

Zombie ideas in policymaking

 Vladimir Rodríguez / 13 julio, 2020


Fabiola Perales-Fernández & Vladimir Rodríguez-Giménez

A little review of the text:

"Zombie Ideas: Why Failed Policy Ideas Persist" written by B. Guy Peters & Maximilian Nagel

In the framework of the activities organized by the *International Public Policy Association (IPPA)*, a few days ago, we had the opportunity to participate in the e-talk given by Professor Dr. B. Guy Peters, a prominent American academic who has made significant contributions to the study of Public Policy in just over 70 books. In this talk, we discussed Professor Guy Peters's next book to be released shortly in co-authorship with Maximilian Nagel, who is a Ph.D. candidate at Zeppelin University in Germany. We found this book fascinating for understanding the contexts in which public policies develop, especially their potential application in Latin American countries. In this sense, our objective is to present the book *«Zombie Ideas: Why Failed Policy Ideas Persist»* and encourage Public Administration and Public Policy researchers and students in Latin America and the Caribbean to study it in-depth and to go further.

Introduction: The role of ideas in public policy

Peters & Nagel (in press), in their text *«Zombie Ideas»*, present an analytical framework of the role and influence of ideas in the formulation of public policies. The authors' central argument is that *«no policy exists without ideas»*. Public Policies are *«whatever governments choose to do or not to do»* (Dye, 1992, p. 3; Rudolf & Marmor, 2008, p. 892). These decisions to act or not reflect the multiple interests of social agents (companies, citizens, social organizations, unions) and political actors. Those interests present through ideas and narratives are in the process of public policy formulation, so *«ideas are inevitably involved in making policies»*.

The authors consider ideas as *«causal beliefs»* (Beland & Cox, 2011, p. 2), they emphasize that ideas in public policy design imply hypotheses of causality, either implicitly or explicitly. That is, an idea in policy-making involves the conceptualization of a problem (the frame or framework of a public problem) and the corresponding possible solutions. While policies may contain *«ideas of how to pursue important social goals»* (Goodin *et al.*, 2006, p. 22), the authors suggest that ideas can also be a way of rationalizing or justifying the self-interest of political actors or interest groups in public policy.

Peters & Nagel (in press) address the persistence and effectiveness of ideas in the policy. They point out that some ideas can persist for a long time, even after the sources of the ideas become extinct or the ideas are no longer useful. They note that some ideas can produce better results than others, other ideas can be debated for years and never adopted, while others are repeatedly tested without producing the expected results, or even positive results. In the possibility of specific ideas persisting over time, Peters & Nagel (in press) are questioning the feasibility of achieving *«learning and policy change»*, arguing that *«policy ideas (as collective ideas) may persist even when they are not successful»*.



What are zombie ideas?

In the multiplicity of ideas displayed into public policies, Peters & Nagel (in press) find a pattern of ideas that obstructs change, innovation, and effectiveness of public policy, this pattern of ideas has been called *«zombie ideas»*. According to the authors, zombie ideas are *«ineffective ideas that persist over time»*, *«... that have caused a policy to fail, and yet persist in failure»*, *«... that will not die, no matter how often they are disproved»*, *«ingrained in the policy-making systems that they may be adopted without adequate thoughts»*. These are central ideas that shape public policy but rarely contribute to the main objective of the policy, focusing mainly on the achievement of secondary objectives.

The authors recognize that while some zombie ideas are *«are misguided from the time they are adopted»*, not all policy ideas are born in this manner, some of them may have been effective when first implemented. However, when their usefulness diminishes or the context changes, they may continue to be implemented without much reflection because the conception has become entrenched in an organization's or government's policies set, making them zombie ideas. Peters & Nagel (in press) acknowledge that *«the existence of zombie ideas may be endemic in policy-making»*.

The authors argue that for identifying a zombie idea, it is imperative to examine *«the number of times the idea has been adopted»* and also identifying the number of times it has failed to accomplish *«tangible success in achieving its stated goals»*. They point out that it is relevant *«to understand the role of context in the failure, and possible success, of policies»* since *«policy ideas that work in one setting may become outmoded as the world changes around them»* or ideas that work in one setting may not work in another. To further clarify the concept, Peters & Nagel (in press) present a few examples of zombie ideas in the United States and Germany.

