CHAPTER 2

Policy Controversies as Frame Conflicts

This chapter presents the framework for reflection on intractable policy controversies that we propose as an alternative to the three we have discussed in the previous chapter. We see policy positions as resting on underlyung structures of belief, perception, and appreciation, which we call "frames." We see policy controversies as disputes in which the contending parties hold conflicting frames. Such disputes are resistant to resolution by appeal to facts or reasoned argumentation because the parties' conflicting frames determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are taken to be relevant and compelling. Moreover, the frames that shape policy positions and underlie controversy are usually tacit, which means that they are exempt from conscious attention and reasoning.

FRAMES AND GENERATIVE METAPHORS:
AN EXAMPLE FROM URBAN HOUSING

The issue domain of urban housing is a good one in which to explore policy frames. Over the last sixty years or so, people have held very different views about urban housing. The issue has provoked extensive controversy in both developed and developing countries, and there have been some very dramatic shifts in ideas in good currency about the problem.

The examples with which we begin are drawn from the rather distant past—the debates about urban renewal policy in the United States.
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in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, as we shall see, the frames underlying these debates are still alive and well.

The first piece of writing we shall examine is drawn from Justice William Douglas’s opinion, handed down in 1954, on the constitutionality of the Federal Urban Renewal Program in the District of Columbia.

The experts concluded that if the community were to be healthy, if it were not to revert again to a blighted or slum area, as though possessed of a congenital disease, the area must be planned as a whole. It was not enough, they believed, to remove existing buildings that were unsanitary or unsightly. It was important to redesign the whole area so as to eliminate the conditions that cause slums—the overcrowding of dwellings, the lack of parks, the lack of adequate streets and alleys, the absence of recreational areas, the lack of light and air, the presence of outmoded street patterns. It was believed that the piecemeal approach, the removal of individual structures that were offensive, would be only a palliative. The entire area needed redesigning so that a balanced, integrated plan could be developed for the region including not only new homes but also schools, churches, parks, streets, and shopping centers. In this way it was hoped that the cycle of decay of the area could be controlled and the birth of future slums prevented.

It is useful, in order to construct the frame underlying this paragraph, to consider it as a story—a story told about a troublesome situation—in this case, the presumed plight of older urban neighborhoods—in which the author describes what is wrong and what needs fixing. In this story, the community itself is one main character, and the planner, or expert, is another. The community, once healthy, has become blighted and diseased. The planner, beholding it in its decayed condition, conceives the image of the community become healthy once again, with “new homes . . . schools, churches, parks, streets and shopping centers.” But this can be achieved only through redesign of the whole area, under a balanced and integrated plan. Otherwise the area will “revert again to a . . . slum area, as though possessed of a congenital disease.”

According to a second story, however, the places called slums are not all the same. Some of them are, indeed, decadent and impoverished, the victims of cycles of decay exacerbated by federal policies of “immuring” and of “urban renewal.” Others, such as the East Village in New York City, or Boston’s West and North Ends (of which Jane Jacobs said, “If this is a slum, we need more like it!”), are true low-income communities that offer their residents the formal services and informal supports that evoke feelings of comfort and belonging. The task is not to redesign and rebuild these communities, much less to destroy buildings and dislocate residents, but to reinforce and rehabilitate them, drawing on the forces for “unslumming” that are already inherent in them.

This story can be made out in Peggy Gleicher and Mark Fried’s summary of their study of West End residents.

In summary, then, we observe that a number of factors contribute to the special importance that the West End seemed to bear for the large majority of its inhabitants. . . . Residence in the West End was highly stable, with relatively little movement from one dwelling unit to another and with minimal transience into and out of the area. Although residential stability is a fact of importance in itself, it does not wholly account for commitment to the area. . . . For the great majority of the people, the local area was a focus for strongly positive sentiments and was perceived, probably in its multiple meanings, as home. The critical significance of belonging in or to an area has been one of the most consistent findings in working-class communities both in the U.S. and in England. . . . [Patterns] of social interaction were of great importance in the West End. Certainly for a great number of people, local space . . . served as a locus for social relationships. . . . In this respect, the urban slum community also has much in common with the communities so frequently observed in folk cultures. . . . These observations lead us to question the extent to which through urban renewal we relieve a situation of stress or create further damage. If the local spatial area and orientation toward localism provide the core of social organization and integration for a large proportion of the working class and if, as current behavioral theories would suggest, social organization and integration are primary factors in providing a base for effective social functioning, what are the consequences of dislocating people from their local areas? Or, assuming that the potentialities of people for adaption to crisis are great, what deeper damage occurs in the process?

