

THE PERSISTENCE OF POLICY MOBILITIES: MULTIPLE ORIGINS, INTER-DISCIPLINARY DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS

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ABSTRACT – Starting with the field’s various intellectual antecedents, revealing the disciplinary elements combined in its constitution, this paper highlights five important characteristics of policy mobilities. We analyse and explore each in turn, discussing epistemological and empirical themes as the field has evolved and grown over the last two and a half decades. We pay particular attention to the contributions from those in geography and planning, as this work has sought to explain public policymaking across such diverse policy areas as economic development, education, health, transport and welfare. We argue for the need to revisit the role of the nation state in policy mobilities research, an absent presence in the field thus far. In conclusion, the paper ends by discussing how focusing on a scalar politics through the nation-state can enrich future contributions to the field.

Keywords: Policy mobilities; scale; nation-state; policymaking; informational infrastructures.

RESUMO – A PERSISTÊNCIA DA MOBILIDADE DE POLÍTICAS: MÚLTIPLAS ORIGENS, DESENVOLVIMENTOS INTERDISCIPLINARES E AGENDAS DE INVESTIGAÇÃO FUTURAS. Começando com os vários antecedentes intelectuais do campo, através dos quais revelamos os elementos disciplinares combinados na sua constituição, este artigo destaca cinco características importantes da mobilidade de políticas. Analisamos e exploramos cada uma por sua vez, discutindo temas epistemológicos e empíricos à medida que o campo evoluiu e cresceu ao longo dos últimos vinte e cinco anos. Damos especial atenção às contribuições provenientes da geografia e do planeamento, uma vez que este trabalho procurou explicar a formulação de políticas públicas em áreas tão diversas como desenvolvimento económico, educação, saúde, transporte e bem-estar. Argumentamos pela necessidade de visitar o papel do estado-nação na investigação das mobilidades de políticas, uma presença ausente no campo até agora. Em conclusão, o artigo termina discutindo como o foco numa política escalar através do estado-nação pode enriquecer as contribuições futuras para o campo.

Palavras-chave: Mobilidade de políticas; escala; estado-nação; formulação de políticas; infraestruturas informacionais.

RESUMEN – LA PERSISTENCIA DE LA MOVILIDAD DE POLÍTICAS: MÚLTIPLES ORÍGENES, DESARROLLOS INTERDISCIPLINARIOS Y AGENDAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN FUTURAS. Comenzando con los diversos antecedentes intelectuales del campo, revelando los elementos disciplinares combinados en su constitución, este artículo destaca cinco características importantes de las movilidades de políticas. Analizamos y exploramos cada una a su vez, discutiendo temas epistemológicos y empíricos a medida que el campo ha evolucionado y crecido durante los últimos veinticinco años. Prestamos especial atención a las contribuciones de aquellos en geografía y planificación, ya que este trabajo ha buscado explicar la formulación de políticas públicas en áreas tan diversas como desarrollo económico, educación, salud, transporte y bienestar. Argumentamos la necesidad de revisar el papel del estado nación en la investigación de las movilidades de políticas, una presencia ausente en el campo hasta ahora. En conclusión, el artículo termina discutiendo cómo el enfoque en una política escalar a través del estado-nación puede enriquecer las contribuciones futuras al campo.

Palavras clave: Movilidades de políticas; escala; estado-nación; formulación de políticas; infraestructuras informacionales.

Recebido: 28/06/2024. Aceite: 31/10/2024. Publicado: 21/02/2025.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The field of policy mobilities emerged from a number of intellectual antecedents.
- Five themes have characterised policy mobilities.
- The nation-state has always been present in urban policy-making, but has not always been visible.
- Bringing the nation-state back in also necessitates considering the scalar politics of policy mobilities.

I. INTRODUCTION

How best to explain and understand the arriving and making up of public policy in the twenty-first century? This is an intellectual challenge, the addressing of which has involved drawing upon elements of a number of disciplines. These include architecture, anthropology, geography, history, planning, and political science. Each of these consists of contributions working on particular aspects and issues related to something they label as “policy”. The combining of these elements over the last couple of decades has constituted the emergence of the field known as “policy mobilities”. Over a decade ago, Peck (2011, p. 774) argued, “the mobilities approach resembles a rolling conversation rather than a coherent paradigm”. This is one which is home to those working across Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Science and Technology Studies (STS), as well as approaches that have been more traditionally associated with policy mobilities: political economy, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism, and, as a result, it is a field to which there are several co-existing and overlapping strands.

