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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EVALUATION AND POLITICS

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Evaluation is a young discipline that, according to Pawson & Tilly (1997), has passed its adolescence. If evaluation is now in its adulthood, it is reasonable to consider whom evaluation should have as its “life partner” or “partners.” The evaluation family traditionally has included good researchers with their ideal of neutral, objective research as the prototype for evaluation and these partners in the evaluation enterprise have been recognized with awards and high status. Evaluation work, however, is always couched within a political context, and this reality brings different kinds of partners into the relationship. These partners, including politicians and policy-makers, often make the evaluation family uneasy. There has been a basic conception that evaluation (and similarly research) becomes adulterated when it mixes with politics. Generally the discussion is permeated by a negative view of politics. Politics conjures up images of trouble, disruption, and even violence, on the one hand, and deceit, manipulation and lies, on the other. It is less common to see a positive or at least neutral view of politics as an important and inevitable part of human life and interaction.

If politics and evaluation are destined to be “life partners” in the adulthood of evaluation, then what forms could the relationship take – marriage, cohabitation or living apart? This chapter will consider some of these possibilities.

## **Definitions of Evaluation and Politics**

“Evaluation” refers to the process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something (Scriven, 1991). The evaluation process involves identifying relevant values or standards that apply to what is being evaluated, performing empirical investigation using techniques from the social sciences, and then integrating conclusions with the standards into an overall evaluation or set of evaluations. The first step in the process, the identification of relevant standards and values to apply to what is being evaluated, has to do with what partners involved in the evaluation see as relevant in the particular case. Should the priority be, for example, on economical, educational, social, ethnic, or democratic standards and values? Making these choices is

an exercise of power that connects evaluation to politics. That is an interpretation in line with Hammersley (1995), who says that politics has to do with the use of power and that it also concerns making value judgments and taking actions on the basis of them.

According to Caro (1977), evaluation must fulfill two purposes—information and judgment. The former fits well with the research community's traditional epistemological perspective, whereas making judgments does not. Social research's aim, traditionally and in a narrow sense, is limited exclusively to producing knowledge but not to producing value judgments or evaluative conclusions. There has also been considerable debate about which models should be adopted for making judgments. One strategy is to treat judgments as technical measurements, in order to avoid involving values with their attendant political implications. It is precisely at this juncture, however, where evaluation and politics are related. Both are concerned with values, value judgments, and value conflicts in public life. The reality is that evaluation, in order to fulfill its second purpose of making judgments, cannot avoid the issue of politics.

### Politics – a Contested Concept

Politics has been defined in many ways. One could say that politics is regarded as an “essentially contested” concept (Gallie, 1956), in that there are controversies about the term so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. In effect, a single term (like “politics”, or “evaluation,” for that matter) can represent a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its “true” meaning. For example, it is equally legitimate to define politics as what concerns the state, as the conduct of public life, as debate and conciliation, and as the distribution of power and resources. On the basis of Lasswell (1936), politics is about who gets what, when, and how. The “when” and “how” aspect of politics is put forward by Heywood (2002), who sees politics in its broadest sense as “the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live” (p. 4). The activities are formed into institutions in Dahl's (1984) definition of politics as “any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, control,

influence, power or authority” (pp. 9–10). Politics, however, is not just activities (decisions on allocation of resources, organization of institutions, etc.). Easton (1968) argues that politics is the authoritative allocation of values for a society, and that politics essentially is making moral decisions about what is good and what is bad. This definition places politics close to that definition of evaluation which emphasizes evaluation as the production of information together with the production of judgment.

### From a Narrow to a Broad Definition

Heywood (2002) presents some illustrative views of politics that can be taken as a point of departure for elaborating the picture of politics. In the narrowest sense, politics can be treated as the equivalent of party politics. Here, politics is restricted to those state actors who are consciously motivated by ideological beliefs and who seek to advance these beliefs through membership in a formal organization such as a political party. This view can be expanded to see politics as the art of government. Here, politics is what takes place within a system of social organization centered upon the machinery of government. More broadly, politics can be associated with formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community. This means that most people, most institutions, and most social activities can be regarded as being “outside” politics and the policy cycle through which politics and governance takes its form. The politicians are described as “political,” whereas civil servants are seen as “non-political,” as long as they act in a neutral and professional fashion. Similarly, evaluators are taken to be “non-political” figures when they interpret and value the evaluand (a program or a policy, for example) impartially and in accordance with the collected information. From this perspective, evaluators may be accused of being political, however, if personal preferences or some other form of bias influences their judgments.

According to Heywood, this definition can be broadened by taking politics beyond the narrow realm of government and viewing politics as public affairs. From this viewpoint, politics is understood as an ethical activity concerned with creating a “just society.” Even

if one regards institutions such as businesses, community groups, clubs, trade unions, and also evaluation, as “public,” this broader perspective still remains a restricted view of politics in that it does not, and should not, infringe upon personal affairs and institutions. This view is illustrated, for example, by the tendency of politicians to draw a clear distinction between their professional conduct and their personal or domestic behavior. By classifying, say, cheating on their partners or treating their children badly as personal matters, they are able to deny the political significance of such behavior on the grounds that it does not touch on their conduct of public affairs.

