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Geographies of policy: From transfer-diffusion to mobility-mutation

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Abstract

The paper develops a geographical approach to the issues of policy transfer and transformation, taking the form of a critical dialogue with three literatures at the borderlands of political science, comparative institutionalism, and political sociology. Making the case for moving beyond rational-choice frameworks and essentialized, formalist representations of policy transfer, the paper advocates a social-constructivist understanding of policy mobilities-and-mutations, sensitive to the constitutive roles of spatiotemporal context.

Keywords

diffusion, policy mobilities, policy transfer, state restructuring

I Introduction: Policy mobilities

[G]ood counsels, whencesoever they come, are born of the wisdom of the prince, and not the wisdom of the prince from good counsels. (Machiavelli, 1992 [1532]: 116)

Machiavelli's Prince may have been a 'constant inquirer', but policy truths were never indiscriminantly sought; the court's 'wise men' were held in close physical and political proximity (Machiavelli, 1992 [1532]: 63–64). The modern policy-making process may still be focused on centers of political authority, but networks of policy advice, advocacy, and activism now exhibit a precociously transnational reach; policy decisions made in one jurisdiction increasingly echo and influence those made elsewhere; and global policy 'models' are exerting normative power over significant distances. Today, sources, channels, and sites of policy 'advice' extend far beyond the modern prince's earshot, encompassing sprawling, global networks of human and non-human actors/actants, from gurus

to consultants and conferences to practitioner blogs, not to mention the more 'hierarchical' influence of multilateral agencies, powerful trading partners, and occupying powers.

Contemporary policy-making processes have promiscuously spilled over jurisdictional boundaries, both 'horizontally' (between national and local political entities) and 'vertically' (between hierarchically scaled institutions and domains). They also seem to be accelerating, as measured by the shortening of policy development cycles and the intensity of cross-jurisdictional exchanges. Today's 'fast-policy' regimes are characterized by the pragmatic borrowing of 'policies that work', by compressed reform horizons, by iterative constructions of best practice, by enlarged roles for intermediaries as 'pushers' of policy routines and

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technologies, and by a growing reliance on prescriptively coded forms of front-loaded advice and evaluation science. On the face of it, policy ideas and techniques have become mobile in entirely new ways – exhibiting an extended reach as well as a diversity of registers.

Indeed, it is increasingly argued that the apparatus of policy diffusion and development has transnationalized in such a profound and irreversible way as to render anachronistic the notion of independent, ‘domestic’ decision-making (Garrett et al., 2008; Gress, 1996; Stubbs, 2005). Yet while it is now widely acknowledged that ‘no government is an island’ (Mörth, 1998), that policy learning and transfer have become continuous, if not endemic, processes (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), and that the rate of transnational policy diffusion is accelerating (Simmons et al., 2008), there are unresolved debates around whether these processes are driving global convergence in policy regimes and over the question of whether they imply a fundamental challenge to, or a reconstruction of, established sources of (national) political authority.

There is a sprawling literature on the issues of policy transfer and transformation, mostly in political science, but also extending into sociology, anthropology, and comparative institutionalism. While it has only been intermittently theorized as such, the phenomenon of ‘policy transfer’ is of course an intrinsically geographical one. A relatively new, but growing body of work is now addressing this question, from a variety of perspectives (see Brenner et al., 2010; Larner, 2009; McCann, 2008; McCann and Ward, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010a; Peet, 2008). As a contribution to the development of what McCann (forthcoming) has called the ‘policy mobilities’ approach, this paper engages with the problematic of policy transfer from a geographical perspective. It does so by exploring the distinction between the rational-formalist tradition of work on policy *transfer*, rooted in orthodox political science, and social-constructivist approaches to policy *mobility and mutation*, an emergent project with

diverse roots in the interdisciplinary zone of ‘critical policy studies’ (see Fischer et al., 2009; Peck and Theodore, 2010a; Pero et al., 2011). This latter approach, it must be said, remains somewhat inchoate at this point, though it draws upon an increasingly interconnected body of work, from across the heterodox social sciences, which is variously committed to postpositivist and socially contextualized analyses of the policy-making process. If the orthodox policy transfer literature tends to be preoccupied with accounts of rationally selected best (or better) practices moving between jurisdictional spaces, the new generation of social constructivist work is much more attentive to the *constitutive* sociospatial context of policy-making activities, and to the hybrid mutations of policy techniques and practices across dynamized institutional landscapes. Here, the movement of policy is more than merely a transaction or transfer, but entails the relational interpenetration of policy-making sites and activities, spawning phenomena like global policy ‘models’, transnational knowledge networks, and innovative forms of audit, evaluation, and advocacy.

Appropriately, perhaps, the mobilities approach resembles a rolling conversation rather than a coherent paradigm, though the distinctions with rational-choice political science are usually quite sharp. In a stylized and preliminary form, these are summarized in Table 1, which constitutes the point of departure for the present paper. Its contribution is to engage critically with three extant literatures on policy transfer and transformation, drawn mainly from political science, comparative institutionalism, and political sociology, with a view to elaborating, in dialogue with this work, the basis for a distinctively geographical approach to the problematic of policy mobility-mutation. The first of these literatures is the wave of diffusion studies, beginning in the 1960s, which focused attention on the spatial sequencing of policy choices, deploying a rational-actor approach that would later evolve into more elaborate models of policy learning (section II). This is followed by an examination of more structurally oriented

Table 1. Policy transfer versus policy mobilities

	Policy transfer	Policy mobilities
Origins	Disciplinary: political science	Transdisciplinary: anthropology, geography, heterodox political science, comparative political economy, science studies, sociology, urban planning
Epistemological foundations	Positivist/rationalist	Postpositivist/constructivist
Privileged analytical object	'Successful' transfers: conspicuous jurisdictional border-crossing	Policies in motion/interconnection: continuous transformation and mutation
Social action	Instrumental: bounded rationality	Strategic: embedded calculation
Dynamic	Frustrated replication of best (or better) practices	Contradictory reproduction of connected but unevenly developing policy regimes
Spatiality	Sequential diffusion	Relational connection
Mode of explanation	Reification of essentialized design features	Contextually sensitive analysis of emergent capacities
Politics of knowledge	Abstracts from politics of knowledge and practice	Problematizes politics of knowledge and practice

theories of transition, in which ruptural or crisis-driven processes of policy transformation are privileged over the incrementalism of diffusion studies (section III). Finally, the recent wave of neodiffusionist studies is considered, in which various forms of induced and coerced policy mobility are evaluated against choice-based models (section IV).