In this context, we provide an overview of this rather unruly field of policy mobilities. Not the first of its kind, of course (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Peck, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2013; Schäfer, 2022), and likely not the last, nevertheless, in the first section we pull together the different intellectual starting points for the field’s emergence, in particular, its reaction against the political science/public administration work on policy transfer. In the second section, we turn to five issues or themes that have characterised and structured to date the field: geographies of public policy-making, the politics of public policy-making, the privileging of “elites”, the role of authenticity, and informational infrastructures in public policy-making. We could have highlighted many more, and these are just a taster of the rich and varied work produced within it. The geographies of public policymaking highlight the inter-connected and variegated geographies, while the political nature of ‘making-up’ policy focuses on the role of interpretation, mediation and translation. Third, the privileging of “elites” in the making of public policy and questions of ‘who counts’ as expert is explored. We then discuss the role of authenticity and of “being there”, such as in examples of policy tourism. Finally, is the notion of “informational infrastructures”, which encourages, facilitates and supports the making of public policy as potentially mobile. Next, we make the case for bringing back in the nation-state to studies of policy mobilities. This we do because, of course, it never went away at the object of our analysis.

We argue that one important strand of future policy mobilities research should consider the processual and relational ways in which multi-level governance is at work in the making of policy. While the nation-state is and always has been present in the making of urban policy, it has not always been visible. Furthermore, the nation-state’s presence is geographically variegated. It’s lack of visibility does not however mean that the nation-state is any less powerful in the making of policies, and it can have profound effects on whether or not policies become ‘best practice’ or are able to be made mobile. Therefore, we argue that more attention to the nation-state in research on policy mobilities can help to draw out important political (both big P and little p politics) processes through which ideas are given the power of mobility. In the conclusion, we discuss how bringing in the nation-state also necessitates grappling with the scalar politics of policy mobilities.

II. POLICY MOBILITIES: BEYOND A “ROLLING CONVERSATION” TO A SPRAWLING, INTER-DISCIPLINARY ‘FIELD’

Where to start? Geographically and intellectually? In asking and seeking to answer these questions in relation to “policy mobilities”, we do so from within the field we seek to represent. Critical review exercises of this sort are never neutral, despite what their authors might sometimes claim. We

acknowledge our position as urban geographers of particular intellectual stripes (post-structural political economists) in the generation of this field, together with many others of course. Hence, what follows makes no claim over objectivity, but rather reflects our organising and tidying of a still growing and unruly set of contributions, with the aim of opening up (not closing down) debates and discussions over the field's future.

Let us rewind twenty-five years. The very early 2000s saw a small number of studies of national welfare reform in the UK and the US (Theodore & Peck, 2000; Peck, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003, 2004). As explained at the time, the focus was on the "phenomenon of rapid international (and increasingly 'interlocal') policy transfers in welfare-to-work/workfare" (Peck & Theodore, 2001, p. 429). In the comparison of the UK and the US, they joined a long tradition of studies from across political science, public administration and sociology (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Rose, 1991; Wolman, 1992). Yet the focus was also quite different from these past studies. It questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions in these disciplines over how something called 'policy' moved, or transferred, from one location to another. That large and still growing body of work on policy transfer spread across political science journals continues to seek to model or to theorize the process of transfer, creating typologies of the actors and institutions involved, identifying the power relations through which it occurs, and specifying the conditions under which it occurs (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012). Peck (2011, p. 774) has termed this approach "the rational-formalist tradition of work on policy transfer". For a consideration of the evolution of this field in relation to policy mobilities literature, see McCann and K. Ward (2012) and Cook (2015). Those working out of other disciplines, such as anthropology, architecture, and history, have studied the role of professions in making policy across geographical locations, contributing to the shaping of the field (Cook *et al.*, 2015; Gómez & Oinas, 2023; Harris & Moore, 2013; Healey & Upton, 2010; Nasr & Volait, 2003; Stanek, 2020; Shore & Wright, 1997; Ward, S., 2007). This focuses on multiple actors and their relationships to places beyond which they live, and work has shaped the relational-constructivist approaches to understanding urban planning and public policy making (Baker *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, most recently it has been the turn of those in criminology, education and sociology to contribute (Ball, 2016; Laing *et al.*, 2024; Lewis, 2021; McKenzie, 2017; Newburn *et al.*, 2018; Pitton & McKenzie, 2022; Savage, 2020; Savage *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, and perhaps trite to note, the field subsequently labelled "policy mobilities" materialised out of a set of already existing interests. What often sets apart these "new" fields from their intellectual predecessors is their combinatory nature, and so it has been with how policy mobilities has reworked previously unconnected (or under-connected) work across disciplines, as the last twenty-five years has seen a still growing body of work emerge on different areas of public policy. In some of the earlier formulations, Cook (2008, p. 776) outlined his approach as one based on the ontological understanding of "processual and contingent disembedding, mobilisation and re-embedding of policies". Peck (2011) subsequently characterised this "new generation of social constructivist work" as:

