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Guest Editorial: Researching the geographies of policy mobility: confronting the methodological challenges

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Researching the geographies of policy mobility: confronting the methodological challenges

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Researching the geographies of policy mobility: confronting new methodological challenges

Abstract

Introducing the special issue on "Researching the geographies of policy mobility," this paper discusses a series of contributions to the methodological challenges posed by the emergence of approaches that draw on notions of policy assemblages, mobility and mutations. While a series of theoretical developments in recent years have challenged orthodox accounts of policy diffusion and transfer, there has thus far been a lack of methodological reflection. It is to attending to this absence that this special issue concerns itself, with each of the four papers blending empirical, methodological and theoretical insights.

1. Introduction

It does not seem so long ago that analysis of policy development was largely conducted within bounded national frameworks, which were taken for granted to such an extent that it did not even seem to call for explicit comment or justification. Local government was discussed as little more than a different level or scale of government, even as tensions were identified within national government systems (see, e.g., in the British case, Rhodes 1988, Duncan and Goodwin 1988, Cochrane 1993). With the exception of writers such as Karl Polanyi (1944/2001) comparison was effectively between national systems even where they were clustered into 'worlds' of welfare capitalism (Esping-Andersen 1990, Cochrane *et al*., 2001). These days, by contrast, it almost goes without saying that it is necessary to recognize the wider framing of policy development, whether in the form of policy transfer (see, e.g., Dolowitz *et al*., 2000, Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), through the lens of multi-level governance (see, e.g., Bache and Flinders, 2004, Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005) or through the prism of policy mobility (see, e.g. McCann and Ward, 2011).

It is no longer possible to view the world through lenses that implicitly or explicitly locate the politics of public policy within national bounded systems, nor even to position them straightforwardly within nested scalar hierarchies (see, e.g. Bulkeley, 2005). However, this still leaves us grappling to understand what a politics that moves beyond such limitations might look like, how it is constructed, how it is assembled.

What is taking place is not simply a move from one context to another – the identification of a successful policy initiative in one place capable of being borrowed and reused elsewhere in a fantasy of rational evidence-based policy-making (see Peck and Theodore, this issue). It is already widely recognized that it is rarely possible to transfer policies directly, precisely because they emerge from and are responses to particular 'local' sets of social and political conditions which are not replicated in the places to which they are transplanted (for an early example, see the discussion of the community development project as a transatlantic borrowing in Loney 1983). And it is also widely acknowledged that global policy-making (whether formulated through the World Bank, the World Health Organisation, the EU or other global agencies) cannot deliver a universally applicable template (Cochrane, 2011). However, this only reinforces the argument for approaching the issue differently. So, for example, in this issue Richard Freeman highlights the need to explore the complex processes of translation involved in the making up of policies in the field of mental health in Europe; while Ananya Roy, also in this issue, points to the significance of what she describes as the circulatory capacities of centres of calculation (including apparently dominant players, but also potentially counter-forces) in the field of (global) poverty management.

2. Thinking about the geographies of policy mobility

Thinking in terms of policy mobilities is, of course, a profoundly geographical enterprise. It requires careful attention to the multiple overlapping spaces of policy-making, some of which are considered in the papers that follow and have also been the focus of an increasingly rich vein of research (including Brenner et al 2010,

Cooke 2008, Gonzalez 2011, Larner and Laurie 2010, McCann 2008, McCann and Ward 2011, McFarlane 2011, Peck and Theodore 2010b, Prince 2010, Raghuram et al 2010, Roy 2010, among many others). However, the implications of taking such an approach for the ways in which geography is understood are also profound, since they make it necessary to rethink or revisit how conceptualise some of the taken for granted tools and heuristics that are often mobilized in geographical thinking – including scale, territory, place, locality, and even the global.