In the book, the authors emphasize that ideas become zombie ideas when they lose their ability to produce positive results and become permanent bad ideas. They also identify that zombie ideas are often *«policy ideas [...] often linked to political ideologies or fundamental belief systems, and hence may not be grounded in any empirical evidence»*.

Zombie ideas are ineffective ideas that persist over time

Peters & Nagel

Why do zombie ideas persist?

Once we have understood what Peters & Nagel (in press) mean by zombie ideas, it is essential to know what factors cause them to persist over time, that is, why these ideas are reproduced over and over again in the social consciousness of public policies, even after they have been proven to be wrong and failed. For this purpose, the authors refer to three levels of explanation and ten reasons that encourage the perpetuation of this pattern of ideas.

The three levels of explanation that Peters & Nagel (in press) provide are related to elites, organizations, and society. In the first level of explanation, the *elites*, the authors characterize them mainly as political elites, but policy experts and policy advocates can also be included. Since the ultimate goal of politicians is to gain popularity in society, if an idea was politically successful in the past, then it is very likely that they will continue to hold onto it. This situation presupposes a conservative attitude where often *«the familiar»* or the already implemented is chosen, in contrast to the newest or innovative ideas. The second level of explanation is in *organizations*, where organizational logic committed to ingrained values, visions, practices, and organizational routines are predisposed towards a particular type of public policies or policy instruments, and which may be replicating specific ideas and biases *«without adequate thought»*. Finally, the authors emphasize that a lousy idea of public policy continues to survive as long as it has support from *society*. They point out that if these ideas do not find support in society in the long run, it is doubtful that they will persist and influence the policy-making process. *«The role of society in the preservation of zombie ideas should not be underestimated»*, since if these ideas find support in society, their prevalence will be more prolonged.

Regarding the reasons why zombie ideas can be perpetuated in time, six of the ten reasons that Peters & Nagel (in press) give in their paper, have caught our attention because they are easily visible in the contexts of Latin American countries. The main ones are path dependence, beliefs and ideologies, symbolism, power and politics, links with individuals, and avoiding being blamed. These are briefly explained below.

Peters & Nagel (in press) indicate that the logic of *path dependence* is especially important to explain public policy ideas that worked at one time but then *«became outmoded»* by some changing situation, either in *«socio-economic conditions»*, in policy instruments or both. This logic of persistence produces a closed system of public policy-making, where new ways of doing things are excluded. In this sense, the authors mention Sarigil's (2015) argument, who say that *«policies simply become habits and are adopted and perpetuated with very little conscious thought»*.

Beliefs and ideologies are another explanation for why zombie ideas persist. It refers to the fact that actors rely on ideological instincts to justify their choices, rather than on evidence and facts. Many of these *«persistent patterns of belief may be individual, but organizations also play a major role in the persistence of ideas»*.

Symbolism refers to interpreting as symbols those public and social values by which the population can feel a certain attraction. Policy ideas that have a *«symbolic appeal»* among a broader population will be more likely to persist than will policy ideas that appeal primarily to policy elites». The authors emphasize that symbols can be used to create *false analogies* that help justify and maintain ineffective policies.

Power and politics involve two practices that help zombie ideas to perpetuate, on the one hand, the consensual nature of the political system and, on the other hand, corporatism. Consensus implies *«basic agreement among the parties and major actors about the course of public policy»* that can reproduce public policy ideas over and over again. Corporatism refers to the political privilege of certain groups, and elites in society to influence government decision-making, favoring some ideas over others.

The links of a policy to powerful symbols, and the role of individuals as policy entrepreneurs also explain the continuity of outmoded ideas of public policy. The authors point out that *«the individuals may also be policy thinkers (as political leaders with a wide social acceptance) whose ideas become accepted as dogma and may be unquestioned even when they are proving to be outdated»*.

Avoiding being blamed for an adverse outcome is another reason why political groups keep some public policy ideas alive. The authors point out, and point out well, that political leaders will avoid at all costs being associated with a negative outcome of their administration, which can lead them to be very conservative, discrediting public policy innovations without a proven outcome, and favoring old ideas that have had some accepted results.

In their text, Peters & Nagel (in press) show the overlap of the three levels of explanations and the ten reasons why they have identified that zombie ideas persist in public policies.

Conclusion

This short text is an invitation to read the book written by Professor Guy Peters and Maximilian Nagel, as well as an invitation to deepen the discussion and study of zombie ideas.

