



Review Forum

Reading Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore's *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism*

Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism, Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (2015). xxxii + 300 pp. £18.49 (kindle editon), from £56.32 (hardcopy), £19.6 (Paperback) ISBN-10: 081667731X, ISBN-13: 978-0816677313

Introduction

Tom Baker

As readers of *Political Geography* would be quick to recognize, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore have done much to enliven the critical study of policy. Their signature work on neoliberalization has, from the beginning, analyzed policy as a politicized, spatialized and dynamic domain through which state and social transformations are accomplished. Extending this work, *Fast Policy*, the book and the concept, addresses the selectively compressed learning cycles and “increasingly reflexive, transnational consciousness that characterizes many policymaking communities” (p. xv). Incorporating fieldwork in over a dozen countries, the book traces two globalizing policy fields to understand the making, maintenance and impact of the social and political condition they call fast policy. Navigating what prove to be politically polyvalent waters, these two policy fields are conditional cash transfers (where cash payments are made to poor households with specified conditions attached, such as school attendance and health examinations) and participatory budgeting (where citizens participate in the prioritization of local government expenditure). In their analyses, the authors offer a towering number of theoretical, methodological and empirical insights. This book review forum examines those insights, assessing their nature, implications and provocations. Originating from a session at the Chicago annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, the forum includes commentaries from scholars embedded in the expanding field of critical policy studies within and beyond geography, namely Michael Peter Smith, Ananya Roy, Eugene McCann, Pauline McGuirk and Alison Mountz. With diverse disciplinary, theoretical and methodological orientations, the commentators discuss issues including the explanatory status of neoliberalism, the propagation of counter-hegemonic policy ideas and the effectivity of practice, among many others. In their response, Peck and Theodore reflect on the commentaries, their book's origins and the future of critical policy research. I sincerely thank the commentators and the authors for so generously sharing their perspectives.

Understanding fast policy worlds

Michael Peter Smith

There is much to like about this book. Peck and Theodore display a rich understanding of the social practices, power relations, and

institutional infrastructures that enable and sustain forms of “policy mobility” that allow policy initiatives begun in one place to travel and gain adoption elsewhere despite differences across borders in local conditions and circumstances. The narrative architecture of *Fast Policy* is user friendly. Its “meat” is served in three parts. The first is devoted to conceptual clarification and reflection on the authors' chosen methodology. A second focuses on empirical mapping and analysis of the spread of conditional cash transfer policies (CCTs) to over forty countries across the globe. Part Three maps the transnational travel of participatory budgeting (PB) to thousands of local jurisdictions. The parts are sandwiched between an introduction that spells out the authors' research strategy for following policies across social fields, policy networks, and institutional milieus, and a concluding chapter that compares the fast policy worlds analyzed in Parts II and III.

The conceptual review of policy mobility moves deftly from dismissal of older, more top-down models of policy transfer, where policies are said to “diffuse” from technically advanced centers of innovation to peripheral hinterlands of emulation in underdeveloped societies, to the more dynamic and uncertain pathways of “fast policy” learning in which models of policy practice are forged vertically and laterally and move jaggedly across and between transnational networks of expertise, communities of social practice, and “co-evolving” (p. 7) governance regimes. In the world of fast policy, policy adoption or transformation is politically channeled rather than technically transferred. This channeling takes place in policy-making environments that are not neutral backgrounds. The contexts of policy making are both sociologically and ideologically structured.

The multidimensional methodological improvisation developed by Peck and Theodore is another strength of their research. They rely on multi-sited elite interviews with policy makers, direct observations in multiple field sites, and documentary analysis geared toward “going with the flow” in the policy-making arenas that constitute “mutating fields of reform and innovation” (p. xxii). Moving beyond rational-choice models of “policy transfer,” favored by political scientists, the authors engage in “policy mobility” research favored by critical geographers, sociologists, and urban studies scholars. This valorizes a social constructionist imaginary conceptualizing policy making as “a socially structured and discursively constituted space, marked by institutional heterogeneity and contending forces” (p. xxiv). In this more open-ended and reflexive context, the authors depict policy mobility as a mode of policy *translation* and even policy *mutation* rather than of intact policy *transfer*. Working in the spirit of Buroway's extended case study methodology, previously deployed to study phenomena ranging from global feminist movements to transnational migrant networks, Peck and Theodore modify the approach to the demands of studying elite level policy networks. To preserve access to the elites they interview, their stance toward their subjects is highly circumspect, deploying a posture of “constructive engagement” (p. 35). Other nuanced modifications of the extended case study methodology are used to fit better with the cosmopolitan elites they have interviewed. These

include adding a spatial/scalar dimension to the analysis that allows for lateral policy reinvention, considering “divergent cases” that display diverse outcomes despite common power relations or causal processes, and paying close attention to *meso* scale influences, since this is the analytical scale at which fast policies develop.

The empirical findings elicited from the array of innovative methodologies deployed to study CCTs are sometimes predictable, sometimes surprising, but always fascinating. New York City’s turn to CCTs under Michael Bloomberg is presented in a nuanced extended case study that captures the startlingly rapid ascendancy and even more rapid demise of “Opportunity NYC,” an experimental policy initiative supposedly patterned after Mexico’s “Oportunidades” CCT program, which has become the poster-child of the World Bank’s “knowledge bank” strategy for promoting a neo-liberal variant of CCTs designed to incentivize work and promote the human capital development of low income recipients. Far from replicating the Mexican model of social policy “that works,” the program in New York was retooled by its implementers, made excessively complex administratively, rendered small in scale, financed by limited private donations from foundations and other wealthy oligarchs like Bloomberg himself, and forced to operate within a highly compressed time frame that could show “results” quickly. Not surprisingly, Opportunity NYC incentivized too many things, made results harder to measure, and produced decidedly mixed results. When the results failed to enhance Bloomberg’s reputation for technical prowess, he quickly abandoned Opportunity NYC.