These are powerful stories, powerful in the sense that they have shaped public consciousness about the issue of urban housing. Each in its time guided the writing of legislation, the formation of policy, the design of programs, the diligence of planners, the allocation of funds, the conduct of evaluation. Each, moreover, has had its period of dominance. The story of blight and renewal shaped public policy in the 1950s, when the idea of urban renewal was at its height. In the 1960s, the story of natural community and its dislocation expressed the negative reactions to urban renewal. In the later 1960s and 1970s, the fur-
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miliar come to be seen in new ways. One thing is seen as another—A is
seen as B—just as in the familiar drawings of the Gestalt psychologists.
A figure may be seen as a vase or the conjunction of two profiles, as
a young woman or an old one, as a duck or a rabbit. When A is seen as
B, the existing description of B is taken as a putative redescription of A.

In the first of our stories, the urban housing situation is seen as a dis-
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already an evaluation—a sense of the good to be sought and the evil to
be avoided. When we see A as B, we carry over to A the evaluation

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genetic predisposition to criminal behavior, where it is the genetic stock itself that is seen as either “healthy” or “diseased.” Indeed, popular culture seems often to identify the good life with the healthy life and to make progress synonymous with the eradication of disease.Only as we strive for health and abhor disease, we have a strong affinity for the “natural” and a deep distrust of the “artificial.” The idea of the natural, with its Romantic origins in the writings of Rousseau and its deeper sources in pantheism, still works its magical appeal. One can also discern the workings of a powerful metaphor of wholeness, which may be associated with the healthy and the natural. When we define the problem of a social service system as fragmentation, for example, and prescribe the remedy of coordination, it is as though we thought of the service system as a shattered vase. The metaphor of wholeness and fragmentation also underlies the familiar call for an integration of medical services currently delivered by a wide range of medical specialists, no one of whom sees the whole patient, as the general practitioner of a bygone era is supposed to have done.

In such examples it is possible to see the workings of a metaphor, or myth, of a Golden Age, according to which present problems are understood as a falling away from a more ideal state attributed to the past. This image underlies both the metaphor of fragmented services, which are seen as having once been whole, and the metaphor of natural communities, which are seen as having been disturbed by such artificial interventions as urban renewal. It is plausible, we believe, although we shall not try to prove the point here, that the number of metacultural frames at work in a society and, even more, the number of generative metaphors underlying these frames are relatively small and constant over long periods of time.

A situation may begin by seeming complex, uncertain, and indeterminate. However, if we can once see it in terms of a normative dualism such as health/disease, nature/artifice, or wholeness/fragmentation, then we shall know in what direction to move. Indeed, the diagnosis and the prescription will seem obvious. This sense of the obviousness of what is wrong and what needs fixing is the hallmark of policy frames and of the generative metaphors that underlie them, and it is central to our account of the intractability of the frame conflicts implicit in policy controversies.

FRAME CONFLICT AND POLICY CONTROVERSY

In a policy controversy such as the continuing controversy over urban renewal and the treatment of urban housing, two or more parties con-
person's blight is another's folk community. What one person sees as unsanitary and unsightly another may find comfortable, homelike, or even picturesque.

Evidence that one party regards as devastating to a second party's argument, the second may dismiss as irrelevant or innocuous. Or the second may easily patch his or her argument so as to incorporate the new evidence within it. So, for example, when Gleichner and Fried call attention to the rich networks of social interaction that filled the old West End, a partisan of urban renewal might point out that the new, high-rise, upper-middle-class development that replaced the old West End has its own networks of social interaction, or might point to the fact that the working-class people displaced by urban renewal in the West End were subsequently able to create new social bonds in the inner-city suburbs to which many of them moved (a possibility also recognized by Gleichner and Fried).

For all these reasons, there is no possibility of falsifying a frame; no data can be produced that would conclusively disconfirm it in the eyes of all qualified, objective observers. The reason for this is that if objective means frame-neutral, there are no objective observers. There is no way of perceiving and making sense of social reality except through a frame, for the very task of making sense of complex, information-rich situations requires an operation of selectivity and organization, which is what "framing" means. As we have illustrated above, those who construct the social reality of a situation through one frame can always ignore or reinterpret the "facts" that holders of a second frame present as decisive counter-evidence to the first.