These arguments anticipate two broad conclusions, relating to the spatiality of contemporary policy development processes (section V). First, context matters, in the sense that policy regimes and landscapes are more than empty spaces across which borrowing and learning take place; they are dynamically remade through the traffic in policy norms and practices, the flows of which *reflect* (and remake) particular policy regimes, rather than simply being isolated vectors of post hoc transformation. There are, in fact, no clear lines between policy innovations *in motion* and the fixity of policy regimes *awaiting reform*, but these are two sides of the same dialectical process. Second, beyond the transfer ontology, in which policies diffuse unidirectionally from the capitals of innovation to hinterlands of emulation, social-constructivist work is drawing attention to the ways in which policy

regimes are becoming ever more deeply, and *relationally*, interconnected.

II Imagining policy markets: From diffusion to learning

There is a long tradition of work policy diffusion and adoption in the political science literature, much of which draws on the precepts of neoclassical economics and orthodox communications theory (see Dye, 1990; Walker, 1969). In the market for policy innovations, apparently, there are producers and there are consumers. And, appropriately enough, it has been argued that the US model of 'competitive federalism' established the basis for a kind of natural experiment in the functioning of policy markets. The founding fathers had placed their faith in competition between the states to restrain the growth of government, over and above the 'parchment barriers' of constitutional restrictions, on the understanding that this would exert downward pressure on taxes while promoting efficiency. In the resulting marketplace for public services, it is '[c]ompetition among governments [that] promotes policy innovation' (Dye, 1990: 15; see also Friedman, 1962; Teibout, 1956). In his classic study of

‘horizontal’ policy diffusion between the states, Walker (1969: 890) remarked that the ‘process of competition and emulation, or cuetaking, is an important phenomenon which determines in large part the pace and direction of social and political change in the American states’.

So was born the notion of the policy-maker as an optimizing, rational actor, scanning the ‘market’ for potential policy products, along with the modernist conception of effective or superior policies diffusing (first and fastest) across jurisdictional spaces. Orthodox conceptions of policy transfer typically invoke a rational universe in which decision-makers more or less freely choose between policy models-cum-options, albeit in terms of varying degrees of knowledge and uncertainty. Drawing on communication, decision, and diffusion theories (Hagerstrand, 1967; Simon, 1957), Walker developed a choice-based model of the policy diffusion process. The account was one of technocratic modernization and increasing efficiency: policy innovation was being driven by the most sophisticated buyers – larger, resource-rich states, endowed with the most advanced organizational capacities (such as New York, Massachusetts, and California) – the downstream benefits of which would eventually trickle down to laggard states (like Mississippi, Nevada, and Wyoming). Moreover, the *rate* of innovation was shown to be accelerating markedly over time, as the gap between innovator-pioneers and emulator-adopters consistently fell between the 1870s and the 1960s, and as the early tendency of states to follow their geographical neighbors progressively gave way to a more nationally integrated system with its ‘specialized set of communication channels through which flow new ideas, information and policy cues’ (Walker, 1969: 898). As Strang and Meyer (1993: 503) commented, the tradition of diffusion research was ‘built fundamentally around assumptions of modernity’.

The policy diffusion studies affirmed one of the stylized facts of innovation theory – the presence of an s-shaped curve in cumulative rates of

adoption, in which a small cluster of policy pioneers is subsequently joined by a larger group of mainstream adopters, after which there is a leveling off around a higher-stage norm (see Weyland, 2006). In the US case, the reformist state governments of the Progressive Era – such as Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin – constituted a dynamic regional cluster of legislative and policy innovators, effectively co-producing rounds of policy reform in fields like railroad and health regulation, and minimum wage and workers’ compensation laws (McVoy, 1940; Walker, 1969). Shared political values enabled and lubricated these early rounds of adoption (see Brock, 1984; Carpenter, 2001; McDonagh, 1992), just as, at the international scale a century later, they would facilitate the early diffusion of neoliberal policy measures like privatization and financial liberalization – the beginning of another s-shaped curve in cross-jurisdictional policy innovation.

The politics of this process, however, did not detain the diffusion analysts, who were less concerned with ‘the circumstances under which new ideas or programs will be conceived or developed’, focusing instead on the strength of the connections between state policy-making systems, the formation of communication channels, and the geographical distribution of ‘competent staff, superior clerical facilities, and supporting services’ (Walker, 1969: 881, 885). In explanatory terms, the decision rules of state policy-makers were seen to hold the key to explaining the rate and distribution of policy diffusion, above and beyond issues of ideology or power. And policy ‘innovations’ themselves were little more than inert data units, traveling across a landscape marked only by formal jurisdictional boundaries. In this respect, it made no appreciable analytical difference whether diffusion studies tracked innovations in, say, public-health or minimum-wage policy, or ‘farmers’ adoption of new crops in India [or] consumers’ adoption of household products in the United States’ (Gray, 1994: 232).

The first wave of diffusion studies seems to have succumbed to its own s-shaped innovation trajectory, petering out during the 1980s. This was also the decade, perhaps not coincidentally, in which the apparently optimizing and modernizing trends towards 'good governance', transmitted between the most administratively efficient organizations by way of nationally integrated communication channels, were seriously disrupted. In fact, the old regional patterns of policy diffusion lurched into reverse, as many of the pioneers of the Progressive Era were abruptly redesignated as 'rustbelt' states. Now, the dynamic was one of competitive emulation born of economic distress, as deindustrializing states rushed to implement new programs for industrial retention and attraction (Eisinger, 1988; Gray and Lowery, 1990; Hanson, 1993). The logic of diffusion had less to do with noble notions of optimal decision-making or the 'emulation of virtue;' it was more about the prosaically impelled 'spread of necessity' (Eyestone, 1977: 446). Maybe the figure of the policy-maker under duress was an incongruous one for rational-choice analysts. Soon, attention was shifting towards a new form of deliberative policy development, based on a conception of the policy-maker as a learning agent, working within the constraints of *bounded* rationality.

'A policymaker is not a theorist', Rose (1991: 5) flatly insisted, 'but a social engineer seeking knowledge instrumentally', while the process of lesson-drawing is ultimately about 'whether programmes can transfer from one place to another; it is not about what politicians think ought to be done'. Motivated to solve a policy problem (or at least to minimize electoral dissatisfaction), this idealized policy actor finds herself in a state of ignorance at $t = 0$. Her subsequent, purposeful steps include scanning the program evaluation evidence from jurisdictions that have addressed similar problems, followed by the construction of conceptual models of programs in order, essentially, to isolate those design features that make them 'effective' from those contextual

or 'idiographic details of foreign practice [that] can distract attention from essentials, and confuse what is generic and potentially transferable with what is specific to time and place' (Rose, 1991: 20). Differentiated search costs and capacity constraints induce policy-makers to pursue lines of least resistance in their search behavior, and in making adoption decisions they are satisficers, doing what is necessary to dissipate dissatisfaction rather than searching endlessly for 'ideal' policy solutions (cf. Simon, 1979).

