Thinking through dualisms in urban policy mobilities

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Abstract

The growing use of the notion of ‘policy mobilities’ to conceptualize how policy is made and moved across and among cities and urbanized regions has led to worthwhile insights, but has also encouraged some critiques. Many of these address certain dualisms that seem to undergird the policy mobilities approach. This paper engages with three of these apparent dualisms – success/failure, presence/absence, and mobilities/immobilities – and argues that while they must be treated with care, they should not be dismissed or expunged *a priori*. Rather, we argue that there is utility in conceptualizing urban policy mobilities through relational dyads, rather than oppositional dualisms. If studies of policy mobilities, urban or otherwise, are to maintain their momentum, success, failure, presence, absence, mobilities, and immobilities should be understood as being intertwined, mutually constituting and reinforcing elements of policy-making.

Keywords: policy mobilities; dualisms; relationality; power; politics

Recently, ‘urban policy mobilities’ has emerged as a term that refers to a series of new approaches to studying urban policy-making (McCann and Ward 2011, 2013). Researchers have focused on the simultaneous making and moving of policy to develop an analysis that is both global and local, while always being close to practice. In doing so, they have produced studies of a number of areas of policy-making – e.g. creativity (Prince, 2010), public health (McCann, 2008), economic development (Ward, 2006), financing (Ward 2012), sustainability planning (Temenos and McCann, 2012), transport (Wood 2013), and welfare (Peck and Theodore 2010). These studies have common foci,
including attention to the role of benchmarking, comparison, consultants, and think tanks in urban policy-making.

Yet, neither these foci nor how they are conceptualized have become ‘canon’ – they still warrant reflection, critique, and extension (e.g., see Clarke, 2011; Cresswell, 2011; Jacobs 2012; Prince, 2012). The literature remains internally heterogeneous and, for its future advancement, it is important that those developing it – including us – reflect upon and question its still-emerging characteristics. Therefore, we want to address and deconstruct certain dualisms – clean and neat divisions of things into opposing categories, described as A/not-A by Rose (1993) – that appear to characterize much of the urban policy mobilities work. We argue that, on reflection, these ‘assumed contrasts either break down or involve more complex relationships than is commonly realized’ (Sayer 1991: 283). Rather than be rejected out of hand, we argue that dualisms should be critically reflected upon and examined in terms of relationality. Sayer (1991) provides an excellent discussion of the implications of dualistic thinking for geographical analyses and ties thinking in our discipline to wider, longstanding currents of scholarship on binaries and dialectics.

The first dualism running through the urban policy mobilities field is that of success/failure. The study of how and why certain policies get mobilized and become best practice models for policy-makers elsewhere is the study of ‘successes’ – at least as defined within dominant policy-making circles (for different critiques of ‘successism’ in this context, see Wolman, 1992; Jacobs, 2012). For example, the dualistic separation between, say, Barcelona as a ‘success’ of post-industrial regeneration and Detroit as a ‘failure’ is, fundamentally, the study of ideology and power in the politics of policy-making. Whether this focus on the construction and labeling of ‘successes’ (and their material effects) can be characterized as coming at the expense of the study of failures or, as Williams and Pendras (2013) have pointed out, a middle ground of ‘stasis’ or slow change, is worthy of further discussion, however. Neither success nor failure is absolute. One does not make sense without the other. Rather, success and failure are relationally constituted in politics and in policy-making. Studies of urban policy mobilities should, then, reflect critically on approaches to success/failure and their relational constitution even as they simultaneously study the effects of their empirical separation and their reification in policy-making.

