10. The sociogenesis of policy tools in the Netherlands

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1. INTRODUCTION

For anyone nowadays involved in the study of Dutch public administration it is difficult to move without stumbling over policy tools. The concept of policy tools is everywhere: in many government sectors, new policy tools in the form of convenants are expected, badly chosen tools abound in a large number of policy analyses, and they sell like hot cakes in one theoretical discussion on policy after another.

Policy tools have not always been the focus of so much attention, and to ask how and why they have obtained that privileged position is to ask exactly what their sociogenesis actually is. Policy itself is a social phenomenon, but the ways in which it is analysed and regarded, as well as the developments in those approaches, are of course social phenomena too. One may therefore wonder how and in what circumstances these phenomena were generated, and that is exactly the question this chapter aims to answer. I shall sketch – and simultaneously criticize – a part of the historical development of thinking in terms of policy tools in the Netherlands. At the same time, I shall refer explicitly to the sociological origin of the impulses which underlie this approach and which explain the remarkable trend towards thinking and speaking in terms of policy tools.

The historical development I shall sketch does not, of course, begin with Adam and Eve; nor shall I deal with countries other than the Netherlands. I shall start with a personal recollection and finish with a plea – which I am not the first to make – for the clear separation of two different ways of studying public administration. The first way is guided by concern with the improvement of public administration and is therefore pursued for its practical use. The second way is in principle only concerned with understanding public administration and is pursued purely for its own sake. But we shall come to that in due time. Let me start with my personal recollection.
2. IN THE BEGINNING...

I still vividly remember my first head-on collision with the term 'policy tools'. It was in February 1983 in Rotterdam during professor Ringeling's inaugural lecture, which he had entitled 'The tools of policy'. I was a little surprised that he had chosen that as his subject, because at the time I did not see how policy tools could possibly be the ingredients of a tasty little inaugural lecture. In that respect I was right. Despite the typical Dutch February weather outside, the speaker's concern was not to serve up something tasty to keep his audience warm. On the contrary, he made mincemeat of the whole policy tools school of thought.

Even so, his oration was very sympathetic and almost optimistic. Because of this ambiguity, and because of its mild tone, and in particular because at the end of the speech Ringeling unfolded the outlines of a programme for further research on policy tools, many of those present might have failed to notice the harsh blows he delivered here and there. After raising serious objections, Ringeling wound up his address with the statement that 'policy tools... are connected with phenomena which are well worth studying'. Mind you, it was the *phenomena* which he said were worth studying, not the tools as such. He would have preferred to remove the term completely from the vocabulary of the study of public administration, because in his view it could too easily be misinterpreted as denoting a mechanistic concept. But the alternatives he mentioned, such as means, instruments or vehicles, unfortunately had the same shortcomings (Ringeling, 1983, p. 23).

That – and here of course starts the critique – is worth noting. One would be inclined to say that if other words lead to the same objections, the problem is not the term 'tools'. The obvious conclusion would be that there is something wrong with the theoretical context which necessitates the use of such a term. In other words, that there is a flaw in the underlying theory which defines what the concept of policy actually is. However, Ringeling did not formulate that conclusion as such.

Since he did not think that banning the term 'policy tools' from public administration would be feasible, he attached strict conditions to the scientific use of the concept (Ringeling, 1983, pp. 22-4). In my view, these ifs and buts are so far-reaching and involve such an extensive scientific research programme that it would be practically the same thing to say: let's just forget about the policy tools approach, at least for the next fifty years.
3. DE MORTUIS...

The mild tone of the inaugural lecture can be explained not only by the speaker's personality, but also by the special function which the lecture fulfilled: that of a scientific funeral oration on the occasion of the demise of the Committee for the Development of Policy Analysis, popularly referred to as COBA. This committee, which had originated within the Ministry of Finance and was obviously influenced by American technological optimism, assumed that government policy could be considerably rationalized, for instance by means of mathematically formalized decision-making techniques, a clear analysis of objectives, and the consequent 'logical' choice of the relevant policy tools (COBA, 1976, 1977). That the everyday reality of public administration in most cases now looks quite different, and looked different at that time as well, did not seem to matter; on the contrary, it was COBA's raison d'être. If reality was different, that was not rational, and so it would have to be changed.

The COBA, however, got itself desperately lost in the fog surrounding such factors as vague compromises and political rationality, internally contradictory or otherwise infeasible objectives, and office politics. In addition to this limited visibility, it was also faced with obstructive power, with the inertia of established routines, with bureaucratic and political rituals, conflicting interests, tribal disputes between departments, symbolic policies and strategic behaviour - matters, in short, which are daily elements in public administration and which are not really uncommon in other organizations either.

