

Topologies of Mobile Policy: Neoliberalism and Creativity

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Introduction

Neoliberalism, Peck and Tickell have famously observed, 'seems to be everywhere' (2002, p. 380). But in the decade that followed this remark, the status of neoliberalism came to be highly contested: not so much in terms of whether we see neoliberalism all around us, which few disputed, but in terms of the very nature of its 'seeming everywhere-ness' (Barnett, 2005; Castree, 2006; Larner, 2003; Peck and Tickell, 2002). It was a difficult question for theoretical and political reasons. Is there really a big-N Neoliberalism that exists at a global scale, constructed by a set of powerful class interests working in elite and exclusive spaces, and which remains unified despite its inevitably variegated presence on the ground? Or are there multiple small-n neoliberalisms that are always-already hybrid and locally situated, linked only by contingent connections and circumstances that fade into the background soon after they manifest? What consequences do these different interpretations have for political engagement? Is local action the only real possible site of resistance, or is it doomed to failure? Can there be a global reckoning of the neoliberal project? Or will we have to wait until it runs its course and its consequences are laid bare? Answering these questions means grasping the elusive geography of neoliberalism.

One way we can empirically examine the 'seeming everywhere-ness' of neoliberalism is through policy topographies. Neoliberal policy, like any policy, will have a topography. These can be thought of as the spatial effects of a policy: such as the boundaries it draws on the landscape, the flows of resources it produces, and the relations of power between different places that result. But this is only half the story. It is the policy topography 'post' policy. Policy also has a topography that is 'pre' policy: all the necessary socio-spatial relations implicated in its production. The emerging geographical literature on 'policy mobilities' explores the apparent movement of particular policy programmes from one place to another (England and Ward, 2007; McCann, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2011; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). The various connections, networks and flows of policy knowledge this work reveals extends our conceptions of a policy's topography to the point where we are able to recognise that the policy itself is just a moment (albeit an important one) somewhere in the middle of a broader socio-spatial process. Understanding these complex topographies can help us to grasp the place of policy in shifting geographies of power, as well as the way a regime like neoliberalism generates its sense of 'everywhere-ness'.

However, if we remain focused just on topography we risk reproducing the received notions of space that policy works through. Policy produces and reproduces space in particular ways – as local or global for example – but it also naturalises these renditions of space to the point that our analytical imaginations will often work with the same spatial conceptions. By trying to hold the world still in this way we risk missing the shifts, and opportunities for shifts, occurring within it. If we are to move beyond the spatial constitution and effects of policy to challenge the way policy is implicated in the production of space, we need to discern the spatial logics that underpin policy: in other words, policy *topologies* (Allen and Cochrane, 2010).

This chapter explores the various policy topologies present in a policy trajectory often associated with neoliberalism: ‘creativity’ policy. The first section of the paper immediately after the introduction describes what comprises this particular trajectory, before moving on to discuss the different topographies and topologies associated with it. I argue that thinking this way can give us a more nuanced understanding of the ‘everywhereness’ of neoliberalism. This is followed by some reflections on the kinds of politics this topological geography of policy produces. The chapter concludes by returning to the questions raised at the beginning of this introduction and considering the kinds of answers and ways forward this approach might offer.

‘Creativity’ Policy

The kinds of policy that I gather here under the heading of ‘creativity’ policy are all relatively new with the earliest of them emerging in the mid-to-late 1990s. It has come in various forms, as the ‘creative industries’, the ‘creative class’, the ‘creative economy’ and as various forms of culture-led regeneration. I will use two of the most developed concepts in the discussion below – the creative industries and the creative class – because they are illustrative of this trajectory, but would not claim that they comprise its entirety.