Critical thinkers, in particular feminists, have pointed out that this implies that politics still stops at the front door, that it does not take place in the family, in domestic life, or in personal relationships – a view these and other critical thinkers disagree with. This kind of critique takes us to the broadest view on politics, which is also the most radical. Rather than confining politics to a particular sphere (the government, the state or the “public” realm), this view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence. Politics takes place at every level of social interaction; it can be found within families and among small groups of friends just as much as among nations and on the global stage. What makes politics a distinctive activity, distinguishable from any other form of social behavior, is that politics at its broadest concerns the production, distribution, and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics is power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. The essential ingredient is the existence of scarcity: the simple fact that, while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. From this perspective, politics is seen as a struggle over scarce resources, and power as the means through which this struggle is conducted, says Heywood.

### Conflict and Consensus

From the discussion thus far, it is clear that politics is inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and consensus. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants,

competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure the rules are upheld, they must work with others. Hauge, Harrop, and Breslin (1992), for example, point out that politics does not always involve conflict. They argue that one reason for studying politics is to search out the conditions under which groups can achieve their goals peacefully and effectively. From this view, politics is a constructive and practical subject and one can emphasize its compromising and consensual aspects. Politics relates not so much to the arena within which politics is conducted as to the way in which decisions are made. Politics is more seen as a particular means of resolving conflict, that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. This is why Crick (1962) portrayed politics as that solution to the problem of order that chooses conciliation before violence and coercion. Crick, who is one of the leading exponents of this view, argues that when social groups and interests possess power, they must be conciliated; they cannot merely be crushed. This view on politics is also based on resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and dialog. In other words, the disagreements that exist can be resolved without resort to intimidation and violence. Politics is no utopian solution (compromise means that concessions are made by all sides, leaving no one perfectly satisfied), but it is undoubtedly preferable to the alternatives: bloodshed and brutality. In this sense, politics can be seen as a civilized and civilizing force. People should be encouraged to respect politics as an activity, and should be prepared to engage in the political life of their own community.

### Evaluation Researchers' Views on the Evaluation and Politics Links

In the light of these definitions of evaluation and politics, evaluation can be part of the big political process (that is, evaluation in politics) and politics can be an aspect of the relationship between the actors involved in the evaluation process (that is, politics in evaluation).

Even though evaluation in politics and politics in evaluation are not the most widely discussed issues in the evaluation literature (compared with, for example, models, methods, and utilization), several evaluation researchers have dealt with the subject. The discussion below provides some notable examples that are illustrative rather than exhaustive of past discussion.

In the early years, Cronbach and his colleagues (1980) viewed evaluation as essentially a political activity through its influence on political decisions and policy formulation. More recently, one who extensively has discussed the matter is Weiss (1973, 1991). She points out at least three ways in which evaluation and politics are linked. First, the policies and programs with which evaluation deals are themselves the products of political decisions. Second, because evaluation is undertaken in order to feed into decision-making, its reports enter the political arena, where evaluation provides information. Third, evaluation itself has a political stance. Evaluation, by its very nature, makes implicit political statements, such as those challenging the legitimacy of certain program goals or implementation strategies. In this case, evaluation serves as critical inquiry.

The different kinds of information needs in the policy cycle are links that Chelimsky (1987, 1989) underlines in discussing the relationship between politics and evaluation. She argues that evaluators must recognize and accept that politics is involved in evaluation and try to understand the dynamics of the policy cycle and the political process into which the evaluation is fed. The policy cycle consists of agenda setting, problem definition, policy design, program implementation, policy or program impact, and termination. At all stages, there is an information need where program evaluation can serve general audiences and individual public decision-makers. They may need information from evaluation for three very broad kinds of purposes.

- for policy formation—for example, to assess and/or justify the need for a new program;
- for policy execution—for example, to ensure that a program is implemented in the most cost/effective way; and

- for accountability in public decision making—for example, to determine the effectiveness of an operation program and the need for its continuation, modification, or termination. (Chelimsky, 1989, p. 75)

Palumbo (1989) also notes that politics play an important role in evaluation design, process, and utilization of results. He comments on the claims that evaluators should not simply be advocates or collaborators of the program managers but of the program and policy itself, as well as of the clients and consumers of the program.

... evaluators may be the only way that the poor, students, offenders, welfare recipients, or mentally ill can influence the policy. These “stakeholders” often are not included in the formulation and implementation of the evaluation. It is in this way that evaluators can represent the public interest rather than specific power holder interest. (p. 38)

Being an advocate for, or at least having an ambition to give unprivileged stakeholders a voice in the evaluation is one way that evaluators incorporate politics into their works.

### Micro- and Macro-Levels

Greene (2003) shows how evaluation and politics are interwoven from micro- and macro-levels. She starts with the question of what the war in Iraq in the spring of 2003 had to do with evaluation. Her answer is that, in a discussion of evaluation and politics, world events such as war and peace, weapons and diplomacy, oppression and freedom are of central importance. Then she describes how macro politics and micro politics are combined when she meets people in her evaluation work who express concern for relatives in the war; this reality then has effects on the evaluation activities and even how the evaluators’ questions (unrelated to the war) are answered. In this way, macro events like the war in Iraq affect the micro work the evaluator does both in conducting the evaluation and reporting the results. This example shows that the evaluator must consider what occurs at both the macro-political and micro-political levels.



