

## **Book Review: *Facts, Values and the Policy World* by Phil Ryan**

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Phil Ryan *Facts, Values and the Policy World* Bristol: Policy Press, 2023. 172 pp. £27.99 (pbk). ISBN 9781447364559

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The distinction between facts and values is a methodological conundrum which faces all social scientists, not least critical social policy analysts. It concerns the need for evidence and rational argument to support a critical perspective on a social issue. So, an author submitting an article to *CSP* is expected to embrace explicitly some element of the 'values' associated with the journal. This entails focus on particular social injustices and oppressions and the role of policy in furthering and/or challenging these. There should be an honest political, normative, ethical value bias, supported by evidence or data ['facts'] with conceptualisation to make a rational argument. The evidence can, of course, take many different forms, but the analyst is expected to strive for some degree of 'objectivity', not least to appeal to the sceptical reader/user, rather than mere dogma or preaching to the converted. Dealing with the fact-value conundrum is a persistent challenge for teaching, researching or formulating policy. It certainly requires reflexivity thereon throughout these different practices, but is this not widely accepted, at least in the contemporary UK? The fact-value distinction is thus not really debated – it is understood that there are no cast-iron social 'facts' and that 'values' are multi-faceted and often nuanced with interaction between the two. In terms of big data, for example, the facts about economic growth, climate change, income poverty, wealth inequality, racial and gender inequality and oppression, migration are not that much disputed. The key questions are what policy and political significance are attributed to them and thence, what impact policies have and what policies should be followed. This is, of course, where values predominate.

The point of this long preamble is that it would be very useful to have a book examining these epistemological and methodological issues and/or a handbook to guide practice for analysts and students on these issues. Unfortunately, this book does not provide such a tool. It focuses on the 'policy world' of analysts in 'government, academia, civil society organisations and so on' (p. 9) many of whom apparently adhere to an absolute distinction between facts and values, where only facts should inform policy making and analysis. The gist of Part One is that a rigid distinction between facts and values is misleading and blinkered.

Part Two suggests that in non-binary analysis 'beliefs form a network [where] facts and norms depend upon each other' so that 'there is always something to talk about' (p. 55). The concept of 'networks of beliefs' is not too clear – are these taken for granted premises or consensual assumptions? There is a lack of concrete examples on this. The author is keen on 'healthy decision contexts, where there is enough time to explore issues in depth' (p. 93) – is this deliberative democracy?; again there are no concrete examples, apart from brief mentions of big public policy decisions such as the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Finally, Part Three discusses two 'caveats' to non-binary healthy decision-making – the power of experts and the limits of dialogue, which works better. For *CSP* readers, the Conclusion is bread and butter, though perhaps rather anodyne: 'a critical normative awareness is not an outlook that the responsible analyst can pack away...it is always needed. It is certainly needed today: we cannot simply assume that today's developed democratic are benign' (p. 131).

The book is written in clear prose, yet it is quite hard to grasp hold of. Public policy examples are mentioned in passing rather than analysed. Climate change is mentioned more than once, where evidence and values interact, but seem only to produce seriously inadequate policy. Other big contemporary social policy issues are not mentioned. Covid-19, the role of think tanks and of the media, particularly social media, in policy dialogue are absent. The book takes a largely abstract approach rooted in political philosophy, with some useful wisdom particularly from the Ancient Greeks, Arendt, Schumpeter and Rawls. The main text is just 132 pages, but there are 22 pages of closely printed endnotes, many of which would have been better in the main text.

The author's mission is to challenge the fact-value binary separation in the policy world, and to reflect on how that world engages with political values and democratic processes. Certainly, one does not have to accept the premise about the influence of the strict binary to agree, obviously, that the interaction of evidence and values is an essential feature of democratic and critical processes.