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Diogo Gaspar Silva & Kevin Ward

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URBAN POLICY MOBILITIES: RECENT DEBATES and FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS


DIOGO GASPAR SILVA  and KEVIN WARD 

ABSTRACT. This paper introduces and discusses the interdisciplinary approach of urban policy mobilities. It begins by reviewing its intellectual antecedents, which the paper argues are rooted in architectural and planning histories, anthropology, cultural and social geography, and political science. Since its emergence in the early 2000s, the approach has expanded significantly. This paper provides a balanced overview of both persistent and still-nascent theoretical and empirical themes or issues structuring the approach. Taking stock of these features and drawing intellectual contributions from within and beyond the social sciences, the paper concludes by arguing for four possible future research pathways for urban policy mobilities *Keywords: policy mobilities, policy transfer, urban policy; urban politics, urban policy making, public policy, urban geography.*

[W]hat we've been looking for [in awarded projects] is particularly resounding impact in local communities, that these projects selected should be *transferable* and one should also be able to *scale them up*. All of this is meant to ... be a *source of learning*, be a *source of inspiration* for all of us.

--Marc Lemaitre, Director-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Union, October 2019

This declaration embodies a pivotal aspect of contemporary policy making. Over recent decades, learning from best practices has become an uncontested rehearsal where policy makers benchmark experiences against those from elsewhere. Events like award ceremonies and conferences, where we see the making of these types of statements, serve as influential arenas for showcasing best practices deemed “inspirational,” “transferable,” and “transformative” (Andersson and Cook 2019; Blake et al. 2021). These events are part of a broader range of infrastructures for the anointing and exchanging of best practices. While benchmarking and sharing best practices in policy making are well established, their presence has become more prominent (Stone et al. 2020; Acuto et al. 2021). This is unsurprising, as communication technologies, globalization, and related uncertainties have led numerous places, policy makers, and other actors to join international networks to share policy ideas and knowledge (Bunnell and Das 2010; Kitchin et al. 2015). These extensive exchanges of best practices have been labeled “natural tactics” for addressing global-urban issues such as climate change (Meerow 2017), the public

 DIOGO GASPAR SILVA, Centre of Geographical Studies, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [diogosilva4@campus.ul.pt]. KEVIN WARD, Department of Geography, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [kevin.ward@manchester.ac.uk].

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health crisis (Connolly et al. 2020), and governance and economic restructuring (Davidson et al. 2019; Praharaj and Han 2019).

In this context, cities and policy makers worldwide have “become highly adept at sharing and adapting new innovations on their own, accelerating the diffusion of good ideas and speeding global learning” (UN-HABITAT 2020, 205). Implicit in these mundane gestures is the pressure on contemporary policy makers to locate solutions to a range of challenges and problems as ways to legitimize political leadership and particular best practices as crisis-solving strategies (Lee and Hwang 2012; Praharaj and Han 2019) and, of course, advance the wider ambitions of their places (Bunnell and Das 2010). For these reasons, the circulation of best practices, policy ideas and knowledge show no signs of abating in contemporary policy making.

However, explaining and understanding the learning, mediation, and making up of policy ideas and knowledge across different places in the twenty-first century remains a complex intellectual challenge. It requires moving beyond the idea that policy makers are the sole enthusiasts of the global endeavor involving policy circulation. In addition to policy makers, the study of policy movement has, over recent decades, attracted attention from an expanding cohort of academics in social sciences, with different degrees of enthusiasm. Traditionally, the positivist/rational-formalist political science-led work on policy diffusion/transfer largely governed such intellectual debates until the early 2000s (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; 2000; Marsh and Sharman 2009; Benson and Jordan 2011; Dolowitz and Marsh 2012). However, the past two decades have seen disciplines such as architecture and planning history, political anthropology, sociology, and, notably, geography, engage in discussions around the nuances of politics and policy making. This interdisciplinary engagement has contributed to the emergence of a still-expanding approach known as urban policy mobilities. Predominantly informed by the foundational work of geographers, this approach has introduced alternative postpositivist/socio-constructivist conceptualizations to study how policies are potentially made transferable, constituted, and reconstituted as they move between places (Peck 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; Temenos and McCann 2013).

The aim of this paper is to situate and discuss the approach of urban policy mobilities within the broader social sciences literature examining the movement of policy futures. The paper goes further, however, and builds on core and still-nascent conceptual and empirical features currently shaping the approach to advance a range of potential pathways for future research as the approach evolves and matures. This is, of course, not the first critical review documenting the intellectual emergence and conceptual, methodological, and empirical foundations of an approach that has matured over the last two decades (Peck 2011; McCann 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; Temenos and McCann 2013; Baker and

Temenos 2015), and it is likely not the last. We argue three reasons for writing up another critical review on urban policy mobilities. First, there remains a sense among policy makers and academics that the translocal circulation of policy ideas and knowledge is taking place with greater ease and speed, showing no signs of abating. While COVID-19 may have produced immediate and long-term consequences for the making of policy futures, it has also stretched the circulation of policy ideas to respond to an unpredictable public health crisis (Acuto et al. 2021; McGuirk et al. 2021). Second, the approach of urban policy mobilities has evolved over the past two decades, with intellectual contributions steadily increasing (Baker and Temenos 2015). Notably, a quick scan of prominent academic databases reveals that this approach has been home to a growing number of studies over the past decade, with a particularly notable surge in publications since 2020, illustrative of the intellectual persistence and relevance of the approach. Third, it has been over a decade since many of the inaugural reviews on urban policy mobilities were published (Peck 2011; McCann 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; Temenos and McCann 2013; Baker and Temenos 2015; Temenos and Baker 2015). Since then, the approach has grown and expanded some of its conceptual, methodological, and empirical repertoires.