So, for example, in the case of urban policy (considered more directly in the paper by McCann and Ward) explicitly place based policies and priorities are consistently formulated with reference to particular understandings of the global context, and it is hard to ignore the heavily populated world of consultants, exchanges and visits, political and professional networks that cluster around urban initiatives and which often have a longer history than is sometimes acknowledged (see, e.g., Ward, 2006; Clarke, 2010, 2011). Meanwhile urban competitiveness in a global marketplace has become a shared concern of academic and policy literatures (see, e.g., Buck *et al.*, 2005) as debates have moved between emphasizing the need for successful cities to open themselves up to the market to bemoaning the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism as a political force or, more positively, searching for the spaces to develop alternative visions at the urban level (Leitner *et al.*, 2006; Cochrane, 2007; Brenner *et al.*, 2011).

In other words, wider policy networks are central to the construction of apparently local responses, while at the same time apparently global phenomena, globalised policies, are only capable of realisation in particular, grounded and localized ways.

Whatever the significance of neo-liberalism as a global phenomenon, it cannot be understood as a sort of global dust cloud just waiting to settle somewhere to be realized in some fixed and more or less perfect form.

But it is equally important to recognize that policies are not just defined in place. They are not only actively produced, but also actively circulated and fed back through global networks (of professionals, consultants, global agencies, national and local players searching for ideas etc.) (Stone, 2004; McCann, 2011). Locally or nationally situated professionals may scan the global horizon for new ideas suitable for borrowing 'off-the-shelf', without the need for extensive investment of time or even thinking, to fit some already existing problem, or they may draw in policy ideas from elsewhere as part of a process of local persuasion and political coalition building (McCann and Ward, this issue, Allen and Cochrane, 2010). The paradox at the heart of this process is apparent as particular experiences are reinterpreted as templates or icons, somehow embodying the policy approaches being promoted – whether Porto Alegre as delivering participatory budgeting; Barcelona as urban transformation driven by culture and the positive legacies of megaprojects such as the Olympics; Wisconsin as home of workfare – in ways that have less and less to do with their supposed 'origins' yet spawn an industry of policy tourism. The process of translation that brings together the global networks and the local practitioners inevitably mistranslates the lived experience of the places that take on a symbolic importance in the language of public policy.

The making of place (at whatever scale) is not just delivered through local social relations but is also a global or international process in a much deeper sense – because

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of the extent to which it is based on systems of borrowing, reinterpreting, learning and building networks and even patterns of professional migration, which are rarely considered in this context (Roy, this issue, Raghuram 2009). The significance of policy networks linking professional worlds – such as architects, engineers and planners - stretching across government and administrative hierarchies has long been recognized (S. Ward, 2006). These facilitate *learning* between practitioners of different sorts, and hence the located contexts (however defined) in which they work (McFarlane, 2009). What matters, in other words, is to be able to explore what Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore describe as the 'prosaic netherworld of policy implementation' (Peck and Theodore, this issue) and, following Ananaya Roy (Roy, this issue) to understand the ways in which middling technocrats (rather than global elites) become the 'embodied subjects who must manage the manifest contradictions of market rule' (see also Larner and Laurie, 2010).

Policy-making has to be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. Rather than merely seeing this as an inherently contradictory process, however, what matters is to be able to explore the ways in which the working through of the tension serves to produce policies and places, policies in place. The conventional distinction that is often made between the two misses the extent to which each necessarily defines and is defined by the other – territories are not fixed, but the outcome of overlapping and interconnecting sets of social, political and economic relations stretching across space, while the existence of identifiable territories shapes and in some cases limits the ways in which those relations are able to develop (in other words relational space and territorial space are necessarily entangled) (Massey 2006). The placing of policies

gives them their meaning in practice, while places draw on (and draw in) a wider policy repertoire than might be available within their national as well as local boundaries.

The key questions about how to address the research challenges remain, precisely because there is no simple linear progression in which policy is drawn from one place to be implemented elsewhere. Because the processes being analyzed are much more fluid, defined through eddies and flows that move uncertainly and are defined in place as well as in and through networks, finding straightforward ways of researching them is not straightforward (Büscher *et al* 2011, Shore and Wright, 1997; Pero *et al*., 2011). The next section explains how the papers in this special issue respond to and seek to take this research agenda forward.

