



Mobilizing policy: Models, methods, and mutations

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ABSTRACT

Introducing the special issue on “Mobilizing policy,” the paper contrasts orthodox approaches to policy transfer with an emerging body of work in the interdisciplinary field critical policy studies. The governing metaphors in this latter body of work are those of mobility and mutation (rather than transfer, transit, and transaction), policymaking dynamics being conceived in terms of reproduction across and between sites of innovation/emulation (rather than interjurisdictional replication). Distinctive contributions of the following collection of papers are highlighted in the context of an emergent “policy mobilities” approach.

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1. From policy transfer to policy mobilities

This collection of papers is connected by a concern to rethink “policy” in the context of the rise of reflexive governance, the accelerating transnationalization of policy norms and practices, and the increased mobility of policy techniques and policy “makers.” Policies, it seems, are on the move, and new forms of policy-making and mobility are drawing attention from across the critical social sciences, including a new round of diffusion studies (Levi-Faur, 2005; Weyland, 2006; Simmons et al., 2008); analyses of migrating neoliberal governmentalities (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Ong, 2006; Ferguson, 2009); explorations of emergent forms of (internationalizing) expertise (Babb, 2001; Mitchell, 2002; Goldman, 2005); and investigations of transnational forms of statecraft and regulatory restructuring (Jayasuriya, 2006; Plehwe et al., 2006; Prasad, 2006). These and other interventions have also been extending the methodological registers of policy analysis. No longer confined to internalist and/or positivist evaluations of state(d) aims and objectives, these now embrace critical genealogies of policy discourses; the tracking of policy networks, norms, and actors; (global) ethnographies of state, parastate, and nonstate policymaking processes; and various forms of transnational, cross-scalar and relational comparativism.

If this represents a new generation of critical policy studies, it is hardly a singular endeavor; indeed, it exhibits a vibrant heterogeneity. Something of a break is nevertheless evident with the more orthodox literature on policy transfer and learning (see Walker, 1969; Rose, 1993; Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Conventional political-science understandings of “policy transfer” typically posit the

existence of a relatively unstructured policy market within which producer-innovators and consumer-emulators engage in freely-chosen transactions, adopting policy products that maximize reform goals. In this rational-actor environment, policy transfers are stylized as a distinctively conspicuous category of boundary-crossing practice, the occurrence of which is (implicitly or explicitly) traced to superior performance in exporting jurisdictions. Border-crossing policies are therefore, in effect, success stories, and as such (rationally) become objects of emulation and learning. The orthodox literature is predominantly concerned with *ex post facto* evaluations of “successful” transfers, often in situations of observed or alleged convergence, which are typically judged according to surface similarities in policy designs, scripts, and rationales. And there is a concern to distill the essential characteristics of transferred policies (their “secrets of success”), together with the learning-and-consuming behaviors of those who enter the market for such policies.

Rational-choice presumptions in this orthodox literature imply that policymakers are maximizers (or at least boundedly rational in their behavior) and that there is a tendency for good policies to drive out bad, in a process of optimizing diffusion. In contrast, the new generation of critical policy studies is more inclined to adopt sociological, anthropological or institutional frames of analysis. Again, this is not a singular project, but there are some recurring features and inclinations. Here, we highlight just a few, which in various ways are reflected in the collection of papers that follow. First, policy formation and transformation are seen as a (socially) constructed processes, as fields of power. Policy transfer is not reduced to a more-or-less efficient process for transmitting best (or better) practices, but is visualized as a field of adaptive connections, deeply structured by enduring power relations and shifting ideological alignments. There is, in other words, an intrinsic politics to the policy transfer process, which is rarely, if ever, just about

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transferring policy knowledge and technology from A to B. Policy mobility also entails the establishment of (sometimes dialogic) connections between policy actors and policymaking sites; it will often be associated with the anointment of favored “models” (for example, microcredit schemes or creative city policies), entailing the enrolment of advocates and followers, the construction of pro-policy “movements,” and the consolidation of norms and paradigms. Second, policy actors are not conceptualized as lone learners, but as embodied members of epistemic, expert, and practice communities. They are sociologically complex actors, located in (shifting) organizational and political fields, whose identities and professional trajectories are often bound up with the policy positions and fixes that they espouse. And rarely do they act alone. Instead, they operate in fields of practice that are heavily intermediated, not least by a range of interests in the policy transfer “business,” such as consultants, advocates, evaluators, gurus, and critics.

