

Nathan Glazer

Realizing the public interest: reflections on an elusive goal

One would think that having edited for thirty years a journal titled *The Public Interest*, I should be clear on what the public interest is, how to determine it, and perhaps how to implement it. But after reading hundreds of articles by scholars, journalists, and public figures who have tried, in one area of public policy after another, to define the policies that would truly promote the public interest, I am only left in greater uncertainty as to how to define it.

Nonetheless, the language to express the public interest, as against all the 'special interests,' is available. No one has done it better than Walter Lippman, when he wrote: "The public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently." (Change 'men' to 'men and women' to account for social changes, and changes in rhetoric, since this statement was published in 1955, and written probably earlier than that.)

Or, in a somewhat more expanded effort by Charles Frankel in 1962: "The ideal of the public interest calls on men, despite their egoism, to set their preferences side by side with the preferences of others, and to examine them all with the same disinterestedness and impartiality. It asks them to seek as tolerable and comprehensive a compromise among those interests as is possible. And it reminds them that every decision they make is a limited one, that some interests may have been overlooked, that something better may be possible."¹

This kind of understanding of the public interest is certainly what Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol had in mind when they founded *The Public Interest* in 1963. It was a time when there were high prospects for the social sciences as a guide to policy, domestic and possibly even foreign, and when it was hoped that rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently." (Change 'men' to 'men and women' to account for social changes, and changes in rhetoric, since this statement was published in 1955, and written probably earlier than that.)

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1 In the interest of full disclosure, both quotations are in Pendleton Herring's article on "Public Interest" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* of 1968.

ality and disinterest would play a larger role in politics and policymaking than ideology, passion, individual power-seeking, and narrow self- and group interest would. These permanent features of the human condition could not be transcended, but at least what would be best, for most of us, could be determined and in any situation of conflict set forth as something for which we should aim. In 1971, John Rawls published a more systematic and rigorous effort to define the public interest, with great influence on political philosophy. *A Theory of Justice* provoked hundreds, if not thousands, of articles trying to define the public interest. And other earlier systematic efforts, such as Jeremy Bentham's, were available.

But defining the public interest was not so easy in practice, when one considered specific policies. For example, in the early years of *The Public Interest*, two great urban domestic enterprises were in process, both spurred by national policies providing hundreds of billions of dollars, and both at first glance, or even at second or third, well qualified to be pronounced policies in pursuit of the public interest. One was a project to build the system of high-speed freeways that would provide easier access from one place to another and enable more rapid commuting to jobs in cities and suburbs.

The second was a program to clear away decrepit housing and other facilities in central cities. These buildings had been constructed at a time when housing had to be close to jobs, and when industrial and business enterprises were concentrated in cities to take advantage of rail access. The aim was to replace these obsolete areas, as they were then thought of, with modern urban environments embracing housing, services, work, and cultural and educational facil-

ities. Much of the new building was to provide housing for moderate-income groups. What could be more in the public interest than such enterprises? Moreover, both had wide support in democratically elected legislatures at all levels – national, state, and local – another way of defining the public interest.

But both were also under attack, not least in *The Public Interest*, for their more immediate as well as their secondary and long-range effects. The construction of freeways, when they entered cities, and urban renewal both required the clearance of land. This land often contained houses in which people had lived, perhaps for decades; and long-established businesses that provided livings for families, and jobs and services for nearby dwellers. How were their interests to be taken into account when one pursued the larger public interest?

There were legal and political mechanisms for doing this: money for relocation, the power of eminent domain to condemn and take property, a mechanism for valuing it. Indeed, to demonstrate the rationality and good sense of such projects, techniques for cost-benefit analysis – with which the public authorities could determine when the 'benefits' of a new enterprise exceeded and made worthwhile the 'costs' required, public and private – were coming into effect and being adopted with great enthusiasm (as well as required by federal legislation). It was a heady moment for such analyses, which were growing ever more technically advanced in pace with new computer capabilities. But how could one value the cost of leaving a home to which one had become attached, a neighborhood in which one had grown up, or a business that had sustained one's parents and one's family? Were these losses a matter that had to be

*Realizing
the public
interest:
reflections
on an elusive
goal*

counted when one considered the public interest?