3. Research challenges and methodological responses

It is important to go beyond highlighting the significance of policy mobilities to begin to identify ways of exploring them and developing deeper understandings of the practices by which they are constituted, and to reflect on the ways in which a focus on these issues may also require the mobilization of particular sets of methods that require a step beyond the comfort zone of case studies and semi-structured interviews, however necessary they may be as part of the process. The challenge is to find means of exploring the ways in which global policy networks, defined through reach - stretching beyond and connecting places, rather than simply scale - in the sense of either of size or hierarchy - contribute to the construction of apparently local responses. And at the same time it is necessary to find ways of researching how it is

that apparently global phenomena, globalised policies find their expression and are given their meaning in particular, grounded, localised ways, how they are translated through practice and how that translation in turn feeds back into further circulation.

There has been surprisingly little discussion over whether existing methodologies and techniques are fit for purpose. As Peck and Theodore (2010a: 171) have argued:

> If processes of policy mobilization have indeed become increasingly trans-national 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.

The challenge faced is that of capturing the complex dance associated with the grounding of mobile policies in place, in ways that give material existence to the policies while also helping to shape the politics of particular places. Despite the increased focus on policy mobilities a persuasive discussion of the methodological innovation associated with and required by that research has not yet been delivered.

In bringing together a series of papers in the way we do here, there may be a danger of implying that we believe that this is a fully comprehensive selection of the ways in which these questions may be explored. On the contrary, we are very aware that what is being presented here simply represents a selection of work being undertaken, a chance to consider examples of the ways in which some of those engaged in research on policy mobilities have done so and reflected on their own practice. While there is some shared sympathy for a broader ethnographic or anthropological turn, only

Ananya Roy's paper seeks to position itself explicity within that tradition, and similarly although there are (sometimes unintended) echoes of the careful tracing of the contingent connections associated with actor-network theory, as undertaken, for example, by Bruno Latour in his systematic review of the failure of a major public transportation project (Latour 1996), none of these papers draws directly on that approach.

Nor, therefore, is any claim being made here that this collection is somehow an expression of a shared methodological project that we wish to promote. That is not our intention. In fact, these papers reflect quite distinctive routes into an engagement with contemporary experiences captured in the notion of policy mobility – they come from different traditions and they approach the issues in different ways. What they share is an understanding of the need to think differently about public policy and its formation in place in a globalised and neo-liberalised world. At this stage, what matters, we believe, is to acknowledge the flowering of research in the area and to reflect on the richness of the methodological approaches that are emerging.

Richard Freeman's paper is quite explicit in already seeking to question the way in which policy mobility is generally understood. His argument questions the possibility of starting with policies or policy, suggesting instead that the starting point should be mobility itself – without mobility, he suggests, that is communicative interaction, there is no policy. Rather than seeing policies as moving (in whatever form) he suggests rather that it is mobility which makes up policy. As a result the methodological focus must be on communication (whether in the form of texts and the negotiation around them, or in the process of discussion in meetings). This

undermines any possibility of seeing policies as fixed, and instead emphasises the ways in which they are generated and consolidated in what he identifies as a process of reverberation.

Of course, the idea that one could follow a policy (along the lines proposed by Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore) sits uneasily with such a perspective. Yet Peck and Theodore are equally convinced of the importance of acknowledging the mutability of policies and emphasise the importance of recognising that it is not appropriate to follow them as if they were identifiable 'things'. What they offer, however, (from a starting point more clearly rooted in political economy) is an ability to trace power rather more clearly and explicitly through the sets of relations associated with policy mobility, the translation of policies form one context to another. Their approach makes it possible to explore the ways in which translation may be contested. In developing what they call a 'distended case study', travelling policies can be understood both as part of processes of neo-liberalisation and as potential sites of resistance or reframing.