House (2003) provides one more example of this perspective, illustrating how the micro-level view of the role of evaluation in politics has implications on the micro-level choice of an evaluator. He frames a future scenario in which evaluation is a tool at the disposal of the powers in force. House describes how evaluators who stand for a perspective that is critical of society will have greater difficulty winning government contracts. Instead, the evaluators who are willing to tow the party line will be hired. Thus, in a sophisticated way, politically correct evaluators are selected by a process of reverse discrimination whereby one does not blacklist people (which would risk a public debate) but instead "white lists" those one knows are favorable in terms of competence and appropriateness.

### How Does Evaluation Influence Politics?

The focus so far has been on evaluation writers' perspectives on politics' influence on evaluation. How can evaluation influence politics? This question can be answered from several perspectives. First, from a positivist, rational, or social engineer's perspective, evaluation fulfills a rational feedback function within the political system and a steering control function. Evaluation provides the "rational" and "unbiased" data that the system needs to determine whether it is on course. Second, from a cultural perspective, evaluation can be understood as one answer to the fundamental need to be able to associate an organization with meaning and rationality. Evaluations can also fulfill a symbolic or ritual function and can be an answer to the trust that has declined in society today. Those in power and public organizations can use evaluations to recreate legitimacy for a program or operation, according to Hanberger (2003). He mentions that an evaluation can fulfill an enlightening (Weiss, 1977), a conceptual (Peltz, 1978), or a learning function (Preskill & Torres, 2000). In addition, evaluations can be used in media debate or in direct meetings with interested parties where the results from the evaluation and possible lines of action are discussed. Such an evaluation function can be described as stimulating public debate.

Stern (2005) distinguishes the following five purposes for evaluation, providing a view

of how evaluation can have an impact on political decisions for planning, learning, developing, and termination of a program.

- Planning/efficiency – ensuring that there is a justification for a policy/programme and that resources are efficiently developed.
- Accountability – demonstrating how far a programme has achieved its objectives and how well it has used its resources.
- Implementation – improving the performance of programmes and the effectiveness of how they are delivered and managed.
- Knowledge production – increasing our understanding of what works in what circumstances and how different measures and interventions can be made more effective.
- Institutional and community strengthening – improving and developing capacity among programme participants and their networks and institutions. (Stern, 2005, p. xxvii)

In summary, some evaluation writers have noted that evaluation and politics can be interpreted from a narrow perspective, as the art of government where evaluation is seen first and foremost as a technical instrument to get information and basic data to the decision-making process. Other commentators take a broader perspective that expands the concept of politics to the public arena and thereby to different social institutions, including evaluation. Political- and value-laden aspects are therefore part of evaluation. Finally, in the broadest interpretation of politics, some evaluation writers argue that all aspects of social life, in both the public and private spheres, are inherently political. From this perspective, not only is evaluation as an institution and undertaking political, but the individual evaluator's values, background, gender, and the like also become part of the explicit and implicit operation of politics in evaluation.

### Three Positions on How Evaluation and Politics are Related

The examples above suggest that more and more evaluators are accepting the reality of connections between evaluation and politics. What remains unclear is the inherent nature of these connections and, based on this, the

**Table 10.1** Three positions on the inherent connections between evaluation and politics

Three positions	Possible to separate evaluation and politics?	Desirable to separate evaluation and politics?
First position	Yes	Yes
Second position	Yes, in providing information; Not entirely when providing judgments	Yes, in providing information
Third position	No	No

range of possibilities for and the limitations of the evaluation–politics relationship. In this section, we propose and describe a framework to help clarify the nature of the connections between evaluation and politics. We also explore the implications of the three different positions that comprise the framework, both for the conduct of evaluation and for the evaluation profession.

The connection between evaluation and politics can be framed in three different ways (see Table 10.1). These ways, which can be characterized as “positions” or “perspectives,” differ along two dimensions: whether it is possible operationally to separate evaluation and politics, and whether it is desirable conceptually to separate evaluation and politics. In this framework, we have adopted the conception that the two main components of evaluation are providing information (the epistemological component) and providing judgment (the value component).

The first position holds that it is both possible and desirable, operationally and conceptually, to separate evaluation and politics. The second position maintains that it is possible and desirable to separate evaluation and politics operationally when providing information but not entirely possible to do so when providing judgments, nor it is conceptually desirable. The third position is that it is neither possible nor desirable, operationally or conceptually, to separate politics and evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the three positions are general characterizations and that individual evaluators do not neatly fit into only one position, especially if we consider those with long histories of evaluation work of many sorts and in different contexts. We have made the boundaries appear more

distinct than they are in the complex, pragmatic undertaking that is evaluation. We have done this to highlight the primary differences, across the three positions, in the view of the relationship between evaluation and politics.

