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Developing a spatial social policy: taking stock and looking to the future.

John Clarke

Chapter for Adam Whitworth (ed.) *Bridging the gap between geography and social policy: Developing a spatial social policy.* Bristol University Press (2019).

This book brings about a long overdue, and much needed, encounter between social policy and geography. Now that it has finally arrived, we can see some of the possibilities and problems that might be at stake in developing the encounter into a more long-running dialogue. Here my aim is to reflect back on some of the issues and arguments that emerged in the preceding chapters and their implications for the study of social policy. Later, I try to pick out two or three themes that might add to the potential conversation between geography and social policy by thinking a little further about ways in which space, place and policy are entangled. The chapter is written from the perspective of an occasionally disaffected social policy scholar who had the good fortune to mix with geographers who taught him the benefits of ‘taking geography seriously’ (Massey and Allen, 1984).

One of the conditions underlying of my social policy disaffection is shared with many of the authors in this collection – and with the position that underpins it. The book is inspired by a deafening silence about place and space in social policy, characterised by the assumption that place is a self-evident and unquestioned terrain where policy and its practices happen. It is treated as a backdrop, location or passive context rather than an active force in the organisation of social life. Whether analysis is directed to the nation-state or the neighbourhood, social policy is shot through with geographical reference points that are rarely questioned. For me, the assumptions about the nation (and its accompanying state) have always been a stumbling block, with national borders taken for granted as the framework within which analysis could be conducted – or between which comparisons could be safely made. The presumption of what we might call spatial tidiness, that belief that there is a stable entity bounded by fixed borders, in which the people, the policy and culture form a coherent and harmonious whole, has dominated much of social policy – with unfortunate consequences.

It should have not taken the more recent troubles of different globalizations, the regional alignments (from the EU to ASEAN), the transnational flows of people, capital and ideas (including policies), nor even the varieties of emergent nation-making (from the former Yugoslav republic to the struggles over Catalan independence) to suggest that the nation is a contingent entity, shaped by complex internal and external relations. Even starting with the UK, we might have noticed some problems with the container model of space that underpins methodological nationalism – the uncomfortable coupling of different countries into one more or less united place; the different legal systems, the varying governmental arrangements, and the different identities, cultures and languages. All of these spoke to some issues about the internal coherence or unity of the ‘United’ Kingdom. At the same time, the long history of colonialism might have pointed to questions about borders and bordering – from the varieties of colonial rule and the economic surpluses they generated;

through differential decolonisations, the sifting of the white dominions from the non-white, and the subsequent layering of citizenship status and access. All of these phenomena interrupt the conception of the closed and bounded nation, its integral state and the associated conditions and practices of social welfare. We might have noticed such things but, in practice, social policy remained dominated by methodological nationalism (occasionally substituting a sort of methodological globalism). As a result, the encounter with geography and a dynamic understanding of the spatial is indeed long overdue – and welcome.

Making place matter

One of the most striking features of this collection is the discovery of the different geographies through which this encounter can be approached. Each chapter opens a different route to spatial thinking: from GIS to Foucault, or from the new localism to neuro-geography. They offer a rich array of resources through which to think about social policy geographically. Each of the chapters here illuminates one of those routes, indicating how taking geography seriously might sharpen our understanding not just of where, but how, policy works.

Chris Philo's argument for treating Foucault as an analyst of the spatial provides an unexpected and uplifting opening, adding a new persona to the many Foucaults who currently circulate in social analysis. The chapter does an impressive job of inviting us to think with Foucault about how power is spatialised and, indeed, how it has spatialising effects. As he notes, the chapter focuses on Foucault's earlier work, where the articulations of space, policy and power are embodied in "institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals" (Foucault, 1980b: 149). The organisation of power, policy and place shifts as this institutional architecture of disciplinary power gives way to, or perhaps more accurately is supplemented by, the threading of power and regulation through multiple social spaces *en route* to the self-surveillance of advanced liberal governmentality. The sites and settings of performance and scrutiny, of evaluation and judgement, multiplied as did the policy knowledges – especially what Nikolas Rose (1985) called the 'psychological complex' – that were put to work.

