Urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge:

Toward a research agenda

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Abstract

This article proposes an agenda for research into the spatial, social, and relational character of globally circulating urban policies, policy models, and policy knowledge. It draws upon geographical political economy literatures that analyze particular social processes in terms of wider socio-spatial contexts, in part by maintaining a focus on the dialectics of fixity and flow. The article combines this perspective with poststructuralist arguments about the analytical benefits of close studies of the embodied practices, representations, and expertise through which policy knowledge is mobilized. I suggest that the notion of 'mobilities' offers a useful rubric under which to operationalize this approach to the 'local globalness' of urban policy transfer. The utility of this research approach is illustrated by the example of Vancouver, BC, a city that is frequently referenced by policy-makers elsewhere as they look for 'hot' policy ideas. The case also indicates that there is much research yet to be done on the character and implications of inter-urban policy transfer. Specifically, I argue that, while maintaining a focus on wider forces, studies of urban policy mobilities must take seriously the role that apparently banal activities of individual policy transfer agents play in the travels of policy models and must also engage in fine-grained qualitative studies of how policies are carried from place to place, learned in specific settings, and changed as they move. The final section offers theoretical/methodological questions and considerations that can frame future research into how, why, and with what consequences urban policies are mobilized globally.

Key words: Policy transfer; urban policy mobilities; urban policy, globalization, geographies of knowledge

Introduction

In 2003, Vancouver, British Columbia architect Bing Thom was hired by the Tarrant County,

Texas Water District to design the Trinity Point Plan, a development and flood control project

for riverside land on the edge of downtown Fort Worth (Thom n.d.). The plan's defining

features are the creation of a new channel in the Trinity River, which will control floodwaters

and thus open 500 acres of floodplain to new development, and an emphasis on residential

density, much of it in apartment blocks, mixed-use zoning, environmentally-conscious design

elements, and waterfront walking paths. The plan was the downtown element of a larger federal

and local effort to manage the Trinity River watershed. From the beginning, Fort Worth's

planners were keen to emulate the good planning strategies they saw in waterfront

redevelopment in other parts of North America. Downtown business interests were also

receptive because they hoped to replicate the success of waterfront real estate development in

San Antonio (Richardson 2002). Therefore, the existing institutional context in Fort Worth made

the hiring of someone like Thom likely from the beginning.

Thom, for his part, reflected the need for consultants to tailor their proposals to the

locality in which they are hired when he argued that his design was "uniquely Fort Worth" (in

Schnurman 2004). Yet, the architect also underscored urban planning and design consultants'

tendency to transfer 'best practices' from elsewhere by noting that his Fort Worth design would

be directly inspired by the compact, residential downtown planning that has recently made

Vancouver famous in global planning and design circles (City of Vancouver 1997; Punter 2003).

Vancouver's model is defined by 'Living First' and 'Sustainability' principles that have

produced a downtown core with one of the highest residential densities and some of the highest

housing prices in North America. The model emphasizes bike and walking paths, a water

orientation, and mixed-use zoning and design intended to maintain attractive, lively streets. Fort Worth's decision-makers saw this landscape first-hand when Thom's firm organized a fact-finding visit to Vancouver. Such visits are crucial for the learning process of potential clients. Indeed, to a Texas politician who participated in the trip, Vancouver "had to be the model" for Fort Worth (in Schnurman 2004).

This back-and-forth teaching and learning process clearly had implications for Fort Worth. The benefits on the Vancouver side did not only accrue to the architectural firm, however. The wider political benefits of favorable attention from elsewhere are evident, for example, to the *Vancouver Sun's* (2004b, I1) real estate column which noted that "[t]he civic worthies of Fort Worth, Tex. have turned to Vancouver, via Thom, for inspiration in their goal of improving the city's quality of life." Vancouver's image as an international inspiration for seekers of good development policy is a powerful political narrative that valorizes existing development models in the city, legitimates the actions of Vancouver's development coalition, and dampens criticism of the negative impacts of the current policy – such as the city's high housing prices and attendant unaffordability for the poor and middle class (Blomley 2004; Boddy 2006; Eby and Misura 2006; Gurstein and Rotberg 2006; Kane 2007).

This example of the Vancouver-Fort Worth connection highlights both the translocal activities of architects (Olds 1997, 2001; McNeill 2009) and the importance of the inter-city, cross-scale circulation of policy knowledge in the production of urban development strategies and "restless" urban landscapes (Knox, 1991). It also underscores the role of private consultants, of which architects are only one type, in shaping flows of knowledge about urban policy and in transferring policies themselves. These are longstanding but increasingly important aspects of the production of cities, yet they have not been adequately studied or theorized.

While focusing little on the specific processes and practices described above, urban scholars in various disciplines have become increasingly concerned, in more general terms, with how cities are produced in and through cross-scale relationships – by flows of people, capital, ideas and so on (Harvey 1982, 1985; Massey 1991, 1993, 2005, 2007; Castells 2000; Graham and Marvin 2001; M.P. Smith 2001; Sassen 2002; Taylor 2007). A great deal of this work recognizes that flows are not unmoored from localities, regions, and territories. Rather, important geographical literatures on scale, place, global cities, neoliberalization, and urban development have grappled with the complex and mutually constitutive relationships between urbanization and processes that operate through and beyond cities, interconnecting them with other scales (Smith 1991; Marston, 2000; Brenner and Theodore, 2002a; Wilson, 2004; Hackworth, 2006).

Two foundational insights underpinning these geographical literatures, alongside their adherence to social constructionist understandings of space (Lefebvre, 1991), are Harvey's (1982, 1985) notion of the productive tension between the fixity and mobility of capital and Massey's (1991, 1993) global-relational conceptualization of place. The former highlights the twin imperatives of capital – to circulate and to be fixed in place – and shows that this tension, and the seesawing bouts of investment and disinvestment in the urban landscape that accompany it, produces cities as dynamic socio-spatial formations. The latter emphasizes that cities must be understood as relational nodes, constituted by the flows of capital, immigrants, information, etc. that tie them to other distant places. Place is, in this conception, an "event . . . the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing … open and . . . internally multiple" (Massey 2005, 141).

These key insights and literatures on scaled and relational places notwithstanding, the proliferation of scholarship on the urbanization-globalization nexus has not fully answered questions about the character and implications of relationships between contemporary urbanism and processes extending through and beyond cities. On the contrary, recent discussions of neoliberalization, for example, suggest the need for research that adds empirical depth and theoretical nuance to our understanding of the 'actually existing' forms of contemporary urban political economies (Brenner and Theodore 2002b; Peck and Tickell 2002; Larner 2003). Specifically, the global circulation of urban policies (formally drafted and adopted guidelines and procedures setting out the long-term purposes of and addressing specific problems of governance), policy models (more general statements of ideal policies, combining elements of more than one policy, or statements of ideal combinations of policies), and policy knowledge (expertise or experienced-based know-how about policies, policy-making, implementation, and best practices) proliferates and, therefore, needs continued research, as recent writing on 'policies in motion' (Peck, 2003; Ward, 2006) and 'inter-local policy transfer' (Theodore and Peck, 2000; Peck and Theodore, 2001) suggests. Research into the processes, agents, and institutions involved in mobilizing certain 'hot' policy ideas – about the best way to build a 'livable' and profitable downtown waterfront, for example – offers clear opportunities to further conceptualize and empirically detail our understanding of contemporary urbanization by tacking back and forth between specificity and generality, relationality and territoriality (Peck and Tickell 2002; Wilson 2004; Proudfoot and McCann 2008; McCann and Ward Forthcoming).

Below, I outline a framework for studying the character and implications of 'urban policy mobilities' – socially produced and circulated forms of knowledge addressing how to design and govern cities that develop in, are conditioned by, travel through, connect, and shape various

spatial scales, networks, policy communities, and institutional contexts. My conceptual starting-point is to take seriously the fixity-mobility dialectic in order to understand policy transfer not in terms of the voluntaristic acts of unconstrained, rational transfer agents freely 'scanning' the world for objectively 'best' practices and not by focusing on and fetishizing policies as naturally mobile objects. Rather, the circulation of policy knowledge is paradoxically structured by embedded institutional legacies and imperatives (e.g., by longstanding policy paradigms, path-dependencies, ideologies, and frames of reference and/or by external forces, like political-economic restructuring, which often necessitate the easiest, fastest, and most politically feasible transfers). These contexts condition the field of policy transfer as social, relational, and power-laden (Peck and Theodore, 2008). Thus, the 'demand side' of policy transfer and the conditions under which adopters of 'best practices' – such as the federal agencies, local planners, and downtown business interests who hired Thom to 'Vancouverize' Fort Worth – operate must be acknowledged in combination with the study of the practices of 'supply side' policy mediators, such as consultants.

