The citizen must be the foundation of any industrial policy – even a free market one

By Sarah Guillou

The purpose of industrial policy is to direct productive specialization towards sectors that are deemed strategic for well-being or economic growth. This means recognizing that productive specialization is important for growth. But what criteria should be used to determine the importance of a given sector? The argument developed here is that there are no sound criteria that do not refer to the collective preferences of present and future citizens.

There are a limited number of theoretical principles for justifying an industrial policy and demonstrating its effectiveness. From the defence of nascent industries (List, 1841) to support for basic industries that generate externalities for growth, the theoretical arguments set out very limited conditions for the exercise of policy. The international legal framework is also very stringent, especially for European Union countries whose authorities are concerned primarily with creating a level playing field for all EU companies and keeping control over payments by the State.

The limited space for industrial policy

In this limited space, the exercise of industrial policy has struggled to find reasons to exist. Even though a movement of "normalization", dear to Dani Rodrik, currently seems to be affecting the study of industrial policy (see Aghion et al., 2011), it is still not part of "normal" policy in the same way

as monetary, fiscal, or trade policy, for example. Industrial policy is exceptional policy resulting from exceptional circumstances. It is in the definition of this term “exceptional”, of its nature and its temporality, that industrial policy derives its legitimacy. Even recently, exceptional circumstances, both political and economic, have served as strong grounds for industrial policy, whereas they actually conceal policies to promote employment and satisfy electoral objectives. Illustrations of this include businesses set up to rescue factories, from Lejaby lingerie units to SeaFrance, as well as announcements of regulations on plant closures when a buyer exists. Even though these interventions have the benefit of reducing information asymmetries between the players by offering mediation that is often useful, they are not really part of industrial policy.

The only “authorized” industrial policy today that is consistent with the institutional and legal framework of Europe and America is one that meets the conditions inherited from liberal doctrine on state intervention in the functioning of the economy. One may wish that the rules on intervention were re-defined – which by the way, would bring a little more transparency into state practices – but the ambition of this note is both more modest and broader. This note aims to show that, even within the minimalist framework of the free market approach, industrial policy must be defined in accordance with a social project that engages the productive specialization of the economy.

As a general principle, liberal doctrine considers competition to be the most efficient process for allocating resources. In other words, competition is the best system for maximizing wealth creation. Indeed, it is supposed to foster emulation between the players and motivate them to increase their productivity and performance; to allow the eviction of inefficient activities that waste poorly exploited resources; and, finally, to ensure equality and freedom among the players

with respect to market entry, and thus the free exercise of economic activity. Liberal economic theory thus envisages only very specific situations for the exercise of industrial policy.

In this framework, state intervention is justified (i) to restore competitive conditions concerning transparency of information; (ii) to support investment in activities that generate positive externalities, such as R&D, or conversely to discourage activities that generate negative externalities, such as pollution, and (iii) to support activities that are considered strategic. Note that these are precisely the three justifications that underpin the European Union's policy on industry and competition. It should be noted above all that while the last two reasons do indeed call for an industrial policy, they demand a higher principle of a political nature that invokes the collective preferences of present and future generations.

Encouraging the externalities that arise from R&D spending does not of course necessarily reflect a political choice. Indeed, the underlying economic logic might be sufficient: the externalities from R&D include a boost in productivity induced by the diffusion of knowledge, which benefits society as a whole. This increased productivity provides additional growth that fuels the creation of jobs and wealth. It is indeed this economic dynamic that is emphasized by the European authorities, including the European Commission (see Buch-Hansen and Wigger, 2010; EC, 2011), just as it underpins American policy on subsidies for R&D (Ketels, 2007). The policy decision to support R&D and more generally investment in human capital can thus be based simply on economic logic.

Any policy that is intended to guide specialization involves society's future

Nevertheless, this logic is not enough: once we have accepted that investment in R&D is needed, then it is necessary to

decide how to ensure that public resources, which are scarce and whose opportunity cost is rising as debt mounts, are invested in the wisest way. The definition of industrial policy must be based on a set of political (and legal) guidelines that are precise enough to lead business to invest in technology whose returns are inherently uncertain. For example, companies do not spontaneously tend to invest in clean technologies. Incentives need to be created that induce them to adopt sustainable development pathways, as is shown by the results of Acemoglu et al. (2011).

In general, any policy that aims to guide specialization involves the future of society: directing the production process towards sustainable development and environmental protection is a decision that will ensure the sustainability of resources, the quality of life and technological innovation. Directing capital towards strategic technologies, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology or space, is a necessity in light of the heavy investments – the fixed costs – that are associated with their development, given that mastering these technologies is essential to society's future well-being. Finally, investing in human capital, a prerequisite to any policy to support R&D, is a way not only to improve people's living standards and quality of life and to qualitatively strengthen their ability to adapt to technological change, but also to ensure the strength and sustainability of democracy (Glaeser et al., 2007).

A commitment to a policy of support for investment in research and education is of course widely shared by political leaders, as it is a general feature of a progressive vision of society, or, in short, a certain vision of social welfare. And a package of measures to meet the objectives of a policy to support R&D in France does clearly exist: the research tax credit for the country's "competitive clusters"; in this respect, France is often seen as a driving force in terms of its industrial policies. But the purpose evoked to justify

these measures is to ensure competitiveness, and not specifically economic growth *per se*.

Nevertheless, the selection of promising technologies and investment in the specializations of the future demands that politics takes precedence, as it must take a stand on the technological future of society, including in matters of protection, security, health and the environment. Ultimately, even a free market industrial policy assumes political choices that correspond to a vision of society. And it is in the name of this social vision that the expenditure associated with industrial policy can be justified. The justifications related to the economic mechanisms set the constraints, but policy choices must set the goals. The expression of collective preferences during the forthcoming electoral processes requires that the technological implications of policy proposals be expressed as clearly as possible.

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