



# Relationality/territoriality: Toward a conceptualization of cities in the world

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 October 2008

Received in revised form 29 June 2009

### Keywords:

Business Improvement Districts

New Urbanism

Mobile policies

Downtown revitalization

Urban politics

## ABSTRACT

The paper contributes to the conceptualization of cities in the world by first outlining the conceptual and empirical challenges of theorizing the urban/global nexus in both relational and territorial terms. It argues that the most useful and appropriate approach to understanding contemporary urban governance in global context is to develop a conceptualization that is equally sensitive to the role of relational and territorial geographies, of fixity and flow, of global contexts and place-specificities (and vice versa), of structural imperatives and embodied practices, in the production of cities. In order to illustrate the benefits of this conceptualization, the paper will apply it to the case of how downtown development is governed in many contemporary cities. The role of the Business Improvement District (BID) program and New Urbanist planning models in shaping downtowns will be examined in terms of: (1) how and by whom these models are developed in a global-relational context and are set in motion through scaled circuits of policy knowledge and (2) how the mobilization of these models are conditioned by their territorialization in specific spatial and political economic contexts. The paper emphasizes that the 'local globalness' of policy models like BIDs and New Urbanism and their consequences for cities can best be understood through a combined focus on relationality and territoriality.

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## 1. Introduction

The policy world seems to be one in constant motion. In a figurative sense, policy-makers seem to be under increasing pressure to 'get a move on' – to keep up with the latest trends and 'hot' ideas that sweep into their offices, to convert those ideas into locally-appropriate 'solutions,' and 'roll them out,' thus making the most of them before the next trend emerges. As waves of innovation arrive more frequently, a concordant 'churning' has been identified in urban policy, with new ideas and initiatives replacing old with increased regularity (Jessop and Peck, 1998; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Theodore and Peck, 2001). Contemporary policy-making, at all scales, therefore involves the constant 'scanning' of the policy landscape, via professional publications and reports, the media, websites, blogs, professional contacts, and word of mouth for ready-made, off-the-shelf policies and best practices that can be quickly applied locally.

It is in this context of 'fast policy transfer' (Peck and Theodore, 2001, p. 429) that figurative motion in the policy world becomes literal motion. Policy actors (a broadly defined category including politicians, policy professionals, practitioners, activists, and consultants) act as 'transfer agents' (Stone, 2004), shuttling policies and

knowledge about policies around the world through attendance at conferences, fact-finding trips, consultancy work, etc. These travels involve the transfer of policies from place to place (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Stone, 1999, 2004), which, in some cases, seem to diffuse with lightening speed, e.g., welfare policies (Peck and Theodore, 2001; Theodore and Peck, 2001) and creative city policies (Florida, 2002; Peck, 2005). These travels and transfers involve local and national policy-makers in networks that extend globally, bringing certain cities into conversation with each other, while pushing others further apart. They create mental maps of 'best cities' for policy that inform future strategies – Austin for quality of life and creativity (Florida, 2002; McCann, 2004), Barcelona and Manchester for urban planning and regeneration (Monclús, 2003; Peck and Ward, 2002), Curitiba for environmental planning (Moore, 2007), Portland for growth management (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001), Porto Alegre for participatory budgeting and direct democracy (Baiocchi, 2003). Thus, in a policy sense as in other ways, cities are constituted through their relations with other places and scales (Massey, 1991, forthcoming).

Yet, while motion and relationality define contemporary policy-making, this is only half the picture. Policies and policy-making are also intensely and fundamentally local, grounded, and territorial. Even a cursory familiarity with the examples above confirms this point, since our ability to refer to complex policies through the use of a shorthand of city names indicates how tied they are to specific places. There is a 'Barcelona model' of urban regeneration, for

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example, which is contingent on the historical-geographical circumstances of that city and its relationship with other regional and national forms of decision-making. While other cities might be encouraged to learn or adopt that model, it is generally understood that, in doing so, adjustments will need to be made in order for it to work elsewhere. Furthermore, policy is fundamentally territorial in that it is tied up with a whole set of locally dependent interests, with those involved in growth coalitions being the most obvious (Cox and Mair, 1988; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Therefore, while there are substantial literatures in urban studies that emphasize cities' relationality and fluidity and while there are other equally important literatures that emphasize their territoriality, we argue that urban policy-making must be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. The contradictory nature of policy should not, however, be seen as detrimental to its operation. Rather, the tension between policy as relational and dynamic, on the one hand, and fixed and territorial, on the other, is a productive one. It is a necessary tension that produces policy and places (cf. Harvey, 1982).

