NEOLIBERALISM EVERYWHERE

Mobile neoliberal policy

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The ‘everywhereness’ of neoliberalism

One of the remarkable features of neoliberalism is its ubiquity: it ‘seems to be everywhere’ (Peck and Tickell 2002: 380). As this volume demonstrates, at all levels, from the local to the supranational, and across international space, from the richest global cities of Europe and America to the poorest communities of Africa, the presence of neoliberalism has been announced. But when we look closely, there is remarkable diversity across time and space between regimes otherwise apparently being reasonably described as neoliberal. Indeed, this diversity has made the status of neoliberalism as a useful descriptor of the current political moment increasingly tenuous (Clarke 2008; Venugopal 2015). If neoliberalism is to remain a worthwhile analytical concept, then we need to square claims about its ‘everywhereness’ with its apparent spatial diversity. So how might we go about grasping how neoliberalism did, or did not, get everywhere? And what might this mean for how we conceive it?

This chapter approaches this task through one of the key manifestations of neoliberalism: policy. Identifying its policy forms and tracing where these have been instituted would seem to offer a straightforward way of empirically studying the everywhereness of neoliberalism. Political science has a long tradition of analysing policy diffusion, mapping how particular policies get taken up in one state after another, and assessing if this will result in eventual policy convergence (Dobbin et al. 2007). Such models can be criticized for overstating the similarity of policy programmes in different states and for reducing explanation to generalized theoretical models, such as economic competition or rational learning, while ignoring the actual processes involved. The policy transfer literature seeks to overcome these shortcomings through a closer focus on the actors and institutions that make policy transfers happen (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996), and with the goal of understanding some of the tectonic shifts occurring in the state system such as globalization and Europeanization.

Central to this has been a consideration of the way that global power dynamics are expressed through transfer processes that will fall on a spectrum between coerced and consensual (Benson and Jordan 2011). One critique of these literatures, coming from geography in particular, is that the formalism of these analyses, based on assumptions of rational actors, has difficulty engaging satisfactorily with the dynamism inherent in transfer processes or with the constitutive socio-spatial contexts in which it occurs (Peck 2011; McCann 2011). The emerging policy mobility
literature emphasizes these aspects, and makes a case for studying policy movement in ways that are more critical and constructivist than normative and formalized.

The policy mobility literature, in particular, has consciously tried to engage with the question of neoliberalism as it has made the case for its perspective, so what follows draws largely from this tradition. Three different narratives about the travel of neoliberal policy are told. Each is differentiated by time and scale, but each also offers a different perspective on how neoliberalism proceeds through policy movement. In each case, it is clear that the way we talk about how policy proceeds across space will shape, and be shaped by, what we think neoliberalism is. The chapter will conclude by reflecting on the politics of our analysis.

Consent and coercion

Neoliberalism, especially in its earliest forms, has been associated with a particular set of policies that have been instituted in different combinations and to different extents in much of the world. These include, but are not limited to, the privatization of publically owned assets, the flexibilization of the labour market, the flattening of personal and corporate tax rates, the lowering of border protections on goods and services, the removal of capital controls on investment flows, and a broadly monetarist approach to fiscal discipline and inflation (Harvey 2005). These policies are founded on intellectual work conducted through much of the second half of the twentieth century by such neoliberal scholarly communities as the Mont Pelerin Society (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), the Centre for the Study of Economic and Social Problems (CESES) (Bockman and Eyal 2002), and the economics programme at the University of Chicago. The latter trained the so-called ‘Chicago Boys’ who instituted arguably the earliest example of this kind of neoliberal economic reform in Pinochet’s Chile in the 1970s (Peck 2010).

The rapidity with which these emblematic neoliberal policies circulated around the world in the 1980s and 1990s has seen this period retrospectively labelled as the neoliberal revolution (Robison 2006; Hall 2011; Dumenil and Levy 2004). Although, at the time, the restructuring that was occurring was often given personalized epithets after some figurehead, such as ‘Thatcher-erism’ for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK or ‘Rogernomics’ for Finance Minister Roger Douglas in New Zealand, the institutionalization of neoliberal policy, albeit in different forms and to varying degrees, was common across much of the developed world. But these epithets do reflect the way that the policies were associated with particular people: not just the figureheads but cabals of well-positioned elites, politicians and technocrats who worked together to embed neoliberal thinking in their respective state apparatuses (see, for example, Kelsey 1995). These actors were internationally linked through state and non-state networks to their counterparts overseas and to the various research centres and think-tanks that had emerged to provide the case for neoliberal economics, and it was often across these that neoliberal policy can be seen to travel (Goldfinch and Roberts 2013; Peck and Tickell 2007; Peet 2007).

