Policies

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Introduction

Certain policy models that are anointed as ‘best practices’ seem to quickly gain political currency across the globe. In parallel, cities that are defined as successful places for policy invention, implementation, and emulation become part of a global discussion. These inter-referential and comparative impulses are evident in municipal decision-makers’ attempts to attract the ‘creative class,’ enhance downtown business areas, become the ‘greenest’ city, or implement new forms of transit. Indeed, references to models from elsewhere empower particular interests, regimes, and constituencies as they engage in local politics and governance. Yet, we should not assume that the policies themselves, or their proliferation, are somehow naturally or unproblematically good or ‘best.’ What is important is not so much that they move around in some abstract sense, but that people move them around for particular purposes. New planning and design strategies, economic development models, etc. are social products, built up from the ground over time and bearing the imprint of the interests involved in producing them (McCann, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; McCann & Ward, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010a; Ward, 2006).

The global proliferation of particular policy models reflects and constitutes not only the local contexts in which they are operationalised and experienced but also important yet understudied global geographies of knowledge circulation and territorialization. How, then, might we characterize, conceptualize, and research these policy movements and mutations? How are these circulations activated, sustained, and directed? Through which spaces do they move and what sorts of infrastructures facilitate and channel their movement?

Contemporary thought in geography has employed the notion of ‘policy mobilities’ as a frame through which to analyze the practices and power relations inherent in the way that
particular policy intervention, defined as a best practice model with wider applicability, is then mobilized through global circuits of policy knowledge, and appears in mutated forms elsewhere (McCann and Ward, 2011). This approach is characterized by a concern for the actors, practices, spaces, and infrastructures that affect the (re)production, adoption and travel of policies and best practice models across space and time. Attention to what happens to policies while they are ‘in motion’ is another important focus, since the paths traveled and the things that happen to policies along the way are just as important as the policies themselves and the places they affect (McCann, 2011a).

A research agenda has begun to emerge that offers a rich conceptualization of ongoing practices, institutions, and ideas that link global circuits of policy knowledge and local policy practice, politics, and actors (McCann, 2011a; McCann & Ward, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010c). This conceptual work informs, but also benefits from, detailed empirical research into how the local and sometimes immobile or fixed aspects of place interact with policies mobilized from elsewhere. Indeed, it can be argued, building upon Harvey (1982) and Massey (1991), that the tension between policy as fixed, territorial, or place-specific, on the one hand, and dynamic, global, and relational on the other is not a problem for conceptualizing policy mobilities. Rather, it is precisely this tension and its productive effects on policies and places that should be our research focus (Massey, 2011).

**Circulating policies: Spaces, mobilities, infrastructures**

The policy mobilities approach develops detailed empirical analyses of the contexts and practices of policy mobilization, critical analyses of inter-local policy mobilizations that seeks to maintain
a focus on wider contexts, an attention to policy mutation, hybridity and emergence, and rich accounts of the politics of policy mobilities. Space does not allow a full discussion of these aspects (but see Peck & Theodore, 2010; McCann & Ward, 2011, In Press). Here we focus on how the policy mobilities approach draws upon the wider mobilities discussion and on how geographers conceptualize the actors, places, and infrastructures that facilitate the circulation of policies.

**Mobilities and policy mobilities**

Attention to notions of mobilization, as well as assemblage and mutation, in critical policy studies stems from a dissatisfaction with a longstanding literature in political science which focuses on policy *transfer*. Geographers have critiqued that literature for its narrow focus on only some policy actors and institutions and its tendency toward a literal and somewhat flat notion of transfer, in which policies are assumed to move fully-formed from point a to b (see McCann & Ward [In Press] for a summary of the critique and Marsh & Evans (2012) for a response).