much more attentive to the constitutive sociospatial context of policy-making activities, and to the hybrid mutations of policy techniques and practices across dynamized institutional landscapes. Here, the movement of policy is more than merely a transaction or transfer but entails the relational interpenetration of policy-making sites and activities, spawning phenomena like global policy 'models', transnational knowledge networks, and innovatory forms of audit, evaluation, and advocacy. (Peck, 2011, p. 774)

As one might expect, we have seen the number of contributions using the term "policy mobilities" increase, in part because the questions behind its initial emergence remain pertinent. So too have we witnessed a concomitant growth in themes that give the field shape and structure. Five have proven particularly important, we argue.

First, we have seen the challenging and questioning of the assumptions over the inter-connected and variegated geographies of public policy-making. This has argued for a complex map of policy emergences and movements between and within those cities labelled as being in the Global North and South as well as amongst cities within the Global South. Examples of this work include Bok (2015, 2020), Bunnell and Das (2010), Chang (2017), Croese (2018), Jirón *et al.* (2022), Montero (2017, 2018), Mukhtarov *et al.*, 2017), Silvestre and Jajamovich (2022), and Song *et al.* (2018). This eschews any past work that starts by assuming some cities in the Global North are naturally those from which others should learn. They demonstrate, as Robinson (2015) notes, the myriad ways that policy emerges from cities located outside of the Western canon of global cities as well as the richness that reorienting the map from whence best practice policymaking originates can bring to the field (Robinson, 2005).

Second, Ward (2006, p. 71) has emphasised that the “process of ‘making-up’ policy is an acutely political one”. That is, their arrival locally involves active drawing together interpretation, mediation and translation (Lane, 2022; Prince, 2017; Robinson, 2015). It can also involve acts of ignoring and representation (Bunnell & Das, 2010, Montero 2018). There is nothing “natural” about the construction of some policies as succeeding and others as failing, for example. Rather, the ascribing of a policy to one of these two categories reflects the privileging of some relations over others. Power geometries are at work in structuring those policies that move from one place to another and the nature of their journeys. The arriving at or making-up of policy is also then a profoundly geographical process, in and through which different places are constructed as facing similar problems in need of similar solutions. This aspect of failure and success is one with which the field continues to wrestle (McCann & Ward, 2015; Temenos & Lauerermann, 2020). Temenos (2024) has recently argued for the need to disaggregate the notion of “failure” into its discursive and material elements. This is part of a wider trend in the field towards acknowledging the affective, discursive and emotional aspects to policy mobilities (Baker & McGuirk, 2019; McKenzie, 2017). Here, the argument is that both the discursive and material elements reflect the spatializing of atmospheres of feeling in explicitly political ways. Their encountering is through a connection to history and place, engaged in outcomes shaped by political will (Bok, 2020; Doucette, 2020; Wilson & Darling, 2016).

Third has been the seeming focus on policy elites of one sort or another in much of the field. That is, a focus on the production of something called neo-liberal “hegemony” through an attention to the work done by those in consultancies, governments, and think tanks. While work in this vein continues to be important in the field, of course (Prince, 2012; Vogelpohl, 2019), during the last decade or so, an attention to others involved in the making and questioning of public policy has emerged (Baker *et al.*, 2020; Lauerermann & Vogelpohl, 2019; Temenos, 2016, 2017). Often self-labelled as studies of “counter-hegemony”, this is an attention to those “ideas ... [that] ... question and challenge contemporary policy orthodoxies” (McCann & Duffin, 2023, p. 85). McKenzie *et al.* (2021, p. 397) argue, “unusual suspects in disparate locations can now access and wield influence in policy processes, perhaps as never before”. Temenos (2017, p. 585) has used the language of “countermobilities” to capture and highlight the “resistances, disruptions and alternative pathways used in activism for policy reform by people in disparate locations”. As McCann (2011, p. 122) has argued, “these actors frequently inhabit and seek to utilize the infrastructures that also make more traditional policy transfer possible, particularly the Internet.” In some cases, work in this vein has drawn upon parallel traditions over trans-national and trans-urban activism and social movements (Laing *et al.*, 2024; Temenos, 2017; Thompson, 2020).