Many of these earlier reviews were timely in framing an approach that was then in its infancy and also authoritative in pointing out a range of intellectual debts and empirical biases that took debates forward in subsequent years. Jane Jacobs (2012) and Temenos and McCann (2013), for instance, draw attention to the methodological presentism shaping earlier contributions which then informed a range of studies sensitive to the multiple temporalities of policy circulation (Wood 2014; 2015; Ward 2018; Baker and McCann 2020). Similarly, some pieces emerging in the mid-2010s, such as Tom Baker and Temenos (2015) and McCann and Ward (2015), argued for a critical consideration of instances beyond “successism” where policies failed to circulate or materialize. Also here, we have seen emerge a multifaceted strand of work that turned into these instances to bring urban policy mobilities conversations forward (Lauermann 2016; Chang 2017; Bok 2020). To better understand the circulation of urban policy futures, this paper outlines the approach’s intellectual origins and current debates to argue that the future of policy mobilities, as a meso-theory, should revisit and extend some of their foundations, engage in wider interdisciplinary dialogues within and beyond the social sciences and illuminate some shaded processes and practices through which policies are potentially learned, mediated, and translated.

At the intersection of these and other issues, we argue that this paper comes at a timely intellectual moment. It provides a balanced overview of an approach that has matured over the last decade. By retrospectively taking stock of both earlier and current debates shaping urban policy mobilities, the paper introduces still-nascent critiques and offers four possible pathways for future research. Rather than exploring the nuances of each of them through empirically focused

research, it assembles a format designed to suggest and stimulate future urban policy mobilities studies in ways that are both intellectually and empirically relevant and impactful. To this end, we have organized this paper into three further sections. In the next section, we review the intellectual antecedents from different parts of the social sciences shaping the emergence of urban policy mobilities, particularly in response to the positivist/rational-formalist-national political science work on policy transfer/diffusion. We then introduce the approach of urban policy mobilities and the key conceptual and empirical features that have structured it. The third section builds upon these features to discuss existing issues within the approach and outline four possible pathways for a more generative research program. In the conclusion, we discuss how these pathways can advance conceptual reflection and empirical practices in policy mobilities studies, contributing to renewing, extending or inventing new ways to understand contemporary urban policy making.

URBAN POLICY MOBILITIES STUDIES IN RETROSPECT: INTELLECTUAL ANTECEDENTS AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

Over the past two decades, a new approach in human geography and urban studies—known as “urban policy mobilities studies” (Jacobs 2012, 418)—has emerged. This transdisciplinary approach is committed to examining the processes, practices, and resources through which policies become transferable, constituted, and reconstituted through movement (McCann and Ward 2013; Cook et al. 2014; Cook 2018). It has emerged to challenge traditional political science work on policy diffusion/transfer, which focused on heuristic models to theorize the spatial-temporal patterns of policy movement between nation-states and examine the power-laden conditions under which this occurs (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; 2000; Marsh and Sharman 2009; Benson and Jordan 2011; Dolowitz and Marsh 2012; Minkman et al. 2018).

Traditional political science work has largely focused on categorizing the range of “transfer agents” involved in policy movement (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; 2000; Stone 2004). These were conceptualized as rational-technocratic individuals who neutrally borrowed best practices from elsewhere, with the expectation of achieving similar results in their jurisdictions. Of course, this earlier work is also not without its scalar assumptions. In addition to its focus on North American and Western European contexts (Benson and Jordan 2011; Stone et al. 2020), policy diffusion/transfer studies have been rooted in nation-state-centric foundations. This has involved studying “transfer” processes—usually successful ones (Stone 2017)—both between national states (Wolman 1992; Dolowitz 1997) and within them (Walker 1969), a scalar focus still prevalent in much of the political science literature (Porto de Oliveira 2020; Stone et al. 2020).

In this sense, policy diffusion/transfer scholars have traditionally conceptualized policy making as a rational-technocratic-linear process of “same-ing” and policies as unchangeable objects moving across jurisdictions. This perspective, however, largely overlooks how policies are learned, mediated, and translated through power-laden processes. Interestingly, political scientists themselves have long been critical of their dissocialized views in not considering the practices through which policies are constituted and reconstituted through movement (Wolman 1992; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Benson and Jordan 2011; Dolowitz and Marsh 2012). More recently, however, work in political science has begun to address some of these issues (Stone 2012; 2017; Stone et al. 2020; Porto de Oliveira 2020).

While taking intellectual inspiration from, and being critical of, traditional policy diffusion/transfer work, urban policy mobilities studies have also borrowed contributions from other disciplines (Peck 2011; McCann 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; Baker and Temenos 2015). Relevant strands of work include architectural and urban planning history, political anthropology, and social and cultural geography. For instance, research in urban planning and architectural history has documented the transnational movement of planning actors, policies, and techniques, particularly within colonial, developmental, and postcolonial power relations (Harris and Moore 2013). The approach has also drawn upon anthropological work to understand policies as complex, power-laden constructs and challenge the notion of policy makers as purely rational entities (Shore and Wright 1997; Shore et al. 2011). Finally, the “mobility turn” in social sciences, stemming from geographical and sociological work, offers a fruitful perspective to urban policy mobilities scholars, framing policy movement as social, relational, and processual rather than a static transfer of unchangeable objects (Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2010). This interdisciplinary approach has engendered postpositivist/socio-constructivist perspectives to study policy circulation, which seem crucial for understanding how policies are potentially learned, mediated, constituted, and reconstituted between places (Cook et al. 2014; Cook 2018).