Lesson drawing, for Rose (1991: 7), has become a normalized and routinized aspect of contemporary policy development, whose rather more jaded, instrumentalist policy actors engage in trial-and-error muddling through, finding 'short cuts' and acceptable compromises where they can. Here, policy learning is a continuous and instrumentalist process, a lesson representing 'an action-oriented conclusion about a programme or programmes in operation elsewhere' (Rose, 1991: 7). As such, the policy learning approach can be distinguished from earlier diffusion studies, which were more concerned with the sequential dynamics of the diffusion process itself, 'presuppos[ing] a kind of technocratic determinism' (Rose, 1991: 9).

The diffusion studies, Wolman (1992: 29) pointed out, had merely inferred – essentially from patterns in policy adoption data – how and why particular policies were traveling, with the result that 'we know almost nothing about the *process* by which such policy transfer occurs'. His worldly tale of the transfer of urban policy practices and philosophies between the Reagan Administration and the Thatcher Government – which had been animated by the British riots of 1981, but which also reflected an ideological preference for devolved, business-led strategies – was hardly consistent with the notion of rational, systematic information-gathering and cold-eyed evaluation:

Visiting ministers, civil servants and fact-finding groups see what they are shown. They are, perhaps

inevitably, exposed much more to the views of advocates ... than the views of critics or neutral observers. They tend to be shown 'show-case' examples rather than average situations ... They will rely more on verbal information than on written material and rarely on analytical written material. (Wolman, 1992: 32–33)

In this case, itineraries organized by consultants, in which visiting British delegations were handed off between political appointees in federal offices, operatives in conservative think tanks, and guided tours of carefully selected 'exemplary projects', seem to have been designed to purposefully *sell* rather than to merely *tell* stories of policy innovation. Meanwhile, it was conceded as 'extremely unlikely ... that dissident voices or critiques' would even be encountered (Wolman, 1992: 37) on such tours of *preferred-practice* sites/sights. If there was 'lesson drawing' at work here, it was occurring within ideologically prescribed parameters, while the emphasis on favored programs effectively served as a form of advocacy by proxy. In such contexts, 'models' were used knowingly, as 'political weapons', while the stylized rendering of technical novelties of far-off success stories effectively served as a ruse for wrong-footing or neutralizing political opponents (see Robertson, 1991: 55). In this sense, the search for a new policy 'solution' is not only a rigged 'lesson', but represents a moment in an insulated and practically self-fulfilling decision-making cycle: the political proclivities of the supposed 'learners' are conveniently affirmed in a selective search process, while deliberative attention to potential alternatives is eschewed. This is hardly a process of open-minded 'learning', but one of incrementally extending policy practice within ideological parameters.

In contrast to the bits-and-pieces, instrumental, and incrementalist conception of policy learning presented by Rose, Wolman (1992: 41) maintained that there was more interest among policy-makers in 'concepts and approaches, rather than specific policy designs'. Indeed, in

contrast to the situation in which objectified policy 'problems' somehow called forth appropriate 'solutions', politicized *opportunities* for intervention seem to have been actively sought. It was to become increasingly clear that periodic crises and strategically selected targets presented the *means to enact* preferred strategies – like privatization, public-private partnership, delegation to 'little platoons', or deregulation (Peck, 1995). Policy 'learning', such that it was in evidence, was being normatively pre-filtered. As Robertson (1991: 64) argued, '[l]essons from other polities are more likely to be used to attack the status quo with evidence that feasible and potentially superior alternatives exist elsewhere'. His deft analysis of conservative and liberal labor-market policies (respectively, right-to-work legislation, 'man in the house' welfare regulations, and workfare demonstration projects as conservative policies; plant-closure pre-notification legislation, state-enacted minimum wages, and extended welfare provisions as liberal policies), demonstrated that learning and diffusion are politically channeled, rather than 'open' processes. In other words, policy transfers tend to be 'ideologically exclusive', while '[f]ar from being a mere technical exercise, lesson-drawing is intensely political' (Robertson, 1991: 70, 75).

Wolman's (1992) case study of urban policy transfer, in what would later be understood as the early stages of transatlantic neoliberalization, reluctantly embraced a similar conclusion, though here the ghost of the rational actor was never fully exorcized. He concluded (rather disapprovingly) that the information gathering process is 'unsystematic and highly anecdotal', noting that the 'level of analysis [was] not highly sophisticated', being dedicated less to incremental learning than to effecting 'major, discontinuous change', which in some cases represented the very 'rationale for looking at other countries' policies' (Wolman, 1992: 42). The policy transfer and learning process, one might more forthrightly conclude, was constitutively politicized.

This is a conclusion that Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) were more willing to confront in their reconsideration of the policy transfer literature. Questioning the idealized portrayal of policy-makers as rational, calculating subjects engaged in ‘voluntaristic’ forms of policy learning, Dolowitz and Marsh enlarged the frame of reference to include ‘coerced’ transfers executed in the context of asymmetrical power relations. Their attendant conception of the policy-making process takes account of ideological predispositions, strategic orientations, and the ‘messy’ realities of what Kingdon (1995: 131) once called the ‘policy primordial soup’, yielding the following oft-quoted definition of policy transfer as:

a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in other time and/or place. (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 344)

Dolowitz and Marsh were concerned to stretch the concept of policy transfer (which they contrasted with intentional ‘learning’) beyond its pluralist origins, subsequently elaborating their classificatory framework to encompass a broader array of non-state actors (such as consultants, advocacy networks, think tanks, and NGOs), while confronting the ways in which ‘policy entrepreneurs “sell” policies around the world’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 21). They continued, however, to position notions of coercive or ‘push’ transfer (involving direct imposition) in an axial relationship with a still-idealized conception of the rational policy actor, freely choosing between well-documented alternatives, with the boundedly rational actor located in between. In effect, this locates ‘cases’ of policy transfer, which themselves become distinct analytical units, on a choice-coercion continuum. Through the addition of a second dimension, running from immunity to transfer through to isomorphic convergence, these cases could then be located within in a two-dimensional policy space (cf. Stubbs,

2005). In the political science literature, such analytical routines have enabled the continued elaboration of taxonomic frameworks, the aim of which is, apparently, to exhaustively classify the full range of empirically observed policy transfers. The explanatory potential of these approaches, however, remains limited (see Bulmer and Padgett, 2004; Evans and Davies, 1999). They are for the most part post hoc classifications of different forms of conspicuous policy mobility.