Having taken this position, my specific purpose is to: (1) elucidate the connective tissue that constitutes cities as global-relational nodes; the representational, comparative, translatory, pedagogical, and ambulatory practices through which contemporary policy experts and consultants, city officials, academics, activists, and other urban actors position themselves and their cities within wider fields of inter-urban competition, cooperation, and learning[1] and (2) conceptualize the role of urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge in providing pathways for the transfer of urban policy models and in shaping contemporary urbanism and urbanization. The article is motivated by Peck and Tickell's (2002) call to 'walk the line' between local specificity and an attention to global interconnection, by Peck's (2003, 229)

related argument for more detailed conceptualizations and "descriptions of the circulatory systems that connect and interpenetrate 'local' policy regimes," and by Larner's (2003, 511) attention to the "apparently mundane practices," agents and experts through which the global is produced.

The article's next section describes the dominant social science literature on policy transfer, one developed by scholars in political science, and critiques it for its lack of full attention to the socio-spatial and scalar elements of these transfers. The subsequent section addresses this critique by proposing a conceptual framework which builds on certain elements of the 'traditional' policy transfer literature but bolsters it through the introduction of insights from both the burgeoning literature on mobilities and also from poststructuralist approaches to government. The point is not to paper over the distinctions between the political economy and poststructuralist approaches but to acknowledge their differences and limits while drawing out their complementary strengths when deployed in a specific context (Larner and Le Heron, 2002a; Le Heron 2007; Lewis, Larner, and Le Heron 2008). This conceptual ground-clearing leads to the case of Vancouver, which I use to outline a perspective on urban policy mobilities which focuses on the transfer agents involved, the specifically inter-city, rather than international, travels of policy models, and the sites in which policies are transferred. Urban development policy, as it is mobilized in and through Vancouver is, then, a lens through which to explore *how* urban policy gets done in global context – through the prosaic routines, practices, technologies, inter-personal connections, and travels of key actors, who Stone (2004) refers to as "transfer agents." This approach emphasizes the situated nature of all global flows, allowing a detailed investigation of how they are performed in and through specific places, or microspaces, while also attending to their more general influence (Burawoy et al., 2000; Larner and Le Heron 2002a,

2002b; McCann 2008; McCann and Ward Forthcoming). Having illustrated how a situated,

relational conceptualization of urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge might

usefully inform the study of urbanization, the article's final section outlines a research agenda

built on a number of theoretical/methodological questions and considerations that stem from the

previous discussion.

Policy transfer

In analyzing the global travels of policies and the circulation of policy knowledge, it is necessary

to engage with the contemporary political science literature on policy transfer. The term 'policy

transfer' is, as Stone (1999) notes, an umbrella concept referring to the practices of national

policy-making elites who, "import innovatory policy developed elsewhere in the belief that it

will be similarly successful in a different context" (ibid, 52)[2] but also to the involuntary adoption

of new policies as the result of external pressures from supra-national institutions like the IMF

(Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Stone 2000; cf. Gilbert 2002) and to structural convergences and

diffusions (R. Rose 1993) in the policy realm in which elites play less of an initiatory role.

While the diversity of processes to which 'policy transfer' refers suggests that it is a 'chaotic

conception' in Sayer's (1992) sense, the term has, nonetheless, spawned a significant literature

that seeks to model or theorize how the transfer process operates, create typologies of the actors

and institutions involved in transfers, identify the power relations through which adoption

occurs, and specify the conditions and mechanisms under which certain policy transfers succeed

or fail (Bennett 1991, 1997; Robertson 1991; R. Rose 1991, 1993; Wolman 1992; Dolowitz and

Marsh 1996, 2000; Stone 1996, 1999, 2000; 2004; Evans and Davies 1999; Wolman and Page

2000, 2002; Dolowitz 2000, 2001, 2003; Radaelli 2000; James and Lodge 2003; Evans 2004; Jones and Newburn 2007).

In developing their influential model of these processes, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, 8) address the following guiding questions:

> Why do actors engage in policy transfer? Who are the key actors involved in the policy transfer process? What is transferred? From where are lessons drawn? What are the different degrees of transfer? What restricts or facilitates the policy transfer process? . . . How is the process of policy transfer related to policy "success" or policy "failure"?

This approach has, then, shed light on a number of key elements of policy transfer. Yet, the utility of this 'traditional' approach to transfer needs to be considered critically from three angles. First, a reading of this literature highlights the care needed when conceptualizing the identities and activities of transfer agents. Those studying policy transfer expend considerable effort on identifying and categorizing these agents. The "Dolowitz and Marsh model" (2000, 10), for example, lists "nine main categories of political actors engaged in the policy transfer process: elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental and nongovernmental institutions and consultants." Stone (2004, 556) also typologizes a set of key agents: "Think-tanks or research institutes, consultancy firms, philanthropic foundations, university centres, scientific associations, professional societies, training institutes and so forth." The issue here is the balance between the empirical description of transfer agents and the analysis of process and practice. Peck and Theodore emphasize "processes of policy learning,

emulation, and *making*" (Peck and Theodore 2001, 429, their emphasis; see Peck, 2006; Ward 2006; Cook 2008) that define contemporary policy and, certainly, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, 7) critique other studies that "describe the transfer of ideas or policies between countries but do not analyze and explain the processes involved." Nonetheless, a focus on typologies of actors, and on models and definitions of what is or is not policy transfer allows the typologies and models themselves to be reified, becoming the *objects* of debate rather than *facilitating* analyses of the social processes that constitute policy transfer (Evans and Davies 1999; James and Lodge 2003). Yet, it is clear that the identification and categorization of actors is a necessary component of studying the fundamentally *social* process of knowledge circulation in general and policy mobilities, more specifically.

A second critique of the traditional approach to transfer is related to its tendency to focus on the national scale (Hoyt 2006 is an exception). The national scale limitation is clear in Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) references to "countries" and "'foreign' models" which belie a particular conceptualization of the institutional geography of policy transfer – one which elides the various sites and scales, including the urban, in and through which policies are produced. A national approach fails to recognize that "*cities* . . . have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories" (Brenner and Theodore 2002b, 21, my emphasis) for numerous policy experiments and that "as extra-local policy learning and emulation is normalised . . . the effectiveness of policies and programmes remains stubbornly dependent on *local* economic and institutional conditions" (Peck and Theodore 2001, 427, their emphasis). Now, Stone (1999, 53) does acknowledge the important, if understudied, occurrence of transfer "at the sub-national level: between states in federal systems and across local governments, municipalities and boroughs." Yet, both she and Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 352)

only go so far as to acknowledge that inter-local transfers and learning can happen *within* one

national system. Thus, the policy transfer literature maintains a problematic separation between

the domestic and the international which does not acknowledge that urban policy actors can act

globally in their own right, particularly in a contemporary context where "state territorial

organization . . . [has been turned] *inside-out* insofar as its . . . goal is to enhance and promote the

global competitiveness of its cities and regions" (Brenner 1998, 16, his emphasis).

A third concern is with the traditional notion of 'transfer' itself. As Peck and Theodore

(2001, 449) argue, the term entails an "implicit literalism . . . which tends to suggest the

importation of fully formed, off-the-shelf policies, when in fact the nature of this process is much

more complex, selective, and multilateral." Policies, models, and ideas are not moved around

like gifts at a birthday party or like jars on shelves, where the mobilization does not change the

character and content of the mobilized objects. While not all policy transfer literature falls

entirely into this literalist trap – Stone (1999, 57) notes, for example, that "the process of

modification in transfer requires closer investigation" – it is important to further detail and

conceptualize how "the form and function of . . . policies is prone to change as they are

translated and re-embedded within and between different institutional, economic and political

contexts (at the local and national scales)" (Peck and Theodore 2001, 427).

From policy transfer to urban policy mobilities

My argument so far has been that certain characteristics of the policy transfer approach – its

tendency toward narrow typologies, its adherence to one or two scales, and its tendency to fall

into a literalist trap of assuming that little happens to policies 'along the way,' or 'in the telling'

as they are moved from place to place – limit its utility in the study of how cities are constituted

as key socio-spatial nodes within global circuits of policy knowledge. In this regard, it is

necessary to draw on the useful insights of the traditional literature but to incorporate other

conceptual vocabularies and perspectives so as to remain open to the array of agents, practices,

processes, socially produced (and productive) scales and territories in and through which cities

are produced. Some of those working in the policy transfer tradition, as well as geographers and

others, have begun to push the limits of the traditional approach (Wolman 1992; Gaffikin and

Warf 1993; Theodore and Peck 2000; Wolman and Page 2000, 2002; Stone 1999; Peck and

Theodore 2001; Peck 2003, 2006; McCann 2004, 2008; Hoyt 2006; Ward 2006; Cook 2008). I

suggest that more can be done, however, by identifying elements of an alternative approach that

can be found in the contemporary literature on mobilities and in poststructuralist scholarship on

the seemingly banal practices of institutional actors.