This intellectual assemblage renders the approach of urban policy mobilities “a rolling conversation rather than a coherent paradigm” (Peck 2011, 774). However, over the past two decades, this approach has coalesced around several conceptual and empirical features. Central to this is the idea that policies are constituted through relational-territorial connections (McCann and Ward 2013). Noting that policies are made in reference to globally circulating best practices, urban policy mobilities studies further acknowledge that policy making is an inherently geographical and place-specific process (Temenos and McCann 2013). This perspective challenges earlier political science-led imaginaries, which assumed that “mobilization does not change the character and content of the mobilized” policies (McCann 2011, 115). Instead, these studies argue that policies are “reworked, streamlined, adapted, and often function in fundamentally

different ways in their re-embedding” elsewhere (Cook 2018, 344). Formal and functional mutations are thus seen as integral to policy-making processes (Peck 2011; Jacobs 2012). For example, the Vision Zero transport policy, originating in Sweden in the 1990s, has been reintroduced in quite different ways in various cities. While retaining the same formal remits (eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries) and nomenclature across Europe (Elvebakk 2007), Latin America (Whitney 2022), or North America (Fleisher et al. 2016), Vision Zero undergoes functional adaptations to suit local contexts. In New York, it emphasizes street repurposing, stricter traffic enforcement, and public awareness campaigns. In Oslo, the focus is on reducing traffic by eliminating parking spaces, while London has introduced segregated cycling infrastructure. These examples illustrate that policies are not uniformly transferred but are reconstituted through movement, with elements coming together in unique ways (see also Lee and Hwang 2012; Praharaj and Han 2019). Of course, these mutations are shaped by wider power-laden processes and geometries that affect how policies are potentially learned, mediated, and translated elsewhere.

In examining the power-laden contexts that shape how policies are rendered comparable, learned, and translated, urban policy mobilities studies frame policy making as a social, practical, and interpersonal techno-political process (Temenos 2016; Blake et al. 2021; Papanastasiou 2024). This approach shifts away from traditional political science-led scholarship that focuses on categorizing “transfer agents” involved in policy circulation. Instead, it emphasizes the socially constructed and politicized nature of policy making. Drawing from anthropological socio-constructivist approaches, urban policy mobilities studies “follow” the range of policy actors, social practices, and techniques of persuasion through which policies are discursively and materially constructed as “best practices” and potentially made mobile (Bunnell and Das 2010; Baker and McGuirk 2019). Until recently, much of their focus has been on privileged policy actors mediating and consuming policies (Baker et al. 2020), including consultants and intelligence corps (Prince 2011; Rapoport and Hult 2017; Vogelpohl 2018), elected policy makers, public officials, and “middling” technocrats (Larner and Laurie 2010; Bunnell and Das 2010), as well as supranational organizations (Blake et al. 2021; Papanastasiou 2024). These actors use various discursive and material practices to showcase, legitimize, and facilitate the circulation of particular policy models.

Within these debates, a particular body of work documenting the social labor of consultants and consultancies in circulating policy knowledge and expertise has emerged. Traditionally, these studies have examined how these “transfer agents” mobilize calculative and persuasive techniques “to create equivalence between different places, making policy transfer . . . possible” (Prince 2011, 199). For instance, Bunnell and Das (2010, 281) highlighted how consulting firms circulated effective “numbers and tables, graphs and charts, glossy pictures, and digital simulations” to render Kuala Lumpur as an urban model for

Hyderabad (see also Rapoport 2015; Praharaj and Han 2019). While insightful and generative, a growing number of urban policy mobilities studies have been critical of the role of consultants in policy making, questioning whether their global expertise and reputation outweigh local stakeholders' knowledge (Vogelpohl 2018). This inevitably raises concerns about the making up of local policy futures. While some argue that local governments retain influence over how consultant-prescribed policies are locally implemented (Rapoport and Hult 2017), others suggest that global consultancies often promote specific policy models that overlook local interests (Praharaj et al. 2018; Praharaj and Han 2019; Vogelpohl et al. 2022).

In response to the “expertocratic” circulation of policy ideas driven by global consultants and other elite actors, recent studies have increasingly focused on exploring the agency of nonelite actors in the circulation of what has been termed “counter-hegemonic policy futures” (Temenos 2016; McCann and Duffin 2023). Drawing from social movement and activism research, Baker et al. (2020) explored how health service providers, such as social workers and nurses, became instrumental in the making up of harm-reduction policies. Similarly, Jenny McArthur (2019) demonstrated how nonexpert community advocates shaped national transport priorities in New Zealand, while others have examined the contributions of community activists (Lauermaann and Vogelpohl 2019; McCann and Duffin 2023) and journalists/opinion-makers (Montero 2016) in policy circulation.

Another significant theme in urban policy mobilities studies is its focus on the places where policy knowledge and expertise are learned, mediated, and exchanged between elite and nonelite policy actors. These places provide “opportunities for policy makers and practitioners to compare, evaluate, judge, learn and situate their city in relation to others” (Cook and Ward 2012, 141). Since the processes of learning, mediating, and translating policy knowledge are inherently social and power-laden, it seems productive to consider the ordinary places, activities and materials that shape “the understandings of policy actors about what is successful, transferable and transformative” (Andersson and Cook 2019, 1364). Here, McCann’s (2011, 114) notion of “informational infrastructures” is foundational for understanding how policy learning and circulation are supported and facilitated. These infrastructures often include events, institutions, and technologies that “frame and package knowledge about best policy practices, successful cities, and cutting-edge ideas” for specific audiences. Urban policy mobilities studies have primarily concentrated on informational infrastructure events, such as study tours (González 2010; Wood 2014; Montero 2016) and conferences (Cook and Ward 2012; Temenos 2016; Andersson and Cook 2019). These events serve to persuade and educate audiences while creating social connections between sites of learning and emulation (Baker and McQuirk 2019). For instance, the quote with which we began this paper illustrates how informational infrastructure events and the experience of “being there” serve as

venues for learning and inspiration. In this sense, Lee and Hwang (2012) found that study tours conducted in Western cities, particularly in the U.K., effectively legitimized the adoption of creative city programs in Seoul. It has been through these events that policy makers are brought together, best practices are showcased and policy circulation is facilitated (Blake et al. 2021; Papanastasiou 2024). And, of course, there is nothing “natural” about the sociopolitical staging of these informational infrastructures. Urban policy mobilities studies have also begun to explore the affective labor behind these initiatives and their resonances on policy learning and mobility (Bunnell and Das 2010; Baker and McGuirk 2019). Here, Marcia McKenzie (2017) and Viviana Pitton and McKenzie (2022) demonstrated how collective affects, like precarity, fear, and aspiration, influenced the local adoption of sustainability policies and shaped the broader socio-political context in which best policy practices were effectively promoted.

