Assembling urbanism: Following policies and 'studying through' the sites and situations of policy-making

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a challenge to the territorial orthodoxy in urban studies. An interest in policy assemblage, mobility and mutation has begun to open up 'the what' and 'the where' of urban policy-making. Unfortunately – but perhaps not surprisingly – theoretical developments and empirical insights have run ahead of significant methodological considerations. This paper turns to some of the methodological consequences of studying the chains, circuits, networks and webs in and through which policy and its associated discourses and ideologies are made mobile and mutable. It focuses on three rubrics under which methodological decisions can be made: 'studying through' (rather than studying up or down), techniques of following actors, policies, etc., and relational situations in which mobilization and assemblage happen. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on how academic researchers design and writing assemble cities and urban policy making in ways that parallel the assembling practices of policy actors.

1. Introduction

We both work on 'urban policy and politics' – research with a seemingly clear set of study sites. Yet recently we have found ourselves doing our fieldwork in all manner of situations that we might not have expected: conference halls, corporate offices, drug consumption rooms, mini-buses, cafés, and hotel bars. Of course, these are the types of settings that many human geographers inhabit as they conduct qualitative research. More surprising for us has been the range of cities in which we have been doing this fieldwork. We have found ourselves moving from one place to another quite frequently, rather than remaining in the cities we think we are studying – our 'field sites.' Why have we found ourselves in these situations? Well, because we have been striving to make good methodologically on the relational theorizations of cities offered by Massey (1993), Robinson (2006), Amin (2007) amongst others. We have been following the policies that develop in, move among, and shape the character of cities in ways that others follow 'things' or commodities through supply chains or production networks (Marcus, 1995; Freidberg, 2001). Our work asks how policy actors circulate policies among cities, how they draw on circulating policy knowledge, and how and for whom they put these engagements to use as they assemble their own 'local' policies and, by extension, their own cities.

The title of this paper, "Assembling Urbanism," was the working title of our recent book. Eventually, the book's title became *Mobile Urbanism* (McCann and Ward, 2011). It collects a number of theoretically-informed, detailed empirical case studies of territorial and relational elements of urban policy. The contributions examine policy in many forms: written policies, policy models and best practices, policy knowledge, policy responses to specific concerns, and the socio-spatial manifestations of policy work. In doing so, the book challenges understandings of policy as technical, rational, neutral, and apolitical. Moreover, as the working

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title and the final title suggest, we are interested in understanding how and with what consequences urbanism is assembled through policy actors' purposive gathering and fixing of globally-mobile resources, ideas, and knowledge.

This approach is informed by our reading of a set of literatures that cumulatively challenge the 'field' as it has traditionally been understood in the study of cities. Two in particular are worth mentioning. The first seeks to re-theorize the notion of comparative urbanism for the twenty-first century. Taking their lead from past work in anthropology and sociology, recent contributions in human geography have sought to emphasize the relational as well as the territorial aspects of comparing cities. They have argued that what might usefully be compared are both cities and also the relations that bind them together and push them apart (Ward, 2010; Robinson, 2011). The second literature has shifted the focus from policy transfer to policy mobility and mutation (Ward, 2006, 2007; McCann and Ward, 2010, 2011; McCann, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010a, Peck, 2011). This work has focused on how policies are constructed and mobilized, mutating as they move from one place to another, being assembled, disassembled and reassembled along the way. While both these literatures provide great insight into the *mobility* of policy, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: first to explore the notion of *assemblage* as a complementary concept and, second, to consider the methodological opportunities that accompany a focus on policy mobility and assemblage, without glamorizing those involved in moving policies and without reifying the mobility itself.

We tend to use 'assemblage' in a descriptive sense to encourage both an attention to the composite and relational character of policies and cities and also to the various social practices that gather, or draw together diverse elements of the world into relatively stable and coherent 'things' (Jacobs, 2006; Jacobs, 2006; McFarlane, 2009, McCann, 2011b). For us, the term encourages a focus on labor and invention but also on "emergence, multiplicity and indeterminacy" (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011: 124) as well as to the unexpected and

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nonlinear. In turn, it encourages and rewards a methodological openness and flexibility which accommodates the tension between the need to carefully design research projects, on the one hand, and the reality of unexpected connections, mutations, and research sites emerging during the projects, on the other.