Activists certainly thought so. What they saw was a community disrupted to promote private interests: the interests of construction companies and construction workers to begin with, for they were often most active in pressing for new construction. Then there were the politicians, who wanted to get reelected by pointing to major projects they had sponsored. All this was obvious before one could discern the longer-range effects that served the public interest. Were they then trying to advance 'public' or 'private' interests? The word 'interest' comes in two different meanings, when we contrast 'the public interest' with 'interest groups.' Should we apply the term 'special-interest groups' to the evicted homeowners and business owners, or to those who would profit from the new building the eviction made possible?

This was only the first and the simplest order of conflict over the public interest when one considered urban redevelopment. In the recent *Kelo* case, the Supreme Court held that a homeowner determined not to sell her house had to give it up under eminent domain, so that a profit-making enterprise that needed a large expanse of land could be built: this development was expected to provide more tax revenue for the community and thus further the public interest.

Potential second- and third-order effects of the road-building and urban renewal programs raised more serious, if less immediate, questions about the public interest. The new freeways made it easier to build suburbs farther from the central cities. But the fixed political boundaries of cities made it impossible to tax those who moved outside their borders yet benefited from the freeways in gaining access to housing in the new

communities built on cheaper land far from the city. The freeways also made it easier for businesses to set up their facilities in the new communities. Thus the cities lost population and jobs and tax revenue. The roads that had been built to make it easier to get to the cities were now being used to flee them.

One of the most intriguing problems raised by efforts to determine the value of public policies came when their direct and immediate effects, it was asserted on the basis of more extended analysis, undermined their intended effects. Economic inequality is always a key concern for public policy, and much public policy is enacted to counter it: minimum-wage laws, programs to provide more funds for housing or food for the poor, an Earned Income Tax Credit to supplement the incomes of low wage-earners, a progressive income tax under which the rich pay more and the poor less.

The latter now exists in pallid and hardly evident form, for the arguments as to its benefits in serving those with less income have been greatly undermined, not least by arguments put forth by conservative (but not only conservative) critics that assert that such measures reduce investments in productive job-creating enterprises and thus hurt not only the economy but also the poor. The poor would be aided more by a vibrant and growing economy than by one that, in its efforts to combat inequality, provided fewer jobs and raised unemployment. Note recent articles on France, where a conservative government, elected in part on the basis of such reasoning, has taken power.

The point here is not to argue that these programs intended to reduce inequality have been shown to be counterproductive, and thus not to realize their intentions. That is a matter for debate among economists and other policy

analysts, and the issues are never fully resolved. (Almost the only public policy of the past half-century that seems to have universal approval is the G.I. Bill of Rights.) The point rather is to note that even the policies that seem to have the most direct effect of alleviating the condition of the poor may be shown on analysis to have other outcomes that subvert their original intentions. Of course, those whom these policies harm – the ‘special interests’ – find it in their interest to promote and publicize such analyses. But the analyses themselves are often conducted by serious and impartial economists and other policy analysts.

This is not the end of the chain of argument and analysis, and counterargument and counteranalysis, as one moves into third-order and further effects. France may create fewer jobs and have a less vibrant economy generally than the United States does, but its people seem generally happier with the society they have, with less inequality, more redistribution, and policies that provide wide access to high-quality public services. Are public satisfaction and amenity to be reckoned into the calculation of the public interest? One would think they would have to be.

And we can go beyond the policies and their effects, direct and indirect, on inequality and quality of life to consider some larger, and now more pressing and widely acknowledged, repercussions of the more active and growing economy that American-style policies promote. Is it in the public interest to foster a more vibrant economy – one that consumes more natural resources, changes the climate, and endangers the earth – when one is already sufficiently well-off? Is not the constant preference for an active, growing economy ignoring a central human interest in a sustainable earth? John

Kenneth Galbraith and others thought we were affluent enough forty-five years ago. Even that final test of the public interest (final, that is, in most current thinking), a growing economy, may have to be challenged by a wider view of the public interest – one that might be called the human interest.

