



Geographies of policy knowledge: The state and corporate dimensions of contemporary policy mobilities



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ABSTRACT

Situated within geographical scholarship on policy mobilities, this article aims to direct attention to the state and corporate dimensions of corporate policy mobilizations as terrains that require further conceptual development. It argues that doing so is important for two reasons. First, it shows that national states should not be seen merely as functional and institutional infrastructures across and through which policies circulate, since national state policymakers also operate as active agents of policy mobilization across space and scale, especially in contexts of strong, centralized governance. Second, it illustrates how the economic dimensions of corporate actors engaged in mobilizing policy deserve more sustained analyses for a better conception of how firms' capitalist agendas shape their participation as policy transfer agents. We suggest that a relational economic geography perspective provides a set of conceptual tools – actors, networks, and value – to unpack the corporate rationalities and knowledge-sharing processes of firms. Drawing on research conducted on the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city, we show how national state policymakers and transnational conglomerates are active agents in circulating urban sustainability expertise across space. An appreciation of these geographies of policy knowledge across the state and corporate domains of policy mobilization is a first step towards grasping these varied registers of expertise, and their implications for the form and content of policies on the move.

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1. Introduction

Policy networks stretching across jurisdictional borders and bringing together a range of geographically dispersed agents and localities have warranted increasing interdisciplinary attention across the social sciences in recent years. In particular, political scientists working in this area have been joined over the past decade by a growing coterie of urban political-economic geographers, conceptualizing the phenomenon through the study of so-called 'policy mobilities' (e.g. McCann, 2011). Through these interventions, which have tended to place more emphasis on specific actors and knowledge flows compared to the more structural/institutional political science approaches, we have arrived at better understandings of how and why policies are moved from one place to another, the transformations they unavoidably undergo in their travels, and how such mobilities contribute to the socio-spatial reproduction of cities. These insights have shed light on urbanization-globalization dynamics during a period when policies and their authors would, indeed, seem to be 'on the move' (McCann & Ward, 2010).

In this paper, we engage closely with these ideas of knowledge circulation, with particular attention to the state and corporate domains

through which policies are mobilized as terrains that require further conceptual development. Adopting an actor-centered approach, we view state and corporate actors as policy 'transfer agents' (Stone, 2002), and mediums and vehicles of knowledge mobilization (Saxenian, 2002). Our argument is composed of two parts. First, states should be seen not just as functional and institutional infrastructures across and through which policies circulate, since national state actors may also operate as active agents of policy mobilization, especially in politico-economic contexts characterized by centralized governance. Second, the economic dimensions of corporate agents engaged in mobilizing policy deserve more sustained analysis for a better conception of how firms' capitalist agendas and interfirm relationships shape their participation as policy transfer agents.

To grasp these corporate-economic aspects, we suggest that work in relational economic geography usefully complements attempts to illuminate the role of firms and their transnational linkages, together with their underlying corporate motivations of value extraction, in contemporary policy mobilizations. The so-called 'relational turn' in economic geography has emerged over the past two decades, primarily as a critique of previously dominant structural approaches that lacked a nuanced consideration of the role of economic agents and their socio-spatial relations in shaping patterns of economic activity (Boggs & Rantisi, 2003). Rather than rely on 'atomistic description[s] of individual actors' (Dicken, Kelly, Olds, & Yeung, 2001, p. 91) to understand the

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global economy, attention has shifted to the socially embedded, power-suffused interactions and interrelationships between economic actors across multiple sites and scales — with the network becoming an increasingly popular metaphor for these complex interconnections. These conceptual developments unfolded alongside the purported rise of the ‘knowledge economy’ and recognition of the growing significance of knowledge and innovation for the spatial organization of economic activity (Bathelt & Glückler, 2011).

We draw on prominent concepts within relational economic geography to unpack the role of corporate actors and interfirm relations of knowledge-sharing in policy mobilization. First, relational economic geographers pay close attention to corporate *actors* and their practices, strategies, and decision-making processes to contextualize these forms of economic action (e.g. Faulconbridge, 2010). Beyond individuals, these corporate actors are also viewed as units composed of multiple, conflicting agendas. Second, there is a focus on *networks* to emphasize inter-corporate relationships stretching across space and scale, as well as the circulation of actors, expertise, and products through these linkages (e.g. Coe et al., 2004). This shows how ‘certain key knowledges “circulate” between producers, consumers and intermediaries, rather than moving in a uni-directional manner’ (Henderson et al., 2002, p. 445). Third, *value* directs attention to how economic rent can be created, enhanced, or captured through inter-corporate relationships (e.g. Murphy & Schindler, 2011). If firms are viewed as corporate transfer agents that move expertise across space, this frames policy mobilization as a value-added activity that provides possibilities of profit generation for economic actors. In what follows, we utilize these concepts in an interrelated fashion to illustrate how a holistic focus on networked corporate actors and their practices of knowledge-sharing casts policy mobilization, in part, as an economic activity of value extraction.