Third, mobile policies rarely travel as complete “packages,” they move in bits and pieces—as selective discourses, inchoate ideas, and synthesized models—and they therefore “arrive” not as replicas but as policies already-in-transformation. The constant process of “making up” policies, the work of policymaking, is itself undergoing change in this environment of increased mobility, as new policies are developed in a comparative frame (with an increased level of consciousness about alternative and complementary policies, deployed elsewhere), as policy peddlers and gurus ply their trade on the international conference circuit, as expertise is insourced from think tanks and consultancies, and so on. Fourth, the resulting dynamic in the policymaking process is not one of simple emulation and linear *replication* across policymaking sites, but a more complex process of nonlinear *reproduction*. Policies will therefore mutate and morph during their journeys. And fifth, the spatiality of policymaking is not flattened into some almost-featureless and inert plane or transaction space, marked only with jurisdictional boundaries, across which transfers occur, but in terms of a three-dimensional mosaic of increasingly reflexive forms of governance, shaped by multi-directional forms of cross-scalar and interlocal policy mobility. In this context, policies are not simply transiting intact between jurisdictions, but evolve through mobility, while at the same time (re)making relational connections between policymaking sites. It follows that there is no expectation of global convergence: high rates of policy mobility are not a prelude to one-best-way unification, or some sort of policy monopoly; *new forms* of uneven spatial development, and new localizations, are constantly being produced under such conditions.

In contrast with the orthodox literature on policy transfer, the governing metaphors in critical policy studies are not those of transit and transaction, but of mobility and mutation. Policies are not seen to be neatly parceled for their journeys, merely traveling from jurisdiction A, the site of innovation and policy production, to jurisdictions B...E, the spaces of emulation and consumption. Instead, the mobilization of policies is understood to entail the reconstitution of fields of power, as the movement of ideas and techniques remakes the *relations* between jurisdictions A...E, breaching the borders between these policymaking sites, constructing symbiotic networks and circulatory systems across and between them, enabling cosmopolitan communities of practice and validating expert knowledges. Mobile policies, then, are not simply traveling across a landscape—they are remaking this landscape, and they are contributing to the interpenetration of distant policymaking sites. In this sense, fields of policy mobility are themselves socially and institutionally constructed. In what follows we put some flesh on the bones of this emergent, “policy mobilities” approach, commenting on the role and salience of policy models; on the methodological approaches that are being tailored around policies in motion; and on the spatio-temporary character of policy mutation.

2. Making models

Which policies rise to the status of “models,” or objects of emulation? Do they simply rise to the top in some competitive marketplace for policies, or are they, instead, creatures of dominant interests, traveling from centers of authority along politically constructed and ideologically lubricated channels? Robertson’s exploration of this question suggests the latter, patterns of policy borrowing tending to follow (prior) ideological alignments (Robertson, 1991; Robertson and Waltman, 1993). More generally, it would seem that policy models that affirm and extend dominant paradigms, and which consolidate powerful interests, are more likely to travel with the following wind of hegemonic compatibility or imprimatur status. As Muniesa and Callon (2007, p. 167) have argued in the context of prevailing forms of (market-oriented) economic policy, mobile models are not simply “observed at a distance but are produced inside the experimental setting [and] formed and deformed in order to put forward some particular economic traits” that in turn are externally projected as widely generalizable, if not wholly immutable and universal. While policy models seek to stabilize and validate an explicit set of rules, techniques, and behaviors, that when applied in “foreign” settings might be expected to yield comparable results, this rational gaze is persistently disrupted by the messy realities of policymaking at the “ground” level. The socioeconomic outcomes of policies remain, to varying degrees, products of local politico-institutional contexts. Paradoxically, however, the principal appeal of policy innovations qua policy models remains the expectation of comparable results, despite obvious differences in institutional arrangements and political alignments between the places of policy innovation and the zones of policy emulation.