More recent contributions to the literature have been open to the relaxation of rational-choice assumptions, though the rational actor often retains an ideal-typical presence, as an abstract measure against which ‘less rational’ behavior is modeled. Notably, the elaborated Dolowitz-Marsh (2000) framework also included an explicit acknowledgement of the role of policy *failure*, which they speculated might arise from uniformed, incomplete, or inappropriate transfer. Wolman’s later work also explores this more prosaic world of often-frustrated policy transfer, although this is combined with even more heroic attempts to salvage elements of rational-choice theorizing. Mossberger and Wolman (2003) present a prescriptive account of the positive role of policy transfer, in what they call ‘prospective policy evaluation’, in a manner consistent with the rational-choice model. However, the behavior that they encounter – including crisis-driven quick fixes, faddishness, opportunism, premature transfers (sometime prior even to full implementation in the ‘originating’ polity), reliance on ‘instinct’ and received wisdom, haphazard use of evaluation evidence, and selection bias – leads them to ‘relax standard rational decision-making criteria’ to the point that the utility of the prevailing rational model is effectively called into question (Mossberger and Wolman, 2003: 428).

The orthodox literatures on policy transfer, diffusion, and learning have been relatively successful, one might say, in putting these phenomena on the map. This work has been impeded,

however, by varying degrees of adherence to optimizing ‘logics of choice’, in which ‘imitation, copying and adaptation are [understood to be] the consequences of rational decisions by policy-makers’ (Radaelli, 2000: 38). The attendant conception of the policy-making process tends to be highly mechanistic, and focused on the formal attributes (or underlying rationalities) of policies and programs (see Jacoby, 2002; Mörth, 1998). Meanwhile, the analytical gaze is fixed, in effect, on policies in transit, willed into motion by searching and learning subjects. What is more, these searching and learning practices tend to be evaluated in terms of universalistic models of rational or satisficing behavior, abstracted from their respective social and institutional contexts. Policy transfers, the objects of analysis, are likewise typically visualized in disembodied and asocial terms, floating in abstract analytical spaces, or boxed inside descriptive taxonomies.

For all the empirical evidence that various forms of policy transfer, particularly in the transnational domain, are on the increase, it remains the case that there has been ‘little conceptual work on the process’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 5). The self-limiting character of this work is also reflected in the statement that ‘few scholars look at how the definitions of problems or solutions are socially constructed’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 357). This calls for a different point of departure from the idealized universe of rational-actor models, in which atomized agents operate in the bright sunlight of information-rich policy markets. Starting in a different place, more heavily shrouded in the shadows of uncertainty, need not (and indeed *should* not) imply the replacement of one normalized/naturalized ‘policy environment’ with another. But it does call attention to the constitutive role of geographical context. This is more, it transpires, than mere background scenery to the policy actors’ performance.

III Embedding policy transfer: Shock treatment and transition imaginaries

If the American federation provided both the testbed and the naturalized setting, for orthodox theories of policy diffusion, learning, and transfer, where might one begin to look for different, maybe more radical and disruptive accounts? Why not eastern and central Europe, a region whose dramatic ‘market transition’ has done much to spur recent interest in the protagonists and practices, causes and consequences of ‘policy transfer?’ As a place to start, this does not immediately invoke, of course, incremental notions of policy adjustment by way of targeted transfer, rationally selected from a universe of potential options – or, for that matter, unhurried forms of ‘learning’. Rather, this is a location in which profoundly path-altering institutional reconstruction has been occurring. Awash with imported ‘solutions’, never perfectly replicated, it is a region in which hybrid and ‘recombined’ policy forms have been produced with almost tectonic intensity. These crisis-driven processes of ‘market-friendly’ policy transfer/transformation have been occurring in the shadow, of course, of a range of powerful interests and agencies – some domestic, some external; some public, some private; some invited, some imposed. In the sense that the US federal system served as a ‘laboratory’ for policy experimentation, ostensibly reflecting an underlying rationality of competitive federalism (Dye, 1990), the postcommunist countries of eastern and central Europe found themselves in a ‘learning environment’ marked by considerable urgency, if not outright vulnerability. Some lessons from abroad would have to be learned the hard way, and very quickly. As Poland’s finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz once observed, his country was simply ‘too poor to experiment . . . For us, it is better to take proven models’ (quoted in Cirtautas, 1997: 209).

This is not to suggest, of course, that the crisis-driven conditions prevailing in eastern and central Europe in the early 1990s can be considered somehow ‘typical’. Rather, it is to bring the ‘environment’ (or structuring context) of the policy-making process into full analytical view, to problematize the notion of typically itself. The postcommunist countries were each confronted with a unique set of conjunctural challenges, prompted by systemic failures across the ideological and institutional realms, to which they respond in ways that reflected both their historically accreted capacities and their shifting positions within transnational policy networks. Their daunting task, which was likened to ‘rebuilding the ship at sea’, entailed the deep transformation of policy rationales, instruments, and rules (Elster et al., 1998; Wedel, 2000). But, in principle, these circumstances were no ‘less conjunctural’ than those found in the United States during the Progressive Era or the New Deal period.

Conjunctural contexts evidently make a difference to how allegedly universal processes of ‘transferability’ operate. Balcerowicz’s ‘proven models’, of course, were ideologically situated constructs. Lectures on the virtues of free-market capitalism drowned out most of the other potential ‘lessons’. In this sense, what is being taught and learned are both products of the politics of a moment ostensibly propelled by history. Patterns and processes of policy transfer and diffusion, in this sense, may not only be institutionally *mediated* (cf. Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996), but institutionally *embedded*. And the postcommunist case, rather than an aberrant exception, may be seen as a specific manifestation of an incipient transnationalization of the policy-making process, along with the hard and soft-selling of ‘global solutions’ (see Peck and Theodore, 2010a; Porter and Craig, 2004; Stone, 2004). This has not, it is important to emphasize, been a prelude to homogenization, notwithstanding the fact that widespread processes of neoliberalization can be seen to be at

work ‘across cases’ (Brenner et al., 2010). In other words, policy mobility and mutation would appear to be simultaneous processes. Policies may be crossing borders ever more ‘freely’, but this is not yielding a flat earth of standardized outcomes or some socio-institutional monoculture. New geographies of policy are being forged, along with new connections between once-distant policy-making sites.