From this perspective, cities can be understood as assemblages of materials and resources, knowledge and understandings from close by and far away, from the present and the past. We can think of urban 'policy assemblages' (Prince, 2010) in a similar way. Our notion of 'assembling urbanism,' then, points to the fact that cities are made coherent through the work of their inhabitants, through the efforts of actors located elsewhere, and through the power-laden and uneven relations among these various actors, all set within larger social and material contexts which tend to complicate straightforward assumptions about causality.

In this paper we consider some of the methodological consequences of studying the chains, circuits, networks, webs, and translations in and through which policy and its associated discourses and ideologies are made mobile and mutable. Throughout, we will also explore the notion of assemblage in terms of the different methodological consequences. The second section discusses what is involved in moving from a 'bounded field' to a 'mobile and multiple situations' approach. The third section turns more specifically to methodology. It considers the methodological consequences of recent theoretical attempts to un-bound the city. We conclude by reflecting on the assembling work researchers do as they construct cities and urban policies as objects of study through their research design, analysis, and writing.

2. From the 'bounded' field to multiple and mobile situations

For the most part traditional accounts of urban policy and politics tend to focus on a particular 'site' and Anglo-American urban geography has historically understood the urban as closed and

bounded, as a self-contained territory. Even much early work on how cities are global has been criticized for its problematic bounding exercises (Robinson, 2006) while much comparative work in the past has tended to compare closed, internally coherent objects against each other (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992; Savitch and Kantor, 2002). Territorial expressions such as 'the urban' have, then, often been left unchallenged in human geography (but see Cox, 2001). Research on aspects of urban policy and policy-making has reflected this ontology of the urban. So, for example, studies of 'urban' politics have historically limited themselves to particular cities and associated stakeholders (Davies and Imbroscio, 2009). Think of an urban study with which you are familiar. It is likely that it will have focused on various agencies and institutions either in the city or whose geographical remit encompasses the city. The 'field' as it is termed in anthropology has for the most part consisted of 'a single and (relatively) geographically bounded place' (Wedel et al., 2005: 39). This territorial emphasis continues to be prevalent. It retains a certain appeal in a number of disciplines, most notably political science, where the *Journal of Urban Affairs* and the *Urban Affairs Review* continue to abound with examples. Not that there is anything wrong with this approach *per se*. It has produced a wealth of insights over the years and continues to do so today. However, recent intellectual developments in anthropology, human geography and sociology have troubled the taken-for-granted status of 'the urban' in this work, have identified the way these assumptions limit certain understandings, and have usefully questioned the work's associated methodological norms, particularly its methodological territorialism.

According to Robinson (2006: 763), we should now be approaching the city as "both a place (a site or territory) and as a series of unbounded, relatively disconnected and dispersed, perhaps sprawling activities, made in and through many different kinds of networks stretching far beyond [its] physical extent." Reflecting a wider intellectual current that argues for a relational understanding of space (Massey, 1993; Allen and Cochrane, 2007), critical studies of

urban policy have recently begun to open up, or 'unbound' the urban in four related ways. The first has entailed a growing appreciation of the various sites, spaces and scales that are co-present in the constitution of 'multiplex cities' (Amin and Graham, 1997; Allen and Cochrane, 2007). Bits of here, there and everywhere are potentially present in these places. Of course, the literature indicates that some elements of some places are more likely than others to proliferate elsewhere. There is unevenness and friction as well as movement in global urban networks, with some cities more 'on the map' than others (Robinson, 2006). In each area of policy – climate change, drugs, economic development, education, and so on – there are those cities that appear and reappear as places to emulate. Others are cast as emulators rather than educators, places from which most cities can learn little except perhaps what *not* to do. As Peck and Theodore (2010a: 171) put it, "the policy blogs are unlikely to be running hot, anytime soon, with talk of the Havana model, *Kabulism*, or even lessons from Detroit", although in the latter case, the city *has* been at the centre of an urban farming movement which has spread more widely (Harris, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the cities are assembled not only by policy actors with a profound command over space, but also by those whose identities condition, but do not necessarily preclude, their involvement in policy decisions (McCann, 2008, 2011c).