Numerous authors have sketched the contours of a recent 'mobilities turn' in the social

sciences (Urry 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2007; Cresswell 2001, 2006; Heyman and Cunningham

2004; Sheller 2004; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006) and begun to

critique certain aspects of it (Ray 2002; Adey 2006; Binnie et al. 2007). The mobilities approach

focuses on, among other things, the various ways in which humans are mobile, how people

mobilize various objects, how technologies, whether mobile themselves or fixed in place

('moored'), facilitate movement, and on the stratification of mobility, identifying distinctions

between "kinetic elites" (Wood and Graham quoted in Hannam Sheller, and Urry 2006, 6) and

other less mobile groups, the relationship between mobility and social exclusion/inclusion, (Urry

2002; Cass, Shove, and Urry 2005), and "how mobilities enables/disables/modifies gendered

practices" (Uteng and Cresswell 2008, 1). These programmatic and conceptual statements have

inspired applications of the notion of mobility/mobilities to a wide range of topics, especially

automobile travel and its associated infrastructures, and cultures (Sheller and Urry 2000; Urry, Featherstone, and Thrift 2004; Hagman 2006; Freund and Martin 2007; Laurier et al. 2008), air travel and airports (Adey 2008; Adey, Budd, and Hubbard 2008; Cwerner 2006; Kellerman 2008), tourism, convention, business, and spiritual travel (Sheller and Urry 2004; Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen, 2006; Bajc, Coleman, and Eade 2007; Edensor 2007), and migration/transnationalism (Conradson and Latham 2005; Ali and Holden 2006; Conradson and McKay 2007). While the range of applications can, on the one hand, be seen as an indication of its analytical merit, mobilities has, on the other hand, been argued to have "become a most elusive theoretical, social, technical, and political construct" (Uteng and Cresswell 2008, 1) and might be accused of being a 'chaotic conception' in its own right.

Nevertheless, I will show that 'mobilities,' when employed judiciously, offers a worthwhile analytical lens through which to study policies in motion. In general terms, it

challenges the ways in which much social science research has been relatively 'a-mobile' until recently . . . . [and] problematizes both 'sedentarist' approaches in the social sciences that treat place, stability, and dwelling as a natural steady-state, and 'deterritorialized' approaches that posit a new 'grand narrative' of mobility, fluidity or liquidity as a pervasive condition of postmodernity or globalization … It is a part of a broader theoretical project aimed at going beyond the imagery of 'terrains' as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes, and calling into question scalar logics such as local/global as descriptors of regional extent … (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006: 5).

This approach resonates with longstanding traditions in geography, represented by the work of Harvey and of Massey, that emphasize the need to understand the production of place in terms of fixity *and* mobility, relationality *and* territoriality. More specifically, and again resonating with geographical literatures, the mobilities approach questions the tendency toward reification and national state-centeredness in much of the traditional policy transfer literature. It offers a vision of society (and policy-making) as a multiply scaled, emergent social process. Furthermore, mobilities provides an opportunity to think about the transfer, translation, or transformation of policy models and ideas in terms of the embodied practices across what Ong (1999, 159) calls "translocal fields of power." Global circuits of policy knowledge shape and are shaped by social connections made by actors sometimes at a distance – over email or by reading policy documents about policies in other places – but, as Urry (2004) emphasizes, these connections also depend on the intermittent copresence of those actors in specific places (see also Larson, Urry, and Axhausen, 2006; Le Heron, 2007).[3]

While the mobilities literature offers useful additions to the study of policy transfer, reference to other literatures allows a sharper perspective on urban policy mobilities by offering insights into questions of knowledge. First, circuits of policy knowledge are composed of epistemic communities who transfer, emplace, and utilize certain forms of knowledge as part of their practice. Economic geographers have a longstanding interest in questions of knowledge, learning, the global and the local. Debates among these scholars continue around the relative importance to economic competitiveness of locally embedded tacit systems of knowledge, developed by and unique to spatially proximate actors and institutions in specific 'learning regions' or 'clusters,' versus codified forms of knowledge that are accessible to economic actors in most locations (Vallance 2007 provides a clear review of this debate). They offer resources to

conceptualize the transfers and uses of policy knowledge, specifically with regard to attempts to complicate the tacit/local – codified/global dualism (Amin and Cohendet 1999, 2004; Grabher 2004; Allen 2000) and, in ways that Vallance (2007) argues parallel the mobilities literature, to emphasize how economic knowledge circulates by being carried by specific actors and through processes of translation and teaching (French 2000; Bunnell and Coe 2001; Coe and Bunnell 2003; Thrift and Olds 2005).[4] Central to this and other literatures in contemporary geography and urban studies is the network metaphor. Certainly, global epistemic communities are networked and analyses that deploy the network as an analytical heuristic have contributed a great deal to scholarship on power, space, and the global. Space does not permit a review of this approach here, since I am more concerned with theorizing exactly *how* knowledge is mobilized in and through territories, places, scales, and networks, without privileging any one of these dimensions (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones, 2008).

A second addition to the mobilities approach involves work by political theorists on the character of knowledge, expertise, and governmental rationalities, on the ways in which certain ideas become hegemonic and global in contemporary society, and on the actors, practices, representations, and discourses that constitute knowledge and truth (Rose and Miller 1992; Dean 1999; N. Rose 1999; Griggs and Howarth 2002; McLennan 2004; Osborne, 2004). Some specifically geographical work on cities and localities, particularly concerning various rationalities and technologies of government, has stemmed from this wider literature (Raco and Imrie 2000; Huxley 2002, 2006) but more can be done in applying its insights to questions of contemporary urban policy transfer. The most convincing combination of the insights and concerns stemming from the types of economic geography and political theory discussed here has been developed by Larner and her collaborators (Larner 2002; Larner and Le Heron 2002a,

2002b, 2004; Larner and Walters 2004; Le Heron 2007; Lewis, Larner, and Le Heron, 2008).

While this work does not have an urban focus, it is particularly useful for my purposes because it

pays attention to the relationship between micropractices, microspaces and globalization.

Therefore, in what follows, I will frame a discussion of urban policy mobilities in terms of a

combination of the work of mobilities scholars and what Larner and Le Heron (2002a, 418) refer

to as "post-structural political economies" involving "[s]ituated theorization and method" (see

also Burawoy et al. 2000; Herbert, 2000).

A city in the world: Policy mobilities in and through Vancouver

The merits of the approach outlined above can best be explored through an empirical case study.

Here I will use aspects of Vancouver's relationship to global circuits of policy knowledge to

illustrate my argument. The discussion is based on an ongoing research project that analyzes two

fields of urban policy in Vancouver that have clear global relations: development and planning

policy and drug policy. In the interests of clarity, I only discuss development and planning here

(but see McCann, 2008). The research employs: discourse analysis of a wide range of

documents including government documents, newspapers, professional publications, web pages,

podcasts, videos, and blogs; interviews with key transfer agents involved in mobilizing policies;

and ethnographic observation of various settings where transfer occurs or is facilitated, including

public meetings, conferences, site visits, seminars, and lectures. The discussion represents an

embryonic attempt to develop a 'global ethnography' of policy transfer which investigates the

processes, meanings, and contexts of a single research site, and the governmentality of certain

microspaces within it, in order to investigate the mutually constitutive relationships, forces, and

imaginaries that tie it to other scales (Burawoy, 2000; Herbert, 2000; Larner and Le Heron, 2002;

Lewis, Larner, and Le Heron, 2008).[5]

Who mobilizes policy?

I have suggested that care needs to be taken when identifying important policy transfer agents since there is a danger of calcifying discussion into typologies that hinder rather than facilitate analysis of social processes. Yet, the need to understand and identify *who* mobilizes policy is crucial precisely because mobilities are social processes. This tension is evident in the way in which the practice and process-oriented literatures discussed in the previous section often parallel the policy transfer literature in producing typologies of key actors. Rose and Miller's (1992, 181) influential statement on governmentality argues that, "[government relies on] designs put forward by philosophers, political economists, physiocrats and philanthropists, government reports, committees of inquiry, White Papers, proposals and counterproposals by organizations of business, labour, finance, charities and professionals, ..." Developing a similar perspective, Larner (2002, 663) specifies a set of experts involved in the production of contemporary globalism. They are a "new specialist elite." "They range from international management consultants to small self-employed entrepreneurs, . . . conference organizers, people in marketing, public relations and software development."

Policy mobilities are simultaneously fixed in and mobilized through communities of social actors and their associated institutions, such as those described by Rose and Larner. Who might these communities of policy mobilizers be in the urban development context, specifically? I identify three broad categories: local policy actors, the global policy consultocracy, and informational infrastructures. The broad category of local policy actors includes policy professionals, like urban planners, working within the state, private policy consultants providing

services to the state, and civil society groups, including political activists and non-profits.[6] Each

works in its own way as a 'policy entrepreneur' (Mintrom, 1997), searching globally for best

practices to embrace, 'cutting edge' cities to emulate, and 'hot' experts from whom to learn but,

as discussed above, always within externally, historically, and institutionally imposed constraints

(Peck and Theodore, 2008). They tap into and utilize extra-local connections – ranging from

official inter-governmental alliances to individual relationships with colleagues elsewhere – to

learn about policy models and physically bring experts to the city to inform locals about cutting-

edge policies.