Consequently, and notwithstanding the performative power of policy models, it does not necessarily follow that territorial policy regimes—such as those organized around national, provincial or local states—are converging towards homogeneity, into borderless governance, or a globalized space of (policy) flows. As McCann and Ward (2010) argue in their contribution to this special issue, there is a persistent tension between fixity and motion in policy regimes. It is something of a truism that policy development and delivery are characteristically grounded processes, and the impact of policies is likewise contextually specific. In this sense, “all policies are local.” So, the much-vaunted “Barcelona model” of urban regeneration, McCann and Ward (2010) observe, is in its original form very much a product of its Catalan context, and in this sense could never be duplicated; yet, at the same time, stylized versions of the Barcelona model possesses a certain kind of representational power, operating as a subtly transformative policy imaginary, in urban-policy networks, in peripatetic practice, and across distant sites of inspiration if not emulation.

Policy models, in this sense, can take on lives of their own, often with little more than symbolic connection to their (supposed) places of origin. The idealized urban-sustainability motif of *Vancouverism*, for example, has its echoes around the world, from Shanghai to Dubai, despite the fact that it may never have existed in Vancouver itself (cf. Berelowitz, 2005; Boddy, 2005). Even if policy models, in practice, are one-sided representations or idealized abstractions of an invariably more prosaic reality, even if they are essentialized condensates of policy rationality that cannot be found anywhere in such a form and that can be replicated nowhere, their symbolic association with specific locations evokes a grounded form of authenticity, implies feasibility, and signals an ideologically palatable origin story. Hence the apparent paradox that as policy flows globalize, the metonymic tagging of policies to places (Barcelona model, *Vancouverism*, ...) seems to be assuming a greater significance, as one of the currencies of transnational

policy mobility. Models that (appear to) come from somewhere travel with the license of pragmatic credibility, and models that emanate from the “right” places invoke positive associations of (preferred forms of) best practice. Models, in this sense, do not simply designate place-specific processes of innovation or sites of creative invention, as the diffusionist paradigm might have it; they connote *networks* of policymaking sites, linked by overlapping ideological orientations, shared aspirations, and at least partly congruent political projects. Substantially, models perform “formatting” functions (cf. Mitchell, 2002), in that they effectively crystallize not only a preferred bundle of practices and conventions, they also stitch together particular readings of policy problems with putative solutions. Workfare models do this, for example, by positing a causal relationship between welfare dependency (itself signaled by a series of behavioral and social characteristics) and worklessness (or the absence of employability), yielding preferred responses in the form of work activation and enforcement measures (Peck, 2001).

A model can only become a model, needless to say, if it has followers, but it will not enroll followers unless it holds the promise of extra-local salience. Models that travel therefore reveal at least as much about “demand-side” needs, imperatives, and anxieties as they do about supply-side inventiveness. The reason why many models achieve mobility in the first place is that they have, in some way or another, been ideologically anointed or sanctioned. There is a pre-constituted market for lessons from Barcelona or Vancouver, locations that are consonant with prevailing policy fixes, but the other side of this coin is that the policy blogs are unlikely to be running hot, any time soon, with talk of the Havana model, *Kabulism*, or even lessons from Detroit.

This said, prevailing policy fixes and favored policy fads do come from somewhere; they are not handed down from on high. Increasingly, it seems that such policy norms are *co-produced* through concurrent processes of site-specific experimentation, purposeful intermediation, and emulative networking. The viral spread of creative city policies in the past decade, for example, has been predicated on an array of supportive conditions and enabling networks, including: stylized, but ground-truthed claims about the underlying causes of innovation-rich growth in cities like Austin, TX and San Francisco; Richard Florida’s brand of guru performativity; the easy manualization of creativity-city policy techniques by consultants and other policy intermediaries; and, not least, the competitive anxieties and fiscal constraints of cities around the world, which effectively constitute a ready market for low-cost, feel-good makeovers of business-as-usual forms of urban entrepreneurialism (Peck, 2009). McCann and Ward describe similar situations with respect to development paradigms like the new urbanism and privatized governance techniques like BIDS, many of which have been moving, in fact, in precisely the same circles as creative cities policies. Here, the social production of policy orthodoxies occurs through interurban networks rather than in a top-down fashion, as the favored strategies of nation states or multilateral agencies.