**First Position – the Value-Neutral Evaluator**

The viewpoint from the first position is that politics and evaluation can and should be kept operationally and conceptually apart. The evaluator works independently to provide an objective, neutral assessment of the program, project, or policy; the politician then receives this assessment and does with it what he or she decides. This view suits the definition of politics as the art of rational government, where the evaluator is an objective, impartial civil servant. The information function of evaluation should be under the control of the evaluator and be his/her primary activity. The judgment function, based on the information, should be under the control of others, including politicians, program planners and implementers, and the electorate. In this view, evaluation is “social research.”

According to Schwandt (2003), some of those who hold this type of position look at politics as something incomplete and faulty which needs to be held in check to prevent it from poisoning the good relations between people. The cure for these faults is objective, impartial, rational, and professional officials who are above the temptation to promote their own or selected others’ interests, who maintain the public’s interests, and who assert general principles of justice that treats everybody equally. As House & Howe (1999) have noted, this relationship between politics and evaluation

neatly fits the representative liberal model of democratic theory (Ferree et al., 2002) in which disinterested, apolitical experts inform public decision-making in a detached (i.e., emotion- and value-free) manner, thereby enhancing both the rationality as well as the civility of the debate about a suitable course of action in the free marketplace of ideas.

Against this picture of how politics can become a threat to objectivity, impartiality and rationality, the question to ask is how the evaluator can protect him or herself from political influences. One way to separate evaluation from politics is to emphasize its autonomy in relation to political institutions and to powerful interests in society. Closely connected to this is the idea that power is a source of corruption which evaluation must be insulated against if it is to be conducted effectively.

How can these political influences be minimized? In his winning response to the 1988 AEA President's Problem (Patton, 1988) around the question of evaluation and politics, Robin Turpin (1989) focuses on ways to minimize the political influences in evaluation. Specifically, politics can influence (p. 55):

- the selection of the evaluator or evaluation team
- chances of funding
- the selectivity of information given to the evaluator
- the general approach or scope of the evaluation project
- the methods used
- the subject or subject pool selection
- the instruments used or developed
- data analyses
- the interpretation of data
- final recommendations
- information that is disseminated

To "produce good, solid, objective research" (p. 55) Turpin suggests that the evaluator should take the following precautions to avoid or minimize political influences (which we have rewritten in minor ways):

1. Uncover who wants the evaluation and the motivation behind it
2. Uncover all sides of the story by talking to the people involved (not just those officially involved)

3. Develop peer review procedures (even for internal, non-funded or routine evaluations)
4. Make use of expert panels and/or outside consultants in the whole evaluation process
5. Use established scales and instruments whenever possible
6. Include in the report a "limitations" section that discusses possible political influences and details critical decisions

Although Turpin also notes that politics can have positive effects on evaluation by opening doors to cooperation and information, even these positive effects can extract a cost, often in the form of subtle pressure on the evaluator. "Politics has a nasty habit of sneaking into all aspects of evaluation," Turpin comments.

The recurring idea that is emphasized is the evaluator as a conscious actor, on guard against undesirable influence and attempts to hinder the evaluation from its task of critical evaluation. The idea is a professional, politically disconnected actor, who completes his or her assignment without regard to the more-or-less explicit desires of the powers that be.

## Second position – the Value-Sensitive Evaluator

In the second position on the connection of evaluation and politics, it is accepted that evaluation takes place in a political environment and that evaluation and politics therefore cannot entirely be separated, specifically in the judging component of evaluation. In the operational, information-finding aspects, however, the evaluator can and should stay separate from the political component, according to this perspective. For example, Chelimsky (1987) points out the need for evaluators to place themselves in the political context that constitutes the program evaluation; she further suggests that evaluators must understand the political system in which evaluation operates and the information needs of those policy actors who utilize evaluations. She says that evaluators must devote much time to negotiating, discussing, briefing, accuracy-checking, prioritizing, and presenting. At the same time, the evaluator takes a professional role for the

conduct of the evaluator that is non-political in the narrow definition of politics.

This second position emphasizes the evaluator's role as a professional expert, but it includes two distinctively different ideas on how politics and expertise can be conceptualized. The first idea has a market perspective and reduces the evaluation-politics relation to a technical task, where the profession is defined by the measurement of quality and efficiency. This is in line with the narrow definition of politics as governance that was presented above. The other idea represents a value-committed perspective on the relation that concerns a professional role that makes the evaluation more democratic. This is more in line with the definition of politics as a public sphere.

#### *Evaluation and Politics as a Market*

From a market perspective, politics is reformulated to be primarily a matter of practical problem-solving (Amy, 1984). This technocratic view of politics has come to prominence as part of the worldwide spread of neo-liberal discourse. Politics is replaced by rational consumer choice. Here, evaluation becomes a means for quality assurance that measures the performance (efficiency) of practices against indicators of success in achieving the targets. The profession of evaluation is reduced to technical expertise to measure quality and performances through prefabricated schemas and formula. The current emphasis in some counties in the education and health arenas for indicators-based performance management also fits within this characterization.