        In seeking to create connections through policy networks and to mobilize policies from

one place to another, local policy actors engage with what might be called, following Saint-

Martin (2000), the 'global consultocracy.' This collection of individuals, firms, and think tanks

can be divided into two groups: incoming policy consultants – those who come to a city from

elsewhere to impart knowledge – and outgoing policy consultants who, like Bing Thom, are

based in one city and present stories of its successes to people elsewhere as part of their

professional practice. The mobility of these consultants and their tendency to gather information

on best practices from various places to bolster their own specific recommendations makes them

particularly powerful conduits of information among far-flung and, in many cases, quite different

cities.

        Policy mobilities are also facilitated by a range of informational infrastructures –

individuals, institutions, organizations, and technologies that interpret, frame, package, and

represent information about best policy practices, successful cities, and cutting-edge ideas.

Specifically, we can identify three distinct but related groups: educators and trainers,

professional organizations and supra-local policy organizations, and the popular media.

Educators and trainers frame knowledge about policy practice by formally educating new generations of policy actors in universities and colleges and by engaging in mid-career professional development training. They codify information about various policy models and about the cities in which they have been implemented, turning the attention of their students toward certain urban development paradigms and their associated cities. By conferring degrees and diplomas, these educational institutions also credentialize and legitimate particular forms of urban policy expertise and their related mental maps of good and bad examples of policy (McCann, 2004; 2008). The research of single or small groups of academics can have a similar effect, of course, as it can highlight and perhaps legitimate certain mobilities and mental maps.

The professional organizations with which policy actors interact are also involved in the framing and dissemination of expert policy knowledge through their awards, conferences, workshops, field trips, professional publications, websites, and email lists (e.g., American Planning Association n.d.; Canadian Institute of Planners n.d.). The locations these organizations choose for their conferences and the plenary speakers they invite are also significant in that they serve to anoint certain cities and certain policies as worthy of attention. A similar informational role can be seen in the work of supra-local policy organizations, such as the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 'UN Habitat.' These organizations perform 'clearing house' functions not dissimilar to, but somewhat differently directed than, national professional organizations. Like professional organizations, they confer legitimacy on certain models and certain cities through reports, awards, and decisions about where to hold conferences (UN Habitat, n.d. a). The popular media, as a third informational infrastructure, play a similar role in the framing of urban policy. They construct narratives and mental maps of good and bad

policies, cities, and neighborhoods and repeat and popularize the findings of the experts and organizations discussed above (McCann, 2004).

In identifying these agents of urban policy transfer, I build upon but also extend, the range of actors proposed by the traditional policy transfer literature. In doing so, I indicate that their activities and the global-relational geographies they construct, are often manifest beyond the traditional bounds of the state, although never entirely divorced from its institutions. Furthermore, as these actors create, maintain, and utilize the "fragile relays, contested locales, and fissiparous affiliations" (Rose 1999, 51) that facilitate policy mobilities, they highlight an important geography of inter-city circuits of knowledge that do not necessarily match the paths of inter-*national* transfers.

Inter-city policy mobilities

In their discussion of the mobilities perspective, Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006) agree with Brenner's (2004, 66) argument that "the image of political-economic space as a complex, tangled mosaic of superimposed and interpenetrating nodes, levels, scales, and morphologies has become more appropriate than the traditional Cartesian model of homogeneous, self-enclosed and contiguous blocks of territory that has long been used to describe the modern interstate system." For them, "the nation itself is being transformed by [various] mobilities, as is the city" (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 2). Inter-urban mobilities, linking cities within the same nation state (Stone 2004) but also connecting cities in different countries, are produced through the activities of policy transfer agents. These connections work in and through national state institutions when, for example, they organize and finance international policy conferences like the World Urban Forum (see below), or when embassy staff help facilitate the insertion of 'their' architects,

planners, construction companies, etc. into other countries, as the Canadian embassy has done in the United Arab Emirates (Lowry and McCann, 2009). Crucially, as this article suggests, these connections also operate outside and around national state frameworks.

Inter-city interaction beyond the formal structures of the national state but, still influenced by national state contexts, is evident in the case of Seattle's recent downtown planning process. In 2005, that city hired Ray Spaxman, a former Vancouver planning director, and Larry Beasley, who at the time was Vancouver's co-director of planning, to evaluate a proposal that recommended changes in downtown development patterns (Spaxman and Beasley, 2005; see Bermingham, 2005; Langston, 2005a, 2005b). Spaxman and Beasley drew on their Vancouver experience by arguing for increased density in Seattle's core. In their report, they also explicitly addressed the similarities and differences between the two cities. The first sentence of the report reads: "Seattle and Vancouver are neighbours and our citizens admire much of what they see in each other's city" (Spaxman and Beasley 2005, 1). The report goes on to set the terms for their inter-city perspective by identifying a degree of commensurability that allows the two cities to be considered benchmarks for each other: "Vancouver and Seattle are kindred cities and we have much to learn from one another. We are good neighbours seeking a good life. We share a similar climate, a similar sized urban conglomeration and the same environmentally sensitive Georgian Basin in the Pacific Northwest" (Ibid. 4).

Yet, the report does not only emphasize similarities and learning opportunities. It also addresses differences between the two cities, in the context of differences between Canada and the United States, again indicating the fine line consultants walk between local specificity and inter-city comparison:

At the same time, we are also different. There are cultural, historic and legislative

differences that need to be understood and respected. Our two countries, although similar

in many ways, manifest divergent values and community aspirations. Our two urban

economies are at different stages of development, and function in dissimilar ways. We

don't want our cities to replicate one another but we can positively influence one another

(Ibid.).

The report sparked debates in Seattle around the question of whether or not Vancouver's policies

could, or should, be imported (Boddy 2005; Dawdy 2005). While it is yet to be seen if the two

downtowns will develop in parallel, the Vancouver consultants' involvement has meant that the

political discussion over the value of residential density in downtown Seattle has been set *in

terms of* the Canadian city while, as in the case of Fort Worth, ongoing discussions over, and

adjustments to urban design policy in Vancouver are, to some extent, conducted *in terms of* the

popularity of the Vancouver model in other cities.

These examples emphasize that an approach to policy transfer that involves only the

analysis of inter-local transfer within a particular polity, or the analysis of international transfer

among national states, suffers from a lack of appreciation for how urban actors act globally in

terms of policy. An approach that starts from the notion of policy mobility as a social process

enacted through the apparently banal practices of bureaucrats, consultants, and activists, will

entail an attention to the representational and comparative practices of these actors and to related

questions of commensurability. It takes, after all, a particular type of persuasive story telling,

involving strategic namings and framings, inserted into a specific context where actors are

predisposed to a certain range of policy options, to convince actors in one city that their place is

commensurate with another to the extent that policies formulated and implemented elsewhere

might also work at home. Such an imaginary – a set of meanings, values, and institutions held in

common and constituting the 'world view' of a particular community or society – is not natural,

but socially produced. Thom, for example, needed to construct a particular persuasive narrative

to convince his Texan clients of the merits of looking to Vancouver for new downtown

development ideas and, clearly, Spaxman and Beasley are at pains to tell just the right story

when offering their Vancouver-inspired vision for the future of downtown Seattle. Their

narratives are mental maps highlighting inter-city connection and similarity and, like all maps,

they represent the interests and intentions of their authors more than they offer a neutral window

onto the 'real' world (Harley 1992; Wood 1992; Pickles 2004). Furthermore, like maps with

their conventions of orientation, shading, labeling, and so on, narratives of inter-city connection

and commensurability are legible, understandable, and persuasive to particular audiences

because they employ a set of tropes and representational techniques with which the audience has

prior comfort and familiarity. The audience – the institutionally-embedded 'demand side' – is

already conditioned to look for certain 'institutional fixes' and therefore respond to a particular

narrative (Peck, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2008)

  For Larner and Le Heron (2002, 762), this hegemonic imaginary is constituted by "an

entire family of conceptually related comparative techniques" which "explicitly or implicitly

involve the imagining of comparisons across geographically discrete spaces and encourage social

relations to be performed in the same way in different locations" (Ibid., 763). Their analysis

centers on benchmarking as a particularly powerful and increasingly prevalent form of

calculation that employs carefully constructed indices and other numerical measures to identify

quantifiable differences and similarities among places. Such calculative and quantitative

techniques permit, among other things, the disembedding of specific characteristics from unique

places and the construction of a matrix of abstract measures and equivalences that "makes the

'incommensurable commensurable'" (Ibid., 761), and make "it possible to think of

organizationally discrete and spatially disparate objects as comparable" (Larner and Le Heron,

2004, 214).

