them to feel persuaded to act and to stay acting while they try to interpret signs and signals in the world and wait to see how their decisions are turning out.

Divided State: an alternating state of mind marked by the possession of incompatible but strongly held beliefs and ideas; this inevitably influences our perception of reality so that at any one time a significant part of our relation to an object is not properly know (felt) by us. The aspects that are known and unknown can reverse, but the momentarily unknown aspect is actively avoided and systematically ignored by our consciousness.

'Dual process' model: a psychological term meaning attitudes are jointly produced by automatic and controlled responses to stimuli.

In-group: in social psychological terms, is the particular group that a person identifies with. Contrast with *out-group*.

Integrated State: a state of mind marked by a sense of coherence, which influences our perception of reality, so that we are more or less aware of our opposed ambivalent and uncertain thought and felt relations to objects.

Massively Multiplayer Games: Bring players together in a shared space, allowing them to interact with one another, to compete and co-operate in various ways. MMO's are a useful social study tool. Game designers are able to see how players deal with money, flocking behaviours, how they team up and make friends. Data mining is core to the design of an MMO, somewhat like Google Analytics with a game built around it. They are, however, unbelievably hard to design due to the nature of people.

Mindspace: a mnemonic for the nine most robust effects on behaviour that operate largely, but not exclusively, through our automatic system (the part of our brain that responds unconsciously to contextual influences).

Object Relationship: the affective relationships of attachment and attraction we establish in our minds about what we are doing.

Phantastic Object: subjectively very attractive 'objects' (people, ideas, or things) which we find highly exciting and idealise, imagining (feeling rather than thinking) they can satisfy our deepest desires, the meaning of which we are only partially aware.

Randomised Controlled Trial: study in which a number of similar people are randomly assigned to two (or more) groups to test a specific drug or treatment. One group (the experimental group) receives the treatment being tested; the other (the comparison or control group) receives an alternative treatment, a dummy treatment (placebo) or no treatment at all. The groups are followed up to see how effective the experimental treatment was. Outcomes are measured at specific times and any difference in response between the groups is assessed statistically.

Relational State: a government that facilitates and listens in order to support community building and shared endeavour. In contrast to technocratic governance.

Social norm: the customary rules that govern behaviour in groups and societies, extensively studied in the social sciences.

Uncertainty: used only in the sense described by Knight (1921) and Keynes (1936) recognising that ultimately we cannot know what will happen in the future.

Conveners

Dr Catherine Fieschi is the Director of Counterpoint. After ten years as an academic Catherine moved in to the policy world: she led the London based think-tank Demos and then directed the think-tank of the British Council. She has advised numerous governments, businesses and foundations on aspects of risk, strategy and policy. Catherine holds a PhD in Comparative Politics from McGill University. She is the author of *In the Shadow of Democracy: Fascism, Populism and the French Fifth Republic* (MUP) and of numerous pamphlets and articles on extremism, populism, citizenship and identity politics.

Dr Heather Grabbe is Director of the Open Society European Policy Institute in Brussels which works to ensure that open society values are at the heart of EU policies and actions, both inside and outside its borders. From 2004 to 2009 she was senior advisor to then European Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn, responsible in his cabinet for the Balkans and Turkey. Her academic and think-tank research ranges over many aspects of European politics, and she is the author of *The EU's Transformative Power* (Palgrave).

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The Bridges project aims to improve public policy outcomes by bringing vital insights from academic research into policy-making. Counterpoint is a research and advisory group that uses social science methods to explain how cultural and social dynamics affect politics and markets. With a focus on how civil society operates in different contexts, Counterpoint helps organisations to develop solutions for more resilient and prosperous societies.

The Open Society European Policy Institute is the EU policy arm of the Open Society Foundations. We encourage the EU to foster open societies through its policies, legislation, funding and political influence – both in the 28 member-states and the wider world. We engage policy-makers and political actors, drawing on evidence, arguments and recommendations from the work of the Open Society Foundations in more than 100 countries.

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