Although many in the populace of the neoliberalizing developed world might disagree that this neoliberalization was in any way consensual, significant proportions of them voted for it repeatedly. This contrasts markedly with the experience of the developing world and the former Soviet states of Eastern Europe where powerful international agencies, most notably the International Monetary Fund, are generally seen as forcing neoliberalism upon them. The economic crises that had occurred in parts of Latin America and Africa in the 1970s and 1980s led to the creation of what became known as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), in which the IMF and World Bank, in league with the US Treasury, would provide relief in return for those countries meeting certain conditions. By 1989, those conditions had coalesced as the ‘Washington Consensus’, the ten-point programme for achieving good governance that featured many of
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the neoliberal policies referred to above (Peet 2007). Despite the apparent failure of these programmes to achieve growth, similar programmes were put in place in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia in the 1990s in more dramatic form as neoliberal ‘shock therapy’. These too failed (Stiglitz 2002), but largely remain in place.

This history of neoliberal policy transfer, where internationally networked elites take control of wealthier states to put in place collectively developed policy programmes which are simultaneously foisted upon poorer nations through institutional pressure, lends itself to two types of analysis in particular. One is a class analysis, such as that offered by Harvey (2005). Here neoliberalism is about the restitution of elite class power that had been eroded by several decades of Keynesian welfare economies dominating policy discourse (see also Peet 2007). The other is a ‘top-down’ analysis of neoliberalism as a global hegemony that descends on different places and people to the point that the latter are constituted as relatively passive victims or, at best, defined by the extent to which they resist neoliberalism. But neither really escapes the diffusionist analytical imaginary, through which we could conceivably argue that the ‘global’ context of a political economy of class, or the social construction of a hegemonic discourse, explains policy convergence around the neoliberal agenda. Furthermore, given the transformations we have seen in and around neoliberal policy in the last couple of decades regularly point to a distinct lack of convergence, we need a different analytic that allows us to grasp exactly what policy is in relation to neoliberalism and so to rethink some of this history. The emergence of the policy mobility literature in geography, which emphasizes not only the movement of policy across space but its related transformation and mutation as it does so (Peck 2011; McCann 2011), offers such an analytic.

Experimentation and mutation

As has already been intimated, the fact is that there has been a lot of variety in the neoliberal project from the ‘beginning’. Different countries and cities have followed often very distinctive and idiosyncratic paths to quite different neoliberalisms which are not easily explained in the terms outlined above (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Brenner and Theodore 2002; North 2007; England and Ward 2007; Jessop 2016). Moreover, the last two decades are increasingly understood as having seen some clear transitions in the nature of what we describe as neoliberalism (Sheppard and Leitner 2010; Peck and Tickell 2002; Peck 2010; Lewis et al. 2008; Sidaway and Hendrikse 2016). After the often figuratively and literally violent ‘retreat’ of the state from its Keynesian role in the economy, characterized by Peck and Tickell (2002) as ‘roll-back neoliberalism’, the 1990s and early 2000s saw much of the stated ideology toned down. New forms of ‘third way’ policy emerged, intended to make markets more feasible in ever more parts of day-to-day life while ameliorating some of the harder edges of the new political settlement. This ‘roll-out neoliberalism’ (Peck and Tickell 2002) was also apparent in developing contexts as the Bretton Woods institutions sought to rectify the failures of the Washington Consensus with reformed, but still neoliberal, policy models (Sheppard and Leitner 2010). Even more recently, the austerity politics that have emerged after the 2008 financial crisis have led others to suggest a new, more aggressive, neoliberalism has arisen (Hendrikse and Sidaway 2010; Sidaway and Hendrikse 2016; Peck et al. 2012).

These shifts have been more complex than can be characterized here, but we can see the way that the policy form of neoliberalism has changed when we examine some of the recently popular and fast-moving policy models that speak to its market narrative. I will briefly outline three widely studied examples. First: ‘workfare’ policies link benefit payments to readiness and willingness to work, extending the neoliberal demand for a flexible workforce into the welfare arena (Peck 2002; MacLeavy 2011; MacLeavy and Peoples 2010). This approach has been taken
up across much of the world, although with quite self-conscious variations to suit local institutional, economic and social conditions (Peck and Theodore 2001; Peck and Theodore 2010; MacLeavy and Peoples 2010).

