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The whereabouts of politics and policy in troubling times

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Introduction

Like so many special issues, this collection emerged out a shared frustration; a dissatisfaction, in this instance, with the stalling of political alternatives and the failure to translate such alternatives into progressive public policies. Writing this editorial looking out from a deeply divided Britain, we face public services at breaking point, protracted industrial disputes, polluted water, police violence, entrenched poverty, and much else besides. So much—including Britain itself—seems to be falling apart. And from climate breakdown to global pandemics, while the cost of living—and corporate profits—may be going up, hope for more just, more caring futures has never felt more distant. So, while policymaking might now be fast (Peck and Theodore, 2015), it sure isn't keeping up with the social, environmental and economic challenges we are now facing.

It might be tempting to throw our hands up and say it's all too much, there's no obvious way out. Others will no doubt confidently insist they knew exactly where everything was heading; they could see it coming a mile off. And perhaps they could. But this special issue was sparked by a commitment towards thinking together across disciplinary boundaries without the guarantee of knowing precisely where to look. The politics of the present, as Stuart Hall (1986) insisted, is forged on an open terrain—not only is there a need to push for more collaborative forms of academic inquiry as no singular theoretical stance or disciplinary perspective can ever be fully sufficient in grasping the many new, potentially surprising, connections shaping the present, but nor can we claim to know all the answers in advance. We can't even be sure if we're necessarily always asking the right questions.

By holding open our terrain of inquiry, we came together around investigating the political work involved in the making and moving of policy. We pushed back against privileging any particular spatial imaginary—the 'municipal' or 'planetary', say—as the definitive frame for interpreting the politics of the present, itself produced through many, overlapping temporalities. Rather, our collective interest was sparked by the need to rethink the spatial politics of governance and the many times and spaces of policy. Along the way, conversations at a Political Studies Association roundtable in Cardiff with Julie MacLeavy, Sarah Ayres, John Allen and Martin Jones helped reframe how we might think spatially about the 'politics of our times'.

This special issue is shaped by two loosely bounded, but interconnected, concerns. First, the need to get to grips with all the cultural-political work involved in making and moving policy through the post-politics of 'what works' and technocratic, depoliticized accounts of evidence-driven policy.

Second, we set our sights on how the state—as a vital, yet contradictory site in the making of policy—may have become overly determined as a barrier to generating and prefiguring other ways of being and alternative democratic models of collective decision-making. Consequently, we sought not to impose constraining frames on our inquiry, but instead offer up exploratory hunches to help rethink the times and spaces of politics and policy.

A trouble with special issues, though, is they take an awfully long time to produce. Or at least, they do when we're organising them. But taking time might offer some benefit. After all, it can be all too easy to proclaim the dawning of a new era as the latest crisis starts taking hold. The rush to publish grand claims following the outbreak of the pandemic, for instance, risked slipping towards the kind of epochal thinking that Raymond Williams (1977) warned against—where sole focus on the *dominant* ignores its entanglements with both *residual* and *emergent* tendencies also at play (see Clarke, 2010 for further discussion). For all the change and instability, for all the crises we now face, so many other relations seem to endure. Sometimes stubbornly so. Our aim for this special issue, then, is to contribute towards analysing these troubling times by investigating the spatial politics of policymaking—and to ask what kinds of politics and policy might figure in the shape of things to come.

The whereabouts of politics

To talk about the 'whereabouts of politics' is, in one sense, to ask: just where has politics gone? This resonates with what has come to be known in recent years as 'anti-politics' or 'post-politics'. Interpretations of what constitutes 'the political' may well differ, yet much critical scholarship has become concerned with the technocratic governing of social, political and economic life, entrenched in times of austerity, to more-or-less further the interests of capital in the name of consensus. For it takes rather a lot of work to shift contentious issues 'above' or 'outside' of the political realm through efforts to displace, conceal or coerce. And as we explore in this special issue, circulating policy often becomes entangled with efforts to depoliticise and displace hotly contested issues and negate opposition (Flinders and Wood, 2015; Griggs and Howarth, 2023).

In another way, though, to ask about the whereabouts of politics is also to examine where political struggles are taking place. No doubt, the political imaginary of the street and the public square continues to animate understandings of the political and the possibility of smashing through the banalities of everyday life in moments of uprising. This understanding of the political is not just the symbolic occupying of public space. As Lazaros Karaliotas (this issue) demonstrates through focusing on the occupation of the Greek Public Broadcasting Service following its dismantling in 2013, occupying the airwaves can become an 'infrastructure of dissensus'. Thinking politically about the 'physical and virtual, embodied and non-human, socio-technical and spatial arrangements that enable and circulate the staging of democratic disagreement' can open up all kinds of infrastructures to repoliticisation. As such, Karaliotas presents a rich account of how such occupation helped articulate and mobilise alternative political possibilities against and beyond the state in times of crisis.