When we attribute the stubbornness of policy controversies to conflicts of policy frames resistant to refutation by appeal to evidence, we come very close to the position Thomas Kuhn has advanced in the philosophy of science. Kuhn distinguished periods of normal science, in which scientists operate within a shared paradigm and agree on the rules of the game for settling their disagreements, from periods of scientific revolution, in which disputes cut across scientific paradigms and there is no agreed-upon framework for reaching agreement. In periods of scientific revolution controversies are not resolved by reasoned appeal to evidence, although they may fade away because the holders of a competing paradigm suffer a conversion experience, or because those individuals simply die out and are not replaced.

In his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty generalizes Kuhn's distinction, differentiating normal from abnormal discourse in science as well as in other fields of inquiry. By "normal" Rorty means discourse that proceeds under a shared set of rules, assumptions, conventions, criteria, and beliefs, all of which tell us how disagreements can be settled, in principle, over time. Here, even though a dispute may in fact persist, there is a belief—perhaps illusory—that it can be settled through reasoned discourse, a belief based on the assumption that the ordinary rules of discourse "embody agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement." This description would apply, in our terms, to policy disagreements. Abnormal discourse occurs, by contrast, when agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement are not present as a basis for communication among the contending actors. Such situations are not defined by the participants in terms of an objective framework within which disagreements can be arbitrated or managed. This is, in our terms, the realm of discourse that revolves around conflicts of frames in policy controversies.

**KINDS, LEVELS, AND SOURCES OF FRAMES**

Part II describes how frame conflicts arise in policy debate and practice and explores the prospects for their resolution through policy inquiry. In order to set the stage for these explorations, however, we must introduce certain terms and distinctions to be illustrated and discussed in greater detail: policy discourse and its several types; rhetorical and action frames; and the several levels of frames, which we call policy, institutional action, and metacultural frames.

**POLICY DISCOURSE**

By policy discourse we mean verbal exchange, or dialogue, about policy issues. The root sense of this term probably lies in the experience of a literal conversation between individuals. When we speak of discourse within or across institutions, we metaphorically extend the meaning of the term.

Because there are no institutional vacuums, interpersonal discourse must have an institutional locus within some larger social system. Even a chat between close friends occurs in the institutional setting of someone's house or a walk around the park. This institutional embedding is important to the nature of discourse in several ways. The institutional context may carry its own characteristic perspectives and ways of framing issues, or it may offer particular roles, channels, and norms for discussion and debate.

When discourse is public, it takes on the special properties of the
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institutions reserved in our society for dialogue about issues of public concern. These are policy forums that serve as institutional vehicles for policy debate. They include legislative arenas, the courts, public commissions, councils of government and political parties, the editorial pages of magazines and newspapers, and radio and television programs, as well as the seminar rooms and lecture halls of academia. Policy forums have their own rules, and discourse tends to conform to the norms of the forum in which it occurs. In a court of law, for example, where people expect to engage in an adversarial process, they tend to keep to themselves whatever doubts they may feel about their own positions. At the bargaining table, each utterance tends to be construed as a move in the bargaining game. In all such forums, individual utterances are likely to have meanings and consequences that go beyond the interpersonal context in which they occur. For example, if there is a possibility that words uttered in a forum may be released to a larger public, who knows how that public may respond?

Rhetorical Frames and Action Frames

There is a discourse of policy debate and a discourse of policy practice. In policy debate, policy stories and the frames they contain serve the rhetorical functions of persuasion, justification, and symbolic display—the functions to which Deborah Stone alludes when she asserts, in the passage quoted, that "groups . . . portray issues deliberately in certain ways so as to win the allegiance of large numbers of people who agree (tacitly) to let the portrait speak for them." In policy practice, on the other hand, policy stories influence the shaping of laws, regulations, allocation decisions, institutional mechanisms, sanctions, incentives, procedures, and patterns of behavior that determine what policies actually mean in action.

We distinguish between rhetorical and action frames. By the former we mean frames that underlie the persuasive use of story and argument in policy debate; by the latter, frames that inform policy practice. Sometimes the same frames serve both functions. More often, frames implicit in the language used to "win the allegiance of large groups of people" differ from the frames implicit in the agreements that determine the content of laws, regulations, and procedures. For example, in the field of welfare policy in the United States, the rhetoric of the "safety net," which figured prominently in speeches on welfare policy by officials of the Reagan and Bush administrations, was accompanied by changes in regulations that seemed mainly intended to crack down on "welfare cheaters."