It may well be true that all these phenomena are everyday aspects of public administration, but it is highly debatable whether they are always recognized as such by the civil servants, politicians and administrators involved and, if so, whether they are always given their right names. The image of reality is usually (in politics practically always) retouched. This apparently has a function. If, under pressure from public opinion or parliament, for example, a department or agency is forced to rub off this make-up, and not telling the truth is once more called 'lying' and unwillingness to cooperate can no longer be called a 'coordinating problem', or a struggle for power in a policy field can no longer be concealed by referring to it as a 'matter of unclear competences', the effect on daily routine in the organizations is far-reaching and many people are unable to do their work properly for a long time.

This, however, is not deliberate deceit. It is one of the rules of the political-bureaucratic game that these phenomena should be hushed up as long as possible and, when that is no longer possible, provided
with technical (and consequently euphemistic) labels. My impression is that many civil servants, politicians and even students of public administration often consider these rose-coloured labels as more realistic than the real, all-too-human phenomena which they obscure, and that many of them have started to believe sincerely that if the rules of the game do not allow certain matters to be mentioned, those matters can hardly exist in reality. To some extent, such a form of short-sightedness is indeed necessary for civil servants and politicians to allow them to function without becoming melancholy, apathetic or cynical, and consequently for students of public administration to allow them to remain on speaking terms with the administrators. In many cases, therefore, the retouching is probably highly functional. I shall return to that later on.

I would not wish to suggest that members of COBA also lived with such a retouched image of public administration, but nor can I exclude the possibility. Whatever the case may be, it is certain that, once political bodies have established their policy objectives, there is no room for the above-mentioned phenomena in COBA’s normative monorational schemes.

But of course it was all there: the pushing and pulling, saying ‘perhaps’ while meaning ‘over my dead body’, the reservatio mentalis, the ritual behaviour and the bureau politics, the clash of interests and the hidden agenda. All those phenomena were present and simply did what they always do: turn goal-rational decision making and technically neutral implementation into pious hopes. COBA, given its own opinion as to how policy should be rationally developed and implemented, could of course not handle them.

The effort to rationalize policy implies the wish to pursue a (meta) policy, and if the regular way of policy making is hardly goal rational, the result is a variation on the chicken-and-egg problem. One wants chickens because one wants eggs, but in order to have chickens, eggs must first be laid and hatched by chickens. By analogy, the same goes for democracy: democracy can only be implemented in a democratic way if there is already democracy, in which case it need not be implemented, and if it does not yet exist it cannot be effected in a democratic manner, and every other means of implementation seems incompatible with the principle.

Nevertheless, history – in the form of social and biological evolution – has produced both more or less democratic systems and egg-laying chickens. There are even government policies which are implemented effectively, efficiently and thus goal-rationally, for instance the monthly payment of salaries to state officials. On a national level there are
150,000 civil servants in the Netherlands, on a local level a total of 200,000, and in education, due to the large number of part-time employees, some 300,000 (Pont, 1991, p. 1). This is an extremely complicated, complex, massive and socially delicate affair, but – apart from the size of the amounts concerned – the transfer of payments usually works perfectly. On the other hand, the transfer of grants and loans to university students in the Netherlands, which is a comparable, even a somewhat less complicated task, looked for a long time more like a very convincing demonstration of Murphy’s fundamental law. Just like ‘democracy’ and ‘chickens which lay eggs’, rational policy is in principle possible, but in order to understand the situations and circumstances in which it actually is or is not possible, a historicizing empirical approach is required. COBA, however, had a non-historical, purely normative-rational approach, which was bound to lead to the committee’s undoing, notwithstanding all its good intentions, efforts and technical ingenuity.

‘De mortuis nil nisi bene’ (speak only good of the dead) must have been in Ringeling’s mind when he gave COBA his scientific blessing after it had been suffocated politically and administratively. But in spite of all his sympathetic words, he could not of course conceal the fact that COBA’s approach to government policy had never been viable and that the same had to be said to the instrumental elaboration of its ideas.

4. THE HAZARDS OF PREDICTING

For the above reason I was never very serious about the ‘programmatic’ part of Ringeling’s inaugural lecture, in which he broadly indicated a few lines of action for further research on policy tools. I considered it first as an obligation, part of the academic ritual connected with an inaugural lecture, and second as a token of reverence for the orphaned relatives of COBA – something like: it is undeniably dead, but it has not lived for nothing, because we can learn from its mistakes. In short, I simply did not believe that much attention would be devoted to the issue of policy tools in the future. Finished, over and done with, I thought. Nobody will ever seriously come back to this. But I turned out to be totally wrong.