The discursive and material power of such national and international institutions, of course, has not faded away. Rather, its *form* has changed. Sheppard and Leitner’s (in press) analysis of the development of development thinking in this special issue, for example, makes the case that the shift from structural adjustment to decentralized governance amongst the “Washington consensus” agencies masks significant continuities in the locus of power and expertise. Global governance discourses, which effectively enframe and organize the evolving normative consensus, continue to bear the imprint of what Sheppard and Leitner call a “developmentalist socio-spatial imaginary,” which preemptively legitimizes first-world expertise and which combines a stageist teleology with an essentially neoliberal vision of competitive leveling. These global

development discourses are today less likely to be enforced by the blunt instruments of structural adjustment (though loan conditionalities and policy-based lending have hardly been abandoned). Increasingly, they travel in the form of favored models of development and socio-technical fixes, like microcredit programs, arrangements to regularize property ownership in informal settlements, and conditional cash transfer schemes (Rankin, 2001; Mitchell, 2009; Peck and Theodore, in press). These stylized schemes themselves may not, strictly speaking, always originate from organizations like the World Bank, but instead are selectively harvested from the fields of decentralized governance, refined into development models and (best) practices, and purposefully re-circulated through global networks. The quasi-academic trappings of the World Bank Institute, its intellectually colonizing “knowledge bank” strategies, and the widespread concern with “scaling up” favored projects can all be seen as manifestations of a certain kind of normative authority (see Fine, 2002; Wade, 2002; IBRD and World Bank, 2004; Goldman, 2005; Peet, 2007).

Hegemony, however, is an always-incomplete process. The powers of network-normativity and model-making may be formidable, but they are far from totalizing, since they are also marked by contradiction and contestation. Macdonald and Mahon (in press), in their contribution to this special issue, conceptualize anti-poverty movements in Toronto and Mexico City not only as spaces of resistance to neoliberal rule, but as sites for the production of alternative policy projects, visions, and strategies. Do such alt-models travel differently to those that (aspire to) reproduce dominant paradigms? This question, which may be an open one for now, calls attention to the transformative potential of (urban) contestation, raising the possibility that the new circuits of transnational policy development might be appropriated for progressive ends (see Leitner et al., 2007). As Ferguson (2009) has recently argued, the distended networks of neoliberal policy experimentation may in fact be prone to capture and retasking, sometimes in surprising ways. Again, policy control at a distance is an incomplete and contradictory process. There is potential for alt-models to circulate in these spaces too.

3. Developing methods

If processes of policy mobilization have indeed become increasingly transnational in reach and cross-scalar in constitution, if they are manifest in ever more complex relational combinations, then there is an inescapable need to confront new methodological challenges. Spatially demarcated forms of policy evaluation certainly will not do. New methodological strategies must be developed to expose and critically interrogate the interconnectedness of policy regimes between places and across scales; the relationships between experiments and models and their fields of (re)constitution; the flows of knowledge, expertise, technologies and cosmopolitan policy actors that connect and remake “local” sites of policymaking; the roles of policy intermediation and networking as the “connective tissue” of the policymaking process; and so forth. In different ways, all of the papers here confront these challenges—of coming to terms with the new ontologies, registers, and modalities of the policymaking process—and most do so by *following* processes, practices, discourses, technologies or networks, thereby *connecting* sites, scales, and subjects. As Larner and Laurie (2010) aptly put it, the concern is to explore how emergent geographies of policy are “made up,” how they are socially constructed and spatially constituted.