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POLICY, INSTITUTIONAL ACTION, AND METACULTURAL FRAMES

Action frames operate at different levels of specificity, as the image of the policy ladder suggests. We distinguish three levels of action frames: policy, institutional action, and metacultural frames.

A policy frame is the frame an institutional actor uses to construct the problem of a specific policy situation. For example, in the mid-1970s the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) framed the problem of low- and middle-income housing mainly in terms of the need to "preserve the city's healthy housing stock," which led the BRA to adopt policies that gave priority to the rehabilitation of existing stock and the clearer separation of "decayed" from "healthy" stock. This policy frame did not lead to policies that emphasized either the income level of the occupants of rehabilitated housing or the shortfall between the need for affordable housing and the available supply.

An institutional action frame is the more generic action frame from which institutional actors derive the policy frames they use to structure a wide range of problematic policy situations. As agents of thought and action, institutions possess characteristic points of view, prevailing systems of beliefs, category schemes, images, routines, and styles of argument and action, all of which inform their action frames. It is in this sense that, in a given policy environment, people learn what to expect from a development authority, a tenant advocacy group, a real estate firm, or a city government.

Institutional action frames tend to be complex and hybrid in nature. They do not usually consist in a single, coherent, overarching frame, but in families of related frames. For example, the same development authority that in one situation sponsors the preservation of healthy housing stock may, in a situation of a different sort, frame policy issues in terms of landlord neglect and tenant disaffection. Moreover, the action frames held by individuals may be only loosely coupled to the action frames of the institutions of which they are members. Individuals' frames may represent selections from or variations of the institution's larger store. For example, individuals closer to street-level operations tend to see problems and respond to them differently than individuals closer to the agency's top and center. Individuals, at whatever level, may differ in their ways of interpreting the action frames that prevail within the agency, or in the degree to which they conform to the agency's prevailing line of thought and action.

Institutional action frames are local expressions of broad, culturally shared systems of belief, which we call metacultural frames. The oppositional pairs disease and cure, natural and artificial, and wholeness and
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fragmentation belong to the realm of metacultural frames. Metacultural frames, organized around generative metaphors, are at the root of the policy stories that shape both rhetorical and action frames. For example, the debate between Wilson and Herrnstein and Leon Kamin, referred to in the previous chapter, is a contemporary version of the nature vs. nurture debate that flourished at the turn of the century, suggesting that in the policy domain of crime—or, more broadly, social pathology—cultural metaframes of nature and nurture remain powerful for thought and action in our society. The nature frame lends itself to prescriptions that favor restraint and segregation of criminals, swift and sure punishment, and (at worst) attempts to control the reproductive behavior of people who are believed to carry the wrong kinds of genetic material. The nurture frame suggests policies that remove or mitigate environmental factors presumed to be conducive to criminality or other forms of social pathology.

Traditionally, liberals in American society have tended to favor the nurture frame, which is consistent with the idea of a public responsibility for the improvement of environmental conditions judged to be conducive to social pathology. It is among conservatives (though not of all types) that the nature frame is held, in conjunction with a broad prescription of social control: rigorous law enforcement coupled with “more and better prisons.” While both liberalism and conservatism in our society are so complex and multilayered that one cannot uniquely attribute a pure metacultural frame to either view, versions of particular metacultural frames clearly tend to be associated with traditional political-economic perspectives.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF FRAME CONSTRUCTION

The frames that shape policies are usually tacit, which means that we tend to argue from our tacit frames to our explicit policy positions. Although frames exert a powerful influence on what we see and how we interpret what we see, they belong to the taken-for-granted world of policy making, and we are usually unaware of their role in organizing our actions, thoughts, and perceptions. In order to reflect on the conflicting frames that underlie policy controversies, we must become aware of our frames, which is to say that we must construct them, either from the texts of debates and speeches or from the decisions, laws, regulations, and routines that make up policy practice. But frame construction is difficult, for both practical and theoretical reasons.

In terms of practical methodology, it may be difficult to tell, in an actual policy situation, what frame really underlies an institutional actor’s policy position. First, the rhetorical frames that shape the public utterances of policy makers may be incongruent with the frames implicit in their patterns of action. In their public utterances, policy makers may hitch on to a dominant frame and its conventional metaphors (the free market, privatization, and “community empowerment,” for example), hoping thereby to purchase legitimacy for a course of action actually inspired by different intentions. When policy antagonists challenge one another’s legitimacy, they may begin gaming, seeking deliberately to obscure the action frames that underlie their stated positions.