Fifteen days after the inaugural lecture, Mr L.A. Geelhoed, a civil servant and as such chairman of the ‘initial working group for the project plan for policy tools in a direct sense’, presented his report The interventionist state: proposal for a theory of policy tools to the chairman
of the Steering Committee for Departmental Reorganization, the then minister Mr Rietkerk.

The essence of the report was that the Dutch society consists of a budget democracy and a market democracy. Both are in disorder because they are too much intertwined. We must examine what tools the budget democracy has at its disposal and, on the basis of the possibilities offered by those tools, determine what its tasks should be. The budget democracy should be restricted to those tasks, and the remaining tasks should be left to the market democracy (Geelhoed, 1983).

The COBA concentrated primarily on analysing the objectives provided and thought that the selection of the corresponding tools would follow automatically, once the objectives had been split up into sufficiently concrete and simple sub-objectives (Bressers, 1983, p. 42). Geelhoed, however, shifted attention to the possibilities offered by the policy tools themselves. To overstate somewhat, the range of objectives to be set follows, in his view, from the possibilities offered by the available instruments, that is, the policy tools.

If we attempt to discover the scientific features of the report, such as a clear and unambiguous conceptual framework, valid argumentation, a strong theoretical basis, sufficient empirical elements, no confusion between the characteristics of theoretical models and of empirical reality, and a careful division between empirical and normative judgements, then we will have little work to do, because the report contains none of these. For that reason, Van Gunsteren (1984) disqualified the report in no uncertain terms as being a political programme. Geelhoed himself was put in the scientific pillory for being a political radical who had apparently not experienced the purifying and self-disciplining effect of writing a thesis.

Meanwhile, the political and administrative significance of the report - as well as that of its author, who rose via a professorship in law and a membership of the WRR (Scientific Council for Government Policy) to become the highest civil servant in the Prime Minister's Office - is something completely different. This significance can hardly be overestimated, although the programme drawn up by Geelhoed and his deregulation committee which made him famous has had as little effect as COBA's, for similar reasons.

The position of Geelhoed's report is clearly illustrated by the fact that it is referred to in the bibliography of many of the publications on policy tools which have since appeared, whereas I have not found a single article which elaborates theoretically or empirically on the conceptual framework or other aspects of the report. De Bruijn, for
instance, refers to Geelhoed's categorization of policy tools but mentions a number of other classifications as well. He eventually rejects them all, for the simple reason that the categories are either too strict and too simple to do justice to the complexity of reality, or are not exclusive; they overlap, and consequently lack the power to make distinctions. The next step is his remark that a classification on the basis of the intrinsic characteristics of tools is not in fact possible, because the effects of a particular tool may be totally different, even opposite, in various policy contexts (De Bruijn, 1990, pp. 48–51). Although these statements are correct, they do not entice the author into banning the policy tools approach from the scene altogether. After some bowing and scraping, the tools leave by the back door (De Bruijn, 1990, pp. 55–7), only to come back later on in the role of prompter. Nor could De Bruijn bring himself to say that Geelhoed's conceptual work had thus been undermined completely.

My conclusion is that the large number of references to Geelhoed's report apparently had to do with a ritual rather than with the importance of its contents. The proliferation of these references implies that many publications on policy tools have appeared since then. That is indeed the case; the number is in fact very large. My conclusion, in 1983, could not have been wider of the mark.

5. A SEMANTIC TEST AS CRITERION

The literature on policy tools has now become so vast that I have probably not seen everything. Nevertheless, I have a reasonable general impression of the literature, and on the basis of that I shall venture to divide the various publications into two groups. The first group includes the documents in which the word 'tool' is used as an ordinary term. Expressions such as 'the tool of subsidy X' or 'the tool of licence Y' are used, but it would have been the same (and shorter) to speak of 'subsidy scheme X' or 'licence system Y', because the specific instrumental aspects of the phenomenon studied are not discussed in a systematic way, that is, within the framework of an explicit theory of policy tools.

This does not necessarily affect the value of the analysis at hand. It is quite possible to make an interesting study of, for instance, the functioning of a subsidy scheme and call that scheme a 'tool' a hundred times in a row without analysing all kinds of other conceivable tools such as levies, licences, and so on, or going into the nature of policy
tools as such. As long as we learn something about the subsidy scheme analysed, there is no real problem.

This characterizes the publications which I classify as belonging to the first group: if the word 'tool' is crossed out or replaced by, say, the empty word 'thingummyjig', this does not change anything in the analysis, the argumentation or the conclusions. Some linguistic patching up is all that will be required.