While many informational infrastructures consist of time-delimited gatherings, their afterlives are unknowable in advance. Beyond the social encounters at these events, urban policy mobilities studies also “follow” the mobile materials, such as images, presentations, reports, and videos, that accompany embodied interactions, helping to articulate and render best practices portable (McCann 2011; Wood 2020). For example, Ian Cook and Ward (2012), analyzing a two-day conference on business improvement district policy, noted that practices like note-taking and sharing PowerPoint presentations were common among delegates. Other studies highlight the role of diverse technologies of seduction, including visual media, as sensory tactics that allow policy makers to experience particular best practices in “real environments” and envision potential transformations for their cities (Rapoport 2015; Andersson and Cook 2019). Moreover, while less empirically explored within urban policy mobilities studies, policy-related documents, such as fact sheets, guidebooks, and reports, seem to be instrumental in reformatting policy imaginaries and influencing the choices of policy actors regarding which policies to adopt (Prince 2010).

It is at the intersection of these issues that urban policy mobilities studies have built a solid empirical foundation over the last two decades. Part of it has centered on the influence of neoliberal ideological stock in contemporary policy circulation (Peck and Theodore 2010; Brenner et al. 2010). Although policy movement is often tied to the political-institutional and ideological contexts policies encounter, the approach has primarily focused on the contemporary circulation of neoliberal policies, particularly in/from Global North cities (Robinson 2016; 2018; Leitner and Sheppard 2020). This has resulted in a somewhat “presentist” methodological approach, given that much of urban policy mobilities work has concentrated on the current neoliberal “moment” (Harris and Moore 2013; Cook et al. 2014; Cook 2018) and neglected the historical-retrospective, nonlinear trajectories figuring in policy movement (Jacobs 2012).

The corollary of these conceptual and methodological biases was, of course, acknowledged in earlier reviews from within the approach that argued, on the one hand, for a reconsideration of the “narrow geographical field of reference upon which most urban theory is based” (Temenos and McCann 2013, 352) and the need to appreciate “the historical embeddedness of policy and policymaking” (Temenos and Baker 2015, 841), on the other. In tandem with these critiques, scholars have also reoriented the geographical focus of policy mobilities research, expanding beyond the traditional Global North/Global South dichotomy. In response, these studies have begun to reconfigure its focus. This includes redrawing the intellectual map to include cities outside the traditional Western/liberal-centric canon as productive instances to extend in-built theorizations of policy-making processes (Robinson 2018; Leitner and Sheppard 2020). Put simply, rather than exclusively seeing Global North cities as policy lenders and Global South cities as policy borrowers, recent policy mobilities studies demonstrate that policy learning and circulation also involve South-South and South-North trajectories, with research from Latin America (Montero 2016; Bertelli 2021; Whitney 2022), Asia (Bunnell and Das 2010; Meerow 2017; Bok 2020), and Eastern Europe (Stanek 2021; Gunko et al. 2022; Temenos 2024) highlighting the fluid and processual nature of urban policy making. Building upon these earlier reviews and critiques, another conceptual and empirical reconfiguration within the approach has involved a nuanced understanding of the history-laden contexts mediating policy circulation, both beyond the prevailing neoliberal framework and capturing the multiple “starts-and-stops” shaping policy movement (Wood 2014; 2015; Ward 2018; Bok 2020; Prince 2024). Drawing attention to the methodological issues around “presentism” in urban policy mobilities studies, this set of reviews outlined the groundwork that stimulated conceptual and empirical attention to historical engagements and legacies as starting points to illuminate the delayed, gradual and repetitive instances animating policy-making processes.

Another central element of the empirical foundation of urban policy mobilities has been the apparently successful circulation of particular policy repertoires (Jacobs 2012; McCann and Ward 2015). However, other instances, such as those of policy absence, deactivation, and failure have, until recently, constituted a notable “absent presence” within the approach (however, see Lee and Hwang 2012; Lovell 2019). Earlier commentaries and critiques acknowledged this, arguing for broader and more generative research agendas within urban policy mobilities studies and suggesting that the approach should move beyond absolute and fixed notions of “success” in the making of “mobile” policy futures (Baker and Temenos 2015; McCann and Ward 2015). Instead, these reviews encouraged further refinement and innovation by approaching “sites of failure, absence and mutation . . . [as] significant empirical instances of differentiation” (Jacobs 2012, 419). As a result, in recent years, urban policy mobilities studies have increasingly explored these “absent presences,” contributing to a more nuanced understanding of policy-

making processes, including through policy ideas that remained immobile, were canceled or thwarted. In particular, urban policy mobilities studies have been home to contributions challenging absolutist notions of “mobility/success/presence,” arguing that these are only “one half of the equation in . . . understanding how differing policy outcomes are enmeshed in broader regulatory landscapes of power” (Bok 2020, 1220). Embracing a relational view of “mobility/immobility,” “success/failure,” and “presence/absence,” recent studies have begun to excavate the processual coproduction and generative aspects embedded in policy-making processes (Temenos and Lauerermann 2020). For example, counteracting the “narrow focus on current successful policies” (Temenos and McCann 2013, 352), John Lauerermann (2016) analyzed how failed Olympic Games bids reshaped long-term (often successful) agendas elsewhere (see also Chang 2017). Baker and McCann (2020) demonstrated how Melbourne’s unsuccessful harm-reduction policy attempts eventually resulted in a commitment to reinvent urban futures, while Temenos (2024) explored how the failure of a once-successful policy at local and national scales prompted its mobility at other governmental levels. Building on these emerging studies that view policy immobility/failure/absence as generative instances shaping policy-making processes, the approach has expanded its scope to examine the politics under which some policies deemed “immobile” or “failed” are potentially reactivated and reconfigured elsewhere, across different temporalities.