Locke and Jacoby (1997) illustrated this point empirically in their analysis of the troubled implementation of West German labor-market policies in the post-unification East. Despite the significant financial, political, and institutional resources dedicated to this task, outcomes at the urban and regional scale proved to be doggedly uneven: the transplanted version of the West’s ‘dual’ training system looked very different in the East, its effective implementation depending, at a minimum, on the presence of strong associative networks and robust business organizations. ‘Textbook’ renditions of West German labor-market policies, for all their model-like aura, bore little resemblance to their transplanted forms in the East. This pronounced (and more than contingent) local variability in outcomes reflects not only some of the real-world ‘limits’ of policy transfer, at least when conceived in terms of some quasi-mechanical replication of policy rationalities (cf. Peck and Theodore, 2001), it also raises deeper questions concerning the manner in which institutions are characterized and the practical scope for ‘abstracting’ particular policy routines from contexts in which they originally functioned. Tendencies to formalize and essentialize policy designs – among analysts and among policy-makers themselves – may have effectively enabled some forms of policy transfer, but they certainly cannot secure carbon-copy outcomes. The transfer optic obfuscates (variable) outcomes ‘on the ground’, while also misrepresenting the transfer process itself:

Traditionally, analyses of institutional arrangements like the German dual system of vocational

training describe (in highly stylized terms) the way things are supposed to work, that is, the way the institutions are designed, as opposed to how they actually operate in the real world. As an academic convention, this style of presentation makes sense. It is parsimonious and lends itself more easily to comparison. [However] this approach has some serious shortcomings. Often these highly stylized accounts take on an ahistorical and noncontextual quality by focusing primarily on the institutional design and structural features of the institutions themselves – frequently slighting or ignoring the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which they were developed and embedded. As a result, the approach often jumps too quickly to normative and prescriptive analyses by concluding that certain institutional arrangements are more ‘efficient’ than others and either prescribes the active replication of these best practices’ or assumes their inevitable diffusion across national boundaries. (Locke and Jacoby, 1997: 58–59)

Offe’s deconstruction of the ideational politics of this process demonstrated that a hyper-rational ‘logic of consequentiality’ was at work. Expert-advocates were claiming bulletproof legitimacy for policies that had allegedly ‘worked elsewhere’, pushing to transplant them *onto* other jurisdictions ‘irrespective of whether they meet with ideas, traditions, and mentalities that prevail in these societies’ (Offe, 1996: 212). Performative deference to the science of policy learning, however, served the political interests of reformers in many of these situations, even if the practices in which they were engaged bore little resemblance to rational emulation. By purposefully misconstruing the process of policy-making, as an imagined process of total supersession, social dislocations were reframed in terms of costs of ‘adjustment’ – a temporary period of pain in anticipation of a longer-term gain. And since the imported systems came complete with supposedly guaranteed results, any failures of performance must have been due to mistakes made during their local (re)assembly.

What was practically ‘inevitable’ here was not the promise of sure-fire results from the

‘imported’ policies, but their prosaic *failure* to meet these very expectations. Yet, ironically, the serial inability of ‘imposed’ policies to deliver the expected results typically resulted in even more hectic, if not drastic, rounds of institutional re-engineering (Offe, 1996). Policy failure would often be excused by domestic political conditions (necessarily bold reforms had been diluted by political concessions) or by implementation problems (since the policies ‘work’ elsewhere, local delivery systems must be at fault). Paradoxically, such forms of policy failure would often result in redoubled reform efforts. Policies were spreading, in this sense, not by succeeding but by *failing*, as the under-performance of first-round reform efforts became the rationale for more stringent measures. This dynamic of flawed-but-endemic experimentation may not be an exclusive feature of neoliberalization, but it seems certainly to have become one of its more notable characteristics (Peck, 2010).

The public act of ‘learning from successful models’ relieved (or displaced) some of the burden of responsibility from the local architects (or franchisees?) of reform, helping ‘to create a deceptive clarity about some evidently and easily superior solution, to mobilize support, and to disguise the creative alterations that the supposed “imitation” is likely to involve’ (Offe, 1996: 213). Deferential declarations of lessons learned therefore comprise a recurrent theme in what might be described as the vernacular language of policy transfer. ‘It is a common theoretical gambit to claim that the elements proposed for diffusion are actually found somewhere’, Strang and Meyer (1993: 500) have observed, the buried rationale being that the operative process is not so much ‘faithful copying as theoretically mediated diffusion or disguised diffusion’.

Even if the notion of perfect institutional replication is a fantasy, the fiction of imitation can be a productive one. In ‘transitioning’ eastern and central Europe, Offe explains, policy-makers were impelled (even quite ‘rationally’)

to distil, reconstruct, or recover reform models from the ‘golden past’ or the ‘golden West’, rather than to stake audacious – and politically risky – claims to institutional novelty or ‘authorship’. Here, it was deemed almost definitionally the case that market-friendly institutions would have to be recovered, at some distance, either from the region’s own precommunist past, or more ‘realistically’, from the West. And deference to foreign ‘models’ would, not coincidentally, obfuscate the roles of political intentionality and sociological agency in the institutional-rebuilding process. Ascendant cadres were quick to identify complementary interests in prevailing models of market-oriented reform, which it was convenient to (mis)represent in the form of self-acting, mechanical rationalities. On the other hand, what might otherwise have been contestable local political spaces – in which both the means and ends of ‘reform’ would be in play – were effectively foreclosed:

It is as if the man-made and hence contingent nature of institutional change must be denied and artificially ‘forgotten’. Otherwise, the example of the designer will invite others to attempt a different design . . . [If] newly designed institutions can be depicted as being not so new after all, but rooted in some respectable past . . . trust in their capacity for performing the functions that they are supposed to perform can be strengthened by the pretense that they are just replicas of demonstrably successful models imported from elsewhere . . . [R]eflexive discourses about the origin of institutions seem to avoid the notion of intentional creation. Instead, they rely on subjectless categories . . . [In this way] institutions just ‘evolve’, ‘develop’, ‘emerge’, are ‘discovered’, or ‘spread’ . . . all of which is to obscure their origin in intentional action. (Offe, 1996: 214–215)

Adam Smith would have been proud: it would seem that the powerful ‘hands’ involved in the design of market-oriented makeovers had to be ‘hidden’, too. Not wanting to be caught in the *deliberate* act of making up ‘designer capitalism’ (Stark, 1992), postcommunist reformers set great rhetorical store by the power of spontaneous markets, the imprimatur of orthodox policy

knowledge, and the efficiency of imported institutional designs. And speed was of the essence, at least for the reform managers. Advocates of an accelerated, ‘big bang’ approach to reform – as if fresh from rereading *The Prince* – maintained that more gradualist approaches would expose unnecessary political vulnerabilities, especially among ‘coalitions of losers’, while eroding the momentum required for systemic transformation. ‘The innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions’, Machiavelli (1992 [1532]: 24) had cautioned, but only ‘lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new’.

