Techniques for Rational Planning

The Uses and Abuses of Forecasting. TOM WHISTON, Ed. Holmes and Meier, New York, 1979. xii, 358 pp., illus. $67.50. A Science Policy Research Unit Book.

The growing interest of government officials in the systematic application of knowledge to problems of public policy has generated a market for complex and sophisticated forecasting techniques. Rational planning requires some idea of future economic and social developments, and careful forecasts, as Andrew Shonfield points out in *Modern Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 67), can "reduce the area of the unpredictable to a manageable series of clear alternatives." But forecasts can also be used by policy-makers to justify choices that have already been made; unfortunately, all rational planning techniques are subject to abuse by both producers and consumers. How, then, are forecasts employed in the policy process?

The Uses and Abuses of Forecasting, the latest contribution of the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex to the forecasting literature, constitutes an effort to evaluate both the adequacy of the methodology and, more important, the relationship between forecasting and policy-making. There has been no dearth of critiques of futures forecasting; indeed, the STAFF (Social and Technological Forecasting for the Future) team that produced the book has been engaged in this line of research and has published several major studies of forecasting over the past few years. This book, the editor promises in his introduction, is different because it provides a balanced presentation of divergent views on the role of forecasting in the policy process.

Balance, of course, is a matter of judgment, but only a handful of the contributors to this volume make any effort to defend current practices. Frank Blackaby, the deputy director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, provides a primer on contemporary economic forecasting, and Mark Abrams, the director of research for Age Concern in London, offers a number of examples of market forecasting in the private sector. Bjorn Wittrock of the University of Stockholm describes the formation and operations of the Swedish Futures Secretariat, an innovative structure that is designed specifically to widen the policy debate within the government. The remaining contributors, however, are openly critical of futures forecasting as applied to policy problems.

The editor's perspective, which is shared by most of the contributors, is that forecasting cannot provide policymakers with any guarantees about the future but can, and should, enlarge the range of options available to them. Government planners, however, are committed too often to a particular set of objectives, and they seek, whether consciously or unconsciously, forecasts of future developments that support these preconceived goals. As a result, forecasting procedures "compromise or attempt to control the future in relation to some particular political or ideological bias rather than present for consideration a range of possibilities from which a more rational or equitable solution might be made" (p. 2). Such practices, unfortunately, are not unknown, but the editor makes no effort to evaluate the extent to which forecasting is abused. The reader must decide independently on the basis of the individual case studies in the book.

The essays in this volume include several first-rate analyses of forecasting experiences. Jonathan Gershuny evaluates the Transport and Road Research Laboratory (TRRL) forecasts of 1974 and 1977 as well as a series of forecasts for London area airports prepared by the British government between 1962 and 1974. He concludes that both sets of forecasts attempted to "fix the future" by consciously ignoring radical alternative transport scenarios. Nonetheless, TRRL's assumptions were vindicated whereas those of the London airport team were not. William Page and Howard Rush undertake a yeoman's task of analyzing 90 forecasts of nonferrous metal production developed since 1910. Nearly 70 percent of these forecasts were classified as correct, even though forecasters had made no effort to examine social and political trends.

Accuracy, however, is not the most significant measure of the utility of forecasting, according to some of the contributors to this volume. Pauline Marstrand and Howard Rush, for example, are more interested in the impact of the Indicative World Plan (IWP), developed under the auspices of the United Nations in 1970, on the effort to meet world food requirements. According to the authors, the IWP generated some programs to cope with an expected world food shortage, but the results of these efforts have harmed rather than helped the poor. John Gribbin apparently shares this perspective on forecasting. In concluding his analysis of the forecasts of physical changes in the environment, he suggests that a "good" forecast is one that maximizes the response to an envisaged crisis rather than one that proves to be accurate.

American readers of *The Uses and Abuses of Forecasting* will find some of these essays confusing, as they are predicated on an appreciation of the labyrinthine British bureaucracy. Kevin McCormick's chapter on the experiences of the Working Group on Manpower Parameters for Scientific Growth is a prime example of this genre. Other essays, notably Roy Turner and Sam Cole's case study of public opposition to the planning of the Brighton Marina, seem out of place in this volume. Several contributions, including the editor's chapter on population forecasting, are in need of simple editing, and others are awkwardly written and virtually unreadable.

Variations in quality in a collection of individual essays are to be expected, and it would be fair to say that the first-rate contributions in this volume outnumber the mediocre. Nonetheless, *The Uses and Abuses of Forecasting* is not altogether satisfying. The purpose of the book, according to the editor, is to allow "everyone who thinks about the future" an opportunity to assess the influence of forecasting on policy-making. This type of evaluation, however, requires more than a collection of case studies and comments. Unfortunately the editor has not made sufficient effort to guide the reader through the maze of otherwise unrelated essays, having provided only a four-page introduction that contains no justification for including certain topics and excluding others and fails to link the essays in any useful manner. As a result, the value of the book is equal to, but not greater than, the value of the individual contributions contained therein.

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