A final and perhaps obvious intellectual feature of urban policy mobilities studies is its scalar assumptions. Stemming to challenge the methodological nationalism prevalent in political science (Benson and Jordan 2011; Dolowitz and Marsh 2012; McCann and Ward 2013), the approach has instead seen “the urban” as a reference scale to understand how policy-making processes occur and shape places in the twenty-first century (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Addie 2020; McFarlane 2024). Interestingly, while the starting point of the earliest work in policy mobilities was the circulation of welfare (Peck and Theodore 2001; 2010) and economic development policies (Ward 2006) between nation-states, this approach has clearly focused on inter- and intraurban policy mobilities (Bunnell and Das 2010; González 2010; Montero 2016; Leitner and Sheppard 2020; Bertelli 2021; Stanek 2021; Temenos 2024), with some scholars even postulating that “national states are no longer primary agents in the production of policies and places” (Temenos and McCann 2013, 346). However, as one might argue, such an ontological focus on cities may overemphasize their role within the new interurban political economy orthodoxy and underplay the ongoing influence of nation-states in the learning, mediation, and translation of policy futures (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Davidson et al. 2019; Acuto et al. 2021). As Ida Andersson and Cook (2019, 1364) note, “cities do not exist in a spatial and scalar vacuum and policy mobilization is not always focused on cities.” This observation stands as an invitation to reconsider some of the theoretical and empirical foundations that have structured urban policy mobilities studies.

URBAN POLICY MOBILITIES STUDIES IN PROSPECT: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE
RESEARCH

In the previous section, we reviewed the intellectual foundations of the policy mobilities approach and discussed its central theoretical and empirical orientations. While there is a general consensus around the conceptual and empirical features that characterize and shape this intellectual approach, as it has expanded and matured, the past decade has seen emerge new contributions that shed light on specific aspects of urban policy making. In the remainder of this paper, we take stock of both foundational and more recent work on urban policy mobilities to outline possible research pathways. We have identified four future directions that, we argue, have been absent from the wider debates but hold particular promise for their advancement. We discuss each in turn and illustrate them with examples of conceptual or empirical overlaps that could guide urban policy mobilities scholars and others interested in the circulation of policy futures.

REVISITING THE SCALAR POLITICS OF POLICY MOBILITIES

First, we argue for a critical interrogation of “the urban” in contemporary policy making. In doing so, we invite urban policy mobilities scholars to revisit some of their scalar ontological foundations. While this approach has made strides in challenging the methodological nationalism prevalent in much of political science, it often confines itself to urban contexts, thereby limiting the understanding of policy making that occurs at regional, national, and supranational scales (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; 2000; Benson and Jordan 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; Temenos and McCann 2013). Recent policy mobilities studies argue that it is conceptually and empirically unreasonable to disregard the influence of the national scale and nation-states in the constitution and reconstitution of urban policies (Praharaj et al. 2018; Gunko et al. 2022; McCann and Duffin 2023; Lorne 2024; Prince 2024). This is especially true in centralized political-institutional arrangements, where urban policies are often shaped or coconstructed through interactions with other scales (Peck and Theodore 2001; 2010; Ward 2006). By bringing these “new” geographies of policy making into focus, we are prompted not only to reconsider the nation-state’s role in, but also to take seriously the interscalar and multiscale nature of, urban policy-making processes.

The opening vignette of this paper illustrates the shift toward reengaging the nation-state (and supranational organizations) in urban policy making. It highlights the European Union’s role as a policy mobilizer that selects and promotes best practices from cities and regions, rendering them transferable and potentially scalable across member states (Andersson and Cook 2019; Blake et al. 2021; Papanastasiou 2024; Temenos 2024). Similarly, the UN New Urban Agenda restates “the leading role of national governments ... in the definition and implementation of inclusive and effective urban policies ... [alongside]

subnational and local governments” (UN-HABITAT 2017, 8; 2020). Therefore, urban policy mobilities might benefit from reengaging, where appropriate, in interdisciplinary dialogs with political science and related disciplines. This would involve revisiting, rather than dismissing, methodological nationalism to better understand policy making as indeterminate, open-ended, and processual. It also encourages appreciation for the nation-states’ power and its associated spatial division of labor among different scales in shaping translocal policy circulations.

Exploring how nation-states and policy makers at national and subnational levels learn, mediate, and translate urban policy futures presents several challenges and opportunities. One avenue involves exploring how supranational organizations, like the European Union, shape how national and local governments introduce and adapt particular urban policies (Blake et al. 2021; Papanastasiou 2024). The question of how national governments mediate the circulation of urban policies between and within cities, especially in centralized/decentralized politico-institutional contexts, also remains relatively unexplored (though see McCann and Duffin 2023; Lorne 2024; Prince 2024; Silva et al. 2024). In centralized governmental systems, where decision-making is often concentrated at the national level, urban policies are often centrally articulated and prescribed, while decentralized governmental systems grant more autonomy to local governments, allowing for formal and functional variations of policies. Comparing how urban policies are potentially learned, mediated, and translated across these different contexts might provide valuable insights into the indeterminate and processual nature of policy making across different spatial and temporal scales. For instance, conducting interurban comparative research projects could generate a nuanced understanding of how policies like Vision Zero, which share formal attributes, are reconstituted to adapt to different functional local governance structures and politico-institutional contexts. Another area of inquiry involves examining the political work required to embed specific policy repertoires, such as neoliberal policies, into diverse governance contexts, particularly where such policies may not “naturally” fit. Put differently, neoliberal policies do not seem to circulate exclusively within neoliberal contexts; however, adapting and translating them into more centralized contexts may require more extensive political work and negotiation, often made of multiple starts-and-stops over time (Ward 2018; Silva et al. 2024).