The deconstruction of policy discourses represents one of the more established methodological strategies for tackling these issues. Sheppard and Leitner (2010), for example, deploy this approach in their decoding of spatialized policy imaginaries

across a range of World Bank statements and documents, establishing connections with various currents of real-time economic theorizing. Many of these circuits of power-knowledge run through academic and policymaking institutions along the Bos-Wash corridor of the United States, but by no means are they confined to these privileged spaces. Not only is there a “constitutive outside” for these (global) elite formulations, they are often reciprocally constituted through distant nodes and sites, for example in Latin America and Eastern Europe (see also Babb, 2001; Bockman and Eyal, 2002); what Mirowski and Plehwe term the neoliberal “thought collective” has for decades been a networked, transnational project (Peck, 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). And the paper in this special issue on policy relays between Mexico and the United States exposes the sedimented layering of “expert isomorphism,” technocratic expertise, evaluation science, and “model knowledge,” which has cumulatively contributed to the shaping of policy norms between Mexico City, Washington, DC, and New York City (Peck and Theodore, 2010). The latest historical manifestations of these processes are “fast policy” circuits, for example between Mexican federal authorities and the Bloomberg administration in New York City, but these networks have been constructed on the basis of deep-seated historical connections between policy actors and institutions—such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank—that have for some time been intimately involved in the business of policy advice.

The analysis of emergent forms of “network consensus,” then, cannot remain at the level of programmatic announcements, official discourse, and expert interactions. This is a layered process involving heterogeneous groups of actors. Larner and Laurie (2010) make the case for extending the reach of these modes of analysis to include the embodiment of more “practical” policy knowledges and capabilities. Policy transformations such as privatization are clearly not realized declaratively or through administrative fiat; they are also embodied practices. “Functionaries” of various kinds play important, though often neglected, roles in realizing such projects—in ways that are far from functionally determined. Larner and Laurie (2010) call attention to the “messy geographies” of the policymaking process in this regard. There is a range of ways, in fact, in which practical programming knowledges and street-level expertise have assumed greater significance in policymaking processes, even across transnational domains (Larner and Laurie, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2010; Peck and Theodore, *in press*). First, multilateral agencies like the World Bank and OECD are paying increased attention to practitioner expertise, seeking to consolidate new orthodoxies, in part, by enabling new forms of networking among “middle managers.” Second, new arenas for policy exchange, such as blogs and international conferences, also place a premium on the circulation of legitimated forms of practice-knowledge, while the credibility of consultants and advocates often rests on (perceptions) of their mastery of implementation and management processes, not just grand designs and policy visions. Third, the ideological emphasis on “what works,” which has been a feature both of Third Way discourse and post-financial crisis pragmatism, can be seen as another way in which practical experience is symbolically privileged over more theoretical knowledge. And finally, a deepening reliance on technocratic forms of policy development and delivery is a widely observed feature of late-neoliberalism. While technocratic networks may resemble self-acting systems—or spontaneously adjusting regimes of auto-governance—they are also, of course, nonetheless socially produced.

The characteristically “low-flying” methods of neoFoucaulian ethnography are in many ways well suited to the challenges of studying embodied policy knowledges and mutating technologies of government. Larner and Laurie (2010) advocate the continued

“thickening” of these methodological approaches, in order to expose the three-dimensional, ethnographic complexity of policy-making processes, beneath the smooth surfaces invoked by policy statements, organizational structures, and the post-rationalizations of elites (see also Dunn, 2007). Flow methodologies, of the kind that stay close to policy subjects and expert actors, and which are attentive to the contingent functioning of policy routines and practices “on the ground,” can provide much-needed depth and multi-dimensionality to critical policy studies. They characteristically pay less attention, however, to macroinstitutional patterning, to scalar architectures, to broad-gauge regulatory variegation, and to the “context of context,” raising the question of how governmentality approaches and ethnographies of state practice might be reconciled with, or brought into conversation with, various forms of institutional political economy (see Fairbanks, 2009; Wacquant, 2009; Brenner et al., 2010).