The second aspect of this emergent work is on the geographical research that urban policy actors themselves conduct (Ward, 2006, 2007; Cook, 2008; McCann, 2008, 2011a; Peck and Theodore 2010b; Clarke, 2011). 'Solutions starved' actors, often under pressure to 'deliver' successfully, quickly, and at low cost, 'scan' globally looking for pre-tested policy models that have been anointed as 'best' in one way or another, with the idea of 'importing' them. In order to learn more about these 'off-the-shelf' policies, they develop relationships with the places with which the policies are associated. This is done either directly – through examples of 'policy tourism' – or via mediating expert consultants who offer knowledge in easily consumable,

sellable, and moveable packages. In and through these different types of inter-dependent relations, cities are rendered relationally proximate. Through them, policies are made mobile, uprooted and moved from one place to another, evolving and mutating as they go. Roy (2010), for example, reveals the circuits – of knowledge, capital, and truth – in and through which the particular commodity called 'development' was made mobile, then moved.

The third element of this contemporary urban geographical work highlights the centrality of comparison in policy-making. While comparison and its ideological and political uses are not new, recent scholarship shows that it is a significant element of current policy-making, used by cities to position themselves – regionally, internationally and, in some cases, globally (Peck, 2003; Ward, 2010; Clarke, 2011; Robinson, 2011). A range of technologies, such as benchmarks, indicators, and rankings, make city-to-city comparisons both possible and increasingly probable we would argue (McCann, 2004; Ward, 2010). Governing elites use them to make claims about a particular city's successes vis-à-vis others. For those who challenge policy orthodoxies, comparison is also used, as they seek to frame debate in terms of other cites and their policies. The politics of the *Plan It Calgary* process is a case-in-point. Some Calgary homebuilders and developers objected to arguments for a denser, transit-oriented city. They were unhappy that the city was being encouraged to compare itself with the likes of Portland, Oregon. They countered this comparison by bringing in Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute who, of course, came with his own ideological baggage, having established the *antiplanner.com* website. He sharply criticized the Smart Growth principles of Denver, Portland, Toronto, and Vancouver. He argued that Calgary should compare itself with, and therefore imitate, Houston. These references to elsewhere were an important element in the 'urban' politics of *Plan It Calgary*.

The fourth way in which some studies are 'unbounding' the urban is through a commitment to the study of practice. Staying 'close to practice' in this way necessitates detailed

description and 'tracing' of the travels, comparative techniques, and representational strategies, of policy actors who mobilize policy and engage with global circuits of policy knowledge. Furthermore, as McFarlane (2009) indicates, this approach, "draws attention to the labour of assembling and reassembling sociomaterial practices that are diffuse, tangled and contingent" in order to constitute relatively coherent 'things' – whether policies, buildings, or cities. This empirical, practice-oriented approach does not mean neglecting the importance of wider contexts. Rather, it emphasizes that while political-economic, ideological, and institutional contexts condition the character of inter-urban policy mobilities in a path dependent way, it is problematic to simply 'read off' the character, trajectory, and intent of specific policy mobilizations and mutations from those contexts.

Together these four aspects of a critical-geographical approach to policy open up the urban and raise a series of methodological issues. It is to these that we now turn.

3. 'Studying through:' following, situations, and the global-relational understanding of urban policy

While there has been quite a lot of attention to theorizing and empirically illustrating the ways in which policies are mobilized, less attention has been given to methodological considerations (although Baker (2011) is an exception). Drawing on anthropological work, it is possible to outline two methodological components of the relational study of inter-urban policy-making. The first involves the *following*, of people, policies and even places (Marcus, 1995). One important consequence of the increased attention to the movement and mutation of policies is the imperative to reflect on how researchers might best move *with* the 'transfer agents' and other policy actors who produce, circulate, mediate, modify, and consume policies through their daily work practices. A certain global class of 'starchitects', consultants, and high-profile planners as

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well as numerous political activists are, for example, behind urban developments and related policies in numerous cities across the world. Following them as they – and their ideas, plans, and arguments – move around the world, in and out of various places, emphasizes the multiple practices and sites involved in the assembling of urban policy in any one place.

The most renowned contemporary example of this phenomenon is Richard Florida and his 'creative class/city' thesis. Following him and his associates to study how they manage to be so persuasive to urban policy-makers – what they do and say and where they do and say it – provides an deeper understanding of the how and why 'creative city' strategies have emerged in so many cities and towns than one would develop if one looked solely at the experience of a single place. This approach does not necessarily entail the study of individuals. Larner and Laurie's (2010) work, for example, hints at the possibilities of analyzing a group of people, and the ways in which studying them as they move – and analyzing what gets left behind and what travels with them – is also revealing. We might not recognize their names, unlike Florida's, but the consequences of their actions can be just as far-reaching.