These results are sharply contrasted with the related case of the Mexican Oportunidades CCT program, whose close ties to World Bank and International Development Bank elites and to a Washington based policy evaluation house produced extensive and more carefully conducted policy evaluations that provided results securing the program’s reputation as an exemplary, even “pioneering,” social policy, that was promoted as a transnational model of CCT practice by the World Bank and generously subsidized by the IDB. The Mexican policy currently serves 6.5 million Mexican families and costs over \$5 billion annually.

In a surprising twist, the authors’ discussion of Brazil’s Bolsa Familia, CCT program, now the largest in the world, demonstrates that despite its original entanglement with the World Bank, with the Bank providing a targeted loan of over \$6 Billion to Bolsa during its early stages of redesign and reorganization, the Bank’s early institutional involvement has been downplayed in subsequent World Bank literature, which tends to represent Mexico’s Comunidades as the “pioneering” CCT program, while airbrushing out of history the fact that Brazil’s more flexible CCT model was initiated earlier than Mexico’s and Mexican policy elites engaged in a fact-finding tour of municipal Bolsa programs prior to developing their own CCT.

In their analysis of the rise of a transnational community of practice around CCTs, Peck and Theodore carefully detail a transnational alliance of practitioners, funders, evaluators, consultants, and political overseers that supported the spread of CCTs laterally, but they are clear that the real momentum was coming “from above” by national government elites, working in close conjunction with multilateral development banks, particularly the World Bank and the IDB, which bankrolled and provided a technocratic gloss for the wider rollout of this late neo-liberal model of anti-poverty policy.

The authors’ treatment of Brazil’s gradual departure from the tight technocratic controls, eligibility monitoring, and randomized evaluation trails of the Mexican model and the morphing of the Brazilian program into an alternative, less conditional model of cash transfers to poor people, is one of the most interesting unanticipated developments in the CCT story. While the majority of the over 40 CCT programs currently in operation have followed the Mexican model of tight managerial controls, a few countries, like Mozambique, have sought and received advice from the ABC, the Brazilian agency for international cooperation. Eventually, the large scale and

continuing viability of the Brazilian program has opened up political space for debates among the transnational networks of CCT practitioners about the relative efficacy of the “hard conditionalities” approach characteristic of the Mexican model versus the “soft-conditionalities-with-social rights” approach followed by Brazil. Moreover, the emergence of South–South policy *translations* has produced other examples of policy variation and mutation rather than strict diffusion–replication, despite the best efforts of the multilateral banks to reshape the world in its preferred direction. In the real world of social policy dialogues, despite the continuing influence of favored global models, policy adoption necessarily produces *adaptation*, animated by “domestic political pressures, discursive representations of ‘the problem,’ and policy precedents” (p. 119). Ironically, the very “avalanche” of CCT fast policies in the past decade has opened up a dialogical space for debating anti-conditional, or even *unconditional* cash transfer policies in the transnational world of social protection policies.

The original Brazilian model of participatory budgeting contained both radical aspirations and more technocratic policy practices that co-produced a defanged version of PB, stressing its formal properties promoting “good governance,” efficient service delivery, and transparency, while neglecting or even blunting its potentially radical democratic substance. This “pasteurized” version of PB has been aggressively hawked by the World Bank, the EU, and the UN Habitat network as a global “best practice” and championed by technocratic advocates and policy entrepreneurs. The ritual mislabeling of PB as a “Porte Alegre inspired” global model has helped to mask the mainstreamed policy’s depoliticized limitations. The result has been the local adoption of a diluted version of PB as a policy tool in more than 2500 sites, spanning all continents.

In opposition to the defanged model of PB practice, Peck and Theodore note the continuing attraction of PB in progressive and even leftist policy circles. They trace the emergence of alternative transnational policy networks seeking to establish horizontal linkages among progressive localities across continents. Key examples include the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy reformist techniques. Likewise, the United Cities and Local Governments network, promotes progressive municipal government policy innovations, including more democratized policy reformations of PB. In the end we are left wondering which of these competing transnational policy networks will prevail *where* and how fruitful alternative political efforts to recapture ownership of PB will be over time.

When making cross-policy comparisons at the end of *Fast Policy*, Peck and Theodore’s otherwise brilliant analysis leaves several questions unanswered. They correctly observe that a robust understanding of transnational fast policy worlds requires us to situate these phenomena within distinctive social worlds and moving landscapes that are crosscut by “sinewy” networks, structured by power relations, and articulated by mobile policy models deployed by cosmopolitan actors. Yet they structure their analysis not around comparing the concrete practices of networks, institutions, and actors, as one might expect, but rather around three alliterative modes of policy *transmission* – mimesis, mutability, and modeling. Despite their neat alliteration, it is hard to see how mimesis and modeling differ since they both can be interpreted as forms of copying. They both clearly differ from mutability, but the framework only names the variation without explaining it, leaving unanswered a central question: What are the conditions that underlie mutability and why don’t they appear in other cases?

Mimesis appears to best fit the transnational travel of participatory budgeting (PB), where inexpensive, hollowed out versions of the radically democratic original Porte Alegre model have been widely adopted by various localities across the globe. The depoliticization of this mainstreamed model has facilitated its promotion by multi-lateral agencies and its imitation across localities.

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