Second, the same course of action may be consistent with quite different policy frames. In American welfare policy, for example, there was a marked continuity in the policy actions taken by the Ford and Carter administrations, even though the two administrations espoused very different views of welfare policy. Conversely, the same frame can lead to different courses of action. Liberals, who advocate the same welfare policies, when such policies are expressed at a high level of generality, tend to disagree among themselves about the proper treatment of ineligibles on the welfare rolls.

Third, as Pressman and Wildavsky showed, the meanings of policy made by a central governmental body in the early stages of policy formation may be transformed at local levels at the stage of policy implementation. Even at the local level, the frames implicit in the discretionary judgments made by street-level bureaucrats, such as housing managers or welfare officials, may differ from the policy frames espoused by state legislators.

Fourth, it may be difficult to distinguish between conflicts within a frame and conflicts that cut across frames. Our judgments on this score may differ depending on how we construct the more generic institutional action and metacultural frames that underlie conflicting policy positions.

Finally, it may be difficult to distinguish between real and potential shifts of frame. The introduction of a new piece of legislation may signal the potential for a reframing of national policy (as the introduction of supplementary security income, SSI, suggested a reframing of American policy toward the poor), but that potential may lie dormant because other reforms, essential to the activation of that potential, are not forthcoming. Conversely, even in the absence of formal deliberations and decision, policy may be reframed as a result of cumulative, incremental adaptations to a changing situation.
Setting the Problem of Framing

These practical difficulties in constructing policy frames may be overcome, at least in principle, by carefully nuanced observations and analyses of the processes by which policy utterances and actions evolve over time and at different levels of the policy-making process. Sophisticated frame construction must attend to the differences between central and local policies, potential and actual changes of frame, the rhetorical frames implicit in espoused policies and the action frames implicit in policy-in-use, formal policies and the policies implicit in the practices of street-level bureaucrats, and visible shifts of policy and the cumulative effects of small changes of policy made in response to changing situations.

In contrast to practical difficulties of frame construction, there is a generic, theoretical difficulty that does not yield in any obvious way to careful methods of observation and analysis. Frames must be constructed by someone, and those who construct frames (the authors of this book, for example) do not do so from positions of unassailable frame-neutrality. They bring their own frames to the enterprise and, what is more, they may be unaware of doing so. For example, a policy analyst who shares the Wilson-Herrnstein position on criminality might go about the task of constructing the frames implicit in that debate very differently than would an analyst who shared Kamin’s position.

If we are right in our approach to frame construction, then any given construction of a policy frame can be tested against relevant data—for example, the texts of policy debates or the artifacts and routines of the policy-making process. Frame-critical analysts can and should ask whether these constructs fit the data, exploring, for example, whether these constructs account adequately for the things and relations the frame sponsor singles out for attention or selectively ignores; or for the way in which the frame sponsor’s policy story executes the normative leap from facts to recommendations. In spite of the availability of such tests, it is quite possible that frame-critical analysts who proceed from different frames of their own may disagree about the nature of a particular frame conflict, and may be unable to resolve that disagreement through reasoned evidence and argument alone. In such an eventuality, we glimpse an epistemological predicament, to which the following chapter turns.

CHAPTER 3

Rationality, Framing, and Frame Reflection

The search for policy rationality is a quest for hope. The hope is that human reason may have a modest place in the reality of policy practice, that policy makers need not inevitably function only as partisan adversaries or as players who unilaterally seek their own advantage in the political game, or as swimmers whose feeble strivings toward reason are bound to be overwhelmed by a sea of chaos and complexity. The hope is that individuals may contribute to the pragmatic resolution of the controversies in which they are embroiled, if only they learn how better to conduct their inquiry.

But if we accept the fact that controversy is central to policy making, and if we analyze controversies as conflicts of action frames, then in what sense may policy practitioners hope to be rational? The prevailing models of policy rationality—choice, politics, and negotiation—can at best provide a radically incomplete framework for rational policy practice. Based as they are on a microeconomic core of instrumental rationality, they cannot explain or respond effectively to the intractability of policy controversy.

Starting with the analysis of controversy as frame conflict, we propose that human beings can reflect on and learn about the game of policy making even as they play it, and, more specifically, that they are capable of reflecting in action on the frame conflicts that underlie controversies and account for their intractability. In our view, human beings are capable of exploring how their own actions may exacerbate contention, contribute to stalemate, and trigger extreme pendulum