"Arriving at" urban policies: the topological spaces of urban policy mobility

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Rather than tracing how policies arrive in different contexts, and are made local, this contribution suggests an inversion of perspective, to consider how cities "arrive at" policies in the context of a globalised world of urban policy circulations. Thus I propose to move beyond a focus on what is moving (tracing the trajectories of a policy document, an idea, a policy consultant), and rather to look at how policy makers compose their ideas in the midst of a myriad influences from elsewhere.

While the intrinsic spatiality of policy mobility is self-evident; the extent to which conventional spatial vocabularies are helpful for understanding the specific dynamics of urban policy circulations is less clear. Earlier analyses of policy "transfers" focus on territories from which policies flow, the routes or trajectories which they follow, and places which are shaped then by the insights and experiences of other places (Stone, 2004; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Ward, 2006). More recently, McCann (2011) has emphasised the embodied, performative and material nature of the process whereby ideas are put into motion, and the settings which facilitate ideas being taken up in new places. Such careful theorisation of the trajectories and tracks of urban policy certainly helps to capture the specificity of the movements of ideas, people and things which make up policies in different places; it focuses on explaining how policies arrive in new places and are transformed in the process, and emphasises the relational nature of urban politics (Cochrane, 2011).

However, it is apparent in writing about urban policy mobilities that scholars struggle to express the complexity associated with the proliferation, speed and extensive transformations wrought by and to policies in motion. Peck and Theodore express this well:

> "The spatiality of policymaking is not flattened into some almost-featureless and inert plane or transaction space, marked only with jurisdictional boundaries, across which transfers occur, but in terms of *a three-dimensional mosaic of increasingly reflexive forms of governance, shaped by multi-directional forms of crossscalar and interlocal policy mobility.*" (Peck and Theodore, 2010, p. 170; italics are mine).

Thus, policies not only circulate; they are also "made up" locally (McCann and Ward, 2010) and across multiple scales and arenas of governance. But as we turn to try to understand this, many of our analytical metaphors seem to lack purchase. We can search for the entanglement of a range of different agendas in one context and consider how they shape one another, or explore the making local of specific policy ideas which can be traced from one context to another (Peck and Theodore, 2012). But we also quickly need to account for more ephemeral spaces of

interaction and communication (Simone, 2001; Saunier, 2002): influence and inspiration, half-forgotten meetings, fleeting encounters, rumours, and long buried memories of policy terminology. Here topological spatialities, concerned less with tracing physical mobilities and connections and more with exploring the spatialities of presencing and proximity, accounting for the interminglings of interiority and exteriority, or exploring how institutions and agents might secure influence at a distance, are, I would suggest, crucial if we are to be able to investigate many of the spatial dynamics operative in determining policy outcomes (Allen, 2008, 2009). Considering how "parts of elsewhere" make up local places (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, p. 1171) has the potential to stretch our analytical capabilities and vocabularies.

The question which arises, then, is, how are urban policies "arrived at" in the midst of here and elsewhere? The experiences of policy makers involved in the development of various versions of Johannesburg's long term city strategy between 1999 and 2011 (see Robinson (2011; 2013) for a fuller treatment), are instructive.

One of the key architects of Johannesburg's 2006 Growth and Development Strategy explains how policy ideas came together for him in this process:

> The way the stuff works in truth is that a small team of people and almost always, one or two individuals within that team are engaged in policy debates more generally, read incredibly widely on all sorts of issues and **it just becomes part of the amorphous mass of their thinking** ... but if you were to say now where did that idea come from, you'd say well it came out of the work we were doing in this particular department but in truth actually the idea probably came from somewhere else (former city policy writer, Johannesburg, July 2009).

In this view, the policy and analytical ideas which are "in motion" within a trajectories perspective are already there. They didn't "arrive". Policy makers in Johannesburg have already made their own many of the different available ways of thinking about and intervening in cities. These might have been learnt from academic or policy literatures, but they are often seen as already profoundly local.

Concepts might be borrowed at one moment, only to be thought of later as newly invented locally. Or policy ideas which arrive from somewhere else might also be the result of long and politically tough policy processes, as with the collaborative format of city-wide strategic planning in Johannesburg which was hard-won over decades of anti-apartheid struggle only to arrive again fully formed from the Cities Alliance. Policy ideas might have wider circulations and histories, but the relevant histories and processes by which they come to policy makers' attention might be entirely localised. For example, urban sprawl is a common feature of many twentieth century modernising cities, but in Johannesburg it is also a specific apartheid inheritance and addressing its consequences for the urban form is has a distinctive political charge. Or, indeed, policy ideas might be self-consciously reimported as new from a different context to reinvigorate policy options which have been displaced locally. This is arguably the case with the idea of in-situ upgrading in Johannesburg, initially very important in late- and post-apartheid urban planning, and then brought "back" from Brazil as the contradictions of post-apartheid's formal housing developments became apparent in the late 2000s.

In one optic, then, I would suggest that in many cases Johannesburg itself – the policy makers and analysts, residents and politicians – already owns the available international urban and policy literature and ideas informing its policies: they are already local. In another, policy makers, politicians and residents often "invent" policy ideas which are very widely known, or which might emerge in different places at the same time. In this context, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to track the topographical provenance of ideas – and in my view this may not be the most interesting dynamic to explore, either politically or in terms of understanding the spatialities of cities in globalisation.

There are many moments, then, in which the trajectories of policy ideas cannot easily be known – and when for policy makers an array of complex local and learned ideas come together to enable them to respond to specific challenges. As one policy maker noted, "*you know with ideas you often don't have any idea of where they come from, you know they just creep in*, like new words and terminologies you know like you don't say as of this day I'm adopting this concept… but you hear it one day etc. and then you realise you've adopted it" (Senior city official, Johannesburg, September 2011; my italics). This might reflect the problematic nature of some aspects of circulating policy – as "super-fast" policy, perhaps, taken up so easily its origins are already forgotten! And it certainly highlights the possibility of incapacitating local policy expertise through the prolific circulation of good practice examples and policy ideas by relatively powerful agents. On the other hand, the Johannesburg policy makers I interviewed work very hard indeed to rework ideas and to consciously build distinctive approaches to their context out of the array of resources available, even despite the strong efforts by powerful organisations to promote certain approaches within international policy circuits. This not only puts pressure on policy makers to get to grips with new ideas, but might also work to limit local agency. As another policy maker observed in relation to the concept of resilience:

> "honestly its been really difficult, very very challenging…it would have been easy if we'd had agreement around the concept and theories of change (concept of resilience) but at the same time … I guess the challenge has been trying to bring together the political imperatives, national and provincial priorities and then this theory stuff together" (City official, Johannesburg, September 2011)

Certainly, then, there is evidence that multiple, often untraceable, influences are brought to bear on even powerful circulating ideas in order to "arrive at" distinctive responses to the specific challenges of a particular city.

Based on these examples, my sense is that the process of making policies local – and of making up local policies (Ward, 2006) – needs to be understood through both topographical and topological spatial imaginations. Arriving at policies involves far more than assembling discrete materialised entities, ideas or objects which we can trace as they move from there to here. Complex, topological spatial imaginations are needed to interpret the mixing and folding of here and "multiple elsewheres" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004) into distinctive local policies.

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