A second, related, dualism is that of presence/absence, in which the existence of policies in some locations is contrasted with their absence elsewhere. By its very nature, urban policy mobilities scholarship tends to focus on presences over absences: the presence of a policy in a particular

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1 Thanks to Sophie McCann for pointing out this usage of ‘canon.’
location, its movement in and through others, its simultaneous, if modified, presence in multiple locations, the implications for those places and for the content, form and shape of the policy itself. Certainly, this approach can be read as constructing presence against absence -- ignoring places from which best practice policy models do not emerge and in which they do not seem to be ‘successfully’ introduced. This would seem to be wrongheaded because it obscures the interests and power present in the construction of presence and absence. Our argument is that there is scope to think critically about the ways in which presence and absence are not absolute or necessarily opposed but, rather exist in relation to each other. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to think through the absences that exist within the presences we study. In a recent contribution, for example, Prince (2012) argues that the metaphors used in the policy mobilities discussion must be critically evaluated and that a metaphor of spatial fluidity can help overcome the reifying tendency of some of our dualisms

Thinking through the presence/absence dualism has at least two consequences for studies of policy mobilities. First, focusing on relationality leads us to take seriously the role that absent presences play in the construction of policy. When policies are being discussed in a particular place, references to examples of similar policies elsewhere abound, as does the influence of ‘outside’ consultants and think tanks. It is sometimes the absence of growth, for example, that encourages attempts to embed a new policy model in place. The introduction of Business Improvement Districts into England from Canada via the US was, in part, due to the absence of an existing model of generating revenues from businesses. Pursuing this reasoning would generate various other sorts of influential ‘absences,’ including national states and international agencies. A second consequence is political. Absence is fundamental to policy mobilization because it legitimizes attempts to change and embed new policy models. Absence of success in an extant policy model, or the absence of knowledge about how to address a particular governance problem are the sorts of present absences that are central to the politics of policy-making. Indeed, they are the basis for what Nick Clarke (2012) calls, ‘actually existing comparative urbanism’ in which urban elites compare their cities to others. Constructed, relationally-produced absence is very much about power and, therefore, we suggest that studies of urban policy mobilities should approach absence and presence not as dichotomous – one here and one over there – but rather as intertwined, mutually constituting, reinforcing, and political.

A third dualism is that of mobilities/immobilities. Much of the work in the urban policy mobilities approaches has, almost by definition, emphasized those policies that appear to be “mobile,” where there is evidence of the policy being moved from location to another and/or where
the policy appears in multiple and inter-connected locations. In some cases, reference is made to a whole policy moving, in others to the circulation of aspects or features of a policy, such as its institutional arrangement, name, objectives or underlying philosophy. The ‘other,’ so to speak, in the literature is the group of policies that do not appear to have travelled, policies that appear to exist in just one location, for example. Here mobility and immobility are understood as absolutes. Yet, mobility and immobility are frequently mutually constitutive. For, even within the most ‘mobile’ of policies there are elements of immobility, not least the institutional and physical infrastructures through which they travel and are conditioned (Temenos and McCann 2013). Furthermore, since policies do not move fully formed from place to place, some parts move while others prove less mobile and remain fixed in place. For example, when Business Improvement Districts were introduced into the UK from the US, their bottom-up emphasis, an element associated with the character of the American state, was left immobile and replaced in Britain by what might be called ‘centrally-prescribed localism,’ reflecting the centralized nature of the UK state (Ward 2006). In at least these two ways, mobilities and immobilities are intertwined.

In this very short intervention we argue for the acknowledgement of the dualisms present in urban policy mobilities research. Yet, we do not necessarily suggest that they must be banished from the field *a priori*. The creation of value-laden dualisms is a fundamental aspect of social hegemony and must be an empirical object of study. More pertinently, analytical dualisms must be thought through critically. We suggest that, in the cases we have outlined, it is important to acknowledge the utility of thinking about relational dyads, rather than oppositional dualisms (Sayer, 1991). This means understanding their elements, not as dichotomous but as intertwined, mutually constituting and reinforcing. To do otherwise would be to fail to learn from previous waves of socio-spatial thinking in which dualisms have been a reoccurring feature (Murdoch 1997).

**References**


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