We draw on empirical material from a wider research project on the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city and the mobility of sustainable urbanism policies. These findings are based on fieldwork undertaken in Singapore and Tianjin from 2014 to 2015, involving: (a) semi-structured interviews with 33 policy transfer agents across Singapore and China; (b) participant observation at field-sites and international conferences on green urbanism; and (c) content and discourse analyses of 350 policy documents and media articles on Singapore’s greening policies and their materialization in the Eco-city. As an urban megaproject enveloped in ideals of knowledge-sharing in sustainability, the Eco-city was initiated by the Singaporean and Chinese national governments in 2008 and developed through partnerships between state and corporate actors originating from the two countries and the wider Pacific Asia region. As we show, particular state and corporate actors emerged as powerful agents in the mobilization of sustainability policy in ways that reflect the significance of national state policymakers and transnational corporations with core competencies in sustainable urbanism. This paper thus contributes to policy mobility scholarship by showing how state and corporate actors are integrated into the travels and territorializations of urban policies, as well as the multiple registers of expertise required to set policy motion and, in turn, bring it back to ground.

The paper proceeds in three sections. The first provides an overview of extant policy mobility scholarship, indicating where knowledge gaps lie with respect to the state and corporate dimensions of policy mobilization. The second turns to broader debates in urban studies and our empirical findings to illustrate the importance of the state for policy mobilization, as opposed to being a mere institutional backdrop for policy mobilities. The third draws on work in relational economic geography and evidence from the Tianjin case to elaborate on the motivations of profit and value extraction driving corporate transfer agents and shaping their role in mobilizing policy.

2. The geographies of policy knowledge in a global-urban world

As a foundational ‘organizing principle’ of society, policies are considered key apparatuses through which powerful actors such as states,

public agencies, and supranational organizations categorize, regulate, and *make knowable* the spaces and subjects they seek to govern (Shore & Wright, 2011). In the conception and grounding of policies, new spaces, subjects, and webs of relations are devised and dismantled. Policies may still be formally enacted in (national) political arenas of decision-making, but the extension of policy networks (understood more expansively than the formal organizational relations depicted in political science circles, e.g. Stone, 2002) and emergence of international policy norms and ‘models’ suggest the growing transnationalization of policymaking processes (Peck & Theodore, 2010). While mobile policies are not a novel phenomenon — as the literatures on planning histories and colonial urban development indicate (e.g. King, 1990) — there are several distinctive aspects of contemporary policy mobilities which signal a qualitative break with the past, notwithstanding the deep historical circulations and institutional path dependencies that continue to undergird the policy movements of today.

First, the typology of agents considered capable of tapping into translocal knowledge conduits now radiates beyond the state to encompass an array of nonstate actors that form the ‘global policy consultocracy’ (McCann, 2011) including, for instance, planning and design consultants. These transfer agents may be spatially distanced, yet socially proximate, converging through communities of practices in relational spaces of knowledge-sharing and learning (Faulconbridge, 2007). Second, contemporary policymaking is constituted through the sheer speed of today’s policy horizons. The enlarged role of nonstate intermediaries is ascribed to cases where resource- and time-strapped policymakers simply lack the tools and information to respond to challenges; for some, these ramped-up turnover times are symptomatic of a broader neoliberal phenomenon termed ‘fast policy’ (Peck & Theodore, 2001). At the expense of long-term policy development, policymakers are pressured to resort to programmatic policies which have been proven to ‘work’, while remaining restricted to narrow ideological parameters. Such occurrences are especially pervasive in cities afflicted by competitive emulation and fiscal budgetary constraints.

Third, the wider contours of contemporary policy mobilities are dynamically shaped by reconfigurations in the global balance of geopower engendered by the (re)emergence of world powers in the so-called ‘Global South’. This rise has seen the inception of new policy exchanges, urban models, and corporate consultancies since the 1990s, signifying shifts in the geopolitics of urban policy relations marked by the ascendancy, in particular, of Asian powerhouses (Roy & Ong, 2011). While these changes have not supplanted existing North-South channels, they have disrupted established patterns in the manufacturing, modeling, and mobilizing of ‘best practice’, especially through the establishment of emergent South-South networks which operate alongside traditional interchanges to arguably undermine paternalist neocolonial exchanges (Harrison, 2015).

To a notable degree, these new aspects of urban policy — which are themselves reflective of broader geoeconomic and geopolitical dynamics — originate from and spread through politico-economic contexts where state-led strategies of national development and urbanization have retained their prominence. Accordingly, there remains the question of how we should account for the multiple, ongoing ways whereby urban actors operate globally through policy, both within and beyond their *national states*. In this context, McCann (2013, p. 23) has observed that while research on policy mobilities has attributed significance to interurban linkages, these analyses have ‘tended to be discussed as linking cities in ways that work outside or around more “traditional” international structures, institutions, and pathways’, thereby at times failing to consider ‘the role national states play in the governance and development of cities’. This critique is mirrored in Acuto’s (2013, p. 171) broader diagnosis of an overly globalist perspective in global cities research: ‘a risk that many urbanists have run in the past few decades is that of veering away from other political spheres to privilege “the urban” — thus risking a dangerous reification of what the political confines of the city are’. This concerning shift away from the national context can

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