Thereafter, the 'capillary' workings of power reorganised social space in dramatic ways before the latest governmental turn, what Jessica Pykett heralds as the emergence of 'neurogeography'. Her chapter traces the changing sites, scales and connections being forged as the neurological becomes a privileged object of intervention. In the process, she draws out the ways in which neurogeography involves new scalar dynamics of policy and intervention – from the transnational circuits through which this new knowledge circulates to the molecular scale of intervention, which imagines the individual differently from the classic individualist conceptions of social policy, especially that rational, calculating subject beloved of liberal political and economic theory. However, both these chapters point to another issue for policy studies (not only social policy) – the danger of assuming that grand plans work as prescribed. Foucault is both an immensely productive resource and a slightly misleading guide. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, he instructs us that, while tracing the institutional architecture of 'disciplinary power', he had never been interested in the 'witches' brew' of practices that went on inside prisons (1991, pp. 81-82). But, for most

policies, there remain important questions about how (and even if) they work in practice. Tania Li, for example, has argued that it is precisely their limited effectivity that stimulates governmental innovation (Li 2007).

The issue of where and how one starts to think about policy and place is illuminated by the different strategy of Anna Minton's chapter on housing, locating the Grenfell Tower Fire of 2017 as a point of departure. The Grenfell Fire condenses a whole series of dynamics of public policy – about the place of social housing in a new housing 'market', in the management strategies of local government, in the regulatory practices of an 'anti-red tape' culture of government, and in the social devaluation of those occupying social housing. Housing is the focus of economic and political strategies for the organisation of social space and people's place within it. The rhetoric of choice has been accompanied by a deepening sense of powerlessness, the shrinking of social rights and deepening ontological insecurity. Minton argues that this confluence of dismal trends should be the condition for rethinking housing as an object of policy and as a focal point of how people understand and inhabit place.

The question of people's sense of place arises in a different way in Adam Whitworth's chapter on local activation services. His exploration of how dioramas can productively map people's sense, and use, of space highlights important issues about the shape and structuring of the local (a point to which I return later). In particular, he draws on Hägerstrand to emphasise the 'daily rhythms' that give a shape to everyday life. He makes dynamic use of David Harvey's three versions of space – absolute, relative and relational – to animate the discussion of the relationships between people, place and service provision. I confess that I find Harvey's conception of relational space thinner and less productive than Doreen Massey's relational view of space and place. I regularly go back to an interview she did with Andrew Stephens in which she expressed this nugget of relational thinking:

For me, places are articulations of 'natural' and social relations, relations that are not fully contained within the place itself. So, first, places are not closed or bounded - which, politically, lays the ground for critiques of exclusivity. Second, places are not 'given' - they are always in open-ended process. They are in that sense 'events'. Third, they and their identity will always be contested (we could almost talk about local-level struggles for hegemony). (Massey nd)

Later, I will come back to what this view does to questions of social, political and economic distance that bear on the making of the local: for example, how the distances between the 'central' and the 'local' aspects of the state; or where the decision-making powers that shape local employment possibilities are located. Reading Adam Whitworth's chapter, I was reminded about some of the strange ways in which policy makers and policy scholars use spatial concepts such as distance. I was once at a conference listening to a set of papers about employment activation policies and stumbled over the idea that services were graduated according to 'people's distance from the labour market'. So I asked a (sadly) naïve question about the significance of geography in policy and received a careful explanation that distance here referred to the individual's attitudinal and developmental 'distance' from the labour market. Sometimes, spatial metaphors are merely metaphorical,

but I thought it provided a striking example of how to legitimate the stratification of social assistance.