This prompts another question: where might the state be making its powerful presence felt and what kind of political responses might this demand? It is certainly helpful to interpret states as contradictory and contested formations, variously generating repression, hope, abandonment and much else besides (Clarke and Newman, 2015). And encounters with the state often register in prosaic, as well as rather more forceful, ways (Painter, 2006). By working through the contradictions of the state, might there yet remain some way of prising open other political possibilities? This is, after all, a concern taken up by Jane Wills (2019) and David Featherstone et al. (2012), reluctant to abandon all potential of the 'local' as a meaningful site of civic engagement and social organisation in order to articulate political alternatives and progressive forms of state intervention.

Certainly, for rather a lot of people, ‘politics’ is all about formal representative political institutions, governmental procedures, local council debates, trade union organizing, public protest and the like. Rethinking the times and spaces of politics and policy in this special issue, we examine how we might push for a renewed political imagination working through political parties and institutions as much as constructing other kinds of political possibilities stretching well beyond.

Quite how the state becomes entangled within wider struggles to reframe debate around controversial issues, situated across ‘technical’ or ‘political’ realms, demands close attention. Efforts to reconstruct and lay claim to contested notions such as the ‘public’, ‘nature’ or ‘equality’ can play a powerful role in legitimising or resisting particular kinds of action or inaction, sometimes violently so (Isakjee et al., 2020). As **Yasminah Beebeejaun** (this issue) illustrates, essentialist gendered ideas have often been mobilised variously as a political resource within planning disputes over shale gas extraction across the US and UK. From a feminist epistemological stance, **Beebeejaun** demonstrates within anti-fracking protests over the politics of noise, how particular people, practices and ways of knowing come to be positioned in opposition to seemingly technical decision-making and are ultimately deemed to be unreliable. As we discuss further below, there is a continued need to come to terms with the highly uneven ways in which knowledge claims register within decision-making processes, triggering and demanding different kinds of resistance and activism.

Unsettling policy

It can be hard to keep up with policy as it moves and mutates across borders (Peck and Theodore, 2015). Just as some ideas start gaining traction, others come into view as the next ‘solution’ to the latest crisis. A seemingly ever-expanding cast of intermediaries such as think-tanks, management consultants, and indeed, globe-trotting ‘superstar’ academic gurus now circulate the latest ‘exemplars’ to emulate and ‘missions’ to follow. Carried along in the bags, laptops and carefully tailored social media accounts of slick policy entrepreneurs, policy travels and can find its way into the production of legislative blueprints, ministerial speeches, practice guidance, briefings, training materials, and consultant reports, as well as media and press statements (Freeman, 2012; Mittal et al., 2023). In fact, as policy moves, it gets reworked by all kinds of people—who may or may not see themselves as part of the state—traversing the everyday, as well as more unexpected, spaces of policymaking. From the corridors of transnational organisations and government ministries to the meetings of regional partnerships or local town hall meetings, mobile policy ideas really can transform social, political and economic life. Though, we mustn’t forget, in processes of translation, all kinds of other possibilities get left unrealised, ignored or simply fade away.

Certainly, a resurgence of critical scholarship has re-energized policy studies over the last decade or so. Freed from the constraints of frameworks, schemas and rational orthodoxies, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and many others have been studying the social and ideological conditioning of policy-on-the-move. A spatial vocabulary of mobilities, mutations and assemblages has helped follow how and why 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’ (Cochrane and Ward, 2012: 5). Along these lines, the whereabouts of policy might be understood to have become rather unbounded and unbundled from conventional accounts of nation-states, government routines, and policy transfer. And, as this special issue demonstrates, mobile policy transcends borders, sometimes in rather surprising ways. But so do new mobilisations and circulating alternatives from below.

That’s not to say that nations and states no longer matter in the making and moving policy. As **Colin Lorne** (this issue) demonstrates, states continue to register their presence within the worlds of fast policy, shaping contracting models, imposing legislative conditions and the like, even if these

may be stretched to their limits and beyond. Recognising the idea of the nation-state to be rather fragile and provisional, a focus on the many times and spaces of policy demands attention to the changing configurations of nations and states, without returning to methodological nationalism that continues to haunt uncritical policy studies literatures, whilst also rejecting methodological globalism (Clarke et al., 2015). For all the focus of global-urban policy mobilities, as Lorne argues, there is an ‘ongoing, yet shifting and politically contested, role of the state and national spatial imaginaries in the making and translating of globally mobile policy’ in the present conjuncture.