  To Larner and Le Heron (2002, 762), benchmarking is an increasingly prevalent activity

beyond the business world. "[P]oliticians, academics and community organizations alike now

'benchmark' themselves in pursuit of 'best practice,'" they argue. This translation of the

incommensurable into the commensurable constitutes global spaces of emulation and

competition "new fields of competition made up of 'best practice' peers that other individuals

and organizations seek to emulate" (Larner and Le Heron 2004, 215). Ward, speaking

specifically of urban policy makes a similar point when arguing that "[t]he 'making-up' of policy

is . . . a profoundly geographical process, in and through which different places are constructed

as facing similar problems in need of similar solutions." (Ward 2006, 70; Rose and Miller 1991).

  The 'narration' of a city as global – as similar and connected to others in terms of policy

– is, then, materialized through the practices of consultants and other 'experts of truth' (N. Rose

1999). For one Vancouver planner whose professional reputation is closely tied to the city's

development model, the point of traveling to other cities with the 'Vancouver story' and of

writing about Vancouver's model, is to portray it correctly and to influence wider discussions

about the future of urbanism.

   I feel . . . an importance in the idea that the image of our city – out to the rest of the world

   – needs to be at least an accurate image. And I like to tell the story to the rest of the

world. So I am . . . oriented to the, not the popular press, I don't feel too much anxiety about the popular press, . . . but the academic press, the people that are setting the basic attitude of our practice here, planning practices here. I want to make sure that we contribute to that. And secondly I like the city to be a player among those that are making contributions that are defining urbanism as we know it today. And I like to think that the city through our example, and through what we have been able to experiment with, failed and succeeded in, those become good contributions toward the bigger debate and discussions going on about urbanism (Interview, senior planner, Vancouver, September, 2006).

The products of the work of experts like this planner – stories, articles, reports, PowerPoints, maps and so on – reflect, travel through, and produce circuits of policy knowledge. Thus, these comparative technologies create their own spatialities, marked by the mobilization of knowledge through certain networks and sites of persuasion and by the creation of specific spatial imaginaries, ways of seeing and acting in the world which "'stabilise' (become rationalities, metadiscourses, logics) as they are communicated in some way, discussed with others, and then instituted as the basis for action and performance" (Larner and Le Heron 2002, 760).

The prominence of Vancouver in the minds of policy actors in certain other cities is evident in an interview with a planner in Portland, Oregon. Discussion in the interview turned to his knowledge of and interaction with Vancouver's planners as 'fellow travelers,' dealing with what he understood as commensurate problems and formulating solutions that he could see as transferable to his own city:

> [If you are] looking for exchange or models or work for you, you probably want to go to a city that is doing something [similar]. So the reason that I was calling Vancouver most recently [was to say], "Hey we are going to hire somebody for our food program [as Vancouver had recently done when setting up the city's Food Policy Council]." So we just called up, or emailed up, and said, "How are you guys approaching this, what are the work projects . . .." That's really what we are dealing with today and we want to hear from somebody else that is doing it (Interview, planner in the Office of Sustainable Development, Portland, Oregon, June, 2005).

The comparative technologies and representational practices of various transfer agents position local policy models in wider scalar contexts. As such, they construct urban policy mobilities that operate in and beyond traditionally-defined realms of policy making, such as localities and nations. The most mundane practices – writing a policy report, phoning or emailing a colleague in another city – are, therefore, very important to policy mobilities as a social, inter-scalar process.

Something happens along the way, in the telling, and on site

If indeed the mobilization of policy among cities is to be understood as continually enacted, performed, and practiced, then it is necessary to escape the literalist trap and to accept that the socio-spatial process of circulating policy ideas shapes and reshapes policies. This assertion draws us to the microspaces of meeting rooms and other sites of persuasion (cf. Peet 2002) where ideas are conveyed, as I will discuss below, but it also points to some of the key insights of the mobilities literature.

Mobility, for Cresswell (2001, 20), is a "meaningful and power-laden geographical phenomenon" involving "the displacement of an object from A to B" (Cresswell 2006, 4). He makes a sharp analytical distinction between mobility and movement, however. "Movement is the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies and social implications of that movement are considered" (Cresswell 2001, 14). "In classic migration theory," he continues by way of example, "the choice of whether or not to move would be the result of so-called *push* and *pull* factors in A and B respectively. The content of the line between them would remain unexplored . . . [and] taken for granted" (Cresswell 2006, 2, his emphasis; see Sheller and Urry's [2006, 212-213] similar critique of transport research). Approaches to policy transfer that assume policies are transferred fully-formed fall into the literalist trap because they understand transfer in abstract terms, as "desocialised movement" (Cresswell 2001, 14) rather than as a social process operating through and constitutive of *social* space. They take the line for granted.

My purpose is to begin to unpack the lines of movement, the connective social tissue, that constitute urban policy mobilities. Something happens to policy knowledge along the way, in the telling, and on site as policy actors learn from each other, from sites they visit, and from the various institutions and mediators they encounter. We can apprehend elements of this process through the lens of mobility. I first focus on the activities, co-presences, and learning opportunities that emerge in the spaces of travel. I will then highlight the microspaces of persuasion that situate and inform policy-oriented travel and learning.

For Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006, 12-13), "the time spent traveling is not dead time that people always seek to minimize." Rather than "distinguish[ing] travel from activities," they emphasize "that activities occur while on the move, that being on the move can involve sets of 'occasioned' activities." These activities can be stimulating and interesting, they can be a

significant part of the reason for traveling, and I suggest that they characterize fact-finding trips, site visits, and conferences attendance, among other types of 'policy travel.' Policy travel provides a particular type of social setting and, ideally, a focused retreat-like context in which to share ideas and to engage with on-the-ground manifestations of urban policy, such as the Vancouver landscapes that were presented to delegations from Fort Worth and Seattle. This particular type of travel is a form of "material and sociable dwelling-in-motion" in which airplane, car, and bus journeys and also walking tours through urban developments represent places of and for social learning activities. They can offer a "space of release" (Le Heron 2007, 35) where participants can think with and beyond their standard reference points and can involve "specific forms of talk, work or information-gathering, but [also] simply being connected, maintaining a moving presence with others that holds the potential for many different convergences or divergences of physical presence" (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 13).

One purpose of such fact-finding trips is, of course, to allow delegations to learn first-hand from their peers in other cities about the processes, challenges, and benefits of the formulation and realization of particular policy models.[7] So policy knowledge is not only produced and performed along the way, through conversations and co-presences, but something happens to policy models as they are told to delegations on-site. Cities that become popular destinations for incoming delegations of policy actors develop protocols and packaged narratives for dealing with their visitors in a way that is efficient for the hosts and also edifying and enjoyable for the guests. In cities like Vancouver, stories of smart growth planning and urban livability are well honed, as are the strategies and logistics for telling them, including having key figures 'ready to go' on relatively short notice, knowing which stories and which tours are best for which delegations of "policy tourists" (Ward, 2007), when to involve the mayor or senior

staff, and how to evaluate the seriousness of various delegations (Interviews with planners, Austin, 2000; Portland, 2005; Vancouver, 2006; see McCann 2004).

A Vancouver planner emphasizes the importance of site visits, rather than simply learning at a distance, as he discusses his department's approach to hosting visiting delegations.

> [T]he best thing that can happen to people is just let them go experience it. I can interpret that for them, I much prefer to interpret after they've had the experience themselves. . . . I've found that when people go out and experience the place, the richness of their experience is actually way more [compelling] than my stories . . .. And then, after they've seen it, they are really good at taking it where they want to take it. I tell them a bit of the story, give them some documents, but they then ask the questions that really matter. The Americans ask one kind of question. Europeans ask another kind of question. People from Asian countries ask different questions (Interview, senior planner, Vancouver, September, 2006).

In turn, members of the delegations shape these narratives and experiences as they retell them upon their return home. They are generally expected to return with coherent stories to tell about what they learned, either in verbal form or in written reports.

Here again, I think we can turn some of the mobilities perspective on travel activities – those of tourists, for example – to the task of conceptualizing policy travel. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006, 15) note that "[m]uch travel and communication involves the active development and performances of 'memory' [involving the] active employment of photographs, postcards, letters, images, guides, souvenirs and objects." They suggest that these images and

objects are carried with people and used to "reassemble memories, practices and even

landscapes." If these are the sorts of objects gathered by migrants, tourists, and day-trippers,

what objects might be carried by urban policy tourists, intent on reassembling their site visits for

their own benefit and for that of their home audience? Photographs, video and audio recordings,

maps, sketches, diagrams, plans, policy documents, brochures, PowerPoint presentations (either

in electronic form or in printed 'notes pages'), and perhaps most importantly word-of-mouth

stories (Wolman, 1992) are among the artifacts of the site that are likely to accompany policy

actors on trips home. These sources are then assembled into a set of 'actionable' ideas that,

when deployed in other cities, can influence their development. Time spent traveling is alive

with possibilities. Things happen along the way. But the possibilities are not limitless. They are

structured by the local conditions and institutional contexts in which the various transfer agents

are embedded.