The movement is known as New Public Management (NPM) and represents a solution to problems in the public sector based on the introduction of management ideas from the private sector. Power (1997) describes what is characteristic of the movement:

Broadly speaking the NPM consists of a cluster of ideas from the conceptual framework of private sector administrative practice. It emphasizes cost control, financial transparency, the autonomization of organisational sub-units, the decentralization or management authority, the creation of market or quasi-market mechanism separating purchasing and providing

functions and their linkage via contracts, and the enhancement of accountability to customers for quality of service via the creation of performance indicators. (p. 43)

The citizens are transformed to consumers who make choices on a market of health care, education, social welfare, etc. Evaluation is seen as a practice that can guide consumer's choice. The view is that institutional structures for control and "accountability" should be strengthened and that evaluation in the first instance should be defined as a steering instrument for management. Through performance management and measurement and the control of quality, politicians are in a position to demonstrate "value for money" to tax-payers. Furthermore, NPM provides a rationale for reducing public sector spending through its support for private solutions rather than politically controlled activities.

#### *Politics and the Democratization of Evaluation*

The other variant of the second position clearly admits that evaluation and politics are not entirely possible to separate, especially when talking of politics in a broad definition that places it in the public sphere. Evaluation is an activity necessarily couched in a political context, and the evaluator must take responsibility for how the evaluation is done, not only in regard to the technical aspects but also with attention to ethical aspects and democratic values. This does not mean that evaluation is totally integrated in politics because the evaluator has a distinctive role separated from politics, in the narrower sense of that term, as the provider of relevant, meaningful information.

From this perspective, there is a responsibility for evaluators to make their own professional perspectives on the evaluation visible. The answer to how this could and should take place is given in different forms. Some forms include the evaluator being a facilitator, a critical friend, a dialog partner, or an educator. In general, the evaluator is expected to support active involvement from stakeholders in the evaluation (Conner, 2005). Special attention is often directed to those who lack power to get their problems and questions observed in the



evaluation. Here, evaluation is not reduced only to a technical matter, but also includes attention to the democratization of the evaluation process, thereby potentially contributing to a larger democratization of the program and its context.

The democratization occurs in the central components in the evaluation process. These components include deciding on the aims for the evaluation (control, development, enlightenment, learning, etc.), determining the resources for the evaluation (economic, social, and political), and selecting the evaluation questions and methods. Politics, values, and power are also apparent in decisions about access to information and where in the organization the evaluation is centered, as well as whether an internal or external evaluation is undertaken.

Some evaluation models can be connected to this view on evaluation and politics. One of the first researchers to formulate a demand for democratic evaluation was MacDonald (1973, 1977). In his version of democratic evaluation, the starting point is the assumption that power is distributed among interest groups and that the evaluator ought to serve the public's right to know. One of the recent contributions to the field of democratic evaluation is House & Howe's (2000) deliberative democratic approach. In their view, evaluation process must be based on the full and fair inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and represent the views of socially disadvantaged groups. Therefore, House & Howe are keen to emphasize that the evaluator has a special responsibility to those stakeholders who might not normally be "heard" (because they are relatively powerless, invisible, unorganized, or for some other reason not likely to be included). To serve the interests of socially disadvantaged groups, the evaluator has to give them a voice in the evaluation.

At the same time, House & Howe reserve the right of the evaluator to make the final pronouncement of the merit, worth, or value of the program under consideration. The idea of procedural justice – central to a theory of deliberative democracy – demands that all voices have had a fair hearing and are involved in deliberation. However, this does not mean

that the evaluator necessarily takes the side of these less powerful voices. Advocating for the inclusion of those less heard from is not the same as endorsing their interests or points of view. Others, who also urge the evaluator to involve interest groups in an evaluation, designate the evaluator's role as that of consultant for these interest groups (Fetterman, 1994; Patton, 1994, 1996). In this situation, the evaluator becomes a "facilitator" and throughout the evaluation adopts a neutral position with respect to the interests of different groups as they strive to empower themselves as individuals and as a group.

There are several other models of participatory and collaborative evaluations that have strong emphasis on the aim to democratize not only the program context but also society as a whole. Cousins & Whitmore (1998) distinguish between practical and transformative evaluations. Practical participatory evaluation focuses on participation in evaluation. The evaluator assumes responsibility for carrying out technical evaluation tasks, and stakeholders are involved predominantly in the definition of the evaluation problem, scope-setting activities, and, later, the interpretation of data emerging from the study. In transformative participatory evaluation, the aim has expanded. Here, one strives for more extensive engagement of stakeholders, for radical social change, and for clarifying values that inevitably shape evaluations.

### Third position – the Value-Critical Evaluator

In comparison with the first and second positions on evaluation and politics, the third position does not see politics stopping at the private sphere but instead views politics as something integrated in our everyday life. Because of this, there can be no separation between evaluation and politics and therefore no neutral value or operational position taken by the evaluator. The position is associated with a perspective which claims not only that human values are inseparable from descriptions of facts but also that science will benefit from admitting this. With reference to Taylor (1985), Geir (2004, p. 197) says that:

... values are an intrinsic part of the interpretive process in two ways, individual and common. The interpreter chooses a theoretical framework or conceptual structure in which she understands the phenomenon in question. These frameworks are pre-models of understanding, initially opening some possible connection and closing others. (p. 197).