The creative industries were first defined in the *Creative Industries Mapping Document* (CIMD) produced by the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as ‘those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’ (DCMS, 2001, p. 4). It included a number of industries that had previously been described as the ‘cultural industries’, including film, theatre, music and publishing, alongside a number of other industries deemed to have an equivalent ‘creative’ element, such as advertising, architecture and software development. The CIMD then measured the contribution of each of these industries to the British economy using a number of standard economic measures such as revenue, GDP and employment. Although the mapping document did not contain any explicit policy, the concept itself quickly went around the world and approximations, if not exact reproductions, of the definition, the constitutive industries and the practice of

measurement appeared in policy documents in places as diverse as New Zealand, Tanzania, Colombia and China (Cunningham, 2009; Prince, 2010; Ross, 2007; Wang, 2004).

The creative class is the brainchild of Richard Florida (see Florida, 2002). It describes a stratum of workers who Florida claims hold the key to increasing productivity in the contemporary global economy. The creative class are workers whose skills and creative capacities are sought by the most innovative companies, and so, according to Florida, these companies will tend to be located in places that have a predominance of this class. If your city or country wants similar innovative and productive companies, then it needs to make itself into a place that is attractive to them. Based on a variety of metrics measuring, on the one hand, the proportion of members of the creative class in particular cities, and on the other, aspects of those cities, such as the size of the gay community and the amount of nightlife, Florida concludes that to be attractive to the creative class, cities need to be tolerant, technologically advanced and with lively inner-cities, amongst other things.

For those that see the hand of neoliberalism in these policies, they are little more than fiscally and politically cheap supply-side gestures aimed at attracting international capital, ramping-up land values, and/or producing more flexible workforces, all conducted on a landscapes where a place's only option is to partake in the competitive 'race to the bottom' (e.g. Gibson and Klocker, 2005; Peck, 2005). In cities in particular they are generally wrapped up with the culture-led urban regeneration and gentrification programmes that have become increasingly common in a neoliberalised political economy in which central government support has been withdrawn and cities have been forced to be more entrepreneurial in their management (Zimmerman, 2008). Their role in what critics call the instrumentalisation of culture (Belfiore, 2012; Gray, 2007) has contributed to the latter increasingly being valued only in terms of the outcomes they produce in local, national and global markets of various kinds. If all this is true, the rapid spread of these kinds of policies to a wide variety of places across multiple countries and continents, and in the developed and developing world, means it provides a useful insight into the kinds of relational geographies that give neoliberalism its sense of 'seeming everywhere', and offer another way of thinking about political engagement.

Topographies and Topologies of Policy

When we consider a mobile policy programme from a topographical point of view, we would map out all the different places where that policy can be said to exist. In the case of the 'creativity' policy I am referring to here, this would be any place which has designed or framed policy in explicit relation to something like the creative industries, the creative class, the creative city or the creative economy. However, although coincidence of words is interesting, it is not enough to say anything substantial about

whether these are indeed 'mobile' policies. So we would also try to map out the various connections between these different incidents of policy and identify the various circuits down which policy can travel. This could be anything from electric and fibre-optic cabling to flight networks and conference and seminar circuits. Once we have the topography established, we can interrogate it for any number of reasons. For example: how 'global' is the policy's uptake? Is it just in the developed or developing world, or both? What differences in policy are there? How can we understand these differences? Has it been the travel of documents down electronic highways that has resulted in policy mobility? Or is it largely travelling through networks of elite actors in spaces out of reach of ordinary people?

These are all important and relevant questions, but a topographical approach like this is limited in how far it can help us to break out of the local-global binary. Policy continues to have 'local' and 'global' dimensions. It simply reinscribes this dimensional binary respectively on the places where the policy manifests and the circuits through which it moves.

Here I suggest we need to consider how mobile policy contributes to the production of space through the *topological* relations they involve (Allen and Cochrane, 2010). The topographical connections through which policy can be seen to travel are wrapped up with multiple topological relations that shape that policy's movement. These topologies, I argue, have the effect of producing particular policies as global and local, as well as national, regional, urban and so on, which in turn shapes how topographical space is understood and acted on. By identifying and examining the topologies of 'seemingly everywhere' policies, I argue here we can think about both why they are so powerful, and how they might be contested.