A second related contribution – and, again, one that resonates strongly with longstanding

traditions of geographical thought dealing with mobility, fixity, global senses of place and

economic geographies of knowledge – is the argument that mobilities operate through nodes and

are predicated on the existence of fixed infrastructures and sites. As Urry (2004, 28) puts it, "all

social life [involves] various kinds of connections sustained at a distance but with intermittent

meetings." Mobilities, then, "involve occasioned, intermittent face-to-face conversations and

meetings within certain places at certain moments that seem obligatory for the sustaining of

families, friendship, workgroups, businesses and leisure organizations" (Hannam, Sheller, and

Urry 2006, 14-15; cf. Amin and Cohendet 1999, 2004; Grabher 2004; Vallance, 2007 on

'relational proximities' and 'swift trust' and 'ephemeral ties' in economic geographies of

knowledge). In the context of policy mobilities, these sites of co-presence, learning, and

persuasion include the spaces of fact-finding trips. Clearly, they also involve the spaces of

conferences and similar meetings. The meeting rooms, hallways, cafes, bars, and restaurants of

conferences are what Larner and Le Heron (2002, 765) term "globalizing 'microspaces'" where

expertise about globally-significant best practice is deployed and discussed, where lessons are

learned, where trust is developed, where reputations are made or unmade (reputations of best

cities, successful policies, and 'hot' policy gurus), and where acquaintances, or 'weak ties,' are

made among co-present conferees, thus connecting what would otherwise be socially and

spatially isolated policy communities (Granovetter 1983). Mobile policies are, then, shaped and

given momentum in the telling of stories during meetings.

Ward has noted the importance of meetings, seminars, symposia, workshops, and

conferences for the mobilization of the Business Improvement District (BID) model into the UK.

He notes the way that British trade and government organizations organized these sorts of events

in conjunction with the roll-out of early pilot BID schemes. "Over 100 local government officers

and business representatives attended these [national seminars]. Local meetings were also held

in the 22 pilots, at which more detailed concerns over local specifics were discussed. At both

types of meetings delegates learnt about BIDs, often through listening about US case studies"

(Ward 2006, 66-67). These meetings had profound impacts. By attending them, "local public

sector officials in a range of UK towns and cities began the process of learning. Existing

subjectivities and rationalities were remade in and through these events, and through the subject-

making exercises the state as *a peopled set of institutions* begun to be restructured along

neoliberal lines . . ." (Ibid, 67, his emphasis). As this example suggests, and as I have already

argued with reference to informational infrastructures like professional organizations, decisions

about how and *where* to hold meetings are strategic, offering benefits to the organizing institutions, the attendees, and the local hosts.

Take, for instance, the Third World Urban Forum ('WUF III'), coordinated by UN Habitat and held in Vancouver in June 2006. Funded primarily by Habitat and the Canadian Government, WUF was intended to support Habitat's mission "to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all" (UN Habitat n.d. b). The organization engages in a number of activities around this goal and, since 1997, has had an explicit focus on policy transfer through its Best Practices and Local Leadership Programme, which focuses on "identifying, disseminating and applying lessons learned from Best Practices to ongoing training, leadership and policy development activities" through "documented and peer-reviewed best practices, examples of good policies and enabling legislation, case studies and briefs and transfer methodologies" (UN Habitat n.d. c). Habitat has positioned itself as a key global informational infrastructure that mediates urban policy mobilities and constructs global spaces of comparison and commensurability.

WUF attracted over nine thousand, six hundred delegates from one hundred countries to Vancouver. It was dominated by governments (31 percent of delegates, 16 percent of which were from local authorities), NGOs (23 percent), professional and research organizations (15 percent), and the private sector (12 percent) (UN Habitat 2006c, 7) and involved five days of meetings, including traditional plenaries, round tables, and paper sessions, and also over one hundred and sixty 'networking events,' intended to provide "an opportunity to . . . build knowledge, strengthen partnerships and share ideas and best practices" (UN Habitat 2006c, 11-12). The event was clearly perceived by its organizers to be the sort of node, or 'globalized microspace,' where best practice peers could understand and build upon their commensurate

problems and experiences. As the official post-Forum summary puts it, "[p]articipants were keen to share ideas, network and forge new alliances through both formal and informal meetings with partners, and viewed the Forum not as a place where declarations and plans of action were endorsed but where experiences were shared" (UN Habitat 2006c, 7).

There were at least two reasons why Vancouver was chosen to host WUF III. First, the Forum commemorated the first Habitat conference, held in Vancouver in 1976 – an event that produced the Vancouver Declaration, still a key text for the organization (UN Habitat 1976). Second, as suggested above, organizations like Habitat choose the sites of their meetings carefully with reference to the connections between their agendas and the characteristics of host cities. Vancouver's reputation dovetailed with Habitat's focus on urban sustainability. As the program outline document argued, "[a] leader in sustainable urbanization, Vancouver . . . is widely considered one of the world's most livable cities" (UN Habitat 2006a, 8). This scripting of the city was reinforced by Habitat's executive director:

> Canada and the city of Vancouver have a consistent record as a wellspring of novel ideas for sustainable urbanization. They are therefore, the most appropriate choice for the Third Session of the World Urban Forum to generate new ideas and actions in support of our common quest for more just, inclusive and environmentally sound cities (Tibaijuka, in UN Habitat 2006b, 2).

The high hopes of the organizers seemed to be confirmed by the end of the conference. Delegates agreed, the official summary argues, "that risk-taking and the pursuit of innovation must characterize municipal leadership if cities are to achieve sustainable development.

Vancouver's example in taking the lead in such areas as air and water quality, public transit and planning was mentioned often in this context" (UN Habitat 2006c, 5).

Within Vancouver's policy and political circles, WUF was welcomed for many reasons. It was, of course, a chance for local policy actors to network with global peers. Moreover, it was an opportunity for many of those actors to engage in what might be called 'policy boosterism' – a specific form of city marketing involving the active promotion of policies, programs, or practices in order to enhance their reputation among, and to encourage their adoption by, a wider community of policy actors (McCann, 2009). As already noted, Vancouver's planners, politicians, and consultants have been assiduous in educating colleagues elsewhere about what some of the more energetic policy boosters have taken to calling 'Vancouverism' (Berelowitz 2005; Price 2005a, 2005b; Yuen, 2005; Harcourt, Cameron, and Rossiter 2007; Sharp and Boddy 2008). In planning documents and meetings prior to WUF, local organizers talked of the opportunity for delegates to experience Vancouver as a laboratory for sustainable urban development. At the Forum, local, provincial, and national politicians consistently invoked the city's high ranking on global livability rankings (*Vancouver Sun* 2004a; Beauchesne 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit 2005; Mercer Human Resource Consulting 2005) to support their view of the city as globally significant (Sullivan 2006; UN Habitat 2006b, 14-15, 17).

Furthermore, numerous conference sessions, with titles including "Planning Successful Sustainable Cities: Case Study Vancouver, Canada," focused on what Punter (2003) has called "the Vancouver achievement" and featured many of the leading lights of the city's urban policy community. As a senior Vancouver planner put it

[I]t was great for the city. It was great to have all the people here. It was probably just as important for what they experienced than what anyone told them. Because the city kind of tells its own story. . . . I can't tell you how many groups and individuals approached me in the . . . bar during . . . the World Urban Forum, who said, 'I've gone to the sessions, I've seen everything, but I still don't know how you make it happen, and I want to know the bread and butter and the tinkering, the mechanics of it because there is something there that I want to take back to my city' (Interview, senior planner, Vancouver, September, 2006).

Strategically placed at the entrances to the downtown convention center where WUF was held were packages of nine glossy brochures produced by the City of Vancouver with the purpose of allowing delegates to experience the city first-hand. Four of these documents, with titles like "Introducing our city and how it works" and "How we plan: Inclusivity in decision making," sketched the city's planning and governance practices. The other five outlined walking and transit tours of the city's neighborhoods with an emphasis on extant examples of policy innovation. All nine were prominently branded with a green logo, showing a leaf superimposed on a silhouette of the city's skyline and the inscription, "Livable City – Sustainable Future" (City of Vancouver 2006).

Conferences, meetings, and fact-finding visits are, then, key relational sites that are central to the social process of teaching and learning about policy and, thus to the contingent, cumulative, and emergent knowledge production processes that 'co-constitute' urban policy mobilities (Le Heron 2007; Le Heron and Lewis, 2007; Lewis, Larner, and Le Heron, 2008). They offer opportunities for urban policy actors and informational infrastructures to influence

and benefit from global circuits of urban policy knowledge and allow concrete settings for researching how these global relational geographies are produced.