While exploring scalar politics in policy mobilities offers significant theoretical insights, it also presents methodological challenges. Researchers must move beyond the confines of city hall and the city itself to embrace a more interconnected conceptualization of scale. This involves considering the utility of provincial and particularized formulations to review existing, or generate novel, interpretations and theoretical claims of the “urban” and the “political” (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Addie 2020; McFarlane 2024). A significant methodological response to these challenges has been a renewed emphasis on comparative studies that take seriously the social and political labor across

multiple scales—urban, regional, national and supranational—to fully excavate the making up of policy futures, highlighting the interscalar conditioning of governance and urban policy making (Brenner 2001; Ward 2010; Robinson 2016; 2018). This maneuver requires a nuanced understanding of local and specialized knowledge regarding the politico-institutional frameworks that shape policy adoption in different contexts. For instance, comparing how Vision Zero policies arrive at different cities illustrates that while these policies may share overarching formal features, they can translate into substantively different functional aspects in different places. In this sense, it seems productive to advance a conjunctural approach to the study of policy mobilities. This approach emphasizes “context-engaged modes of analysis and reflexive theory-building, focused on the analysis of politically salient ‘situations,’ places and moments” (Peck 2023, 2). Such analysis aims to shed light on the actors, structures, and scales involved in urban policy making in multiple, varied, and interconnected forms (Davidson and Ward 2024). While this work is certainly time consuming, and contextually specific and intensive, we might see conjunctural analysis as both an epistemological and methodological orientation that furthers our understanding of the evolving, relational nature of policy making while grounding future comparative-based empirical studies in rigorous theoretical and methodological frameworks.

INTRODUCING THE PLACE OF LAW IN POLICY MOBILITIES

Second, we turn to the place of law and socio-legal issues in the making up of policy futures. While urban policy mobilities have focused extensively on the circulation of neoliberal ideological stock, these studies have, perhaps surprisingly, underplayed the role of law as a social, practical, and interpersonal technopolitical process and sociocultural practice. Yet, the legal dimensions of policy making and their variegated resonances within legal rules, relationships, and governance modes are crucial to understanding how policies are potentially learned, mediated, and translated (Brenner et al. 2010; Peck and Theodore 2010; Gunko et al. 2022). These processes unfold within spaces of legal proceedings, networks of actors and site-specific socio-legal contexts. We argue that policy mobilities research must pay more critical attention to these distinctly legal phenomena to better understand the embodied and place-specific ways policies are constituted and reconstituted as they travel.

We are not suggesting that policy mobilities have completely ignored the formal and functional ways through which laws and regulations shape, or are shaped by, the movement of policies. Some work has addressed the discursive and material reembedding of policies in different forms across various socio-legal contexts (Lee and Hwang 2012; McCann and Ward 2013; Cook 2018; Stanek 2021). However, we advocate for a more explicit engagement with the path-dependent legal frameworks and socio-legal complexities that define the power

relations embedded in law-making and policy-making processes. By focusing on the legal practices underpinning policy mobilities, scholars can gain deeper insights into how policies are interpreted, enacted, constituted, and reconstituted across different contexts.

Integrating law and socio-legal issues into policy mobilities studies is a necessary and timely expansion of the approach, both intellectually and empirically. It builds on a growing conjunctural and generative reading that calls for broadening the intellectual and empirical maps of policy mobilities to include non-Western and other-than-liberal places (Robinson 2016; 2018; Leitner and Sheppard 2020). This shift involves rethinking the geographies of comparison, learning, and exchange to expand, enrich or perhaps challenge “universal” theorizations and illuminate the path-dependent nature of policy making (Addie 2020; McFarlane 2024). However, this direction is not without challenges. To effectively study these legal aspects, researchers must engage with multilevel legal frameworks, often requiring specialized knowledge or collaboration with legal experts to further illuminate the path-dependent nature of policy making.

Advancing these debates requires revisiting the foundational work in political anthropology (Shore and Wright 1997; Shore et al. 2011), while also engaging with emerging scholarship on legal geographies. This approach deepens our understanding of “how law is constitutive of space or implicated in social [and political] spatializations . . . through legal territorializations of different kinds [of policies] at various scales” (Delaney 2014, 99; 2016). This, of course, also requires refining methodological approaches. The study of policy mobilities, particularly through a socio-legal lens, demands balancing the structures and agencies of legal actors while also considering geographical knowledge production. Studies in the emerging field of legal geographies offer innovative and participatory methodologies that reveal how legal practices and frameworks intersect with place. These methodologies could be vital for urban policy mobilities scholars as they work to unpack the legally constituted spaces where policies take shape. For instance, studies of how law is constitutive of space highlight how policies are embedded through legal mechanisms at different scales (Delaney 2014; 2016). Such approaches can illuminate how policies are named, classified, ruled, governed, and ordered within different socio-legal contexts.

While geographers have often seen “the legal” as a taken-for-granted structure determining how policies arrive at various contexts, a productive way forward might be, for example, to consider how legal frameworks are constructed in centralized and decentralized governmental systems. This approach reveals how power-laden geometries shape policy mediation and reembedding across different places. For example, the making up of transportation policies like Vision Zero varies significantly across legal contexts. In cities in Sweden, the centralized government seems to play a prominent role in shaping the socio-legal aspects of Vision Zero, while in the United States, a decentralized system

requires each city or state to navigate its legal landscape (Fleisher et al. 2016). Moreover, the legal ordering of policies like business improvement districts further illustrates the role of law in shaping how policies are reembedded into different socio-legal arrangements. In English cities, mandatory levies (a feature inherent to this policy) are collected from business-occupiers, but in Sweden and Denmark, there are no legal means to enforce compulsory participation from local stakeholders, partly due to the effects of social-democrat welfare regimes in making laws (Ward 2006; Valli et al. 2024). Ultimately, these socio-legal aspects illuminate how distinct legal structures and frameworks reflect and reinforce underlying power relations, which in turn shapes how policies are potentially learned, mediated, and translated into and across different contexts.