Fourth, González (2011) developed the notion of ‘policy tourism’, where policy makers and those responsible for implementing policy travel to the ‘original site’ to see in-person how policies work. Using Barcelona and Bilbao, González (2011, p. 1414) highlights how these cities (as well as “British or American cities”), “with high levels of political and financial autonomy and charismatic leaders ... are coming up with creative neo-liberal solutions, which are emulated by foreign policy-makers”. In the field, this notion is both foundational and omnipresent, characterising the vast majority of studies (Cook & Ward, 2011; Ward, 2011). Subsequent work has also taken-up the conceptual development of this notion (Wood, 2014). For example, Baker and McGuirk (2019, p. 561) argue “for greater attention to the active and affective production of authenticity as a means to better understand policy tourism and its significant effect on policy learning and mobility”. Challenging the notion of presentism, that all policy making is referent only unto itself, Cook *et al.* (2015), amongst others, have sought to historicize matters (See also Lees & Warwick, 2022; McCann & Duffin, 2023; Temenos, 2024). They reveal the importance of professional study tours, early examples of policy tourism, in the evolution of UK planning.

Fifth, and finally, is the notion of ‘informational infrastructure’ introduced by McCann (2008, 2011). This underscored an earlier, shorter definition (McCann, 2008), where he emphasized the role of these infrastructures in the facilitating and mediating of the role of experts and expertise, arguing they are “highly political rather than merely informational” (McCann, 2008, p. 899). Identified are three types of “agents of urban policy transfer” (McCann, 2011, p. 114): “educators and trainers, professional organizations and supralocal policy organizations, and the popular media”. Together with a range of objects (presentations, reports, etc.) and spaces (conferences, tours etc.), they act as a means of making policy mobilities possible (and probable). While the majority of subsequent policy mobilities work appears to have taken the existence of these informational infrastructures almost as a given, there has been relatively little development of the notion itself (although see Cook & Ward, 2012; Franco & Ortiz, 2020; Temenos, 2016; Temenos & McCann, 2014; Ward, 2024).

III. BRINGING BACK THE NATION-STATE

If place, power, actors, expertise, and infrastructures go into how we analyse and we understand the ways in which public policy making is constructed and mobilised, the multiple constellations or assemblages of policy mobility can reveal multifaceted processes, shedding light on seeming absences. For us, one has been the nation-state. Therefore, we argue that there needs to be a reconsideration of the role of the nation-state in policy mobilities. Much of the initial work in the field over two decades ago sought to challenge the methodological nationalism that tended to characterise work in political science and public administration (McCann & Ward, 2011). In eschewing the ontological privileging of a particular scale, work in the field turned its attention towards inter-local or inter-urban policy mobilities. Within policy mobilities, then, we have seen a large and significant programme of work on urban policies (Fischer, 2014; McCann, 2008; McCann & Ward, 2011; Montero, 2017; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Temenos & McCann, 2014; Wood, 2014). Indeed, we would go as far as to argue that this switching of one scale for another was foundational for the emergence of the wider field, for example, as suggested in the use of the global-urban shorthand (McCann & Ward, 2010). The “nation” was literally absent. However, we want to argue for a rethinking of the place of the nation-state in policy mobilities, as part of a wider argument over rethinking the notion of “scale”. We have long argued that policy mobilities approaches can, and in some cases have, extend

geographers’ ongoing conceptualization of scale as socially produced, relational and territorial, interconnected and malleable... From this perspective, the national scale and the national states are no longer primary agents in the production of policies and places, as the policy transfer literature suggests, even as it also acknowledges that it would be wrong to discount national influence on urban policy (Temenos & McCann, 2014, p. 347).

To do this, we draw upon the 1990s debates over the role of the nation-state under globalization (Leitner, 1990, MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999). Here, arguments centred on its form and function. The use of the shorthand of the “hollowing out” was not to argue that the nation-state was no longer important or present, although there were some who pushed that point, but rather that its role had qualitatively changed (Dicken *et al.*, 1997). The nation-state remained important under globalization, while we also witnessed the emergence as important sites of decision-making and policy-making sub-national and supra-national scales (Brenner, 2001; Cox, 1993). The point of departure became about how different state sites were co-present in a combinatory manner. This was a more open, processual and relational theorization of the role of the nation-state, one from which we argue we might usefully learn in thinking about a future strand of policy mobilities research. As others have begun to argue (Lorne, 2024; Schindler *et al.*, 2018), how the nation-state remains present in the making of public policy is in part reflective of the extent to which a country’s governmental systems is centralized/decentralized. Indeed, some of the earliest work in policy mobilities examined the role of two nation states – the UK and the US – and the emergence of welfare reform (Peck & Theodore, 2001; Theodore & Peck, 2000). Moreover, in the UK, in a highly centralized system, the Business Improvement District policy introduced in the early 2000s was in effect a national urban policy (Ward, 2006). This is in contrast to the Canadian and US systems, out of which BIDs emerged (Hoyt, 2006). What we are suggesting going forward is an attention to those elements of government co-present in the making of policy mobilities, and that includes the various ways in which the nation-state is involved, directly and indirectly.