These less than systematic considerations on arguments over what serves the public interest raise a number of general problems. The list that follows is hardly complete, nor are all the items on the same plane from the point of view of logic or relationship to the problem of the public interest, but they arise from tussling with concrete policy issues that have engaged us in recent decades. They make the problem of unambiguously defining the public interest a difficult one.

We can characterize the first large problem in determining the public interest in this way: what is ‘the public’ when we consider the public interest? For many issues of public policy, we tend to set the boundary for consideration as that of the nation, the largest political entity that wields effective and dominant power. But the public can be as narrow as the neighborhood that will be affected by the building of a major road, a low-rent housing project, a half-way house for persons released from prison, or a home for mental patients who are being removed from large state institutions, which have everywhere been closed. Can a larger calculation of costs and benefits settle the matter? Perhaps in theory, but certainly not in practice or in local politics.

Today we also have to take into account issues that may be under the control of national entities but transcend national boundaries. These are preeminently the policies contributing to global warming. This is certainly a matter

*Realizing
the public
interest:
reflections
on an elusive
goal*

for the public interest, but the effective ‘publics’ who determine how the issue is to be governed are national publics, defined by state boundaries. That ‘public’ is too large for some issues – those neighborhood issues I have referred to, for it may not notice the harm it does in pursuing *its* interests – but too small in considering a worldwide public interest like limiting climate change.

Something like an international public is emerging, as we note when we see some change in President Bush’s position on policies to control carbon emission. His shift suggests that the interest of the United States in a strong and growing economy, which led to his initial dismissal of the Kyoto proposals, has been modified, perhaps in part by the growth of what we might call an international public opinion and an international public interest. Other elements, such as his declining political effectiveness, are major contributors to the change.

The issue of a boundary to the public is not often in mind when we speak of the public interest, since effective decision making is taken by national governments for a public within that boundary. But if one does not so bound the reach of the public interest, one may note many issues – determined at the national level – that ideally should take into account their impact beyond the national boundary. At the present writing, we are engaged in a major debate on immigration policy. We consider its effects on us as a nation, within the United States, and the research on these effects concentrates on such matters as immigration’s impact on wage levels for the low-income wage-earner, or the dependence of certain businesses and industries on imported immigrant labor.

But our immigration policies also have consequences for our neighbors, preemi-

nently Mexico but also Central America and the Caribbean nations (with lesser effects on other nations), because of their dependence on the United States as a place where their poor and young may find employment and remit earnings to their families in their home countries. If the United States made the cut-off for these wage-earners effective, would that not also affect the internal stability of these nations, and is that not also part of the American public interest?

A second large issue I have raised in these initial considerations is that of how far we should extend our consideration of the consequences of policies affecting the public interest. Here, extended analysis, as I have shown, may contradict the initial intentions and expectations of given policies. This is related to a third issue: how far into the future can we go when we consider the public interest? The policy we choose today may be different if we think about the public interest ten or twenty or thirty years ahead. Our politics, as is well known, are not set up so as to account for long-range interests. We elect our public officials for two or four or six years, and often limit their opportunity to seek reelection.

Not long ago, three widely discussed exhibits on the work of Robert Moses in reshaping the city of New York were on display in various venues in New York. They raised this question: may a policy that we generally think of as not in the public interest be reinterpreted to be in the public interest a few decades down the line?

Robert Moses was indeed a controversial figure. He undoubtedly thought that he was working exclusively in the public interest, and when one contrasts his career with that of public figures today – many of whom seem to take their years in public life as a prelude to money-mak-

ing in post-public life – he does stand out as distinctively indifferent to any personal self-interest. He dealt with projects that cost the equivalent of billions in today’s dollars, but left an estate of \$50,000. If one looks at the public works to which he devoted himself – parks and playgrounds and public beaches; swimming pools for the poor; parkways and expressways; middle-class housing projects – one would regard him a major public servant. But Moses was execrated during the last decades of his long career, and the weight of public opinion since then has judged him severely as someone who destroyed much that was valuable in New York City, an arrogant egomaniac whom mass public protest had to stop before he caused greater damage to the public domain.

Yet Moses was regularly appointed to the positions that permitted him to carry out his public works by democratically elected governors and mayors, most of whom are considered in their public lives embodiments of enlightened public service. How could opinion on the work and career of Robert Moses diverge so radically? One reason is the difference in how we evaluate what we have in the present against a perspective that looks further into the future. Here, other issues arise, such as how far we can look into the future, and how we can avoid grave errors in sacrificing a present to a presumed better future.