Questions and considerations toward a research agenda

The purpose of this article is to outline an analytical approach to the global circulation of urban policy models, knowledge, and ideas. This approach is influenced, on the one hand, by geographical political economy arguments about the need to understand specific social interactions in terms of wider processes, contexts, forces, and structures and the related need to maintain a dual focus on fixity and flow, or territoriality and relationality, in the study of society. I combine these insights with arguments about the need to pay close attention to the embodied practices, representations, and expertise through which policy knowledge is developed, mobilized, and operationalized in different contexts. The notion of mobilities captures this conceptual nexus and, thus, I have employed it here as a rubric under which to focus on the 'local globalness' of urban policy-making.

This suggests that our understanding of urban policy mobilities can benefit from a 'global ethnography' that entails "a shift from studying 'sites' [e.g., Vancouver] to studying 'fields,' that is, the relations *between* sites" while maintaining one site as a "primary perspective" (Gowan and Ó Riain, 2000, xii, their emphasis; Burawoy, 2000, 30-31). This 'extended case' method involves ethnographic engagement with participants and processes, careful attention to the external forces and connections shaping specific sites, and, as a result of this work, the extension of theory (Burawoy, 2000, 26-28; Burawoy et al. 1991). The Vancouver case indicates that there is much more research to be done on the character and implications of how urban actors act globally. Such a research agenda can be built at the intersection of the theoretical and

methodological considerations identified by Burawoy and his co-authors, but it must be specified further. In the remaining paragraphs I will set out a number of questions and considerations that go some way to constituting an agenda for research on policy mobilities.

Mobilities

It is important to begin by considering the concept of 'mobilities' itself. It is a relatively new one in the social science lexicon but one that has proliferated, largely due to the productivity of a small number of scholars who have applied the concept to specific topics and who have sought to codify and institutionalize their approach through programmatic statements, the creation of a research centre (CeMoRe, n.d.), and the publication of the journal, *Mobilities*. This energetic promotion of an idea may be viewed skeptically, particularly in a context where mobilities can be seen to draw heavily from already existing work on scale, relationality, and the fixity/mobility dialectic. Yet, mobilities scholars are clear on their intellectual debts and 'mobilities' is hardly the first concept to be promoted by communities of interested scholars or to take on the characteristics of a fad. Therefore, the mobilities approach should not be dismissed out of hand. Rather, the concept should be seen and utilized for what it is: one which, which when deployed critically and in combination with others, allows useful, but by no means complete, insight into a specific sets of social processes.

The use of any concept has implications, of course. A focus on mobilities might tempt and uncritical and celebratory stance toward humans' ability to move around the planet. Yet, more sober analyses emphasize that mobility is stratified and conditioned by access to resources and by one's identity (classed, racialized, gendered, etc.) as well as by one's embeddedness in particular institutional and political contexts that define a constrained set of potential pathways

for action (Peck and Theodore, 2008). Not everyone has the same ability to pay for Internet access, conference fees, or plane tickets and many people, when they move, do so because they have been forced. The mobilities literature, acknowledging critiques of the romanticization and uncritical acceptance of mobility as a given (Tsing 2000; Hannam et al. 2006), seems intent on avoiding the uncritical glamorization of mobility. The point about stratification is worth emphasizing nonetheless as a key conceptual consideration. In the context of urban policy mobilities, specifically, it underscores both the need to critically conceptualize urban policy actors' differing levels of fixity/mobility and differential, institutionally conditioned access to global circuits of policy knowledge and also to conceptualize policy transfer and policy learning as socio-spatially uneven and selective processes.

Specific questions that arise in this context include: Why do some ideas and models travel while others do not? Certainly, the policy transfer literature indicates a number of structural reasons why transfer becomes popular at certain times. For example, reductions in state staffing budgets coupled with intensified competitive pressures and shortened deadlines increase the attractiveness of adopting ready-made, quick-fix, off-the-shelf policies from other jurisdictions or by private consultants. This "fast policy transfer" (Peck and Theodore 2001, 429) is also facilitated by international organizations that encourage or force the adoption of certain policy models (Peet 2002). These structural conditions are coupled with the rise of cadres of policy consultants whose activities are motivated by the need to gain contracts, by considerations of professional reputation, and by the belief that they can help improve cities.

A second question involves the geographical unevenness of policy transfer. Not all policies, even ones that are locally successful, are mobilized or designated as 'best practices.' Similarly, not all cities feature in the mental maps of policy-makers or international institutions

when they identify exemplars of best practice. Furthermore, certain policy consultants 'go global' while most do not. Why does this unevenness exist and what are its implications? It would be too simple to assume that certain best practices, cities, and consultants 'naturally' rise to the top. Access to resources such as time, travel budgets, the media, translation services, and cultural capital would presumably make it easier for certain policy boosters to articulate their knowledge widely while uneven access to those same resources would condition which urban actors are able to learn from global conversations about good policy. One might surmise that, despite the efforts of organizations like UN Habitat, poorer municipalities would be less likely to contribute to or learn from global policy mobilities. But this is a hypothesis in need of further testing.[8]

It is the case that differential access to resources and the specific character of certain policy prescriptions condition the opportunities for certain actors and policies to have impact beyond their home cities. Yet, there is evidence that subaltern groups and others proposing counter-hegemonic visions of urban policy do find ways to act globally. The travels of consultants, politicians, policy professionals, and their policy models are in many ways paralleled, if not necessarily equaled, by the mobilities of NGOs and activists who find ways to disseminate alternative and innovate policy prescriptions. Indeed, these actors frequently inhabit and seek to utilize the infrastructures that also make more traditional policy transfer possible, particularly the Internet. Questions of how and with what implications subaltern groups, such as drug users (McCann, 2008) and/or human rights activists (Bosco 2001), for example, are able to 'inhabit' the same infrastructures as policy elites are worthy of further consideration.[9]

These questions indicate the need to understand urban policy mobilities neither in terms of fetishized mobile objects or free-floating fields of transfer but to conceptualize them as

produced by the social, spatial, institutional, ideological, and political contexts in which they are developed, applied, transferred, and adopted. As such, the study of the sites and processes of transfer must include analysis of the forces that condition them. Yet, an attention to these forces, tendencies, and structures involves the danger of objectifying them and "making them appear inevitable and natural" (Burawoy, 2000, 29). One of Burawoy's strategies for dealing with this problem seems apropos in this context. He endeavors to "see global [macro, external, or extralocal] forces as themselves the product of contingent social processes." This conceptualization then leads to a methodological stance: "Here forces become the topic of investigation; they are examined as the product of flows of people, things, and ideas, that is, the global connections between sites" (Ibid.).

Territoriality / Relationality

The integration of theory and method is, then, central to the development of this research agenda. Conceptualizing sites of policy transfer as global-relational allows a move toward a form of global ethnography through, but not confined to, a primary case. This strategy may raise questions about the efficacy of the single case study as a source of general or generalizable statements. There are strong and, for me, convincing statements in the literature about the utility of the single case method (Burawoy et al. 1991, 2000; Herbert, 2000; Flyvbjerg 2006). Comparative case studies also offer potential insights in the study of mobile policies (Ward 2008), as do multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus, 1998; Olds, 2001) and detailed ethnographic studies of knowledge networks (Riles 2001). The methods chosen in a specific study will relate to the conceptualizations employed and the empirical questions asked. Various methods, in various combinations, will emerge. Each combination will paint a somewhat different but not

necessarily incompatible picture of the character and consequences of urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge.

For example, questions regarding the structural and historical contexts within which contemporary urban policy mobilities have emerged may be addressed through the analysis of policy documents, websites, and blogs, coupled with semi-structured qualitative interviews with key informants. Analysis of these sorts of data might then involve some form of discourse analysis (Lees, 2004). Questions about the character and frequency of policy travel and inter-city networking might entail a set of quantitative and survey methods. Mail or Internet-based questionnaires might produce a broad sense of what city officials get from conferences and site visits (Wolman and Page 2000) and how their travel is patterned and funded. This method would provide a general understanding, for example, of which city governments tend to fund fact-finding trips, which cities are most visited by delegations, and at which scale (regional, national, global) inter-city connections are strongest. Analysis of these data might not only entail standard statistical methods and the mapping of the results (graduated circle maps of the most visited cities, for example) but might also entail network visualization or mapping of policy networks and knowledge domains. They may identify key locations, policies, and individuals who seem to be central to discussions over high quality and transferrable urban policies, formal and informal linkages among cities, common or divergent goals, and clusters of organizations around particular agendas (Brandes et al. 1999; Skupin 2004).