The local appears in other guises in the book, for example, in Richard Harris's chapter on spatialising social statistics. He offers a compelling critique of the sorts of a-spatial or spatially naive statistical methods that are commonplace within social policy. He argues that they treat geography as a 'nuisance' rather than as a constitutive feature of social life. Taking a typical policy problem, the causes of differential pupil attainment, he offers two alternative approaches – object and field – to taking place seriously as a formative influence on pupil outcomes. For me, his chapter also raised characteristic problems about how we think about the 'local' because in exploring the two approaches he engages with conceptual and methodological challenges about how we locate the local, how we identify its boundaries and how we think about proximate or 'neighbouring' places. Such discussions remind me of other contemporary debates about borders and bordering which engage with processual conceptions of how lines are drawn, who gets to draw them and with what consequences (e.g., Green, 2012; Kramsch, 2010; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007). So who gets to define the local and with what consequences? The question is posed in a different way in Martin Jones's chapter on the return or revival of 'localism' in policy making, which explores both geographical and policy debates about the nature of the local and makes a subtle argument for 'locality' as a focal point for critical policy analysis, one that should enable us to attend to the 'combined and uneven development' of policy impacts. The chapter makes a strong case for rescuing 'locality' from the previous conceptual disputes and tangles in which it became enmeshed in the 1980s and 1990s (and it is useful to be reminded of disciplinary histories in this way).

Scott Orford and Brian Webb explore the complex possibilities of GIS for considering the spatial dynamics of social policy. They are attentive to the ways in which the organisation of spaces for GIS purposes reflects older histories and purposes, while considering emerging approaches to mapping that are more open and enable a more relational understanding of places – and how they are imagined and inhabited. These emerging possibilities include participatory processes that enable user generated mappings and they are attentive to the ways in which GIS approaches may exclude or render invisible some categories of people (such as those who are homeless). They also cast an eye on the possibilities of 'Geodemographics' – an approach that is underpinned by the view that 'where you are says something about who you are' (Harris et al, 2005: 2). Like other demographic categorization approaches, this has problems of both categorization and generalization (see the interesting discussion of place and politics against categorization in McQuarrie, 2017). As recent arguments around the use of AI in policing policy have indicated, the value of such predictive approaches depends heavily on both the reliability and validity of the base data: if current crime and policing data is racially structured, then it will produce racially profiled approaches to policing (see Sharkey, 2018)

Finally, Jay Wiggan's examination of Social Investment Bonds explores a neglected set of spatial dynamics in what has become a much-feted approach to funding policy interventions. His discussion of the 'intensive financialisation' of welfare policy draws out the complex spatial restructuring of social policy that this device brings into play. Policies

directed at localised (and often profoundly immobilised) populations who thereby become the object of deterritorialised financial risk and reward, a process that connects (albeit not reciprocally) such local populations to global financial markets. This analysis intersects with other spatially dislocating dynamics of welfare policy and government, not least the uneven impacts of what Jamie Peck (2012) has called 'austerity urbanism'. As Sarah Phinney (2019) has recently argued in relation to Detroit, both the (projected) causes of austerity policies and their effects are profoundly racialised. Places and policies can form toxic combinations.

The analyses collected here also point to how questions of space are closely coupled to questions of scale in relation to social policy, ranging from the global to the neuromolecular. Scale is not exactly the same as space, even though scalar logics are often underpinned and reinforced by spatial imaginaries – the bounded nation, the intimate neighbourhood or even the household. Here, too, social policy makers and scholars have tended to take scales as simple facts, the levels at which policy is made, enacted and experienced. Even if it is sometimes necessary to attend to multi-level analysis, the levels are understood as pre-existing conditions. In her critique of such scalar conceptions, Doreen Massey notably described this logic as treating scales as 'a nested set of Russian dolls' (2004: 9). Instead, policy studies might benefit from an understanding of scales as relationally constituted, open to contestation and changing constructions that are geographically variable. As Jones reminds us, the local is not the same everywhere. In a recent book on education policy, Natalie Papanastasiou (2019) has explored how a 'politics of scale' both shapes – and is shaped by – education policies and practices, from inventing the 'European level' and its differences from national spaces to the new localism in education policy. Scale, in this sense, is critically important for studying policy because forms and sites of governing are typically, and common-sensically, thought of in scalar terms (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002).

The chapters collected here have made a substantial contribution to demonstrating both the necessity and the value of that encounter between social policy and geography. Even so, I want to sketch two further aspects of what might be at stake in putting policy in its place. The first concerns social policy; the second geography.