In Marcus' (1995) anthropological statement on 'following' as a research method, he is clear that we need not only follow people. He identifies things, metaphors, stories, and conflicts as mobile objects of research. Therefore, we turn to the following of policies by drawing on the anthropological movement away from what Nader (1972) refers to as 'studying up' (i.e., researching those, like colonizers or corporate elites, who are considered to have more power than the average academic researcher) and 'studying down,' (i.e., researching those considered to be powerless, such as economically impoverished people). Engaging in what Shore and Wright (1997: 14) term 'studying through,' we advocate "tracing ways in which power creates webs and relations *between* actors, institutions and discourses across time and space" and "following the source of a policy – its discourses, prescriptions, and programs – through to those affected by the policy" (Wedel et al., 2005: 40). This involves tracing connections "between different

organizational and everyday worlds, even where actors in different sites do not know each other or share a moral universe" (Shore and Wright 1997: 14; see also Shore et al., 2011). Whether it is working 'forward' from where a policy originates (if a single point of origin can be identified at all) or 'backwards' from where it has arrived, this approach is about tracing – laying bare – the places a policy has travelled through and interrogating how the policy has mutated or been transformed along the way. In the case of Business Improvement Districts, for example, the policy that left Toronto in 1970 was not the same one that entered the UK in 2001 (Ward 2006). Similarly, the family resemblances among harm reduction drug strategies in urban Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and Australia only serve to cast the local differences among these policies that have emerged through their somewhat unpredictable circulation/mutation into sharp relief (McCann, 2008).

As well as following policy actors and policies, we can also follow places. Here we are not talking of literal movement but the figurative uprooting and making-mobile of certain places in relation to particular models. There are numerous ways in which places in all their complexity are reduced to a particularly one-dimensional 'model' that is then moved by policy actors. We can think of the 'Barcelona model of urban regeneration' or the 'Baltimore waterfront model' or 'Vancouverism,' as stylized, packaged understandings of complex 'local' approaches to urban planning, design, and redevelopment. The ways that these reified avatars of places circulate, how they mutate as they are moved, and how they are understood and put to work in the politics of policy-making in other cities provides methodological opportunities for urban policy as unbound and global-relational.

Techniques of following are complemented by the study of *situations*. We understand 'situations' relationally: traditionally in geography, 'site' referred to the internal properties of a location, while its 'situation' referred to the various constitutive relationships that existed beyond its physical extent (e.g., Dickinson, 1948). While picking up on this notion of situation,

we want to go further than its quite static traditional use. We are also advocating an approach that differs slightly from the multiple-site approaches that have been advanced by ethnographers (Marcus 1995; Burawoy 2001), even though we learn a lot and have great sympathy for their work. The opening up and re-assembling of 'the urban' points to the continued importance of territories and fixity, but it also emphasizes the need to both conceive of the relational situatedness of these sites – as places constituted by assemblages of the near and far, the fixed and the mobile – and also to conceive the situations of policy making as ones that happed in places outside policy actors' own cities, including sites that are fleeting or mobile.

In theorizing the different 'wheres' in and through which policies are molded and mobilized, we highlight a need to attend to the various situations in which policy knowledge is mobilized and assembled. These include conferences, seminars, workshops, guest lectures, fact-finding field trips, site visits, walking tours, informal dinners and trips to cafès and bars, among many others – the sorts of situations in which we have found ourselves doing research (Cook and Ward, 2011). They are relational sites where the past, present and potential future of a policy can co-exist. Past 'successes', current 'problems' and future 'scenarios' are discussed comparatively, conditioning and shaping the paths or tracks along which policies will move. They are not just spatial situations but also social ones and, therefore, provide numerous opportunities for research. They are also often unexpected sites, as we have suggested, and the methodological openness that we allude to above is necessary to take advantage of the insights they might provide.

Table 1 brings together techniques of following and the socio-spatial situations through which policies can be followed. In contrast to some of the literature on mobile methodologies (Fincham et al., 2010: 2), where the challenge is to 'research and represent mobile experiences', the object of analysis for us – the policy and those involved in its production, circulation, and embedding – are being moved *and* fixed. We find elements of Büscher et al.'s (2011:7)

discussion of 'mobile methods' to be useful for studying through these policy mobilities and fixities. They argue that by,

> allowing themselves to move with and to be moved by subjects, researchers can become tuned into the social organization of 'moves.' Investigations of how people, objects, information and ideas move and are mobilized in interaction with others reveal how actions – like moves in a game – are oriented towards and reflexively shape orders of social, economic and political relations.