There is least argument over his work developing parks, playgrounds, beaches, and swimming pools. These were often on undeveloped land or land left over from other projects, and did not require the large-scale uprooting of homes and business that the major road-building and urban renewal projects entailed. In Robert Caro’s huge book on Moses, *The Power Broker*, which has been the dominant influence in shaping the public

image of Moses, some of the most powerful and affecting pages describe the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and its destruction of working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in the Bronx.

In recent years, Jane Jacobs, who has reshaped our thinking about city planning and urban development, has emerged as the foil to Robert Moses. She fought and stopped his plan to run a major freeway across Lower Manhattan, enabling rapid access between New Jersey and Long Island and reducing truck and other traffic on the streets of Lower Manhattan. Its path ran through what were then moribund and low-priced small-scale industrial facilities and businesses. In subsequent years the areas that were to be demolished flourished as Soho and Tribeca, in the very buildings deemed derelict and slated for demolition. Here, the long-range future spoke decisively against Moses: who would exchange Soho and Tribeca and the related areas today for an expressway?

But what do we think today about the large-scale housing developments for the middle class that Moses built under urban renewal, also attacked in his time for uprooting small businesses and homeowners and renters? Today, these developments are seen as one of the few anchors of a lower-middle class and middle class in Manhattan and New York City. When *The Power Broker* was published, in 1974, New York City was going through the worst financial crisis in its history: it was losing population, and it seemed doubtful it would ever recover. Little need then to take much account of Moses’s housing developments. But the 1980s saw some progress, the 1990s more, and today the rising costs of land and rent have effectively turned Manhattan, and in increasing

*Realizing
the public
interest:
reflections
on an elusive
goal*

measure the rest of New York City, into places where apparently only the poor, in subsidized housing projects, and the prosperous, in the private market for housing, can live. The middle-income developments built by Moses under urban renewal now provide thousands of apartments for teachers, policemen, firefighters, health workers, and the like. Here, the future has spoken in favor of Moses's vision, though we may still decry the design of these developments, so similar to low-rent housing projects.

There was no way of calculating the verdict of the future, and a rather far future, in the 1950s and 1960s. There is no way of calculating what the future will think of the policies we institute today. To sacrifice the present for the future on a large scale – the policy of Communism in Russia and China – is abhorrent to us. But on a smaller scale we do it every day, when we demolish a neighborhood for a new tax-paying development or a new major road, replacing a modest present with what we conceive of as a larger, or more useful, or more productive, perhaps grander, future.

It is harder to do these days, in part because of our experience with Robert Moses and his equivalents in other cities. We now have a much greater degree of mandated local participation and required environmental impact reports for every large project; we now have specialists who are employed by developers to engage in scores of meetings with communities to ease the way for approvals for every large project, and to overcome the inevitable opposition of those invested in what exists for what will replace it.

All this is for the best. Our democratic processes have been developed and expanded to define the public interest bet-

ter. But when we think of the many great projects of the past, effected in days when these democratic processes hardly existed, we can also regret the limitation we have placed on large thinking, on commitments on a large scale to what we will need, appreciate, or enjoy in the future. When community activists, raising environmental considerations (the breeding environment of a Hudson River fish would be affected), shot down the proposal for a grand new roadway to be built through parks on the west side of Manhattan, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (then a senator from New York, who supported the project along with the then-mayor of New York City and the governor of New York State) mused in public, "How did we ever build the George Washington Bridge?"

We must ask whether we struck the right balance in pursuing the public interest when in the 1960s and 1970s we created the institutions and practices to govern and limit public action. Do we weight the present against a possible future too highly? It is not an easy answer. When we look at the cities of China, we think, they need less Robert Moses and more Jane Jacobs. But in our country today, perhaps certain kinds of public work, in furtherance of the public interest, are too hampered. When the exhibit on the magnificent work of Jane Jacobs opens soon, we may be led to wonder, how under her strictures do we build the grand projects that we may need and that may fulfill our desires for a great city?