Reference to the mobilities approach has allowed a shift in the terms of debate from policy transfer to ‘policy mobilities.’ Conceptually, mobilities scholars reject both understandings of places as natural steady-state containers of socio-spatial processes and also the glamorization of free-flowing movement as the new ‘unsteady-state’ of globalization. Thus, they question received spatial binaries like global/local or near/far and emphasize the importance of connections. Furthermore, they take issue with the ‘black-boxing’ of the powerful socio-spatial relations that constitute the connection between the beginning and end points in any
displacement process. While these end-points are important, powerful, and meaningful, so is what happens in transit among them (Cresswell 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobilities are, nonetheless, tied to and facilitated by various ‘moorings,’ organizing nodes, or fixed infrastructures. They “entail distinct social spaces that orchestrate new forms of social life around such nodes, for example, stations, hotels, motorways, resorts, airports, leisure complexes, cosmopolitan cities, beaches, galleries and roadside parks” (Sheller & Urry 2006, 213).

The study of policy through a mobilities frame adds spaces of knowledge production and circulation, including the Internet, social media, and the ‘geoweb,’ conferences, mega-events, and sites of protest to the spaces that most mobilities scholarship has addressed (but see Larsen et al 2006). These are sites of encounter, persuasion, and motivation. They are places where mobilized policy knowledge must touch down in one sense or another to gain fuel and traction, as in the case of conferences where encounter around ideas directs and invigorates policy circulation (Adey 2006; England & Ward 2007; Ward & Cook 2012; McCann 2011c). Furthermore, a focus on policy emphasizes and elaborates the role that states at various scales play in shaping geographies of knowledge circulation. Tracing the travels of policies allows us to disrupt common conceptualizations of states as territorially, politically, and socially bounded entities. Instead, we can conceptualize interconnections among ‘unbounded’ states and state actors as crucial circulatory infrastructures while simultaneously emphasizing the continued importance of territorial fixity and embeddedness – of both state actors and other policy actors – in powerful geographies of knowledge production.
Informational and institutional infrastructures

‘Informational infrastructures’ (McCann 2004, 2008, 2011a; Cook and Ward 2011) are institutions, organizations, and technologies that frame and package knowledge about best policy practices, successful cities, and cutting-edge ideas for specific audiences. There are at least four sub-sets of these infrastructures:

(1) States, from the local to the national, and related international organizations play crucial roles in defining and directing flows of knowledge about policy. State actors, from politicians to bureaucrats engage with global circuits of policy knowledge, learning new models or promoting their own innovations to others. They have the power to implement the new ideas in their jurisdictions, thus lending them legitimacy (when they can be defined as successful).

(2) Educators and trainers formally educate new generations of policy actors, usually in institutions of higher education and subsequent professional development training. They frame knowledge by turning their students’ attention to particular, ‘hot’ policy models, gurus, and exemplary cities. This knowledge frame is legitimized through networks of credentialization.

(3) Professional and activist organizations also frame, codify, and facilitate the circulation of policy knowledge through their professional publications, information clearinghouse websites, email lists, awards, conferences, workshops, and field trips (e.g., see McCann’s [2011a] discussions of UN Habitat and Ward’s [2006, 2007, 2010b] analysis of institutions spreading the model of Business Improvement Districts). Through their activities, these organizations anoint certain policies and cities as worthy of notice and emulation.
(4) The popular media also frame and channel knowledge about urban policy. Their dissemination and repetition of narratives about what constitutes good or bad policies, policy gurus, and exemplary cities shape the mental maps of policy actors, thus partly defining and directing popular and political policy discussions and agendas (McCann, 2004).

In combination, these actors and institutions compose the “fragile relays, contested locales, and fissiparous affiliations” – the socio-spatial infrastructures, of policy mobilization (Rose 1999, 51).