For all that, the totally superfluous, empty use of the word 'tool' has become widespread. For instance, I came across the following sentences in an otherwise rather good booklet on the council of ministers and its policy, written by a senior lawyer in the Department of General Affairs (Hoekstra, 1988):

In 1983, the tool of the council of ministers and the office of the prime minister were incorporated into the constitution. (p. 11)

And a little further on:

In this way, the unity of argumentation may be enhanced by means of the tool of the council of ministers. (p. 26)

You probably see what I mean. The word 'tool' does not add anything to what is already said, that is, that the council of ministers is now mentioned in the constitution and that the existence of the council may enhance the unity of argumentation. Numerous other examples of this kind could be given.

The empty language in this example is not very serious, but in other cases it may be more harmful. I shall give another example. In 1990, the National Audit Office (Algemene Rekenkamer) published a devastating report on the planning and construction of hospital facilities (Algemene Rekenkamer, 1990). I would like to emphasize that this is an excellent report in comparison with others of the same kind. The Hospital Facilities Act, the construction budget, the measures taken to reduce the number of beds and so on are consistently called 'tools' in this report. Naturally, one might think. But application of the semantic test reveals that the word 'tool' might as well be replaced by 'thingummyjig' or could simply have been left out. It would not have altered the data, nor the analysis, nor the devastating nature of the main conclusion. That conclusion (an undoubtedly justified one) is, in ordinary words, that planning and construction policy with regard to hospitals, nursing homes and mental hospitals has been far from successful. If the Audit Office had formulated its criticism in this way, the following questions would
certainly have arisen: How is that possible? Whose responsibility is it? But since the Audit Office formulated it differently, the question as to the social origin of the problems was never even asked, though the answer was already implied. The Audit Office wrote:

The National Government has not succeeded in initiating an effective and efficient policy process... by means of the above-mentioned policy tools. (National Audit Office, 1990, p. 54)

This formulation suggests that the failure was due to the policy tools applied, and that other policy tools might have led to better results. The Audit Office even advised the Secretary to reconsider the set of policy tools, upon which the Secretary made known that he had already decided to do just that. This will surely be of no avail because there is nothing wrong with the relevant law or the other measures as such. In other fields of policy more or less comparable laws seem to work very well. The real trouble in this field is the permanent warfare between the many parties concerned (see Baakman, 1990, 1992, passim). But this true state of affairs was concealed by blaming the instruments. Besides, the Audit Office did not base its verdict about the instruments on an analysis of the data, but on the policy tools terminology which, in the report, is used without any discussion or justification. I do not know, of course, the meaning the researchers assigned to the word 'tool', but it really does not mean anything in the context of their analysis. If we leave out the word throughout the whole report, we are not faced with any semantic, logical or scientific puzzles, but at the most with a few easily solvable linguistic problems.

The above example is less trivial and raises the pressing question as to why the use of the word 'tool' is so popular. I shall come back to that later on. First, however, I must finish what I was doing, namely, classifying the literature on tools. In the first group of publications I distinguished, the word is used only in a nominal way, as a label, and not in an explicit theory of policy tools. The distinctive criterion is whether we can leave it out or replace it by a meaningless word. If this does not yield any problems or only linguistic ones, the publication belongs to the first group. It is a large and fairly incoherent group, of which I have only a general impression and certainly no clear overview.

The second, much smaller, group obviously does have a relevant theoretical framework. The connection between the publications is also much closer, which results from the fact that there is an actual research programme, with the quarterly journal Beleidswetenschap (Policy
Science) as an important forum. But this group also includes a number of research reports, papers and even theses. Unfortunately, I cannot deal with all of them. I shall follow the mainstream, and I apologize to those whose work I shall have to ignore.

It all started with Bressers's thesis in (again) 1983, for which he received the Van Poelje prize a year later. Although his thesis deals with the effects of water quality policies and is consequently not directly concerned with policy tools, Bressers discovered that levies had much more effect than the other policy tools applied in this field (Bressers, 1983, p. 286). Bressers, who understandably enough was completely unaware of Ringeling's oration when he carried out his research, distinguished various instruments within his area of study which he called policy tools, but he did not yet develop an actual theory of policy tools. In part, Bressers simply elaborated on the work of COBA, albeit far from uncritically. His criticism, however, was not of a transcendent but of an immanent nature. In other words, it was not concerned with COBA's way of thinking about policy; it remained within the given framework and tried to elaborate on that. A case of 'normal science', to quote Thomas Kuhn.

In the meantime, Bressers's conclusion concerning the effectiveness of the levy system compared to the other policy tools had become a real eye-opener for the departmental policy makers in the field of environmental protection. None of them had thought that the levy system would be so effective, but it was certainly very convenient since environmental policy was an important political issue and would probably become even more so. Much work had to be done, and now a prize-winning scientific study had revealed that certain policy tools were apparently far better than others! It would be splendid if the department knew more about them!