There are multiple possible topologies associated with a policy. Here I will follow the influential work of John Law and Annemarie Mol (see Law and Mol, 2001; Mol and Law, 1994) on the 'social topologies' of region, network, fluid and fire to describe and discuss the topologies associated with 'creativity' policy, in the process showing that a key element of the topologies of creativity policy is their technical aspect, and that this is central to their mobility. This is not to deny the possibility of other topologies, or to suggest that this four-fold schema contains all the topological possibilities (Blok, 2010; Vasantkumar, 2013). Rather, this discussion is intended to be illustrative of the possibilities offered by thinking policy topologically.

Regional topologies are composed of bounded areas that do not overlap (Mol and Law, 1994). They can, however, be nested at different scales, and so contained within larger regions. Conventional conceptions of political scale are classic regional topologies, including differentiated regions at the levels of, for example, the neighbourhood, the urban, the provincial, the nation-state, the continental and the global. Regional topologies inscribe boundaries between different regions at each of these scales, and

they are often reproduced through the construction of administrative jurisdictions that are coterminous with the region. From this point of view, the nation-state is the most well developed regional construct of the last century. But regions are also reproduced through the collapse of variation within boundaries and its reconstruction *between* regions. Economic activity, for example, is often aggregated at the level of the nation-state through measurements like GDP. At this scale, variation comes to be understood as varying between nation-states, but not within them.

Creativity policy tends to work with existing regions. The Creative Industries Mapping Document (CIMD) used existing statistics on those industries deemed 'creative' that were scaled at the national level to show their contribution to the British economy in terms of GDP, trade revenue and employment. Those countries that adopted this policy approach performed a similar quantification exercise. Richard Florida's desirable 'creative class' was deemed to want to live in places that scored well on a variety of indices produced based on such measures as the size of the gay population and the physical fitness of the citizenry. These measures were aggregated at the level of the city. The regional topology of creativity policy, then, reinscribes existing regions as levels of policy action. Regional differentiation produces alongside it regional centres (not necessarily located inside the region itself) where policy for a region will be made, and so serves as a condition of possibility for policy mobility in the first place – without differentiated regions of space that do not have a particular policy enacted, there would be nowhere for the policy to 'move' to. Because creativity policy has not challenged received regional topologies, it is no surprise its mobility has been across pre-existing policy-making centres (see Cunningham, 2009).

Network topologies can cut across regional boundaries, but are, paradoxically, central to their reproduction (Mol and Law, 1994). Measuring the creative industries in a way that means they can be compared to other regions means being able to reproduce the same methodology of measurement in each of the different regions. This requires that the measurers are networked, circulating measurement techniques and the measurements produced back and forth across the network. The topological effect here is to draw often distant places onto a level space of comparison. This space is observable in Richard Florida's various tables listing different American cities according to where they sit on a particular index. It is observable when we compare the analysis of the economic contribution of the creative industries in the UK and New Zealand (see Walton and Duncan, 2002). When we observe this space, the difference, and the distance, between two or more places gets reduced to their respective quantities on a series of metrics. The complexity 'behind' these metrics is rendered invisible. The aspirational policy-maker's task becomes deciding which metrics matter, who is performing better on them, and thinking about what could be learned from those 'better' performers. Even without such aspiration, the easy comparability enabled by these topological relations makes possible cross-jurisdictional conversation about policies that act on these metrics. These conversations occur through various forums,

including conferences and policy tourism. For the policy topography, the result is that the initial connections expand into channels down which policies can more easily move. Much like regions then, networks can be conceived in topographical terms, but it is their topological qualities that make policy mobility possible.

Nevertheless, topologies generally need existing networks – those initial connections. Creative industries measurements often make use of government economic statistics, merely producing a new subset within them. Topological relations already exist through these numbers; they are simply being reformatted in a way that allows a new policy concept to circulate across them. Other times, statistics are being gathered together from a myriad of sources in often innovative ways, as Richard Florida does with his various indices, which produce new opportunities for policy mobility. The point is that the ‘new’ topological spaces of creativity policy are never entirely new. They build on and transform existing topological relations, with their existing policy channels, to produce a policy geography that is distinctive, and yet emerges out of prevailing configurations.