**Placing policy mobilities**

How, then, have geographers and others working on policy mobilities understood these spatialities and infrastructures? Following Massey (1991), they understand urban places as unbounded, as nodes within networks of relations, or as “the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing … open and … internally multiple” (Massey 2005: 141; 2011). They are assemblages of policy models and expertise drawn out of circulation and gathered in local contexts. Yet, these policy assemblages (Prince 2010) tend to be constrained and conditioned by various forces, legacies, and pre-existing conditions, including infrastructures. The range of opportunities for a city with a particular heavy industrial heritage and a declining population and tax base, for example, are likely to be quite different from a city with a booming economy and a growing population.

Critical research on policy-making seeks to grapple with the tension-filled relationships between territorial fixity and place specificity and global flows, relations, and interconnections.
Similarly, researchers balance studies of the wider conditioning contexts and ideologies that delimit and define ‘best’ practice models with serious consideration of the role of individuals and small groups of policy actors in mobilizing and operationalizing policies.

*Conditioning contexts and ‘middling’ technocrats*

Policy mobilities researchers reject the notion of policies as unitary objects, found in particular places and then moved in complete form across space. Rather, geographers consider “power relations … [conditioning] what is seen, and what counts, in terms of policy innovations, preferred models, and best practices” Peck (2011, 791).

Peck and Theodore’s (2010b) analysis of the travels of ‘conditional cash transfer’ (CCT) anti-poverty programs pays attention to “institutional and ideological conditions that variously enable, envelope, and energize [the] purposeful mobilization” of policies (Peck 2011, 793). CCT policies have been in place across the Global South for over a decade, are promoted by the World Bank, and were adopted by New York City after policy actors from there studied Mexico’s federal *Oportunidades* program. It was distilled, translated, and mobilized by Mexican technocrats, then adopted in localities elsewhere. Peck notes that CCTs “have been actively co-produced with the new [global institutional] ‘consensus’ on poverty alleviation and as such can be seen as mobile and somewhat self-fulfilling affirmations of that evolving consensus” (Peck 2011b, 176). CCTs then, become ‘best’ practice models not so much as a result of their inherent qualities, but because they are produced by and reflect the ideological/institutional context, or infrastructure, in which they have emerged.

Larner and Laurie (2010) go further in their study of individual policy actors. “Travelling technocrats,” they argue, are not only high-level agents of elite institutions like the World Bank.
“‘[M]iddling’ technocrats” play a crucial role in the spread and, crucially, the implementation of new policy ideas since, “[t]hey are … on the ground as employees, contractors or consultants, rather than occupying high status roles in international think tanks, government offices or executive boards of transnational corporations” (Larner & Laurie, 2010, 219). Similarly Kuus (2011, 1144) argues that the study of bureaucratic actors allows “a closer examination of the interconnections between geopolitical practices and the agents of these practices.” From both perspectives, the ‘policy actors’ who both utilize and constitute the institutional spaces and informational infrastructures of policy mobilities are not only those elites who write the policies, nor are they only “the hegemonic institutions and actors, and NGOs and transnational social movements, who feature in most existing accounts” (Larner & Laurie, 2010, 224-225). Rather, they are also those ‘middling’ actors who engage in the seemingly banal technocratic (infrastructural) work of teaching and spreading new models.

Inter-urban policy mobilities and policy tourism

Many policy models that gain popularity are associated, to varying degrees of accuracy, with particular cities (e.g., Bogota for transportation, Porto Alegre for participatory budgeting, Copenhagen for bicycle lanes) and, certainly, most travelling policy models journey through cities in one way or another. It is perhaps not surprising then that most of the work on policy mobilities has an urban orientation. Ward’s (2006) study of Business Improvement Districts is a clear example (see also: Ward, 2007, 2010b, 2011, and Cook 2008, 2009). BIDs are areas of cities where businesses have agreed to be taxed at a higher rate and to use the revenue to fund place-specific governance strategies like private security, extra street cleaning, or advertizing. They are a particular mobile policy model that is representative of both the activities and
priorities of contemporary urban business leaders and politicians and also of the wider institutional and ideological context of global neoliberalism. Ward traces the BID model’s development in one city, its circulation through particular infrastructures – government institutions, professional bodies, specific places – and its adoption, in modified form elsewhere.