Different temporalities can condition policy as it moves and mutates. As demonstrated in Lorne’s intervention in this collection, as well as that of Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs, policies are bound up with the articulation of particular temporal narratives (Jupp, 2020), transporting the ‘present’ back and forth into the ‘past’ and on to the ‘future’ and much in-between. Such narratives compress and distort time, constructing a multiplicity of ‘nows’ that may inhabit the different sites of policymaking (Jones, 2022: 53). And yet, time can also act as something of an ‘anchor’ placing constraints or limits upon what futures might become possible. Perhaps, then, we might think about the spaces of policymaking as ‘plastic’, bent and moulded through the contradictory forces of change and stability (Jones, 2022: 51-54)? Or maybe, ‘topology’ might offer the kind of spatial vocabulary needed to get to grips with the ‘changing same’ of power (Allen, 2016)? In whichever case, those involved in the work of making up policy are continuously negotiating an everyday politics of reframings, refusals, and resistances (Temenos, 2017). Policy may be mobile, and space malleable, but as this special issue demonstrates, politics profoundly conditions what—and what doesn’t—move, one aspect of the unsettling entanglements between policy failure and policy mobility (Lorne, 2021; McCann and Ward, 2015; McConnell, 2010).

With this in mind, as our collective inquiry unfolded, a question became one of how politics can shape why some ideas become mobile, whilst other ideas are left to wilt. Policy mutates and evolves through seemingly ever-faster procedures and routines, increasingly running ahead of conventional policymaking practices. Officials and politicians may rearticulate and reconstitute policy, before its anchoring (or not) in practices, rules and norms of institutions. Such processes of normalisation or sedimentation hint towards the complexities and contingencies of mobile policy and the political work of remaking policy which the studies assembled here underline. In different ways, each contribution contests some of the residual assumptions about ‘the state’ in the making of top-down policymaking processes as the twists and turns of policy stretch across otherwise familiar boundaries and scales, bringing the centre into the local and back again.

A mobile policy fix?

So how does policy end up touching down or settling in particular places? Investigating the ways in which policy traverses the scalar dynamics of transnational governance arrangements of the European Commission, Natalie Papanastasiou (this issue) focuses on the making and remaking of knowledge about education policy. Papanastasiou characterises ‘best practice’ as a hegemonic form of policy knowledge which renders the space of policymaking a depoliticised and technical domain. In her analysis, Papanastasiou thereby explores how best practice moves from the particular to the universal, as knowledge forged in specific contexts is ‘exported’ elsewhere. This process of exporting begins with a kind of depoliticised extraction, as policy knowledge is first removed from the spaces of the political, with space itself ‘rendered technical’. In other words, depoliticising entails the fabrication of policy into a ‘technical’ space where political decisions are wrapped up in the rhetoric of evidence-based policymaking. Such strategies remain, Papanastasiou concludes, one of the conditions of the hegemony of policy regimes.

Making up policy can therefore reproduce particular political and institutional boundaries and exclusions, arguably over-determining or containing the domains of issues such as housing, health or the urban and social. As **Andreas Öjehag-Pettersson** foregrounds in analysing regional government in Sweden, policy sediments particular practices in different spaces, differentially mobilising actors and privileging particular voices and performances, while drawing the lines between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. As **Öjehag-Pettersson** details, over time the Swedish territorial formation of the ‘competitive region’ has been moulded and brought into being by a multiplicity of ‘chains of rationalities’ assembled into policymaking practices. And, as he concludes, in the political work of policymaking, exclusionary dynamics became ‘normalised’, obfuscating the political conditions or origins embedded within such assumptions.

In other words, for policy to take hold it can often require an apparent ‘emptying’ of politics from spaces of governance, a concealing of the political practices which instead become taken-for-granted. Moreover, as **Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs** argue in their study of the spaces of the local, local government officers move across such sedimented and arguably depoliticised spaces, reproducing and adapting to established practices rather than challenging boundaries and potential alternative ways of organizing. This is a mobile policy fix in many senses of the word.

Just as it takes a lot of work to ‘take the politics out’, such processes cannot always hold in the face of growing hostility and opposition. Practices of depoliticisation are always at risk of efforts to *repoliticise* whereby policymaking can lurch from moments of politicisation, depoliticisation and repoliticisation (**Griggs and Howarth, 2023**). We have witnessed growing challenge to technocratic expertise in recent years, propelled, for instance, by very different kinds of popular and political alternatives to liberal representative democracy. Policy can always be imagined and remade otherwise (**Temenos, 2017**). Even deeply embedded claims to universal knowledge and dominant ‘what works’ policy regimes are open to what **Papanastasiou** calls efforts to ‘re-complexify’ policy spaces, challenging, for instance, the exclusions embodied within the technical and evidence-based logics of ‘best practice’. Such work, she suggests, can mobilise alternative spatial epistemologies, questioning regimes of best practice through appeals to the specificity of ‘context’ in order to reframe or challenge dominant policies.