It is "not enough to 'explain' complex, chaotic yet ordered social and material realities," they continue, "[i]t is not just about how people make knowledge of the world, but how they physically and socially make the world through the ways they move and mobilize people, objects, information and ideas" (ibid., 14). The authors go on to identify a series of methods as 'mobile' due, in some cases, to their manner of execution (e.g., walking along with actors as they do their jobs or conduct other aspects of their lives) and, in all cases, to what they argue are the methods' particular abilities to help us understand mobilities/immobilities of various kinds and degrees (see ibid., 7-13 for a full list; see also Fincham et al., 2010). Those we highlight in Table 1 seem particularly apropos to the study of policy mobilization (cf. McCann, 2011a, 120-124) since they provide open and flexible, rather than overly prescriptive, approach to the study of social practice and to the detailed tracing of the prosaic assemblages, circuits, connections, movements, mutations, networks, and webs in and through which cities are constituted.

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that cities become coherent entities through the assembling and mobilizing work of their inhabitants, including those involved in producing and implementing policy, through the efforts of actors located elsewhere, and through the relations among these various actors. The paper highlights the need to think seriously about the methodological consequences of the current interest in policy assemblage, mobility and mutation and signposts some ways of researching how, why, and with what consequences urban policies are mobilized. This, in one sense, is a conceptual point and one that has been well rehearsed in the literature in recent years. Yet we argue that there is still a lot to be done in terms of following through on a commitment to a 'global sense of place' in urban studies. Specifically, there has been little in the way of thorough methodological thinking about how a global-relational conceptualization of the urban – and of urban policy-making – can be translated into a specific set of methods and techniques of inquiry. Advancing the field in this way would do two things. First, it would facilitate a better set of understandings of contemporary policy-making. Second it would also reveal the powerful discourses and practices that shape cities for the benefit of the few rather than the many – ones that might be overlooked because of they are located elsewhere.

We suggest that these methods might be quite 'standard' – interviews with policy actors about where and from who they learn, for example – but we have also noted that notions of 'following' and 'studying through,' drawn from anthropology, orient us towards new situations – relational, fleeting, mobile, etc. – in which we must conduct, and to which we must focus, our research. If, as we argue, policy actors are engaged in a range of contingent and tactical learning and sharing practices as part of their 'local' work, then it is incumbent on researchers to be there – literally when possible, figuratively when not – to gain a detailed appreciation of the practices

through which policy actors draw on circuits of policy knowledge as they cobble together their policies and cities.

This appreciation is never straightforward, however. Rather, it involves social processes of interpretation and representation. As researchers, we do not unproblematically reflect or report on the world of policy mobilities through our analysis and writing. Instead, our writing of the policy world – the world of mobilities and selective gatherings of exemplars, models, and best practices – is, in itself, an assemblage. It is with this point – one that resonates with much contemporary thinking in the social sciences but which is, nonetheless, worth repeating in the context of a discussion of methodology in a burgeoning literature that has concerned itself centrally with the detailed empirical analysis of practice – that we will conclude.

If we are to fully understand the ways that cities and urban policies are gathered together from circulating knowledge and are reified as 'models,' we must also maintain a reflexive focus on how academics play a role in assembling urbanism through the choices we make in our research designs, our methods, and in our writing. This is a point made forcefully in Robinson's (2006) work on global, world, and ordinary cities for example. We might reflect on how these practices involve the conscious and unconscious selection, ordering, and mobilizing of a set of engagements we have with the policy world, engagements that take place in conferences, on mini-buses, on sidewalks, in bars. Our decisions about which policies to follow – harm reduction drug policy in one of our cases, Business Improvement Districts in the other – and our judgments about the level of meaning and importance to attach to particular people, models, technologies, artifacts, and situations leads us to assemble a particular urbanism which we then represent in writing. Yet, as Richardson (2000), among many others have noted, writing is not, nor should it be, simply 'writing up.' While the latter implies a post-hoc, mechanistic, and transparent reporting of 'findings,' the former encourages analysis and expression in and through the process of representation. As such, it also indicates another

process of assemblage. Through our practice as researchers, the already-assembled policy world is (re)assembled twice more, first in reference to research design decisions, then through writing. This reflexive understanding provides the opportunity for further refinements of the critical geographical study of policies-on-the-move.

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