The problem of social policy

As a long-term inhabitant in the field of social policy, I live with many problems but here I want to focus on one in particular: its shape-shifting character. The mutability of social policy has two important implications for trying to construct conversations. The first is that social policy designates both an object of study (a sub-set of policies to be distinguished from economic, foreign or public policy) and a field of study (Social Policy, or what used to be Social Policy and Administration, as the study of social policies). This is a banal, but consequential, distinction: the doubling of the name demands some care about which social policy might benefit from a geographical encounter. Social policy as a more or less loosely bounded set of policies takes us to the business of governing. Here the problem of social policy demands that we think about the relationships between governing and the social. Do we accept a story of social progress and improvement, in which social policy contributes to and enhances the greater good? Or do we take a more sceptical view of social policy as a means of managing the social, through which divisions are reproduced, inequalities are secured and the reproduction of systems and hierarchies of power is maintained?

If we accept the former, then improving the quality of knowledge – not least geographical knowledge – is an important way in which social scientists can contribute both to the improvement of policy and the enhancement of social life. The more sceptical view, however, raises questions not just about the improvement of knowledge but political contention about the purpose and direction of policy (for example in arguments about the purposes and effects of Austerity policies; see Cooper and Whyte, 2017 and McKee et al, 2012). Geographical knowledge also matters here, albeit in a different way, in tracing the flows of policy making (such as the spread of Austerity as the new transnational governmental wisdom after 2008) and in terms of the uneven social and spatial distribution of its consequences. The chapters here range across these possibilities, from seeking to generate better knowledge for policy-making, through generating alternative knowledges (through participatory mapping practices) to critical deconstructions of the social and spatial effects of policy. But I suspect the issue is worth a more explicit place in the conversations between geography and social policy.

The second aspect of the mutable character of social policy is linked to this first problem. As a field of study, social policy does not have a single, coherent intellectual disposition. It certainly has its roots in a Fabian belief in combining social knowledge and social improvement, but it has fractured as many of the wider debates, arguments and controversies in the social sciences have found a foothold in the field. These include the arrival of Marxist analyses of social policy and welfare states, feminist expansions of the horizons of social policy to questions of gender, labour and care, anti- and post-colonial approaches to the imperial foundations of national welfare systems and the reproduction of racialised hierarchies through welfare – and more (see, for example, Williams, 1995). So, just as there are many geographies that might bring their voices to this conversation, so too, there are different social policy voices, including some that have begun to worry about the spatial and scalar assumptions that underpin so much social policy and so much social policy scholarship.

This is not just an argument that ‘it’s more complicated than that’. Rather, I am suggesting that ‘conversation’ is a difficult practice and that identifying likely and potentially productive interlocutors is part of the process of mutual exchange. The diversity of voices both makes this a more difficult challenge (how to find a friend?) and potentially more productive as lines of intersection flow across disciplinary borders. Certainly, I feel fortunate to have found geographers who were willing to both tell me about why geography matters but, perhaps more importantly, to talk about what’s at stake in the encounter between social policy and geography. This leads me to my next set of concerns about social policy as place-making.

Social policy as place making

For me, one of the critical issues at stake in the encounter between geography and social policy is not just that social policies *take place* (that is, they have a distinct spatial character) but that they also help to *make place*. By this, I mean something more than the now recognised interest of local and regional governments in ‘place making’ (my local authority has a ‘Director of Place’). Rather I am interested in the questions of how space and places

are imagined, are folded into policy, are governed through and materialised in policies and practices (echoing some of Jones' concerns about the making of the local). Policies help to reconfigure places – both their internal elements, relationships and processes and the external relationships through which particular places are located. Entangled in such processes are the dynamics of political economy and what Eugene McCann (2002), in the context of local economic development, nicely calls 'cultural politics' (or the contested meaning-making that surrounds places). But there are also varieties of governing institutions, actors and practices that translate, mediate and manage these complex dynamics.