The pertinent lesson for eastern Europe, apparently, was that there was no time to learn. What Poland’s Leszek Balcerowicz had portrayed as the unacceptably high ‘cost’ of endogenous institution-building represented a political – not simply a financial – calculus. Poland’s leaders insisted that the country could not afford the *time*. ‘The greatest risk in Poland’, Jeffrey Sachs wrote, ‘is that populist concerns over short-term hardships, confusion over property rights and a splintering of political power in parliament will lead to weak government unable to take the last decisive step to private ownership’, raising the specter not only that the ‘economic situation will almost certainly deteriorate further’, but that ‘democratic government could be as thoroughly discredited as its totalitarian predecessor’ (Sachs, 1992: 26).

Rapid technocratic makeovers – leaning very heavily on external ‘advice’, imported expertise, approved models, and policy ‘borrowing’ – were therefore rationalized, by elites at least, in the long-term interests of both ‘democracy’ and of those who would have to bear the costs of adjustment in the short run. This also reflected a recognition that the durability and legitimacy of the ‘newly built institutions [would likely] depend more on people’s trust, compliance, and patience in enduring the transition than in the quality of the design of those institutions themselves’ (Offe, 1996: 215). This is a recipe, of course, for large (and, if necessary, increasing) doses of ‘shock

treatment', administered by unflinching experts (Klein, 2007). It is also a rationale for expedited forms of policy transfer, within sharply prescribed political parameters. As Offe (1996: 217) explains, this "'copying" of institutions approach tries to bypass, or at any rate shorten, [the] period of gestation'. Hence the reliance on tried-and-true remedies, at least *representations* thereof, administered in the context of an intensive treatment regimen, instilling effectively unstoppable processes of fast-policy conversion. Poland, for its part, was to 'choose' the most painful and demanding of the three restructuring packages presented by the IMF in the early 1990s, the so-called 'big bang' approach – what was characterized as a 'kamikaze' mission to secure the *irreversibility* of the reform process (Bruno, 1992; Neuber, 1993).

Should such experiences be bracketed off as 'atypical'? Should they be contrasted with those forms of policy-making, development, and reform that prevail in supposedly 'normal' times? Allegedly normal times and ostensibly typical cases were foregrounded, as we have seen, in 'learning' models of policy diffusion, in which change was understood to be incremental. What Hall (1993) once characterized as 'first-order' forms of policy change entail the adjustment of established policy instruments in a context of continuity in basic goals and objectives. This is the familiar (diffusionist) universe of satisficing behavior, incremental change, and routinized decision-making. Second-order shifts, within this framework, entail the adoption of new instruments of policy (rather than mere recalibration), although again the strategic orientation of policy remains intact. Here, 'normal' patterns of policy development are somewhat disrupted, as the case for more far-reaching adjustments is made and accepted. Finally, third-order change, for Hall, involves a wholesale movement from one paradigm to another, along with *simultaneous* changes in key policy instruments, their settings, and the hierarchy of goals that underpin them. Hall characterizes this as a Kuhnian shift in the

Gestalt of the policy process, as one framework of policy ideas, standards, procedures, and practices is (unevenly) displaced by another. In fact, in the course of such a structural shift, the very ontology of the policy-makers' world undergoes a fundamental reconstruction. Referring to the eastern European case, Bockman and Eyal (2002: 313) note that the power of policy discourse in such contexts is to make, and then reproduce, alternative regimes of truth, the tenacious influence of which stems not from the fact that 'they are taken for granted, not because actors do not think about them, but because they think *with* them'.

Hall likewise underlines the importance of discursive formations that work to stabilize 'framework[s] of ideas and standards that [specify] not only the goals of policy but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing' (Hall, 1993: 279). Policy paradigms, like Keynesianism or neoliberalism for example, comprise their own social ontologies, their own hierarchies of goals and preferred instruments, constituting a kind of 'prism' through which policy-makers read, interpret, and act on the world (Blyth, 2008). It follows that phase-shifts, from one paradigm to another, involve much more than the adoption of new policy measures and mechanisms:

[T]he process whereby one policy paradigm comes to replace another is likely to be more sociological than scientific . . . [It] is likely to be preceded by significant shifts in the locus of authority over policy [and will] involve the accumulation of anomalies, experimentation with new forms of policy, and policy failures that precipitate a shift in the locus of authority over policy and initiate a wider contest between competing paradigms. (Hall, 1993: 280)

Not only is the policy world changing, the policy world-*view* is changing too.

Hall explicates these arguments by way of an analysis of the turbulent transition from Keynesian to monetarism in British macroeconomic policy. This was not simply an instance of externally induced 'structural adjustment',

though powerful external players like the IMF were involved; nor was it a case of first- and second-order policy change piling up into third-order change. It was a disjunctive process, as much *realized through* as animated by crisis. Inflation replaced unemployment as the dominant policy problem, and instruments like incomes policies and exchange controls were abandoned in favor of selective ‘deregulations’ and monetary targeting. Monetarism was never, of course, the only or inevitable successor, though it conveniently (and hardly coincidentally) offered ‘a simple but appealing prescription for all of these dilemmas’ (Hall, 1993: 286), together with a prescription purposefully formulated as an immanent critique of Keynesian reason (Peck, 2010).

Neither the strength of the Keynesian vacuum, nor the ideational fitness-for-purpose of the imminent neoliberal critique, were sufficient on their own to secure the monetarist ascendancy. This was eventually stabilized through a self-reinforcing combination of political struggle (the rise of Thatcherite ‘dries’ within the Conservative Party), electoral competition (Labour’s defeat in the wake of the ‘Winter of Discontent’), ideational contestation (the shift from Cambridge- to Chicago-centricity within the economics profession; the rise of free-market think tanks), external leverage (a first-world application of IMF loan conditionalities), and reverberations through popular and elite media markets (the selective stoking of popular discontent; monetarist conversions among the economic commentariat). The central protagonists and players in the process far exceeded the narrow elite of policy-makers in the Treasury. Opinion-page journalists, vanguard politicians, think-tank policy wonks, crusading economists, TV analysts, IMF technocrats, prominent financiers, and new-style corporate managers all had a role in this interstitial struggle, in the course of which the locus of power in macro-economic policy-making decisively shifted, new institutions and networks came to the fore, and hierarchies of political power were reorganized (Peck

and Tickell, 2007). ‘Policy-making’ spilled out beyond established centers, circuits, and boundaries, especially those associated with the Keynesian paradigm. The policy-making game was being played by new rules, through new circuits, and in new spaces.

