Complicating the mobile policy world


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Policy ‘modeling,’ policy mobilizing, and the ideological and institutional conditions that shape policies-on-the-move seem to be increasingly on the agenda for social scientists, policy-makers, and political activists. A number of works in geography and cognate disciplines have sought to conceptualize the ways in which policy travels and what traveling policies do to and for the contexts through which they move. Some of this work also operationalizes and extends these conceptualizations through empirical studies. Yet, there has been no book-length study of mobile policies from a critical geographical perspective.

Fast Policy fills this gap and offers many pointers and provocations for further research. Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore are ideally positioned to provide this addition to the policy mobilities discussion. Their individual and collective work in the late 1990s and early 2000s involved an initial attempt to conceptualize how, why, and where certain policy models moved. Their insights inspired others to pursue the ‘policy mobilities’ approach later in the decade, while Peck and Theodore themselves continued to shape it. They contributed significantly, but not solely, through their attention to policy mutation, and their insistence that the study of mobile policy models must take account of the wider ideological, political, and institutional fields that condition their ‘model’ status and their very mobility.

Fast Policy, then, has been keenly anticipated and it doesn’t disappoint. It makes a strong conceptual statement, or set of statements, about how we should understand policy-making as it relates to the local contexts of policy development and adoption, the wider landscapes through which policies travel, and the institutions and ideologies that are fundamental to its development and dissemination. ‘Fast policy,’ the authors argue, is not simply a reference to velocity. Instead, it connotes a contemporary condition in which policy-making happens in compressed contexts of interconnection and continual inter-referencing and experimentation. The book details exhaustive research into Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT: payments to low income families, based on stipulations like children’s attendance at school) and Participatory Budgeting (PB: methods of incorporating community input into local government spending decisions).

These two policy models are most associated with Latin America, but have been mobilized through the (inter)actions of a range of local, national, and global actors. Peck and Theodore show that in order to understand the way policies get anointed as worthy of
adoption, we must understand the specific contexts and conjunctures from which they are drawn and to which they travel. The book also shows how those contexts not only shape early versions of the policies, but also get used as strategic reference points for the policy models as they are ‘sold’ elsewhere. These reference points can aid in somewhat ‘faithful’ replications of the models, but they can also be used to present superficial versions of the original policies or the might be the locations from which new adopters rhetorically and practically distance themselves as they rework policies to different ends.

An important contribution of the book’s two case studies is how they highlight the political and practical complexities of CCT and PB: “the progressive potential of CCTs exceeded our expectations, while the radicalizing capabilities of PB seemed to have been almost exhausted in practical terms. … there are (social) dynamics here worthy of serious attention beyond what might be deduced from ‘reading off’ more generic models of neoliberalization”(32). The book is valuable, then, because it is not a straightforward tale of linear progression (whether ideological or geographical) from origins to adopters or from specific ideological contexts to similar political moments elsewhere.

The book is well written, with a driving prose style that carries the reader along from place to place, policy iteration to policy iteration, and from argument to argument. However, I think one of its best features is when the authors slow down to reflect. The book includes three ‘Reflections’ sections – on methodology, in the first, and on principles of analysis, in the second and third. These prompt numerous thoughts that can inform ongoing research and debate on policy mobilities. For example, in the methodological reflection, we are warned not to be “inside dopester[s]” (37) or “network dopester[s]” (38) when studying policy movements – particularly when trying to study them from the inside. On the one hand, this is a salutary caution about the need to maintain critical distance when engaging in any qualitative or ethnographic research project. Yet, it also raises questions about the differences that might exist between studying policies that one is politically opposed to, or politically ambivalent about, versus those for which one has a degree of sympathy.

Peck and Theodore are right to caution against uncritical credulity when researchers are embedded in the contexts or networks they are researching. Certainly, this issue of positionality and critical distance (or closeness) has long been a concern of ethnographers, among others. Yet, maintaining a critical distance – being able to travel in but not with networks, as they put it – may have extra ethical, political, and analytical challenges when those networks are ones with whose aims and methods one generally agrees. The policy mobilities literature would benefit from an ongoing discussion of how to negotiate ‘network dopesterism’ when studying policy models that promote social justice. It would seem to me that we must still maintain some degree of critical remove in these situations, but to do so will involve different strategies from the ones needed to study hegemonic policies. This is not to say that the methods of analysis laid out in Fast Policy are incompatible with the study of radical or progressive ideas. Indeed, the last passage of the book considers what insights it might offer to anti-neoliberal experiments: they will not succeed, the authors argue, if they are only focused on better internal design, without equal attention to methods of dissemination and persuasion; they will fail if local victories are their goal and only achievement. These observations are
tantalizingly brief, however, and one awaits with anticipation a future book, by these authors or by others, that pursues them further. That book may be entitled *Just Policy*.

*Fast Policy* covers a great deal of literal and figurative territory. Its analysis extends far beyond a fetishistic concern with the internal design of policies or with formal models of policy cycles. Fast policy is a social condition, the authors assert and, therefore, studying it is about studying much more than policy, narrowly defined. Nevertheless, ‘policy’ is central to the book and to the wider discussion into which it fits. But what might be the limits of an explicit focus on policy? Peck and Theodore's book is, in many ways, a study of ideas – ideas made powerful and fast by the resources backing them. So what is gained and lost by the study of policy ideas, _per se_? On the one hand, many ideas only shape the world by being articulated with state institutions. Thus, studying policies focuses our analyses on powerful ideas and their effects. Yet, on the other hand, many ideas are not embedded in policies, or not yet, or not in many places. So, the study of this wider set of ideas might also benefit from the policy mobilities literature, and, certainly, insights from literatures on activism or social movements, for example, can inform how we analyze mobile policy models. We must not fetishize or reify ‘policy.’ Thus, seeing the critical study of policy as the study of the geography of ideas and their attendant persuasive discourses, as I think Peck and Theodore do, allows us to maintain a critically open stance toward how studies of policy mobilities might develop in the future.

According to Peck and Theodore, “All models have their makers … but the generative capacities and downstream consequences of models invariably exceed and outrun those of their architects” (234). Nonetheless, models set the terms for debate and become resources for future practice. Indeed, the authors argue, “[t]he act of commanding attention is central to the very definition of a _model_ … This is what models do” (234). *Fast Policy* is, itself, a model of how to study contemporary policy-making and how to write about it. The book demands attention. Yet, it has now exceeded its makers and has become another reference point in a far-from-settled discussion of why, how, and where to study policy-making. The book's readers, like the audiences of policy models, will not be passive. Rather, they will be “continuously engaged in translating and rewriting the original script” (236). The book is a model, but by no means the model, for doing critical policy research. It complicates the mobile policy world but in a way that should encourage, rather than foreclose, other analyses. Its ideas will travel, mutate, and get assembled with others. They will act as inspirations for some and foils for others. Before its ideas can have effects, however, the book must gain the audience it demands. Scholars interested in how the contemporary world works should get a copy. Fast.