Ward highlights the role New York has played as a destination and learning site for those interested in seeing how BIDs are operationalized. These trips are important elements of policy mobilization and, in them, we can see the intersection of the policy mobilities notion of informational infrastructures with the more traditional idea of physical infrastructures underpinning movement, as discussed by mobilities scholars. Institutional and informational infrastructures of knowledge mobilization create road maps for policy entrepreneurs as they look to study policy models in the field while their physical travels are facilitated and mediated by infrastructures like airports, conference facilities, etc.

These trips are a form of ‘policy tourism,’ in which the tours on which visiting delegations are taken and the places they visit are carefully regulated by their organizers, thus the knowledge generated through this practice is relationally produced and packaged. Yet, contemporary policy tourists regard seeing a policy operating in its ‘natural environment’ as an effective learning experience (Gonzalez, 2010), as have generations of policy actors before them (Clarke 2011a, 2011b). In this sense, the ‘touristic’ aspect of policy mobilization – fact-finding trips, site visits, and conferences attendance – resonates with Hannam et. al.’s (2006, 12-13) assertion that, “the time spent traveling is not dead time” but involves inspiring activities. Such policy travel ideally provides a focused retreat-like context to share ideas with peers and study on-the-ground manifestations of policy models. On the ‘supply side,’ cities that are popular destinations for delegations of policy actors often develop protocols and narratives that make
dealing with policy tourists efficient, edifying, and also convey a consistent message.

These combinations of routeways, encounters, and stories are forms of infrastructure since one of the purposes of infrastructures is to facilitate and direct repeated actions, processes, or movements in a way that is predictable and largely invisible. Again, these informational infrastructures are interconnected with the material infrastructures of physical travel and it is worth emphasizing that these infrastructures are themselves conditioned by wider ideological fields that define which policies, which cities, which policy gurus are appropriate objects of tourism and learning.

*Local politics and global infrastructures*

Identifying these nested hierarchies of ideological, institutional, informational, and physical infrastructures does not mean that the definition of a policy as a ‘best’ practice or the definition of a city as a worthy ‘model’ for others is a straightforward matter, however. The critical question is, best for whom? Every policy and every policy infrastructure serves particular interests more so than others. For some, a policy encouraging dense condo living around a downtown core is a beneficial form of ‘revitalization.’ Yet, for others, the same model of new urbanism threatens to gentrify existing neighborhoods and displace vulnerable populations. The question of whether such a model is good for a city then becomes not a technical question of zoning bylaws, green building technologies, and rapid transit but a political one of social justice, equity, and community resilience.

The study of policy mobilities, like the study of all mobilities, must then be the study of politics and power. In general terms, when a locally-developed policy becomes a global ‘model’ by receiving accolades and being copied by others, we might ask whether this positive attention
is likely to confer weight and legitimacy on its advocates and thus increase their influence in the local politics of policy-making? When a ‘best practice’ policy model is brought into a city from elsewhere, is it somewhat armored against local criticism and questioning by its global renown, even as it has to be modified to the local context? Furthermore, when local policy-making is ‘globalized’ in these ways, does local politics also take on a partially global character as those involved in debating the pros and cons of a new policy direction in a specific city seek to characterize and evaluate how, in whose interests, and with what outcomes it operated in cities elsewhere?

In this regard, policy experts and consultants whose travels spread ‘best practice’ models are not only members of a growing ‘consultocracy’ (Saint-Martin 2000) who help to constitute infrastructures of policy knowledge, but they are also political actors. Temenos and McCann (2012), for example, chart how a sustainability framework originally associated closely with a particular consultant and originally developed for the corporate sector was introduced into a municipal planning process because its precepts dovetailed with local political elites’ desire to both educate the local population in growth management planning and recycling practices and also to develop and market a brand for their municipality as a model of sustainable development.