The point here is not that different explanations are required for disjunctural moments, such as the transitions to varieties of neoliberal rule in eastern Europe in the 1990s or Britain in the 1970s, when business-as-usual statecraft is self-evidently disrupted. Rather, it is to underline the claim that *all* forms of policy transfer and learning are embedded in discursive paradigms, ideational circuits, institutional frameworks, and power structures. In the case of the examples briefly mentioned here, forms of policy transfer and learning that were associated with eastern European state socialism or UK-style social democracy unevenly gave way to a range of *distinctively* neoliberalized forms, in circumstances powerfully shaped by conjunctural and contextual conditions (see Brenner et al., 2010). What we understand to be ‘standard’ neoliberal operating procedures were co-formed in, and across, these multiple sites, absorbing domestic as well as transnational influences along the way.

IV Competitive emulation: Mobilizing policy under market rule

The ascendancy of neoliberal globalism did not herald the end of history and the death of geography, as some overenthusiastic early observers claimed, but it may have coincided with a near-terminal moment for those introspective, endogenous forms of policy development that had previously been so strongly associated with the ‘domestic’ sphere. For their part, Garrett et al. (2008: 359) prefer to remain agnostic on the question of the continued reproduction of neoliberalization, though they are convinced that the step change in international policy diffusion

(and the historically specific forms of interdependence between local and national polities that have emerged in its wake) is effectively irreversible, because even if ‘the world deviates from its liberal trajectory and into trends such as nationalism, expropriation, protection, and authoritarianism, diffusion [will] likely play a pivotal role’. Liberalization, in other words, may come and go, in its various historically specific forms, but the expansive circulatory systems and deep interdependencies that have evolved over the past three decades are here to stay (see also Levi-Faur, 2005).

In contrast to orthodox treatments of policy diffusion, learning, and transfer, which tend to abstract policies (or their essentialized representations in the form of innovations, lessons, or models) from their institutional and social context, rendering them in effect as policy ‘products’ within relatively unstructured policy ‘markets’, Garrett and his colleagues propose a more heterodox approach, one which is sensitive to historically distinctive forms of ideological mediation and institutional interdependence. They seek to transcend the conventional tropes of (unilinear) global convergence, one-way transition models, and (static) path dependency by way of a neodiffusionist emphasis on mutually dependent transformation. Theirs is a critique *both* of the ‘underlying meta-model of political and policy change [in the form] of unconnected domestic processes’, *and* of the exaggerated reaction to this orthodoxy in the shape of concepts of exogenously driven global convergence. They also seek to move beyond recent reformulations that attempt to square the circle between these positions through the invocation of a ‘common stimulus, mediated response’ model which has been deployed to ‘reconcile the broad trend toward liberal markets with substantial national variations in the speed and the end points of change’ (Garrett et al., 2008: 344). Even the most sophisticated extensions of the ‘common stimulus, mediated response’ model, such as those found in more recent iterations of the

varieties of capitalism literature (for critical commentaries, see Deeg and Jackson, 2007; Peck and Theodore, 2007), are, according to Garrett et al. (2008: 345, 360), ‘inherently incapable’ of coming to grips with the causes and consequences of *deepening transnational interdependence* in political decision-making and policy development, because by making the ‘apparently innocuous simplifying assumption of countries as independent actors’ they risk seriously misunderstanding how the (relatively new) world ‘really works’.

Garrett et al. set out to test the efficacy of four causal mechanisms of international policy diffusion – emulation, learning, competition, and coercion. The first of these mechanisms, emulation, is in many respects the most familiar. With roots in the orthodox diffusion literature, emulation refers to the voluntary adoption of new policies in contexts of less-than-perfect knowledge, albeit through channels, and across terrains, that are socially constructed. This more sociological perspective recognizes that even ‘the most rational of decision makers can rarely find incontrovertible evidence of the effectiveness of a prospective policy’; the result being that ‘theory and rhetoric’ are crucial to search and emulation processes (Simmons et al., 2008: 32). Forms of emulation include ‘follow the leader’ models, in which wannabe policy-makers copy the strategies of powerful or successful actors/institutions, which become viewed as a kind of standard practice for improved performance (see Haveman, 1993); ‘expert theorization’, in which epistemic communities coalesce around favored policy solutions that are subsequently ‘sold’ through various channels (see Haas, 1992); learning from peers, in which emulators borrow from those countries with whom they share political or cultural affinities, or what Rose (1993) called, reflecting methodologically individualist bent of much of this work, ‘psychological proximity’.

Learning models of policy diffusion are predicated on the understanding that intelligence

concerning ‘success or failure of policy change in other countries is expected to influence the probability of policy change in the country under analysis’ (Simmons et al., 2008: 31). In orthodox treatments, the learning process is effectively individualized, as information on policies is continuously accumulated and updated in a Bayesian fashion, with subsequent adoptions representing a form of optimization. As Hall’s (1993) work demonstrated, however, learning processes are profoundly ‘social’, if not ideologically circumscribed and channeled. And if learning is more prevalent among ideologically aligned peers, then it can be difficult to isolate deliberative learning from other forms of emulation and transfer. While learning models presuppose that ‘successful’ policies are more likely to be replicated, and that ‘failures’ may likewise serve as potent warning signs, the near impossibility of rationally determining ‘success’ or ‘failure’ outside the framework of particular policy paradigms and belief systems means that learning behavior remains in the eye of the beholder. Merely observing that some countries follow the lead of others is not the same as demonstrating the presence of deliberative learning, while formal deference to evidence-based policy likewise does not account for the ways in which evidence-based systems are themselves often embedded in ideological or theoretical regimes (Garrett et al., 2008; Peck and Theodore, 2010b). Learning is a (situated) social construct.

Competition models, in contrast, explain the diffusion of neoliberal modes of governance in terms of their complementarity with unevenly distributed competitive pressures: ‘governments have strong incentives to choose “market-friendly” policies that make their jurisdiction an attractive place for global investment, and to remain competitive in product markets by minimizing costs’ (Simmons et al., 2008: 17). Here, the policy choices of competitors, where they are understood to be conducive to private investment, incentivize diffusion among those jurisdictions most closely linked through market

relations, manifestations of which include smokestack chasing or courting talent workers, and races to the bottom in environmental regulation or welfare provision, at the interurban and international scales. Harvey’s (1989) influential analysis of urban entrepreneurialism echoes some of these themes, as do those accounts that emphasize the role of accelerating capital mobility as a ‘primordial threat’ to local jurisdictions, or as an inducement to preemptively lower taxes (Robertson, 1991; Rodrick, 1997). Here, the diffusion process tends to be manifest in ‘horizontal’ forms of competitively induced contagion, mostly explicitly among jurisdictions competing for the scarce-but-mobile resources, assets, or market advantages.