In this view, it is important for evaluators to formulate a theoretical framework for a broader understanding of the program or subject that is evaluated. Evaluation approaches that could be connected with this kind of ideas are characterized to be:

intentionally and directly engage[d] with the politics and values of an evaluation context, in order to explicitly advance particular political interests and values, and often also, to effect some kind of socio-political change in the evaluation context itself. Examples of value-engaged evaluative stances include feminist, empowerment, and democratizing approaches to evaluation. Proponents of these approaches are characteristically informed by ideologically-oriented methodological traditions such as feminism and critical theory. (Greene, 2003)

It is important to note that the borderline between this third position and the “democratic and participatory” variant of the second position is by no means clear-cut. Among those who argue for the desirability of separating some parts of evaluation and politics, as those in the second position do, are evaluators who also embrace the value-laden quality of human action and thus also of knowledge about human action. What differs between the second and third positions is the relative importance given to the values of social change and transformation.

#### *A Broad View on Politics and Evaluation*

From the third position, politics is not viewed as something negative. It is conceptualized in considerably broader terms than only a question of asserting one’s own interests and exercising power. Politics is defined as an activity through which we live together and regulate or adapt our goals and efforts. It is also

conceptualized as critical reflections on the public good. The basic idea is that it is via citizenship – through people deciding together how they will act and then following through with it – that an individual can achieve his or her full potential. Politics is concerned with taking a stance, being touched and engaged by something, defining right and wrong, good and evil, and acting on one’s convictions. With these viewpoints politics is inherently human, with roots in morals and values (Schuman, 1977).

With morals and values brought into the picture, a number of new critical questions arise concerning who conducts evaluation and for whom, which evaluative questions will be raised, and what judgment criteria will be employed. The stand the evaluator takes on these questions determines the judgment he or she presents. This kind of idea plays a central role in the understanding of how the relations between evaluation and politics are conceptualized. Politics like citizen activity requires both an intellectual and physical arena, a public forum in which people can come together and plan for action. The space provided in voting halls is insufficient; politics requires involvement between elections. One alternative is to go to the streets and demonstrate; others are public enterprises where people meet, for example in pre-schools, schools, and in associations where one has an active interest. Another example of an arena for citizen involvement is evaluation conducted openly with the participation of various interested parties.

Dahler-Larsen (2003) is an evaluation researcher who places the question of evaluation politics on this broader societal level or “res publica.” He views evaluation as a creative force in our understanding of society. He looks at evaluation as a cooperative and structuring force in our understanding of society. Evaluation is defined as a practice that describes other practices and that forms our impressions of these by naming the efforts, goals, criteria, standards, and the like. In this way, evaluation gives prior interpretation of the public efforts and the values that comprise them. Based on Beck’s (1994) term, Dahler-Larsen notes that we live in a “reflexive

modernity” where confidence in progress decreases in concert with the increasing time spent grappling with the problems that these create. According to Beck, the security that has until now been associated with the modern projects” progress has been weakened in the new “reflexive modernity.” Instead, “reflexivity” reigns in a double sense. First, the reflexivity is a throwing-back of side effects onto society itself (environmental problems, highway congestion, coordination problems, iatrogenic illnesses, etc.). Second, the reflexivity is an increased moral, ethical, and political concern for the handling of these side effects. One such “side-effect” is reactions to public policies from users and other stakeholders.

These changes in how one looks at the ontological and epistemological foundations for evaluation, and on society in the perspective of new reflexive modernity, have also changed the political framework for evaluation. Society is not the only thing that has become more complex. Evaluations have been given many different functions as well. These functions include some traditional ones, such as the use of evaluation as an instrument for national and local governments to exercise control and as an instrument for society and citizens to receive information and knowledge. A newer function for evaluation includes its use as an instrument for interested parties and organizations to observe and influence.

Evaluation, however, does not simply disseminate results; it also provides a deeper, better understanding of the evaluated object.

Through linguistic designations of “the evaluator”, “the points of measurement”, “criteria”, “standards”, evaluation discourse draws attention to certain phenomena and orientations. Hereby evaluation is an interpretation of what the public effort is altogether and in wherein its value consists. (Dahler-Larsen, 2003)

From this point of view, evaluation informs about the merits and value of a program but also has a broader perspective. This type of evaluation informs about a larger framework, with reference to roles and relations. Evaluations become a meta-communication about the character of people and their relations, which in turn are an arrangement of politics in its deep

meaning. This does not mean that evaluations always have this impact on our conceptions of the world and ourselves. How strong the impact is depends on a number of contextual factors such as organization, culture, and structure.

## Summary

In our discussion of the subject of evaluation and politics, we have assumed that evaluation is not an isolated island but instead an enterprise in a political context. This context means that there are multiple actors and institutions with power and interests to influence the evaluation, from the choices of criteria, standards, and methods, to the choice of an evaluator.