The development of the concept of zombie ideas, seen as ineffective public policy ideas that persist over time, is fascinating because it allows us to generate a link between the theory and practice of public policy. The approach to the study of *ideas* is a thread running through the entire public policy process, which would be relevant to observe, study, evaluate, and further theorize.

Peters & Nagel (in press) enable scholars to build an influential research agenda to understand various dimensions of public policy that have not yet been studied. It is not only about the failure of a policy, but why these ideas persist, beyond the political strategies that actors have to respond of what the authors call *«policy traps»*, in which *«political leaders may well know that the policies they advocate are likely to be ineffective, but adopt them because they need to do something in the face of popular demands, or a genuine crisis»*.

«Zombie Ideas: Why Failed Policy Ideas Persist» is a clear and friendly text, like its authors, that can be read by students and experts alike and be fully understood. Each reader will be able to visualize examples of zombie ideas in their daily lives. From now on, every time we ask ourselves to disbelief how certain ineffective ideas remain in force, we have elements for their study and discussion at hand.

From our perspective the scholars can deepen the study of zombie ideas from the following dimensions: 1. the role of ideas in the formulation of public policies; 2. the debate on the concept of zombie ideas; 3. deepen identification, persistence, and reproduction of zombie ideas; 4. the effects of zombie ideas in the economic and social development of countries; 5. the possible reproduction of zombie ideas from the policy diffusion process; 6. strategies to avoid the reproduction of zombie ideas; and, 7. the study of policy change and policy learning from the perspective of zombie ideas, principally.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor Guy Peters and Maximilian Nagel for letting us write this review about their work and the CIDE for allowing us to disseminate these ideas.

References

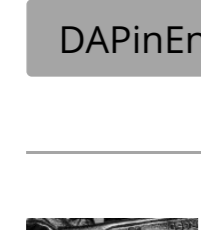
Dye, T. R., & Dye, T. R. (1992). *Understanding public policy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. *The Oxford handbook of public policy* (Vol. 6).

Goodin, R. E., Moran, M., & Rein, M. (2006). *Oxford Handbooks of Political*.

Rudolf, K., & Marmor, T. R. (2008). Reflections on policy analysis: Putting it together again. *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*. MR a. REG Michael Moran. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1, 983.

Sarigil, Z. (2015). Showing the Path to Path Dependence: The Habitual Path. *European Political Science Review* 7, pp. 221-42.

DAPinEnglish | reviews



ENTRADA ANTERIOR
Instrumentos para la integración de la política social en México



ENTRADA SIGUIENTE
Ideas zombis en la formulación de políticas públicas



ENTRADAS RECIENTES

Ideas zombis en la formulación de políticas públicas

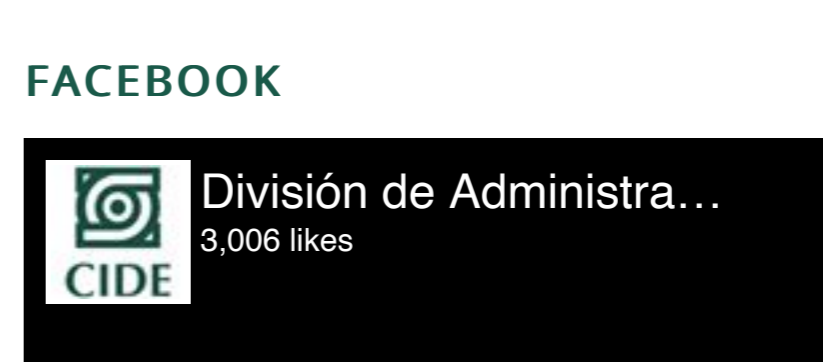
Zombie ideas in policymaking

Instrumentos para la integración de la política social en México

Los Sistemas Estatales Anticorrupción y el reto de la coordinación

Hacia un programa de investigación sobre Inteligencia Artificial en la Gestión Pública

FACEBOOK



Like Page | Share

Log In

You must be logged in to Facebook to message the page

TWITTER

Seguir a @CIDE_DAP

Twitter a @CIDE_DAP

SITIOS WEB

DAP - CIDE
Nuestra Maestría
Nuestro Doctorado



ADMINISTRADORES

Acceder
Feed de entradas
Feed de comentarios
WordPress.org