Our purpose in this paper is to explore the implications of this tension for our understanding of urban policy and to use the study of the 'local globalness' of urban policy to inform the study of urban–global relations more generally. We discuss how contemporary scholarship across the social sciences is exhibiting a remarkable convergence around questions of inter-scalar relations and around a conviction that specific cases of regulation, design, or policy-making, for example, must be understood in terms of processes stretching over wider geographical fields and in terms of imperatives that may not be immediately evident at the scale of, or on the face of the cases themselves. We argue that this is an important moment in which to consider global–urban relations since on-going discussions about the relationships between cities and global processes (Robinson, 2006; Taylor, 2004) and about networked, relational, and territorial conceptualizations of social space (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Jessop et al., 2008) indicate that cities are important nodes in a 'globalizing' world. Yet, scholars still do not understand, in a deep and detailed way, how those involved in urban politics and policy-making act beyond their own cities in order to practice or perform urban globalness and to articulate their cities in the world (but see the essays in McCann and Ward, forthcoming). So, while we will outline a convergence of thought around the need for empirical detail on global political-economic relations, we will also suggest that the literature needs more empirical accounts of the struggles, practices and representations that underpin global–urban relations and that territorialize global flows.

In the following section, we outline the convergence of work on scalar relations and through a critical discussion of the 'traditional' political science literature on policy transfer we connect a relational/territorial approach to our specific empirical concerns. Subsequently, we detail two related examples of urban policy – Business Improvement Districts and New Urbanist approaches to urban planning and design. As Olds (2001, p. 9, citing Murdoch, 1997, p. 334) puts it, "the 'role of the analyst,'" is... 'to follow networks as they stretch through space and time, localizing and globalizing along the way.'" This is what we attempt to do. Our two examples are drawn from long-term research projects that seek to understand the politics of urban policy-making in scalar terms through largely qualitative research methods. Specifically, the examples draw upon content and discourse analyses of consultancy, government, media, practitioner and think tank publications, on semi-structured interviews with key transfer agents in a number of cities, and on participation in and observation of relevant meetings and conferences where ideas about 'good' urban policy are transferred and negotiated. We contend that qualitative

empirical investigations of case studies are a necessary element in any conceptualization of mobile policy. In doing so, we pay close attention to: (1) how urban policies are set 'in motion' globally and how global circuits of policy knowledge and the transfer of policy models influence the governance of specific cities; (2) how the 'making up' of policy (Ward, 2006) is a fundamentally territorialized and political process, contingent on specific historical-geographical circumstances. In the final section, we draw out some implications of our analysis for the wider concerns that are motivating this special issue.

## 2. Conceptualizing global–urban connections: relationalities, territorialities, policies

Territories do not come at the expense of extensive networks and flows but, rather, they are constituted by and contribute to these social networks (Beaumont and Nicholls, 2007, p. 2559).

### 2.1. The relational and territorial geographies of urban policies

A great deal of critical geographical scholarship on cities examines the connections between urbanization and capitalism, the changing territorial forms of the state, and the production of new institutional arrangements for urban and regional governance, focusing on economic development and the 'new urban politics' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Cox and Mair, 1988; Harvey, 1989a,b; Jonas and Wilson, 1999; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Yet, more analysis is needed on *how* – through what practices, where, when, and by whom – urban policies are produced in global-relational context, are transferred and reproduced from place to place, and are negotiated politically in various locations. That said, a number of influential, although varied, and not always entirely compatible, theorizations have sought to understand the tensions and power relations central to these global–urban connections. Harvey's (1982) conceptualization of the dialectic of fixity and mobility in capitalism and the implications of investment and disinvestment for urban built environments is one of these. Massey's (1991) notion of a global sense of place, in which specific places are understood to be open to and defined by situated combinations of flows of people, communications, responsibilities, etc. that extend far beyond specific locales, is another. The literature on spatial scale, much of which focuses on conceptualizations of territorialization and deterritorialization (Brenner, 1998, 2001, 2004; Jonas, 1994; Smith, 1993), and the world/global cities literature, with its focus on certain cities as powerful nodes in the networked geographies of finance capital (Taylor, 2004), are two other established bodies of work. The burgeoning 'mobilities' approach, which seeks to conceptualize the social content of movements of people and objects from place to place at various scales and the immobilities and 'moorings' that underpin and challenge these dynamics, constitutes another worthwhile approach (Cresswell, 2001; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Each of these literatures seeks to conceptualize how cities are produced in relation to processes operating across wider geographical fields, while recognizing that urban localities simultaneously provide necessary basing-points for those wider processes. Each suggests that there can be no separation between place-based and global-relational conceptualizations of contemporary political economies. As Hannam et al. (2006, p. 5) put it: "[m]obilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities." Rather, Brenner (2004) suggests that territory must be seen as relationally produced rather than bounded and static. He argues

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