EXPERIMENTING WITH POLICY FUTURES IN POLICY MOBILITIES

A third research direction is for a more direct theorization of experimentation. While studying the making up of policies after their legal adoption and institutionalization is valuable and has been the focus of policy mobilities, we argue for a broader perspective that recognizes the social, discursive, and material labor involved in policy making, which starts long before and extends beyond formal policy institutionalization. Emphasizing the indeterminate and open-ended nature of policy-making processes, this research direction requires consideration of the “longer histories of experimentation” (Temenos 2024, 527) and acknowledgment of the iterative and fluid nature of how policies are constituted and reconstituted over time (Wood 2014; 2015; Ward 2018; Baker and McCann 2020).

Advancing this research involves embracing particular ontological foundations and drawing on contributions from fields within and beyond the social sciences, including political science/public administration, geographical work on governance, and science and technology studies (STS). Collectively, these fields offer insights into how policy experimentation is often integrated into regular policy-making processes across various temporalities. Shared features shaping these fields include a “laboratorian” approach to experimenting with processes and protocols, and the notion that these are contingent, open, and generative (Karvonen and van Heur 2014). These aspects align with emerging conversations in policy mobilities around the coproduction of “mobility/immobility,” “success/failure,” and “presence/absence” (Lovell 2019; Bok 2020; Temenos 2024), as well as the nonlinear and generative aspects of policy making (Wood 2015; Ward 2018; Baker and McCann 2020).

Political science and public administration scholarship, for instance, has explored how public sector innovation laboratories serve as instances for testing and refining policy concepts usually before nationwide institutionalization (McCann et al. 2018; Ferreira and Botero 2020). Similarly, geographical studies on urban and environmental governance have examined urban laboratories as collaborative and experimental environments where socio-technical innovations

are developed and tested to address global-urban challenges, potentially accelerating political-institutional change (Bulkeley and Castán-Broto 2014; McGuirk et al. 2022; Valli et al. 2024). These studies argue that experimentation is not confined to a single moment in the policy-making process, but is integrated into regular policy making across various temporalities. For instance, the New South Wales Government's *Street as Shared Spaces* program exemplifies a municipal experiment addressing social distancing needs during COVID-19 while anticipating long-term transformations in urban public space (McGuirk et al. 2021). By studying such examples, researchers can better understand how experimentation shapes both short-term policy responses, often rendered mobile through policy making circuits, and long-term urban planning policies. Shaping these strands of work is the interdisciplinary field of STS, which examines innovation and experimentation in science laboratories. Here, "success/failure" is seen as contingent, fluid, and unpredictable, influenced by a complex network of actors, institutions, and practices. STS research argues that through testing and refining practices, tools, and methods used in scientific laboratories, new forms of codified and tacit knowledge are potentially produced and circulated (Latour 1987; Hess and Sovacool 2020).

Incorporating these intellectual contributions, we argue, opens fertile ground for comprehensively exploring how policy experimentation influences the politics of learning both before and after policy adoption. Here, key questions arise: How, for instance, does experimenting with globally circulating best practices affect the potential ways policies are locally learned, mediated, and constituted? How do different temporalities of policy experimentation (pre- and post-institutionalization) shape policy futures? If policies are complex constructs resulting from power-laden encounters, how do policy experiments shed light on such power geometries and contribute to the reinvention of policy features both before and after formal adoption? In what ways do various policy actors shape policy-making processes during the experimentation phase and beyond? And, as we have seen, it is not all about instances of "successful" experimentation; future policy mobilities studies should also examine cases where policy experiments produce negative learning outcomes, exploring the "local" politics of learning from failures and their potential generative effects in subsequent policy-making stages.

In pursuing this research agenda, scholars in urban policy mobilities must confront the challenges of following and tracing informal, often behind-the-scenes, experimentation processes, particularly when these occur before policy adoption. Methodologically, this involves mobilizing qualitative approaches, such as ethnography and participatory action research, to follow the discourses, processes, and practices through those affected by policy experiments. Such an approach also enables researchers to trace "the ways in which power creates webs and relations *between* actors, institutions and discourses across time and space" (Shore and Wright 1997, 14) that ultimately inform the reimagining of policy

futures, either through policy learning and adoption or policy rejection and deactivation. By considering these complexities, we argue that this research agenda can expand our understanding of the broader politics of learning within instances of policy experimentation and the ways in which various policy actors (local, regional, national, and international) and their associated social labor shape policy-making processes both a priori and a posteriori experimentation and institutionalization.

UNVEILING THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFORMATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES IN POLICY MOBILITIES

It is worth recalling the statement with which we opened this discussion, reflecting on the role of informational infrastructures such as conferences and award ceremonies in the exchange of best practices. It echoes numerous studies highlighting the multifaceted role these infrastructures play in policy learning and mobility (González 2010; Cook and Ward 2012; Montero 2016; Temenos 2016; Andersson and Cook 2019). However, beyond in-person exchanges, it is increasingly important to recognize the mediation of these infrastructures by digital technologies, which shape how policies are learned, mediated, and ultimately reconstituted. For example, though not explicitly mentioned in the introductory vignette, but noteworthy, is that the REGIOStars ceremony was also streamed through digital channels and made permanently available beyond the physical conference room. This underscores how digital artifacts, environments, and technologies are increasingly transforming the production, consumption, and circulation of best practices. Understanding these transformations and their broader implications for policy-making processes is a crucial theme that warrants further intellectual and empirical investigation in policy mobilities studies.

In this wider context, it is now generally accepted that the COVID-19 pandemic, with its immediate and potential longer-term impacts on in-person encounters, has accelerated the integration of “the digital” into policy-making processes (Acuto et al. 2021; McGuirk et al. 2021; Ward 2024). In the aftermath of the pandemic, informational infrastructures that once relied primarily on face-to-face exchanges have turned to digital platforms for policy learning and exchange (Marvin et al. 2023). Whether or not we return to pre-pandemic levels of in-person policy-making events, the place of digital technologies in shaping how policies are learned, mediated, and translated has expanded, and this shift needs to be conceptually and methodologically situated.