The dualism between these qualitative and quantitative methods is often usefully transcended, of course, and these methods could also be complemented by ethnographic methods, defined by some form of participation and observation (Herbert, 2000) and intended to understand the social process of transfer and learning within and among communities of

practitioners. It is on this aspect of policy mobilities that much of this article has focused as it argues for the utility of semi-structured qualitative interviews, document analysis, and ethnographic observation of site visits, fact-finding trips, meetings with visiting delegations and consultants, and various types of conferences, symposiums, and forums. While there is literature that explicitly discusses anthropological or ethnographic aspects of policy research (e.g., Shore and Wright 1997), and while a great deal of the geography/urban studies literature on urban policy and politics relies on forms of qualitative and ethnographic inquiry, there is remarkably little scholarship on how conferences might be studied ethnographically as research sites, where dispersed communities of policy actors come together in one place to strengthen their ties, share knowledge, etc. More work is needed in this area if the importance of conferences and site visits to urban policy mobilities is to be understood. Similarly, if travel, including policy travel, is to be understood as productive rather than 'dead' time, ethnographic research – being with delegations on trips elsewhere, in meetings, and on site – is needed on these mobile communities in order to better apprehend *how* exactly such time is productive for urban policy-making. This, of course, demands a great deal of time and funding from the researcher, which may be why it constitutes a gap in the literature!

A concern with global ethnography emphasizes conceptual considerations once more. Specifically, the need to employ a methodological lens that focuses simultaneously on specific sites and on global forces, connections, and imaginaries reflects a concern with how to theorize the relationships between fixity and mobility, or territoriality and relationality, in the context of geographies of policy. A conceptualization of the productive tension between fixity and mobility is, of course, central to Harvey's (1982) historical-geographical materialist approach to capitalist development. Notions of territoriality and relationality have, for the most part, been less closely

linked in the study of cities, however (but see Beaumont and Nicholls, 2007). Many political geographers have tended to emphasize the role of the former while others have, in varying ways, sought to highlight the mutually constitutive relationships between cities and global processes. The mobilities perspective offers the opportunity to think about contemporary urban policy-making and politics in terms of the connections between territoriality and relationality since it emphasizes that while knowledge might be understood to 'flow' around the world, it is only 'actionable' and productive when it is embedded or territorialized in specific social, spatial, and institutional contexts (Peck and Theodore, 2008). If, as Beaumont and Nicholls (2007, p.2559) argue, "[t]erritories do not come at the expense of extensive networks and flows but, rather, they are constituted by and contribute to these social networks," then, I would argue, that it is through the careful empirical tracing of social interactions across various scales that conceptualizations of relationality and territoriality can be further developed (N. Rose, 1999, 12-13; Peck, 2003; McCann and Ward, 2008).

Research might focus, for example, on questions of politics and power as, for example, territorially dependent growth coalitions engage with global circuits of policy knowledge in order to adopt policies that serve their interests. In turn, this leads to the question of what are the local political implications of the increased normalization of inter-urban policy comparison and transfer? No urban policy is ever universally accepted. Any policy serves different interests differently or favors the interests of some over others. Therefore, policies that encourage downtown residential development are frequently opposed as gentrifying strategies that displace low-income residents in favor of wealthy condo-dwellers, for example. If such policies are lauded and copied globally as 'best practice' in terms of urban revitalization and sustainability, questions arise about the political force and legitimacy such positive attention lends them in the

localities where they were developed. Is it more difficult to question or change local policies when they have been branded as 'best' not only by local officials but also by a range of other cities and organizations? Similarly, when a policy model is transferred into a city from elsewhere and has been anointed as 'best,' is it again more difficult to question its precepts, implications, and attendant interests?

Furthermore, I have argued that two crucial elements of policy mobilities are site visits and conference attendance; that face-to-face interactions in these globalizing microspaces play a central role in shaping policies and policy learning. This leads to another set of questions related to territorialized politics and global relations. First, what are the political characteristics and implications of policy travel when it is defined as necessary for fact-finding versus when it is defined as wasteful 'junketing'? Accusations of junketing are common in local politics and the study of this political discourse in the context of global policy mobilities offers the opportunity to extend the case out beyond the 'merely' local. Second, what might be the impacts on policy learning and on 'local' politics of periods of increased oil prices and related rises in the cost of travel, such as the period prior to the current global economic crisis? Does attendance at policy conferences or the number and size of fact-finding delegations decline as costs rise and municipal budgets are tightened? Do city officials, consultants, and activists see the quality of information gained from other sources like the Internet, phone calls, video conferences, or printed reports as being equal to the quality of understanding gained from on-site learning (thus allowing them to reduce their policy travel)? Third, how do those engaged in policy travel, those who travel elsewhere to teach and/or learn about policy, attach meaning to and practically negotiate questions of budgetary responsibility and environmental ethics? Do popular worries about the environmental impacts of air travel, for example, influence decisions about policy

travel perhaps particularly for transfer agents whose teaching and learning is directed toward

questions of sustainability? These and other questions will, as I have suggested, point to a range

of methods ranging from surveys to ethnographic engagement with subjects who may not be

willing to talk about ethical considerations, for example, until they have developed trust with the

researcher. In turn, these questions, offer the opportunity to further theorize the power-laden

processes and forces that constitute global circuits of policy knowledge.

Dangers of diffusionism

The purpose of a 'global ethnographic' approach is to free this type of process-oriented research

from the "narrow boundaries of the traditional ethnographic 'site'" (Gowan and Ó Riain 2000,

xii). Therefore, I will conclude with a cautionary observation about the conceptual difficulties of

extending the details of a specific case back out to the global. A great deal of recent urban

studies has been marked by problematic attempts to assert one city as the quintessence of much

wider processes of urbanization and as the place where most noteworthy innovation occurs. Los

Angeles is the obvious example of this tendency, but it is only one of many, as a recent

symposium in the *Urban Affairs Review* and various critiques of the global/world cities approach

have suggested (McCann, 2002, 2004; Robinson, 2002, 2006; Dear and Dahmann, 2008;

Mollenkopf, 2008; Simpson and Kelly, 2008). It would be equally problematic to position

Vancouver as the center of global policy innovation and this has certainly not been my intention.

A resort to a form of synecdoche – where a part is represented as standing for the whole –

is conceptually problematic (McCann 2002). Among other things, it involves a dangerous

tendency toward diffusionism. For Blaut (1987; 1993), diffusionism involves a belief that

inventiveness is scarce and concentrated in a few advanced and progressive places from which

innovations flow to the rest of the world. Diffusionism is "spatial elitism," Blaut (1993, 12)

argues. It inscribes a geography of center and periphery on the world, justifying perspectives

and practices that denigrate and exploit the innovations of the many in service of the few. Now,

Blaut's argument is concerned with Eurocentrism and colonialism through history, but his

admonition against spatial elitism is relevant to the study of contemporary urban policy

mobilities. There is a distinct danger, after all, that accounts of specific cities, their policy

innovations, and their prominence in global conversations about best practices can position them

as 'special' places (naturally) endowed with uncommon amounts of innovatory capacity. Local

policy boosters would likely welcome this sort of account. It would be an uncritical and

politically problematic approach, however, since it would fail to address the wider historical,

geographical, cultural, and political-economic contexts in which policy innovations are

developed and mobilized. It is at the nexus of specific case study sites and these wider forces

that further research on urban policy mobilities can best be directed.

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Endnotes

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[1] The impact of these circuits on specific places is not only a contemporary phenomenon and any discussion of urban development in this context must acknowledge the long history of largely unequal exchanges of knowledge around the world. The landscapes of cities that are, or have been, on both sides of colonial connections exhibit clear evidence of exchange and interaction (Saunier, 2002; Nasr and Volait 2003).

[2] These activities have also been referred to as 'lesson-drawing' (R. Rose 1991, 1993; Robertson 1991), 'emulation' (Bennett 1991), 'imitation' (Jacoby 2000), 'importation' (Hoyt 2006) and even 'pinching' (Schneider and Ingram 1988).

[3] Again, this notion of copresence, or 'co-gredience' (Harvey, 1996, 259-260), has been a feature of geographical literatures on place and scale (Merrifield 1993; Amin and Graham, 1997; McCann 2002)

[4] As will become clear below, the tensions between physical proximity and "relational proximity" (Amin and Cohendet 1999, 2004) in the production of economic knowledge are also in the production of urban policy knowledge.

[5] Burawoy and his coauthors suggest that this approach must, for logistical reasons almost always take one site as its primary vantage point (Burawoy *et al*, 2000).

[6] Starting here with local actors is not intended to suggest that the local is the most real, authentic, or necessary scale.

[7] It is important to note that, in all likelihood, visiting delegations will only be presented with the positives of a situation and are less likely to hear from local critics or skeptical evaluators of a program (see Wolman 1992, 37).

[8] And it is important to acknowledge that cities in the global south – Curitiba or Porto Alegre, for example – have significant influence on policy thinking in the north (Baiocchi 2003; Moore, 2007).

[9] It is worth emphasizing that counter-hegemonic groups also see the need to build their own, separate infrastructures, such as the World Social Forum, to aid in the mobilization of their policy ideas and political agendas.