We have described three views on the relationship between evaluation and politics. The first position sees politics as driven to protect its own interests and as harmful to evaluation. In this view, politics is at best a fickle partner, driven by many influences other than information, and at worst an unsavory one. Evaluation can and should be kept apart from it. If an evaluator has to deal with politics, the evaluator must be careful not to be too engaged and not to scrutinize the political influences to decide how to behave. Instead, the evaluator uses professional standards and guidelines to produce objective information, so that if and when the possibility to use it arises, the information is available.

In the second view, in one interpretation, politics is replaced by the idea of the market with rational consumers making choice based on evidence. Here, the political is paradoxically transformed into an outwardly apolitical phenomenon – a style of formalized accountability that becomes the new ethical and political principle of governance (Power, 1997). The role of evaluation in this view is to provide professional technical help to measure quality and to produce quality-assurance. A different interpretation of the second position is to acknowledge the inseparable connections between evaluation and politics in the area of value- or judgment-making and therefore to democratize the evaluation process at critical stages (for example, deciding on the evaluation

questions), with special attention to those whose voice may not be easily heard in the public arena. At the same time, however, evaluation is kept separate from politics in the implementation of the evaluation, to avoid biases in the information produced.

The third position views evaluation and politics as inseparable, both in the conceptual as operational aspects. Here, the evaluator accepts that evaluation and politics are connected in many intricate ways and acts accordingly. The evaluator acknowledges and states his or her own ethical and moral standpoints so that these are transparent during the evaluation process. Actions such as these suggest a more prominent role for evaluation and evaluators in shaping society and its politics.

### Discussion and Implications

Each of the three positions (and sub-positions) can be criticized on different aspects. One could question the claims held in the first position that evaluation can be independent from external power. Those who criticize the idea of evaluation's autonomy from external power believe that evaluation easily can become a part of, and work for, the ideological state apparatus in society. Another criticism of the first position focuses on the idea that evaluation is a value-free practice of objective research. Social science has prided itself on being value-free for many decades. However, Scriven (2003/04) notes that this view of social science research is changing as social science becomes more involved with serious social problems, interventions, and issues. To be successful in this new arena, social science will have to incorporate evaluation or evaluative elements, he says. A final criticism of the first position is that it is difficult to separate the judgment-making component of evaluation from politics, both on an individual level and on a societal level. Hammersley (1995) presents several arguments why values cannot be insulated from research. According to one of his arguments, because information and knowledge is always produced within a perspective or framework, the knowledge that one

prioritizes is also dependent on circumstances in the socio-political context. Another of his arguments focuses on how the researcher's or evaluator's own personal and positional realities (ethnic, gender, economic, and the like) play an important role in shaping priorities and interests that can affect an evaluation.

Criticism could also be directed at the second position, with evaluation and politics related conceptually in judgment-making but separated in information-making. The market-oriented variant of this position expects that central values will be based on the needs of the market and expressed by the multiple actors representing different interests. However, only a subset of actors are effectively involved, and the particular subset will shape the normative content of an evaluation, determining the boundaries of the "knowledge base, the scope, and potentially the outcomes of evaluation" (Dabinett & Richardson, 1999, p. 233). The indicators-based performance management focus that is central in the market-oriented perspective also carries risks. Four of these risks are that indicators may not measure what they are intended to; that unwarranted attributions of causality for outcomes may be made to indicators; that performance information may be used for purposes for which it was not intended; and that goal displacement may occur if incentives divert effort from attaining program objectives to meeting the requirements of measuring and reporting (Davies, 1999). Performance measurement systems also decouple accountability from ownership and responsibility, thus assigning to accountability a role in regulation and control and inhibiting shared responsibility among stakeholder-citizens. They "also let the evaluator off the hook, by heavily obscuring their authorship and thereby muting their responsibility" (Greene, 1999, p. 170).

Some criticize the other variant of the second position, focused on democratic approaches to evaluation, because it tends to be connected to the macro politics of society, in that evaluation is expressly positioned as an instrument of democracy and as an advocate for democratic ideals and for change. The explicit ideological stance and political



positioning are democratic and the express point of evaluation in these approaches is to render an assessment and judgment of evaluation quality that inherently incorporates democratic standards of judgment and thus serves to advance democratic ideals and values. Above, we mentioned several evaluation researchers that represent these ideas. One more example on this is Mark, Henry, & Julnes (2000) who clearly put evaluation in a political discourse of democratic decision-making and also reject the fact-value dichotomy. At the same time, Greene and Walker (2001) notes that these authors have:

... positioned evaluators and the knowledge they generate apart from the politicized fray of democratic decision-making. From this position, evaluators can use a mix of methods within selected inquiry modes to impartially make sense of the quality of, and the diverse values that accompany, a given social program or policy and then offer that assisted sense-making to those in democratic institutions for their deliberations (p. 371).

Against this position, Greene & Walker argue for an alternative view that:

does not separate the practice of evaluation from socio-political practices and institutions to which it is designed to contribute or in which it is embedded .... Evaluators should not be absolved from the moral and ethical responsibility for the practice choices we make and the knowledge claims we generate. If we wish to claim that a particular social program or policy can indeed contribute to social betterment, we must be responsible for that claim—both as a warranted representation of human experience and as a defensible valuing of what is “good” and “right” about that experience (Greene & Walker, 2001, p. 371).