Here we encounter what Neil Brenner (2004) called 'new state spaces' as states were reconfigured, rescaled and re-tooled for the challenges of managing neoliberalism's contradictory and crisis-ridden trajectories. As Brenner's stress on urban governance indicated, the urban became a privileged site and scale in these remakings – the beneficiary/victim of decentralizing strategies; the local embodiment of the 'competition state' (competing for grants as well as investment); feted as the new location of compulsory partnership models of governing; and, eventually, the fiscal conduit through which 'Austerity' could be delivered (Peck, 2012). In particular, these urban/local sites were imagined as repositories of resources (assets, skills, dispositions) that could be competitively mobilised. These new spaces and scales also became the setting for the new localism in welfare, as states sought to make 'welfare' (most obviously in the form of 'workfare') responsive to local needs and conditions. As Allan Cochrane and David Etherington argued:

Within the new policy landscape, a range of relationships is being configured across traditional levels of governance, generating hybrid state and quasi-state forms and producing distinctive welfare spaces. It is perhaps no surprise that where you live makes a difference to how you live; but it also makes a significant difference to the forms of support that will be available and the ways these are managed, whether they appear to come through the working of the market (in the form of employment), through community-based schemes, or directly through state institutions. The nature of the governance arrangements may be summarised in terms such as public-private partnership that identify shared features and point to their hybrid form; but terms like these can mask very different sets of social and governing relationships. (2007: 2972)

Significant though these spaces and scales are, they do not exhaust the changes in the state as a nexus of policy and governance. Nation-states were remade in other scalar terms (as part of the unevenly developing dynamics of globalization and the emergence of supra-national alliances, agencies and apparatuses). They were subjected to contradictory pressures, not least those of emerging nationalisms that disrupted the apparent coherence of the nation-space. In the context of deepening transnational relations of competition (and the increasing circulation of 'league tables' and 'best practice' learning), states were invited/incited to take up new devices, techniques and technologies to govern in a 'modern' way. Such innovations involved the cultivation of the 'self-directing' responsible subject (and the disciplining of those who failed to self-direct in the required directions). They also involved the expansion of the repertoire of governing strategies, for example, the rise of practices of emotional or affective governance (Jupp, Pykett and Smith, 2017). In the midst of all this, states were experimenting with new ways to govern (sometimes called the shift

from government to governance) in which they sought new organisational forms through which to manage different domains, involving the dispersion of state power through new relationships. Such changes are well documented, but it is harder to think about their spatial character given the coincidence of so many different, if not divergent, dynamics. It is the challenges of conceptualising this complexity that has driven some geographers to argue for a topological rather than topographical understanding of spatial relationships. For example, writing about emerging forms of regional governance, John Allen and Allan Cochrane have argued that:

We start from a topological account of state spatiality, one that draws attention to the spatial reconfiguration of the state's institutional hierarchies and the ways in which a more transverse set of political interactions holds that hierarchy in place, but not in ways conventionally understood through a topographical lens. In contrast to a vertical or horizontal imagery of the geography of state power, what states possess, we suggest, is reach, not height. Topological thinking suggests that the powers of the state are not so much "above us" as more or less present through mediated and realtime connections, some direct, others more distanced. (Allen and Cochrane, 2010: 1072-3)

This approach refuses some well-established figures through which we think about the state, not least that of 'height' in which the state rises above society. This view of the state, which James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) describe as resting on the images of verticality and encompassment, has been central to the treatment of the state across the social sciences (a significant exception being Philip Abrams' essay on the idea of the state, 1988). Topological approaches, by contrast, change our understanding of proximity and distance in important ways, enabling attention to how certain forms of reach mobilise power across space, bringing apparently 'distant' agents and agencies into close contact. Thus, global organizations and their governing logics, such as the OECD PISA tables of educational performance, come to be folded into both nation-states and the workings of individual schools. As Glenn Savage has recently put it:

The OECD, therefore, serves as an exemplar of Prince's (2017) argument that the 'technocracy' – that is, 'the technical experts who produce ostensibly neutral and objective knowledge of objects like the economy in the form of universal measures of economic performance' (p. 338) – is an increasingly powerful force in bringing nations into new topological assemblages, 'often in the form of a ladder with the "best" at the top and the "worst" at the bottom' (p. 339). (Savage, 2018: 10)