Second: business improvement districts, or BIDs, are areas of a city in which responsibility for taxation and spending is devolved to business interests in the area for the purposes of making them work better for those very businesses. This kind of non-state, private-sector friendly regulation appeals to neoliberal sensibilities (Ward 2006). The BID ‘model’ has been exported from the USA to other parts of the world, including the UK, Europe and South Africa, where how it has been taken up has varied depending on local political and economic circumstances (Cook and Ward 2012; Peyroux et al. 2012; Ward 2006). The BID in Cape Town in post-apartheid South Africa, for example, has focused nascent social development aspects on access for disadvantaged black communities by drawing on traditions of faith-based charities providing work and housing in the BID space (Didier et al. 2013).

And third: the ‘creative city’ is a policy narrative that captures a range of interventions purportedly intended to increase the economic and social impact of the urban population’s latent ‘creativity’ (Evans 2009; Zimmerman 2008). It became a popular refrain through the 2000s for cities in all parts of the world to emphasize creativity, whether it was through developing their own native and imported ‘creative industries’ (Cunningham 2009), or through attracting more of Richard Florida’s (2002) fabled ‘creative class’ to their inner cities (O’Callaghan 2010). Despite the diversity, they rarely offered more than the kinds of city boosterism, regeneration projects and supply-side supports that did not fall outside of the neoliberal script (Peck 2005, 2012).

Each of these policy models speak to certain neoliberal themes, but each also has a lot of variation across its global geography. The emerging policy mobility literature engages directly with these tendencies by emphasizing mobility and mutation in policy as two sides of the same coin. Additionally, policy itself not only changes as it travels, its movement is linked to the reshaping of the very landscape it moves across. Peck et al. (2013; see also Brenner et al. 2010a; 2010b; Peck et al. 2012) deploy this insight to argue for a perspective on neoliberalism that does not link it to any particular set of policies but to a mode of ‘market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring’ (Peck et al. 2013: 269) in which experimentation and the rapid transfer of policy across space is the norm. The mobility of policy – what they call ‘fast policy transfer’ by coordinated communities of politicians, technocrats, consultants and other policy actors – is central to understanding the political dynamic that constitutes neoliberalism, or, as they prefer, neoliberalization. For these authors, this helps us to explain why policy models like the creative city and the BID are the progeny of ‘older’ (but still very alive) neoliberal policies like privatization and free trade. But it also explains why they vary so much across space and time as they are made to fit a variety of circumstances. They argue that the post-ideological and often highly technocratic nature of these kinds of policies, purportedly founded on ‘evidence’ and a pragmatic predilection for ‘what works’, enables this constant experimentation and mutation, but that it all still occurs within institutional parameters that remain staunchly neoliberal.

The restless policy landscape that this evokes certainly challenges the notion of neoliberalism as a top-down process, foisted on state actors with little choice in the matter. This is partly because neoliberalism is never, in policy terms, one thing: ‘systemic geoinstitutional differentiation’ is understood as one of its defining features (Peck et al. 2013: 269). But this is also because it leaves room for new policy models developed outside of the traditional ‘heartlands’ of neoliberalism (the UK and USA) to circulate back, further reinforcing its apparent openness (Peck and Theodore 2010). Nevertheless, this approach remains open to a class analysis through an ongoing
focus on policy elites, albeit one that nuances those analyses more firmly grounded in a Marxist critique of capitalism.

**Assemblages and topologies**

Another approach which challenges the top-down narrative, but in a different way and with different implications for our understanding of neoliberalism, considers policy formation and mobility through an analytic of assemblage, a concept that plays on its status as both verb and noun (Allen 2011; Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Collier 2006; Marcus and Saka 2006; McCann and Ward 2012). Peck and his colleagues have tended to emphasize circuits that join up different territories in new ways and adorn them with a new suite of policy injunctions and circumscriptions. In contrast, an assemblage approach weaves territories into analyses of policy assemblages that bring together diverse and variable elements in contingent combinations (Phelps et al. 2014; Jacobs 2012; Robinson 2011, 2013). Neoliberalism is understood here less as the explanatory structuring narrative and more as a specific set of individualization and marketization technologies that get selectively deployed in different circumstances alongside other governing logics and techniques (Ong 2007).

Rather than thinking about policy as something that gets ‘applied’ to a territory, an assemblage approach to policy means thinking about how that territory is reassembled, in more or less significant ways, through the assemblage of the policy. Thinking about policy mobility means thinking about how connections to other territories are constructed as a part of this process, and what the consequences of this are. One of the key ways that this occurs is through specific techniques of measurement. Larner and Le Heron (2002), for example, talk about the way the technique of benchmarking by governmental and non-governmental organizations has the effect of drawing their comparators into close proximity, making the practices of those comparators more likely to be emulated in this new relational assemblage of comparison. This has implications for how we might think about which policies from which territories will be considered in practices of policy learning (McCann 2008). For instance, this can help us to understand the circulation of ‘creativity’-based policies, which have tended to be founded on the invention of quantitative measures of creativity – from Richard Florida’s (2002) city-ranking tables of creativity indices to the more conventional statistical measurement of the so-called ‘creative industries’ in relation to GDP (see DCMS 2001). The measurement techniques are reproduced in other places, in the process assembling ‘creativity’ as a universal, and knowable, aspect of cities and economies, and it is across this ‘global assemblage’ (Collier 2006) that policies which speak to these measurements are mobilized by policy actors (Prince 2010, 2014).