Such arguments resonate with those of **Colin Lorne** whose study of national policy mobilities demonstrates how struggles for universal public healthcare—shaped by the residual, yet enduring political and emotional significance of the NHS across Britain—evoked national and international spatial imaginaries as a political resource to resist ‘policies from elsewhere’, in this instance, the looming threat of ‘Americanization’. And yet, we must remain alert to the political dangers of ventriloquizing nationalist logics in the fight against the injustices of neoliberalism (see further, **Lorne and Lambert, 2023**). As **Lorne** foregrounds, we should be troubled by the temporalities of ‘context’, and how, in this instance, nostalgia can be resurrected and deployed within and against policymaking practices.

If we take seriously all the cultural and political work involved in making and moving policy, recognised to be always becoming and open to ‘messy’ politics and challenge, then what might this mean for pushing for alternatives?

Knowing alternatives

It’s easy to give up hope. Yet, we’re not without progressive or radical alternatives. Various demands for the right to the city, equality, participatory democracy, abolition, defunding, commoning, municipal socialism, ecological justice and ‘rainbow coalitions’ abound, as just a few examples (**Mouffe, 2022; Fraser, 2022**; among many others). It may be tempting to pin our colours to one of these particular masts. Yet, the ‘nature of conjunctural politics’, as **Massey and Rustin (2015: 216)** suggest, ‘is that one cannot predict the locations of antagonism and potentiality which might prove

most significant in the struggles to supplant neoliberalism from its current positional of ideological dominance'. Our aim here, then, is to foreground how the many times and spaces of policy might be contested and alternative or new ways of working opened up or become possible.

As the contributions to this edited collection underline, any progressive agenda struggling to forge a new 'common sense' cannot ignore the making of policy, nor the whereabouts of the state. Policy, we insist, can cultivate new and meaningful spaces of contestation, which may themselves become pivotal in the struggles for hegemony and transformation (see further, [Griggs and Howarth, 2023](#)). As so aptly discussed by our contributors, a starting point for fostering alternatives may be through strategies of politicization, or re-politicisation, which is in part about creating space for agency to help unsettle dominant practices and the prevailing states of affairs. Just as lots of cultural-political work has gone into embedding political logics into the everyday routines and practices of policymaking, lots of research is required to unearth such logics to help make it possible to imagine how policy might be made differently ([Glynos and Howarth, 2007](#)).

Importantly, the struggle for hegemony within spaces of policy cannot be divorced from the processes of knowledge production, the generation of other ways of knowing, and questioning what 'counts' as evidence ([Freeman and Sturdy, 2015](#)). After all, if policymakers are 'truth junkies', it is nonetheless a particular version of 'truth' that too often wins out ([Sullivan, 2011](#)). As introduced above, **Beebejaun** thus questions the gendered and binary politics of 'evidence' in planning inquiries, exposing how alternative constructions of noise were systematically framed as 'gendered and unreliable' in a technical planning arena. Destabilising such embedded oppositions between so-called rational and irrational knowledge is, **Beebejaun** concludes, not without its difficulties.

Of course, as policy moves, it is re-produced, with the possibility for it to be re-articulated and transformed. But as we know, movement too often results in little more than putting a 'twist' on powerfully sedimented logics. Policy as it moves is made to 'fit' with the particularities of different 'contexts', contexts that it in part brings into being. Indeed, **Öjehag-Pettersson** aptly demonstrates the difficulties of disrupting the chains of mutually reinforcing rationales and technologies that constitute the Swedish 'competitive region', exposing how such chains of rationales not only give primacy to economics over politics but also provide the grounds for the kinds of 'fast policy' solutions that hamper efforts to tackle economic, political, and social inequalities. As the contributions to this collection thus demonstrate, destabilising policy may well rely on exploiting moments of 'crisis' and their potential to open up spaces for experimentation as evidenced in the work of **Lazaros Karaliotas** on the workers' occupation of Greece's Public Broadcasting Services. The working existence of the ERT and the occupation of its building and services across Greece cultivated, as **Karaliotas** surfaces, new political spatialities, with the success of the occupation owing much to its capacity to prefigure new ways of being and organising, to bring into being 'new worlds' or alternative socio-political imaginaries ([Howarth, 2008](#)).

It is in this spirit that we emphasise why imagining and enacting political alternatives is vital for making policy move otherwise. Doubtful of the more apocalyptic stories of living in a post-political age, it is critical we hold open the possibility, at least, of living together in more hopeful, caring ways. Occupying the spaces of the state—however, contested, contradictory, and limiting this may be—continues to offer one such chance of rethinking, redirecting and resourcing policy differently. By thinking through the many times and spaces of politics and policy in the present conjuncture, our hope for this special issue is to encourage working across disciplinary boundaries in ways which push for political alternatives, build new solidarities, and foster the kinds of experimentation so desperately needed in these troubling times.

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