Particularly useful, in these and other respects, can be those studies that break out of the single-site tradition to explore different forms of comparative analysis. In this special issue of *Geoforum*, McCann and Ward explore recent currents in what has been a long-standing, transatlantic policy dialogue, while Macdonald and Mahon present a novel form of cross-urban comparison that spans the analytical divide between the global North and South. Larner and Laurie trace networks of engineers out of Britain and New Zealand into Asia and elsewhere, while Peck and Theodore present a relational comparison of policymaking sites in New York and Mexico. Typical methods deployed in these research projects include in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, coupled with ethnographic observations. These are not necessarily, it should be said, the kind of multi-site ethnographies advocated by some, which in the tradeoff between *in situ* analysis and the tracing of connective flows or relations tends to favor the former (Marcus, 1998; Hannerz, 2003), though this would certainly be a promising avenue to explore (see Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Wedel et al., 2005). Adaptations of extended case methods and global ethnographies might also be anticipated, especially where these extend across translocal sites and scales (Burawoy et al., 2000; Burawoy, 2009). Potentially, these could be creatively organized so as to follow (or travel with) policymakers, intermediaries or models, to connect sites of experimentation and emulation, or to expose nodes and networks of resistance.

4. Mutations and open pathways

Every generation may be prone to the conceit that modern life is accelerating, but the last two decades of globalization talk seem to have elevated this to the level of an existential condition (Harvey, 1989; Pieterse, 2009). The claim that “policy time” is speeding up, along with intensifications in the inter-referentiality and interpenetration of policy regimes, cannot simply be accepted on face value, but must be subjected to empirical verification (see Simmons et al., 2008). In the field of welfare, policing, and urban policy, at least, there is evidence that prescriptive policy models are circulating with increased velocity, aided by new communications technologies and a growing cadre of cosmopolitan policy advocates (Wacquant, 1999; Peck, 2002; Mountz and Curran, 2009; McCann and Ward, 2010). With the growth of systematic forms of evaluation science, such as randomized trials, various forms of evidence-based policy have also proliferated, though the emulation of favored policies, it must be said, often runs ahead of the “evidence,” especially in cases where there is strong ideological alignment (Wolman, 1992; Schram, 1995; Theodore and Peck, 2000; Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2010).

There is still a running debate around whether such accelerated forms of policy mobility are driving global convergence, best-prac-

tice isomorphism, or races to the bottom/top. Contributors to this special issue tend to take the view that increasing policy mobility need not imply policy convergence, either in principle or in practice. More often than not, policies will mutate in the course of their travels from one jurisdiction to another (McCann and Ward, 2010), while nomadic policy entrepreneurs and peripatetic forms of expertise are likewise typically transformed by the journeys that they make (Larner and Laurie, 2010). Even the “same” policies tend to be associated with different effects in different places, by virtue of their embeddedness in, and interactions with, local economic, social, and institutional environments (Peck and Theodore, 2010).

Transnational agencies may attempt to “format” the world according to universal principles and imperial visions, but they are only ever incompletely (and unevenly) successful in these endeavors (Mitchell, 2002; Sheppard and Leitner, 2010). Similarly, the programmatic aspirations of neoliberal policymakers are, in practice, routinely frustrated, their fantasies of market convergence being confounded not only by serial policy failure but by their own implication in the reproduction of uneven socio-spatial development (Brenner et al., 2010). Once released into the wild, policies will often mutate and hybridize in surprising ways (Ong, 2006; Ferguson, 2009). In contrast to the policy transfer tradition, which invokes notions of rational diffusion and best-practice replication, critical approaches to policy mobility tend to explore open-ended and politicized processes of networking and mutation across shifting social landscapes. These may have followed a neoliberal patterning in recent years, though this too has been associated with an evolving, experimental policy repertoire, beset by contradictions, as opposed to some fixed blueprint. The analytical pursuit of mutating policies, in this context, need not be a fatalistic affirmation of hegemony; it can reveal the limits of neoliberalization as well as its logics. There is also a politics, then, to following mobile policies, to tracing their twists, turns, and localized effects. One really can never tell where they may lead.

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