Another way territories are relationally reassembled is through the circulation of knowledge across them. Forms of knowledge produced in one territory can be extracted and made mobile in both textual and embodied forms. In the process, representations of territories circulate and can become a part of other assemblages (Roy 2012). This often happens with ‘policy models’, such as in the representation of certain cities in ideal terms to shape policy formation in another (Pow 2014; McCann and Ward 2010). And it can happen with people. Experts from places that appear to fit a set of policy aspirations, or who seek out new territories for their own purposes, can connect policy narratives between one place and another. The way they connect these narratives is likely to produce unexpected outcomes in policy form, and can help us to understand some of the disjunctive and surprising ways that policy gets assembled (Larner 2009; Larner and Laurie 2010; Roy 2012).

Neoliberal policy mobility is more circumscribed from this perspective. Indeed, understanding neoliberalism as an overarching structural logic is anathema to this approach. Rather, ideology
is subordinate to the work of assemblage. Particular technologies of governing that we might identify as neoliberal, such as those that individualize and responsibilize the citizenry, or that marketize social relations, will often be quite mobile and so a part of policy assemblages that are transnationally constituted (Ong 2007). But to assume that these are their most important components is to undertake the significance of other rationalities and logics that emerge to shape policy from changing political constituencies and their expectations and demands (Barnett 2005). Conversely, this can overstate the relative novelty of many of the technologies and policies associated with neoliberalism, which often have much longer and more complex histories than such a designation would suggest (Clarke 2009).

Taking account of the myriad ways that a policy assemblage might be connected to other territories and places, and the shifting significance that might be ascribed to any set of these according to the accident of a given moment, left Robinson (2013) arguing for a different understanding of policy mobility. Rather than think about how policy ‘arrives’ at a destination, she advocates thinking about how policy is ‘arrived at’ in place, and so understanding how certain influences loom larger over decision-making while others are pushed to the background. This approach provincializes policy-making, so is opposed to a reading of neoliberalism ‘upwards’ as universal, global or structural in the way it shapes policy. Instead, it makes the case for more specificity, and thinking about neoliberalism in ways that undermine its dominance in the narrative, rather than cementing it.

**Conclusion: everywhere neoliberalism?**

I suggested in the introduction that tracing policy should be a straightforward way of grasping neoliberalism’s everywhereness. The three discussions above show that it is anything but. While each of them overlaps with the others in certain ways, they tend to sit in tension with one another over the ontological status of neoliberalism. While one is happy to see neoliberalism as a top-down, class-driven global policy project, another describes it as a form of regulatory restructuring that parameterizes and directs market-based policy-making, while the third understands it as a specific set of technologies that get deployed in what are often otherwise highly divergent policy assemblages. Arguably, anyone with much familiarity with recent debates about neoliberalism could recognize the way these can roughly map onto particular conceptions of neoliberalism, such as political economy (e.g. Carroll and Sapinski 2016), regulationist (e.g. Jessop 2016), and governmentality (e.g. Lewis 2016) conceptions respectively. A focus on policy mobility, then, may not resolve these debates, but it nevertheless helps to further nuance each perspective.

But, more than this, a focus on neoliberal policy can make us think about the politics of how we conceive neoliberalism. For example, thinking of it as a top-down project places neoliberal policy at the centre of a fundamental global class conflict, and so something to be necessarily opposed at every step by progressive forces. An approach that considers it a regulatory regime brings the focus more to the way that policy-making institutions are aligned within and across states, and points to effective politics being directed towards reshaping such rule regimes. In contrast, treating neoliberalism as a specific set of technologies that can be parts of complex policy assemblages suggests that a politics opposed to neoliberalism needs to be more carefully specified to not only distinguish what is neoliberal and what is not, but even what may be distinguished as neoliberal that might still be progressive and worth working with (Lewis 2009; Ferguson 2010). Whichever of these is more useful for contending with neoliberal policy is debatable, but it reminds us that neoliberalism is not simply a descriptive and analytical category, it is a political one. What it offers to or closes down for political possibilities needs to be considered whenever we use it.
References