That is probably more or less what happened, I think, although I was not there. In any case, contacts were established and a contract was drawn up for conducting more research. One of the early fruits of these activities was the research project Comparative study of the effects of tools in environmental policy (quoted in Bressers and Klok, 1988, p. 6). Soon afterwards the real work began. First came a Preliminary theory of policy tools for environmental policy (Bressers and Klok, 1987a), then for fellow scholars in public administration an article in Beleidswetenschap entitled 'Foundations for a theory of policy tools' (Bressers and Klok, 1987b), for the civil service the report Handbook of the theory of policy tools (Bressers and Klok, 1988), and quite a few more articles in the journal Beleidswetenschap, eventually culminating in

According to Klok, the theory of policy tools has ceased to be preliminary but is simply not yet complete, because the information content is not yet what it should be, the external circumstances have not been integrated systematically, informal tools have not been taken into account, and a number of other minor points (Klok, 1991, pp. 345–6). But, as I have said, Klok’s work is still the culmination of the mainstream of the real theory of policy tools; a couple of important tributaries I would like to mention are the theses by De Bruijn (1990) and by Van der Doelen (1989).

6. AGAIN AD FONTES . . .

If we return to the beginning of my discourse, the speech by Ringeling, we are faced with an interesting problem. It does not have to do with the first group of publications, because that is, in fact, a variant on the theme of ‘the emperor’s new clothes’. The problem is related to the second group of publications, because that category is concerned with a real theory of policy tools, and that raises a few questions.

Has nobody read Ringeling? Have his comments been taken seriously, and have they been acted on after all? Has his extensive research programme, in which the theory of policy tools should have been embedded, been implemented? Or was he perhaps just wrong? And what if none of these is true? Presumably, Ringeling has indeed been read. Everybody has done his homework; the inaugural lecture figures in almost all lists of references. But, to begin with, he was apparently misunderstood.

For instance, in the programmatic article by Bressers and Klok, ‘Foundations for a theory of policy tools’ (Bressers and Klok, 1987b), the oration is included in the list of references, whereas the discrepancy with regard to content could hardly be greater. Bressers and Klok state, for instance, that

> There is a growing awareness that . . . a much greater variety of tools is possible. These tools constitute a sort of toolbox, from which a conscious choice can be made after careful consideration of the requirements of the intended effects and the circumstances (Bressers and Klok, 1987b, p. 78).

And what was Ringeling’s view in that respect? He said, among other
things, that 'a free choice of policy tools does not exist' (Ringeling, 1983, p. 10). And under the sub-heading 'A risky metaphor', he wrote:

There is a . . . danger of thinking exclusively in terms of direct use and direct effects. One may easily be misled by the mechanical metaphor of the tool. It is . . . misleading because it suggests a representation of reality which has a rather poor empirical basis. (Ringeling, 1983, pp. 22–3)

Never the twain shall meet, one would be inclined to think, but the opposite is true. Ringeling and Bressers met in an evaluation committee and together published an article entitled 'Policy tools in three arenas: policy-making, implementation and effect' (Bressers and Ringeling, 1989).

The authors wanted to know if the two approaches could perhaps enrich one another, and the concept of the arena seemed to make that possible. Ringeling’s point of view appears more clearly when the first arena (policy making) is discussed; Bressers’s ideas are predominant in the other two arenas (the implementation and the effect of the policy in the field). In the real-life policy process, these arenas merge naturally into one another: what happens in one arena has certain effects on the other two. A theory of policy tools ought to do justice to that reality, the authors thought, and their joint conclusion was that this did not make it easier to formulate a theory (Bressers and Ringeling, 1989, p. 4). In my personal view, this is putting it very mildly.

The fact that Ringeling was right was not only recognized, but it also became even more evident because of the greatly increased number of empirical studies on the implementation of policy published since his inaugural lecture. The overall conclusion of all these studies is that the results of concrete policies are determined by a true profusion of highly specific factors, sometimes interacting, and at other times reinforcing or neutralizing one another. Or, if you like, that this profusion of factors determines the effects of the tools applied.

Klok summarized all this in a useful article (Klok, 1989) and made an effort to demonstrate that it was in fact all included in his theory of policy tools or, if not, could in principle be incorporated in it. The main problem in that respect is the continuous manoeuvring between the risk of an oversimplified theory on the one hand, and the risk of unmanageable complexity on the other. Klok writes:

The complex character of the implementation process makes the use of relatively simple explanation models impossible. For the time being, however, it is inconceivable that models will be developed which do justice
to the complex character of the process by taking all relevant variables into consideration. (Klok, 1989, p. 274)

It is necessary to work out a compromise, and Klok expected that he would succeed in doing so.