An analysis of the local politics of policy-making also highlights how activists hoping to radically change cities can also be transfer agents, using similar infrastructures and strategies as business and political elites to spread their own particular ‘best practices;’ a process Purcell (2008) dubs ‘fast resistance transfer.’ For example, the development of Vancouver, Canada’s drug policy at the turn of the current century involved significant changes in local discourses around injection drug use, public health, and the (de)merits of criminalizing users of illicit drugs. In a few years, a standard criminalization approach was replaced by a strategy in which drug use
was defined as primarily a public health issue and a new facility was established to allow users to inject under supervision and in relative safety. This new ‘harm reduction’ strategy was modeled on several European cities via Internet and document searches, fact-finding trips, conferences, guest experts, lectures, workshops, etc. (McCann, 2008). During this time, local politics became framed by points of reference elsewhere. Critics of the harm reduction approach opposed its implementation in Vancouver by articulating different stories of its impacts in European cities while also offering up other places as alternative models (McCann, 2011b). The local politics of policy-making is, then, also a global(ized) politics. It is one that tends to be driven by hegemonic elites but, like any hegemony, it can be challenged and restructured.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been both to outline the notion of policy mobilities and also to discuss the actors, institutions, spaces, and infrastructures that activate and direct policy mobilities. We have shown how geographers with an interest in the critical study of policy utilize the notions of mobilities and infrastructures as part of an analysis of the spatialities of knowledge. We suggest that the informational infrastructures that underpin the global circulation of policy models work at different levels of abstraction to condition the possibilities of policy change, we point out that these infrastructures are social and can best be understood through a lens that focuses closely on micro-practices and micro-sites of policy-making as well as on larger ideological and institutional contexts, and, finally, we argue that, as a social process, policy mobilization is fundamentally about power and politics.

The policy mobilities approach is recent and, therefore, will continue to be fleshed-out
conceptually and empirically through debate, critique, and empirical application. Certainly, questions of how policies move or don’t, what happens in the process, and what are their socio-spatial implications remain to be fully answered. More specifically, three issues are likely to shape much future discussion in the literature. First, there is a question of methodology. Researchers have largely employed a number of ‘standard’ qualitative, case study methods – interviews, discourse and document analysis, participant or direct observation – but with an attention to literally and figuratively following policies and policy actors through particular spaces and infrastructures of knowledge production and political struggle/legitimation (Cochrane and Ward, 2012; McCann and Ward, 2012). More might be done to elaborate on these ‘mobile methods’ (Büscher et al 2011). Second, Robinson (2011) and Massey (2011) rightly argue for a more serious consideration of the policy innovations and productive connections developed in Global South cities in order to “draw us towards alternative maps of causality [and] differently constituted cases for comparison” (Robinson, 2011a, 13; see also Clarke 2011; Peck & Theodore 2010b; Roy & Ong, 2011). Third, there is the question of immobility, failure, and disconnection. Not all policies are mobilized and not all mobilized policies find receptive audiences elsewhere. Furthermore, there is geographies of policy mobility are as uneven as any other geographies and they reflect power differentials in access to policy networks and communities. Like physical infrastructures, informational infrastructures channel, delimit, and prohibit flows in ways that reflect longstanding legacies of power relations. Thus, attention must be paid to immobilities so we do not normalize or glamorize movement (Adey 2006, Sheller & Urry 2006). As Jacobs (2011, 8) notes, “Sites of failure, absence and mutation are significant empirical instances of differentiation.”

Commonalities, we suggest, among policies are not the result of happenstance. They are,
in part, the product of purposeful mobilizations and their social and physical infrastructures. Mobilities and infrastructures of all types facilitate and channel interconnections but they also delimit and contain flows and access to flows. Thus the policy mobilities approach seeks to analyze the inherent fixities and mobilities of policy-making as powerful socio-spatial formations that deeply impact everyday life.

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