The presence of networks as described here suggests that we would see similar policy objects in different regions as the technicians doing the measuring reproduce ‘best practice’ in the network. But this is not generally the case. Even when they move as a result of these kinds of technical connections, policy objects and their associated policies still mutate as they move (Peck, 2011). The notion of a fluid topology helps us to conceptualise this variation (Mol and Law, 1994). Fluid spaces resemble networks more than they do regions in that they cut across boundaries rather than being contained by them. But unlike networks, which are based on similarity being produced between different points through, for example, the reproduction of measurement methodologies, fluid spaces tolerate considerable variation across them. It is the fluidity of the circulating policy objects that make any kind of comparison possible. For example, because of the different tools and resources available at different policy centres, the policy objects, such as the creative industries, can end up being measured differently, using statistics that have been collected in often very different ways. This lack of consistency causes some to fret about the reliability and comparability of renditions of the creative industries produced in different countries (Tremblay, 2011), yet this does not stop comparisons and associated policy mobility occurring anyway.

A major reason for this is that policy objects often have dimensions that are less clearly laid out, more malleable, and more open to interpretation and manipulation. They have a fluidity to them that makes them changeable and mixable (de Laet and Mol, 2000). Policy objects like the creative industries and the creative class will have their technical dimension made use of by policy-makers, but often they are being adopted for other reasons, whether it is the feel-good affect associated with the idea of creativity, or because of a political belief in the need to diversify an economic base. The way these policies often get mixed together, as fluids can be, despite their different provenances is

testament to the various motivations that shape them in place (Prince, 2012). Auckland City Council, for example, made use of the concepts of the creative class and the creative city in a report on the city's creative industries produced in 2005, arguing the latter were more than just a sector in themselves (as they were imagined in the British CIMD), but that they enabled innovation in other economic sectors while making Auckland into a 'magnet city' that would attract more of the creative class to come and live there, who would in turn further transform life in those cities (see Auckland City Council, 2005, p. 7). This mixing of concepts, and the new logics they create, has the potential to change how these policy concepts are thought about, measured, and acted on, while still being part of a fluid topology.

This example also brings us to the fourth topology, fire space (Law and Mol, 2001). From a relational perspective, policy cannot be understood on its own. Hidden behind a policy document is a myriad of ideas, actions, conflicts, negotiations, connections and decisions, all occurring across a variety of social and material relations. If a policy is enacted, and often even if it is not, more of the same will flow from it. A policy document is meaningless on its own: it is given meaning in the web of relations that shape it. Topographically, some of these relations are close by, and some are far away, but they all have an 'absent presence' in the policy document, providing it with an 'invisible' topological infrastructure that, like a flame, seems to flicker into visibility at certain moments such as through a cross-reference to policy from elsewhere. This is what marks out fire space. Just as a flame requires fuel to exist, but which is not present in the flame itself, so policy depends on this infrastructure.

So rather than an analytical imagination caught between the binary of global and local, we can think about policy, including neoliberal policy, as having multiple relational topologies. It is these multiple topologies that make instances of policy into something that is simultaneously 'from here' and 'from there'. Instances of policy imagine and produce the boundaries between regions and the networks that cut across them. They depend on the absent presence of a variety of influences from a variety of places that are able to come together in a particular programme because of their malleable and fluid nature. This gives us a more nuanced understanding of the 'everywhereness' of neoliberalism.

Politics and Topologies

Policy is an important feature of the modern world. But there is more to this than just the effect it has on who gets what and who gets to do what. Policy is always underpinned by knowledge of the world that it is acting on. When policy is conceived and rolled out, this knowledge informs how it imagines and acts on the various spaces and subjects that constitute the targets of the policy, whether it is beneficiaries, citizens, criminals, cities, public spaces or anything else that can be conceived as in need of regulation. And this knowledge produces relations and institutions of power as actors

and objects get arranged 'around' the subjects and spaces of the policy. In other words, policy produces topographies.