When we realize that he was only thinking of policy implementation, and not of the other phases in the policy process which in practice cannot even be clearly distinguished from implementation, Klok’s vision is shown to be far too optimistic. A more realistic conclusion to be drawn from the implementation literature might be that a middle course will probably suffer from a combination of both evils. It will be too simplistic to do justice to the reality, but at the same time too complex to be applied in the practice of policy.

But Klok did not draw that conclusion. And his thesis, in which his great ambitions would have to be achieved, does not correspond with his optimistic point of view. His theory, although restricted to the implementation of policy, the formal tools and a specific policy area, is not even complete, and I pity the policy maker who has to put this theory into practice. Few officials in policy making will have the courage to go through all those steps, quite apart from the fact that it is most uncertain whether anybody in public administration will ever get the opportunity to do so.

As I mentioned earlier, the objections raised by Ringeling and the extensive programme in which he wished to have the research on policy tools embedded, mean in my opinion the same as: let’s just forget it for the next fifty years. Well, not even fifteen years have passed; Ringeling’s criticism has not been refuted but rather confirmed by implementation studies; he has eventually been read by the instrumentalists and justice has even been done to him to some degree, although his major research programme has still not been carried out. Yet the words ‘policy tool’ are on everyone’s lips and there is a theory of policy tools which, in fact, cannot exist. How is that possible? What is the social origin of this phenomenon?

7. FINALLY: THE SOCIOGENESIS. PROPOSAL FOR A SCHISM

The answer is simple: there is no theory of policy tools, at least not one that would in any way deserve the name. First of all, efforts to classify the empirically existing tools in an unambiguous way and to distinguish them from one another have been unsuccessful. However, an empirical
theory designed to play a prescriptive role may be expected to provide operational terms that link up with the empirical reality – after all, the aim of the theory is to be applied. In every concrete policy context in public administration, terms like plan, law, information, licence, order, subsidy, by-law, and so on, have a well-defined meaning for the civil servants and administrators involved. These terms are used in and form part of their day-to-day practice; these concepts – whose connotation is implicit and goes without saying – are the basis of communication, and the policy context concerned is denoted by these and many similar terms. Any prescriptive theory of policy tools ought to be phrased in these terms, but that has always remained wishful thinking, because nobody has managed to categorize these actually existing tools in an unambiguous way. Out of desperation, the efforts were aimed instead at classifying abstractions of the real tools. According to De Bruijn, Van der Doelen has done very well in that respect.

Van der Doelen refers to policy tools as steering models. He differentiates between a legal model (regulations), an economic model (incentives), and a communicative model (information), each of which may either increase or restrict the number of possibilities (De Bruijn, 1990, p. 50). However, something as simple as a regulation that all foodstuffs must have a label indicating the ingredients is already too complicated for this conceptual framework: it has both legal, communicative and economic aspects. This would then be a 'mix of models', because all three models appear to be equally applicable.

Scientifically, that is of course untenable: a model is a simplified representation of the real world, and if a relevant piece of that reality fits into all three models, then the point is not that the real world is mixed, but that the models are unfit for an empirical description of that particular piece of the social reality. From an analytical point of view, Klok performs a little better by claiming that three different tools are applied respectively: a communicative, a legal and an economic tool (Klok, 1991, p. 172). However, for the civil servants, administrators and the business community involved – that is, empirically – there is only one tool, which is simply called a labelling regulation. That can be visualized, it exists, and that is what they must deal with.

I have attempted to think up a tool which is not mixed according to this train of thought, but I have failed. Is there any government activity which does not have a legal basis, or contain any economic component, or involve communication? Even if such activities do exist, they can never be very substantial or relevant. If our theory of policy tools for public administration does not, therefore, link up with the terms which
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define and must define the reality of public administration and consequently the tools involved, we are not going to get anywhere.

Second, we should realize that a theory of policy tools can only have significance within a relevant theoretical framework. After all, a tool is only a tool if it is instrumental in achieving a certain objective. With this in mind, we see something rather interesting. COBA concentrated on a proper analysis of objectives and assumed that once the main objective had been split up into simple sub-objectives, the choice of the appropriate tool would follow automatically. In their approach, the policy objectives are at the forefront. According to Geelhoed, the most sensible objectives to be chosen by the public administration follow from the possibilities offered by the available tools. Only what falls within the range of these possibilities is worth being made into a policy objective. Bressers and Klok, and others too, teach us that very little can be deduced from the intrinsic qualities of the tools, and that we should concentrate instead on the core circumstances in which the tools are applied. Indeed, those circumstances include objectives. Certainly, but these are not policy objectives, but rather the private objectives of those who implement the policy or are subjected to it. The policy objectives themselves have completely disappeared.