The absent presence of the nation-state in policy mobilities research has often begged the question of what is ‘urban’ about policy mobilities? Research covering transnational activism as a route of mobilising (commonly national) policies, grapples with but rarely theorises the tensions between the need to change national policies and their embodied everyday effects often encountered in urban spaces. Studies of drug policies have highlighted this tension (McCann, 2008, McCann & Duffin, 2023; Swanson, 2013, Temenos, 2017, 2024). The seeming re-emergence (because of course it never truly went away) of the nation-state in urban policymaking has gained momentum since the 2016 adoption of the New Urban Agenda, UN Habitat’s call and guidance for signatories to develop national urban plans to help guide urbanization in the 21st century.

For cities in the Global South, whose infrastructural development programs are often dependent on international development aid, this has entailed a kind of formalisation of the role of the nation in guiding how development resources were spent in urban areas, with an implication being that there would be more transparent processes through which decision-making would happen in urban development. While cities in Global North countries have tended to engage this through renewed calls for more control of resource spending on already devolved powers. For example, in the UK, the

emergence of 'city deals' that have devolved certain health, transportation, and other infrastructural decision-making powers, have seen city mayors arguing for more control over national budgets, and those that have seen some of the better successes at this model of governance indeed have had fiscal powers devolved to parallel policy-making powers. The adaptation of the city deal 'model' from the UK to Australia also allowed the federal government to have a more direct hand in policy areas usually left to regional state government (Pill & Gurran, 2023).

The urban remains important both as a dynamic site in and through which relational processes of social and economic reproduction are realised, as well as a scale at which relationality is rendered legible. The urban then has ontological, epistemological, as well as empirical value bound up in the field of policy mobilities. Thus, while every study of policy mobilities certainly does not have to be an urban study (and in fact some of the foundational studies of policy mobility were not urban at all (i.e. Peck, 2001a), it is important to acknowledge the field's intellectual debts.

IV. CONCLUSION: REVEALING THE NATION-STATE, REVISITING SCALE?

In this short article, we have introduced and reviewed the field of policy mobilities. Given the generative contributions to date, what might be its future trajectory? There are many possibilities, of course. A series of relatively recent interventions have each made the case for some particular futures over others (McCann & Duffin, 2023; Prince, 2024; Ward, 2024). The strand we identify here likely says as much about our own disciplinary and intellectual predispositions and preferences as they do about some already existing future research agenda, the discovery of which is only a matter of time.

In a recent commentary considering the influence of Leitner (1990), which argued for a multi-scalar relational analysis of urban processes to understand contemporary urban geographies, Martin (2024) noted that Leitner's paper

received more citations in the last five years (2018-2023) than in the first five years after publication (in both cases omitting self-citations). This signals the persistence of its approach, which has helped to shape several decades of attention to the complex interplay of structure and agency in constituting places at multiple scales. (author, year, page)

In this instance, the engagement with relational scalings of the city in the 1990s in urban geography then gave way to tumultuous debate on scale in the early 2000s (Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000). MacLeod and Goodwin (1999, p. 505) emphasised the ongoing "reluctance to engage explicitly with the critical issue of scale" in urban geographies. Post 2010 saw a turn further away from discussions of scale in urban geography, including the then-nascent literature on urban policy mobilities.

However, if we recognise the multi-level nature of policy mobility and want to meaningfully engage with calls to decentre the map, then focusing on the nation-state, as a relational object of analysis will also necessitate scholars of urban policy mobilities to take Leitner's argument seriously and to grapple with scale. As Andersson and Cook (2019, p. 1364) argue, "cities do not exist in a spatial and scalar vacuum and policy mobilisation is not always focused on cities". Furthermore, local-level policymaking is not always the focus of urban policy mobilities studies (Temenos, 2024). Andersson and Cook (2019, p. 1364) further argue that policy mobilities research should look for "insights into the spatial, scalar and institutional dynamics of policy mobilisation". Thirty-five years on then, it is perhaps time for urban policy mobilities, and urban geographies more broadly, to take on a reckoning with the seemingly straightforward, yet frustratingly elusive, concept of scale and the city.

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