The topologies associated with a policy can help us to grasp the kind of knowledge that underpins a policy programme. As I have discussed above, creativity policy has fairly conventional regional models of the space that policy will be directed at, whether these are countries or cities. When any policy is rolled out with this topology, it imprints it on the topography through the production of topographical boundaries within which the policy applies. The network topology of creativity policy collapses difference and distance between places, making them comparable, and making it possible to compare policy approaches. This has a topographical effect as well: once different regions are comparable, and policy-makers have a basis for exchanging knowledge about the objects in question, they can begin purposively circulating across space between policy-making centres. They will construct topographical networks that cut across, but also reproduce, policy regions. Given the regional nature of contemporary democratic processes, it is likely they will be powerful elite spaces, seemingly existing and circulating out of reach of ordinary citizens. The transnational and elite nature of these spaces is why they are described as 'global', and the policy-making or influencing capacity they apparently have is exactly why such 'global' spaces are ascribed power. This suggests that their power stems not from the fact of their globalness, but from the policy topologies that put them in this position.

Of course, policy topologies do not always automatically produce policy topographies. Reversing a policy topography that we regard as egregious is not as simple as producing policy that has a different topology. We are limited by the existing topography. It creates a path dependency that shapes capacities and imaginations. Creativity policy is conceived using received regional topologies largely because these regional spaces are consistently reproduced as the space of policy action through, for example, the nation-state system. The network topologies of creativity policy are usually based on existing topographical network connections. It may then transform these network connections, such as through the types of people and ideas circulating, but it is unlikely to entirely erase and reform them. However, the fluid topology of policy creates the possibility of something different. Fluid topology has two roles here. The fluidity of the policy objects that circulate enables network connections to be reproduced, even when the policy-makers who are exchanging knowledge are talking about differently conceived objects. This maintains existing and emerging network topographies in which policy is produced. But the fluidity of the policy objects also creates the opportunity for innovation in policy, and for new objects and new topologies to be created. I will return to this point shortly.

When we consider creativity policy there is one element of its topologies that is of particular significance: its technical aspect. Creativity policy, almost without fail, consists of attempts to measure the nature and size of something considered relevant to

creativity. This quantitative dimension is central to the topologies of policy that are present here, particularly in relation to regions and networks. It is through practices of measurement that diverse activities within a space get reduced down to singular quantifiable categories. This is what makes one region's creative industries comparable to other regions. Moreover, this technical aspect makes the creative industries into a universal category, present anywhere measurement of them is conducted (Collier and Ong, 2005; Prince, 2010). This effect is important: it strips policy objects of the context of their initial conception (in the case of the creative industries, post-Thatcher Britain). It makes them appear not as the contingent, politically motivated policy devices they were in that context but as objective, even scientific, representations of phenomena potentially present everywhere. This global validity makes their transferability conceivable and actionable.

From this perspective, there is nothing particularly unique about creativity policy. Its multiple topologies are founded on technical, calculative forms of knowledge that reduce complexity down to comparable figures on a table. This kind of knowledge, with its associated regional and network topologies and topographies, is typical as an underpinning of contemporary policy knowledge. 'The economy' was constructed in the 20th century along much the same lines, through the measurement of invented but now universal concepts like GDP, inflation, unemployment rates, and various other supposed markers of economic health (Breslau, 2003; Mitchell, 2002). Although neoliberals are often contrasted with the Keynesians who constructed the economy as a calculable object, their market solutions were similarly technical, simply emphasising a different set of calculations (Callon, 1998; Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Mitchell, 2011). For example, while Keynesians focused on full employment, neoliberal economists would regard inflation as more important.