If anything is beautifully illustrated by this development in the policy tools approach, it is the fact that the interpretation of government policy in which objectives are chosen, the instruments (tools) pertaining to those objectives selected, those tools weighed on the basis of a cost–benefit analysis, and so on, is in most cases totally inadequate. It may look very rational, but it is also very normative, because it does not correspond with what we perceive. The empirical reality of policy making is very different. If the policy objectives fall, the policy tools fall too, because it is the policy objectives which make any government action instrumental, and if the policy tools fall, the related theory naturally falls with them.

Third, the existing theory does not say anything at all about the actual process of choosing policy tools. Klok distinguishes between a theory and a doctrine of policy tools. The theory deals with the effects, while, according to Klok, the doctrine is concerned with the choice of the tools. But alas, the content of the doctrine is nowhere to be found. Klok and the others only deal with the effects of the implemented tools. So what we have is merely an evaluation technique, and its authors have always acknowledged it rather shamelessly as such, but without being prepared to give up the term ‘theory of policy tools’; witness a chapter by Bressers on the theory of policy tools in a book on policy evaluation (Bressers, 1991, passim).
The question we should now concentrate on and which will complete the sociogenesis of the policy tools approach, is: why is the term ‘tools’ used so frequently in an empty sense? Why does De Bruijn reject the theory of policy tools in his thesis (De Bruijn, 1990, p. 37 ff.) only to reintroduce it in an indirect way (tools as filter or technology of the organization), although he does not need that framework at all for his empirical analysis of the economic subsidies granted by the Department of Economic Affairs? Why did Bressers and Klok set out on their ‘mission impossible’ and why did they call the evaluation theory they developed a ‘theory of policy tools’? Where on earth do that word and the thinking in those terms stem from?

Various social sources can be given. Firstly the spirit of the times. Weber distinguished ‘wertrational’ from ‘zweckrational’, Mannheim differentiated between instrumental and substantial reason, the Frankfurt school and Habermas waged war against the ‘positivistisch halbierte Vernunft’ which they saw arising everywhere, but it was to no avail. Nowadays, rational is always goal-rational, and goal-rational thinking means instrumental thinking. It is in the air and you can smell it everywhere.

But there are also more specific origins than the macrosocial context. Ringeling has worked out where the term ‘policy tools’ was used for the first time in the Netherlands. It was not in academia, but in public administration, in official reports and documents. From there it started its triumphant march through the country. COBA and Geelhoed, whose backgrounds were to be found not in science but in the civil service, are illustrative examples. I also have the impression that the extensive literature in which the word ‘tool’ occurs in an empty sense is predominantly written by reflective practitioners, by people whose daily activities are directly or indirectly concerned with public administration and who occasionally write about it.

Given the position public administration has assumed, due to the development of the welfare state, that is quite understandable. The public administration must act; there are evils to be fought; there are political and social pressures to be taken into account. Anyone who wants to achieve something within public administration is faced with problems, so it is better not to want too much; every civil servant, however, every administrator, every politician is supposed to do something. Activity, action – something must be done all the time, or at least the impression must be created that something is being done. Although that perspective of activity has always existed, it used to be much less dominant. Anyone who has to do anything will ask: ‘How am I going to do it? What tools do I have at my disposal?’ And in the case of a
failure – which sometimes seems to happen – the same terminology offers a beautiful excuse: ‘I didn’t have the right tools.’ That is of course nobody’s fault.

As I mentioned earlier, a retouched image of reality is almost indispensable in order to function adequately in public administration. At least it is highly functional for the personal well-being of all persons involved. In public administration, a considerable proportion of the time is devoted to things which are not supposed to occur, or in any case should not be called by their real names and consequently do not really exist. Spending departments never make the slightest effort to fool the Ministry of Finance, office politics does not exist, civil servants do not steer policy decisions, departments do not have tribal disputes, there are certainly no symbolic policies, hidden agendas do not exist either, strategic information is never withheld, and so on. For that reason, the public administration can very well do without analyses of those kinds of phenomena – except when it happens to be convenient, for instance in a battle with another department – because such analyses are most confusing, damaging as they do the functional self-image. It is evident that these non-existent phenomena cause numerous problems, but such problems can be conveniently expressed in technical terms such as ‘too complex objectives’ or ‘missing or inadequate tools’. Technical errors are also errors, of course, but they can more easily be forgiven and corrected than can the action of giving highest priority to the interest of the department, administrative obstruction or political activities by bodies which lack democratic legitimization by the electorate. In this way, criticism remains administratively and politically manageable, if things have got too obviously out of hand.