What Greene & Walker criticize is the idea of a detached “professional” evaluator that is central in the concept of evaluation and politics held by those working in the democratic variant of the second position. Those working from this perspective also need to address and resolve the problem of identifying and securing comprehensive, representative stakeholder involvement. Furthermore, one could ask how

the representatives of groups, sectors, or interests are to be chosen, and how the differences in power among stakeholder groups influence their roles in the evaluation. These questions highlight the dilemma facing the evaluator when he/she tries to strengthen powerless stakeholders. One could also ask about the value position that motivates such a decision, and about the influence such an “empower-the-powerless” standpoint is likely to have on confidence in the evaluation among other more traditional, empowered groups (Karlsson, 1996, 2001).

Finally, the third position, that evaluation and politics are inseparable in all ways, has some limitations and raises some questions, as is the case with the other two positions. The ethical and moral standpoint that demands a better world, a more equal society and a fight against any discrimination leaves no private zone where less-than-enthusiastic support for these ideas can be hidden. Here, the evaluator cannot, so to say, hide behind a professional role if one chooses not to take a stand on these issues. One could ask if this broad and expanded role for evaluation makes the evaluator more of an intellectual discussant on general political, ethical, and moral issues, and less of a professional narrowly examining a program in accordance with more specific goals and chosen criteria. Are evaluators trained and skilled to play such a broad, prominent role in societal discussions, and, even if they are, can they reasonably and responsibly fulfill such a broad role? In this more prominent role, what assurances are there that the reasons for the evaluator’s value stance are transparent? How can we know, for example, the extent to which an evaluator’s views are motivated by his/her general personal values rather than by specific factors related to the evaluation? Also, are there safeguards in place that will allow the evaluator to share his/her viewpoints without silencing the views of others who could participate, including those who are often voiceless in the political process? Rather than being the spokesperson for others’ views, maybe the evaluator should work to let them speak for themselves.

An interpretation of evaluation from this broad moral perspective could be that all who work with people in different situations, especially when one has power over others” live, health, education, or security, have the responsibility to reflect actively and systematically about one’s own behavior and to be self-critical. Here, we can talk about an “evaluator role” that is integrated in every responsible profession, including physicians, teachers, social workers, lawyers, and others. This view raises the question of whether there is space for a profession that exclusively deals with evaluation, not as an alternative but as a complement to all other professionals and to their own evaluations and critical reflections on what they are doing.

### Implications

One of the things we can learn from our review of the relationship between evaluation and politics is how the relationship between the two is much more complex and difficult to grasp than thought in earlier decades (the 1970s, 1980s and 90s). Today, we must take a more nuanced view of the evaluator, not simply considering him or her to be a neutral, independent, objective methodologist who presents facts. That older, traditional image can be contrasted with an image from the other extreme that places evaluators (and evaluations) in a political powder keg where various interests and values meet and clash. The better image, we believe, is probably one in the middle of this spectrum: a professional, skilled, well-trained evaluator working in a context with explicit or implicit political, cultural, and personal implications, all of which can potentially exert some influence in the decisions about evaluation questions, methods, and results. It is clear that, for better or worse, evaluation and politics are partners. The decisions an evaluator makes are affected not only by issues of science but also by politics and ethics.

What can evaluators do to maximize the benefits of the link between evaluation and politics and minimize its risks? One piece of advice is for the evaluator to watch for the diverse supports and unexpected opportunities

that exist in a large, complex context. Another suggestion is that the evaluator be clear about the special skills and perspectives or “added value” that he or she brings to the situation, in relation to the other participants. These are the anchors around which the evaluator should build. Another suggestion is to have a supportive base in the evaluation profession, an evaluation network or some other professional group. This provides another type of anchor and perspective, when pressures build that the evaluator is not fully in control of. Although these suggestions mostly focus on the individual evaluator, we also think that there is a need to scrutinize more critically what purpose evaluations can serve. In the wake of increasing uncertainty about how public enterprises can be steered, controlled, and developed through democratic decisions, expectations increase about evaluations” ability to solve these steering problems. This has led to evaluation enterprises being viewed as a self-evident requirement at all levels of society. Management and personnel are expected to spend more time finding out about how their efforts are perceived by users and other people who are affected. As a consequence of these increased evaluation efforts, there has been an expansion of administrative systems to handle the information that comes in, which in turn requires more resources. We would argue for an alternative to this expansion of evaluation into a large bureaucratic system, in favor of a shift toward more reflective, critical-focused evaluation as part of every practitioner’s work toward a democratic, humanistic ideal that gives marginalized groups a voice.

### Note

1 From a logical standpoint, there is a fourth position: that it is not possible to separate evaluation and politics (either the information or the judgment aspects), but that it would be desirable to do so (in both aspects). Because this is not a realistic possibility to guide evaluation work, we have not considered it here. There are some, however, who might argue that serious consideration should be given to this position, because, if it can be shown to be highly desirable, the evaluation community might begin to set in place policies and procedures to bring

about the separation. The latter assumes, of course, that the "evaluation community" could and would speak with one voice on this matter. As the three positions described here show, this is unlikely to occur.

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