Like Allen and Cochrane, Savage approaches these policy questions through the concept of assemblage (derived, often through circuitous routes, from the works of Deleuze and Guattari as a translation of their concept of *agencement*, see also Clarke et al, 2015). For me, this combination of topological thinking and assemblage enables us to think again (and think better) about persistent problems within social policy. Let me note three such issues here. First, they offer a way of thinking about the local which does not fix it in a scalar hierarchy, but allows an approach which foregrounds the relationships and dynamics through which particular locals are constituted and remade, for example through the decision-making 'reach' of global corporations that can calculate and enact factory closures,

the levels of service provision that they offer (e.g., in commercial and financial services), or their engagement in 'partnerships' to provide (or fail to provide) public services, - all with profound local consequences. This topological view offers a route to grasping what Massey described as 'geographies of responsibility' (2004).

Second, for these authors, as for many others, the concept of assemblage is productive because it highlights the *contingent* quality of particular assemblages (rather than reified and singular conceptions of the state or government). This contingent quality has two linked dimensions. On the one hand, it points to the complex internal composition of assemblage – the linking together of diverse and heterogeneous elements to make up a temporary unity – a formation that exists in a condition of 'unstable equilibrium' (to borrow from Gramsci). These diverse elements always have the potential to revert to their separated condition – to disassemble – or to be realigned in new or emergent assemblages through processes of borrowing, bending and blending (or what Levi-Strauss called *bricolage*). Savage nicely poses the centrality of contingency:

Assemblages are heterogeneous, comprised of a multiplicity of component parts that have been arranged together towards particular strategic ends. Given the aforementioned commitments to relations of exteriority, anti-reductionism and the rejection of 'coherent wholes', the heterogeneous component parts that constitute an assemblage are also understood to have a contingent rather than necessary relationship, brought together into particular relational configurations which have mutable rather than fixed forms. This means an assemblage approach emphasizes the always moving and evolving nature of social formations. The complex relationships between heterogeneity, relationality and flux – and how these features can inform an assemblage approach to policy analysis – require careful unpacking. (2019: 7)

The other dimension of contingency is not shared by all who use assemblage but feels vitally important to me. Assemblages require the labour of assembling: they are the product of contextually specific agents and agencies, working in forms of relationship (from conflict to collaboration) with the intention of bringing about a new ordering of things (things including problems, people, places, policies, practices and forms of power). Consequently, assemblages are vulnerable to mobilizations (organizational, political, ideological, and more) that seek to disassemble them: in this sense, policy and governance are marked by continual efforts to remove, reform, improve or supercede existing assemblages. Assemblages are, in short, *contestable*.

Finally, the shift to assemblage thinking raises an interesting question about temporality. To what extent do we understand the concept of assemblage as marking a historical shift in the organization of power from old (state-centric) forms to new forms (diverse assemblages)? There is clearly a temptation to see this as a shift from what were formerly integrated institutions – the state, especially the *nation*-state – towards more complex disaggregated and dispersed formations (e.g., Slaughter, 2004) or as the shift from government to governance. I think this is a temptation to be resisted, resting as it does on a common ahistorical distinction between old and new (what Janet Fink and I once referred to as 'sociological time' as a way of capturing the binary juxtaposition of past and present, 2008). We might be better served by looking back at older formations and wondering whether

their apparently integral/integrated character was, in fact, the effect of sets of state-making practices that produced an assemblage with the appearance of being integrated, or what might be called the performance of integration. For example, we might look behind the assumptions about the closed and bordered territorial space of the British nation (and its accompanying state) and treat them (nation and state) instead as topological assemblages of colonial power. Those assemblages organised multiple relationships (including racialised and gendered divisions of labour). They ordered flows (of people, power and profit) in which metropolises and colonies were intimately entangled. And they enabled the surpluses through which the metropolises were able to craft welfare settlements from the late nineteenth century. Such a view of past assemblages might also enable us to better grasp the complex relations of proximity and distance – and of denial and intimacy – that characterise the postcolonial period. From that standpoint, we might have a new understanding of the current rise of ‘nativist’ sentiments about who is entitled to welfare in the global north. Such possibilities might be part of a committed attempt to put place into policy – and to put policy in its place.

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