Professor Brasz wrote to me in a personal communication:

Eventually, all attempts to bind bureaucracies . . . to a goal-rational approach result in increasing rigidity. These attempts . . . have been extremely successful as regards the words used. The [public] administration has come to speak the language of policy analysis. But it does not help a great deal . . .

That observation seems correct to me, because the difference between the professional language of many academic policy analysts on the one hand and civil servants, administrators and politicians with the proper education on the other hand is often hard to detect. They all talk about clear objectives, goal achievement, choosing the right tools, and the need for adequate coordination between them. But the important question here is, who has adopted whose professional language? Who, because of their structural social position, is obliged to think and speak
about policy in terms of goals to achieve and tools to implement? In view of the observations we made earlier this is a rhetorical question, one is inclined to say. But whoever, in an attempt to be equally rhetorical, suggests that it is policy analysis itself which is responsible for choosing concepts which are so convenient for public administration, who furthermore suggests that policy analysis is not obliged to do so, because it is an intellectually independent activity, overlooks something. According to a particular interpretation of the field of study, that cannot be the case.

Public administration can only be improved directly by science by means of recommendations in terms of a goal-rational approach. After all, those who make strategic, tactical or political recommendations for the benefit of a certain government agency X, which is in dispute with department Y, are in favour of or serving X, and so are against Y, and are consequently no longer independent. In the long run, therefore, they lose – even in their own eyes – their scientific aura and the knowledge they produce will show partiality. However, civil servants are also very skilful in that respect – probably even more so, because many of them not only have a university degree but also know the field and the context in which the knowledge must be applied far better than any academic researcher.

In order to achieve direct improvements, recommendations must be made. Scientific recommendations, therefore, must be presented in the form of a goal-rational approach lest they be rejected as being partial. No self-respecting person can make recommendations in terms of a goal-rational approach if he/she does not sincerely believe that the most important component of the research object falls within that framework. I do not in any way doubt the integrity of such analyses. They can even be very critical and may be most unpleasant reading for the public administration.

However, it is immanent rather than transcendent criticism. It remains within the normative self-image which public administration must have. The fact that the starting-point of this type of analysis is of a purely normative nature can easily be concealed because the point at issue is not normativeness in the sense of a party-political view. The available models are, after all, purely rational, and their only normative aspect is the fact that the real world of policy making looks rather different. For that reason, we do have an ingenious method for scientifically designing goal-rational policies, but not for designing symbolic policies. For the same reason, there is a theory of policy tools for environmental policy, but not for the annual battle between the spending departments and the Ministry of Finance, although for each
department this annually recurring confrontation consumes far more
administrative energy than environmental policy.

Let there be no misunderstanding about it: I am not pleading for
such subversive instrumental studies – I only want to point out why
they do not exist. For public administration, there are officially no such
problems. Those who look at policy in a rational way do not permit
such phenomena other than in the form of regrettable blunders for
which, of course, a rational remedy is recommended.

This constellation of the albeit functional, but nevertheless highly
coloured self-image of public administration, the very respectable wish
of scientists to improve the functioning of public administration, the
normative but respectable (because totally rational) starting-point of a
strong trend in the study of public administration – that complex of
social factors has been responsible for the sociogenesis of the approach
in terms of policy tools and has prompted studies such as that by Klok.
His is a study which an otherwise sympathetic critic has called a classic

My objections, however, do not only concern Klok; that would be
extremely unfair. My objections are concerned with a manner of
thinking and analysing which, because it aims at being useful for both
the science and the practice of public administration, cannot fail to
yield products which serve neither purpose. This is why I repeat once
more the old plea for a distinction between scientific and practical
knowledge. That distinction does exist and it makes sense, as every
organizational consultant will confirm, and it should also become
evident in the science of public administration. The first type of knowl-
edge is not aimed at improving public administration, but at being
subservient to society by analysing what happens within public admin-
istration. It attempts to be objective, uncovers and debunks myths, and
does not care about the practical usefulness of its knowledge. Insight,
understanding what happens – that is what it is interested in (for an
eexample of such an analysis, see Baakman, 1990).

The other type of public administration knowledge is subservient to
practice. It is clever, partial if necessary (in the way a lawyer may, within
his professional code, be partial in respect of his client's interests),
diplomatic, and concerned about the usefulness of its knowledge and
recommendations (for an example, see Baakman, 1992). It is possible
to play both roles, even for one single public administration expert,
albeit not simultaneously. There are also legitimate arguments in favour
of both viewpoints. But they should not be blended. That would be an
intellectual disaster.