In some respects, Ananya Roy's approach can be seen as closer to that of Freeman, because it is rooted in the possibilities of developing an ethnography, not of place or location, but rather – as she puts it – a 'study of the practices through which policy is made mobile'. Her interest is in the apparatus, the ways in which the rules are shaped to allow policy to develop. She is not, therefore, interested in identifying some set of powerful interests who may be deemed to determine but rather in the middling technocrats who come to embody the policy process. At the heart of the methodology she proposes, therefore, is the mode of de-familiarisation – so that the taken for granted is no longer taken for granted by the observer. If – for Freeman – all policy is

mobile, in a sense for Roy what has to be explained is, rather how policy is made mobile, mobilised in practice by those she seeks to study.

The approach adopted by Eugene McCann and Kevin Ward is distinctive again. In a sense, the other three all start from the policy as mobile – formulated in Roy's terms as ethnographic circulations. This does not mean it is necessarily inconsistent with those approaches, but it starts form elsewhere, from the sites and situations where policy is assembled in practice. They start from place, from the city as the node through which policies pass and which give them their meaning in practice. They explore the ways in which those who might be conceived of as local actors draw in ideas, initiatives and imaginaries from elsewhere, seeking to translate them from one context to another. Of course, these actors are not divorced from the middle level technocrats that interest Roy, they are among those actively drawing on the models considered by Peck and Theodore, and they are to be found in the networks identified by Freeman. But the methods involved require a focus on the ways in which policies and places are assembled together, rather than a consideration of the agents who are defined through the process of circulation.

4. Conclusions

Policies with the same or similar name in different contexts may imply similar practices, but the process of borrowing or translation is always a complex and sometimes a contested one. It is the process itself which defines and gives meaning to particular policy practices to the extent that Richard Freeman argues that policy 'must change in order to move and must move in order to exist' (Freeman, this issue).

It is this that makes it so important to trace that process, to explore the emergence and development of policies, without being trapped into an ultimately regressive process of searching for the 'origin' which all too often might imply that there is some essential 'policy' to be found, maybe subject to distortion through movement, but ultimately capable of being uncovered and revealed (McCann and Ward, this issue; Peck and Theodore, this issue). Nor is this merely an academic issue – origins are often used to justify the implementation of a policy in a new place (carrying with it a 'progressive' imprimatur from elsewhere, for example) and are often badges of pride (and sometimes shame) for those places with a claim to be the original source.

If the search for an 'origin' is unlikely to be successful (or helpful) it is nevertheless important to recognize that the research being undertaken will involve tracing power, exploring how it is constituted, how equality and inequality are constructed in practice, and through the practices of policy making. This is unlikely to be an innocent process, in the sense that policy making operates within (sometimes undermining, sometimes reinforcing) frameworks that limit what is possible – the choices available to those involved in the negotiation are limited, although it is important to be able to trace the possibility of counter-forces as well as the official policies of what Ananya Roy identifies as the apparatus (Roy, this issue). This may be a world of neo liberalism, but, if it is, it is certainly the product of variegated neo liberalization (Brenner et al 2010), precisely because it is these processes that help to construct how neo liberalism is experienced in practice.

The research process throws up significant tensions, which require those engaged in this sort of research to be careful about how they proceed, avoiding the danger of slipping into the role of 'inside dopester', slipping into an approach that leaves them suggesting their particular network is the only one that matters and claiming a secialist expertise in uncovering the particular truths associated with it (Peck and Theodore, this issue). And it is also important to recognize the extent to which they too may be playing a part in assembling the world which they are researching (McCann and Ward, this issue, Roy, this issue). The academic research process is one of identifying, describing and setting down in ways that give solidity to that which may not be so solid after all. This makes the advice of Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore to see the process as 'explanatory prototyping' rather than 'hypothesis testing' a particularly valuable one in this context.

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