Some have described this use of measurement and calculation as a form of anti-politics (Barry, 2002; Ferguson, 1994). The point is not that politics is made redundant by the use of technical expertise that claims absolute authority over the problems in question, but that, when successful, anti-politics results in the displacement of politics to other realms. It is a profoundly political move. The construction of stable networks of technical expertise that produce self-contained regions will shape the topographies on which future policy can be imagined, and so the parameters of policy debate. But as we have seen, these are not the only topologies that are involved, and there are always openings. The policy objects that are circulating are fluid. There are opportunities for new combinations and new renditions of creativity that have the potential to be more progressive than some of the current dominant strands. For example, the acceptance of the creative industries discourse in New Zealand underpinned national music policy that developed the local popular music industry – known as the New Zealand 'pop renaissance' – and offered a form of social inclusion to a frequently marginalised subsection of urban youth in particular (Scott, 2008, 2012).

Such programmes are not unproblematic, but we should not overly fixate on these aspects at the expense of the possibilities. Any policy programme exists in fire space, meaning it will have its absent presences. Indeed, it is often the absent presences that give policy validity. Comparison to regions with real or perceived superior outcomes on the issue in question can justify the attempted emulation of their policies, for example. The 'absent presence' of this influence makes it more defensible as policy 'best practice'. The persuasive and seductive power (Allen, 2003) of being able to make this kind of claim should not be ignored – it has certainly not been ignored by neoliberals. Moreover, it is impossible to escape from absent presences. It is unlikely ideal policy can be produced from first principles. With this in mind, and given the fluidity of many policy objects, the imperative is to take advantage of existing policy trends. Contemporary creativity policy may have a technical dimension many are not comfortable with, but it has provided it with a particular fire topology that makes creativity a universal element of economic development. By speaking to this universality, while also taking advantage of the policy object's fluidity, it may be possible to produce more progressive policy programmes.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a series of questions regarding neoliberalism that have emerged from the last decade of debating it. So what kind of answer does this analysis offer?

Rather than ask whether neoliberalism is really 'global' or 'local', the perspective adopted here suggests that its simultaneously local and global provenance is a topological effect of its technically rendered nature. As the case of 'creativity' policy demonstrates, technical policy forms produce topological proximity because they universalise their objects. By being rendered measurable, for example, the creative industries can have their presence established anywhere measurement can be made, even if what is established is that they are not present. Once this move is made, concerns and concepts that cannot be rendered in the same technical language become specific, and so 'parochial' and 'local'. But we should not assume this will map onto the topography of the relations that constitute a particular instance of policy. 'Parochial' concerns can emerge from relations that stretch a long way across space, such as an expatriate community, while 'universal' technical forms still require place-specific capacities to produce sufficient measurements. We can conclude that the 'seeming everywhere-ness' of this policy is a topological, as well as a topographical, effect.

What consequences does this analysis have for political engagement? Most immediately, it should bring the eye to the kind of work necessary to assemble policy topologies and topographies: the underlabouring that makes regions thinkable, joins networks up across regions, enables fluidity across and around those networks, and draws out of those fluids the fuel to make policy. This includes the seemingly mundane work of

analysts, consultants, and researchers involved with the development, emulation and execution of methods for measuring all the objects that inform the policy moment. It is their work that is producing and reproducing these policy topologies (Prince, 2013). By examining the practices associated with, on the one hand, the reduction of difference across and within space to convert a complex social landscape into a numerical measure, and on the other, the manipulation of fluid policy objects to make them comparable, we can lift the veil of neutrality that sits over the technical policy forms which generate the topological effect of 'everywhereness'.

Neoliberalism certainly has its ideological aspect, and countering this remains a central project of progressive thought. But it should also be remembered that as a political project neoliberalism is founded on a technical base. As 'creativity' policy illustrates, it involved the use of fluid aspects of existing technically constructed policy objects to produce new policy configurations. Some of these are progressive (Ferguson, 2010; Lewis, 2009), and efforts to maintain this aspect should not be dismissed out-of-hand. While many don't trust constructs like the creative industries because of their neoliberal heritage, their fluid component ought to be recognised. It should not be assumed that what is true in one place about the policy is necessarily true elsewhere, or that it needs to be. Thinking about how we might engage with this fluidity by, for example, engaging with the underlabourers who produce the important technical forms of knowledge, might offer some paths forward.

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