Bringing “the digital” into policy mobilities studies involves considering three key issues as starting points. The first issue is to investigate how digital artifacts, environments, and technologies mediate policy learning, exchange, and constitution. Future research should focus on how digital artifacts, such as data-driven mechanisms like indices, rankings, and benchmarks, shape the making of particular policy futures. These digital tools and environments

often push places to compare themselves against one another through digital simulations, interactive dashboards, repositories, online reports, and virtual conferences (Bunnell and Das 2010; Kitchin et al. 2015; Acuto et al. 2021). While such informational infrastructures offer efficiency and wide accessibility, they also come with risks, such as the potential oversimplification of complex policy features and the emergence of a “digital divide,” where some voices and places are marginalized or excluded from digital environments (Ferreira and Vale 2022). In this sense, policy mobilities scholars must critically consider who produces these data-driven comparisons and who benefits from their circulation. There is need to explore the power-laden complexities behind how particular actors, institutions, places and policies are represented and made transferable, while others are overlooked or silenced within these digital infrastructures. Qualitative approaches, like digital ethnography or critical discourse analysis, are productive tactics to understand how policy actors interact with these digital artifacts and how best practices are constructed in virtual spaces.

A second important issue is to situate social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and YouTube, as spaces where policy actors acquire, share, and debate policy knowledge. As seen in Astrid Wood’s (2020) research on bus rapid transit, a YouTube video showcasing best practices from Curitiba, Bogotá, and Brisbane inspired the adoption of similar policies in Johannesburg. However, the ephemeral and sometimes unstructured nature of social media exchanges presents challenges for researchers trying to capture the politics of learning in digital informational infrastructures. Scholars have the opportunity to investigate how algorithmic visibility and virality on social platforms shape policy debates and the circulation of policy ideas. Methods such as network analysis or sentiment analysis are experimental grounds to trace how these ideas are learned, mediated, constituted, and reconstituted through “the digital.” However, we caution against technological determinism, as the focus on digital mediation should not obscure the contextual, political, discursive and material dimensions of policy making. A balanced methodological approach, combining digital tools with ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews, is fundamental to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the role of social media platforms and other digital informational infrastructures in public policy making.

Finally, future urban policy mobilities studies need to consider the emergence of “the digital” as a globally mobile policy in itself. Here, we have seen global consultancies like IBM discursively framing the smart city concept as a solution to global-urban challenges through digital technology in cities like those in India, discursively positioning digital technologies at the heart of urban governance (Praharaj et al. 2018; Praharaj and Han 2019). More recently, there has been growing discussion about the pervasive influence of transnational digital platforms on urban governance, with concerns about inequality, privacy, and social polarization, prompting policy makers to adopt policies to regulate

these platforms (Graham 2020; Bignami and Hanakata 2024). Addressing these and related issues within policy mobilities studies allows for a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, materialities, and immaterialities involved in the digital mediation of policies. Taking them seriously, we argue, offers a more comprehensive view of the role of informational infrastructures, particularly in the post-COVID-19 policy-making landscape.

CONCLUSION

This paper opened with a reflection on the significance of award ceremonies and conferences in the making of public policy making. These are “arenas” where policy ideas, often labeled as “inspirational,” “transferable,” and “transformative,” are showcased and gain audiences among policy makers and practitioners. Building on this opening vignette, the paper examined the evolving approach of urban policy mobilities, which over the past two decades has focused on studying the processes, practices, and resources through which policies are learned, mediated, interpreted, and translated in and across different places. It reviewed the approach’s main intellectual origins and provided a critical yet constructive overview of the persistent and still-nascent theoretical and empirical themes shaping the approach. In light of these discussions, the paper proposed four potential future research pathways. This is not intended as a definitive forecast or prediction of what will be, of course. Given this, we are not seeking an assessment of whether our offerings are “right” or “wrong.” Instead, our contribution is to argue how the approach might usefully evolve in the years ahead. We will do our bit going forward, and we hope that others will use our contributions, along with those from others, to continue to stress-test and further advance urban policy mobilities approach. For while the intellectual future of the approach remains uncertain. Perhaps not as uncertain as the object it seeks to study, however, but uncertain nevertheless.

The four proposed pathways are as follows: (a) we suggest that the approach should move beyond its “urban” mantra to argue that policy making remains sensitive to interscalar conditioning. Revisiting the nation-state’s influence, long emphasized in political science, stands as a productive starting point for uncovering the power-laden ways in which the national/regional scales continue to shape policy learning, circulation, and translation (McCann and Duffin 2023; Lorne 2024; Prince 2024; Silva et al. 2024); (b) we advocate for incorporating perspectives from political anthropology and socio-legal studies to explore how legal frameworks and socio-legal complexities affect policy reembedding across different contexts (Delaney 2014; 2016; Robinson 2018); (c) we propose drawing on political science, geographical work on governance, and STS to examine “the longer histories of experimentation” (Temenos 2024, 527) and understand how policies-from-elsewhere are locally tested and potentially reworked, both before and after

institutionalization. This aligns with calls to view policy making as an indeterminate and processual process; and (d) we highlight the need to address the increasing influence of digital informational infrastructures in policy making, in the aftermath of COVID-19, a theme that has remained marginal in policy mobilities studies (Marvin and others 2023). Exploring how “the digital” mediates policy learning and exchange and becomes a policy object in itself requires further attention (Wood 2020; Ward 2024).

Together, and acknowledging that there might be some degree of incommensurability between them, our argument invites policy mobilities scholars and those interested in the circulation of policy futures to explore, refine and innovate new approaches for understanding the indeterminate, open-ended, and processual nature of contemporary policy making. While inherently challenging, time consuming and perhaps not always aligned with the fast-paced demands of academic publishing, pursuing these avenues can set the stage for future studies that delve into empirical testing and ultimately advance our comprehension of the circulation of policy futures in ways that are both productive and enriching.

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ORCID

Diogo Gaspar Silva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5142-7176>

Kevin Ward  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3810-0889>

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