Finally, coercion involves ‘the (usually conscious) manipulation of incentives by powerful actors to encourage others to implement policy change’ (Simmons et al., 2008: 10–11). Strong actors in this case might be powerful nation states, multilateral agencies, and possibly even NGOs, who are able to impose their will by inducing subordinate actors to implement policy change, for example, through the threat of military force or political sanction, through conditionalities attached to loans or aid, through forms of political or public (relations) pressure, or through the monopolization of expertise and ideational channels. The diffusion process here tends to be hierarchical, with policy imperatives emanating out (or ‘down’) from powerful centers. Policy coercion may exhibit a concrete institutional, legal, or regulatory form (such as IMF loan conditionalities, EU law, WTO sanctions, or NAFTA regulations), or it may take the less tangible form of hegemonic power, adherence to particular policy paradigms, or normative isomorphism (along with metaphorical representations, often in the form of loose *geographical* signifiers, like the Washington consensus, Chicago School economics, or Wall Street). But clean lines of cause and effect are invariably difficult to establish, even where power asymmetries are extreme (for example,

if local cadres work to realize sectional interests through the adoption of nominally ‘coerced’ policy shifts, and thereby exploiting the perception of external imposition). Characteristic of work in this vein is Gill’s (2002) analysis of the embedding of ‘disciplinary’ neoliberalism in constitutional conventions and hegemonic institutions at the global scale, and Gilardi’s (2005) deconstruction of the ‘vertical diffusion’ of regulatory practices within the European Union.

Garrett and his colleagues conclude that, even as international policy diffusion appears to have become an endemic and entrenched phenomenon, there is little evidence that direct forms of coercion have been especially prevalent, and neither, where they are found, have they been effective. Furthermore, voluntaristic modes of policy learning are, in reality, even more rare. On the other hand, various forms of economic competition and social emulation, often acting in concert or combination, seem to be the dominant mechanisms of (neoliberal) policy diffusion, many of them operating through power-soaked epistemic networks. The very reach and complexity of these networks apparently outruns the controlling capacity of crudely coercive efforts, but this is more of a commentary on the form of hegemony rather than the fact of it. As Garrett et al. (2008) put it:

hegemonic ideas may continue to flow via experts and advocates around the world. But ideas are theorised, touted, and legitimated; they are not well enforced at gunpoint. They seem not even to be enforceable at loan point by the IMF. Indeed, coercive efforts tend to spawn effective resistance, much as we have seen since the mid-1990s with respect to the rise of both anti-globalization and Islamic extremism . . . [Irrespective of the outcomes of contemporary transformations] diffusion mechanisms . . . will play critical roles in the future of global policy and political change. (Garrett et al., 2008: 358–359)

Diffusion processes, in this context, do not necessarily reproduce more ‘efficient’ forms of governance, neither are they spontaneously animated by the rational decisions of well-informed

policy-makers. Indeed, Garrett et al. (2008: 359) conclude that the plethora of new policy networks and circuits is more likely to spawn “‘unreasoned’ mimicry” than deliberative learning, enlarging the repertoire of isomorphic practices identified some time ago by DiMaggio and Powell.

Institutional isomorphism, according to this position, denotes not simple convergence, but a tendency for *conformity* between a community or group of organizations, on the one hand, and the ‘field’ in which they are located, on the other (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Radaelli, 2000). DiMaggio and Powell identified three principal forms of isomorphism: coercive isomorphism, which may take the form of persuasion or collusion, as well as force; mimetic isomorphism, driven by uncertainty, in which institutions ‘model’ themselves on influential peers, either through deliberate emulation or through less discriminate styles of policy borrowing from conspicuous sites and sources; and normative isomorphism, through proliferating professional networks, with their distinctive forms of socialization, organizational vocabularies, and codes of conduct, the most powerful of which channel through various kinds of ‘central organizations’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 153). While these claims were initially explicated with reference to professional and managerial organizations, subsequent attention has focused on expert and technocratic networks, many of which have been instrumental in the propagation of neoliberal reason, practice, and rule (see Babb, 2001; Dezalay and Garth, 2002). Kogut and Macpherson (2008: 136), for example, demonstrated that the presence of Chicago-trained economists exerted a quantifiable influence on governments’ subsequent decisions to privatize – so strong in fact that they were moved to portray the finding as ‘sensational’ – the blunt instrument of coercion having been rendered largely moot by *preceding* involvement in the ‘shared construction of an ontology of knowledge’. These processes of shared construction, however, were not handed

down on tablets of stone, or rendered in toto in Chicago-school workshops, but were produced in *and between* networked institutional sites (Peck, 2010). Although, in this case, ‘the transmission of ideas [may have occurred] through a global network of experts’ with Chicago affiliations, this was not an unmoored or floating network, but one ‘whose efficacy [was] dependent upon local political conditions and the control over the exercise of state power’ (Kogut and Macpherson, 2008: 107).

While nodal centers of one kind or another tend to play key roles in managing such networks, deepening relations of interdependence seem to have been associated with a trend away from simple monocentricity. Even under conditions of marked power asymmetries, policy networks are inescapably relational constructs. And the policy ‘objects’ that pass through these networks are not only transformed on the journey, they are also *transforming of* both the network and its nodes. Contra the original diffusionist paradigm, in which policy innovations travel unidirectionally across a practically inert landscape, mobile policies also reorganize the institutional geographies and regulatory relations – what DiMaggio and Powell call the ‘structured field’ – in which they are embedded. As Bockman and Eyal (2002: 315) explain, ‘institutional models are not simply passed along, copied and imitated via transnational networks, [they] are put together and reproduced through them’. This underlines the need to probe the institutional, sociological, and economic factors that ‘structure’ such fields, the flexible architectures of the networks that provide their (inter-)connective tissue, and the variably ‘mobile’ policy designs and techniques that both reflect and reconstitute them.

The project of neoliberalization did not simply ‘arrive’ in eastern Europe, but neither was it unilaterally imposed by western powers. In fact, it was constructed through several decades of (asymmetrical) dialogue and (mis-)communication, through organizations like the

Milan-based Centro Studie Ricerche su Problemi Economico-Sociali. According to Bockman and Eyal (2002), this was a ‘transnational dialogue [that] reshaped both sides’:

It was not so much part of a successful libertarian conspiracy to topple communism and Keynesianism in one blow, but the breeding ground for a new hybrid discourse of neoliberalism, which was being created through the process of translating, on both sides, the knowledge produced by participants and mobilizing it to travel back to the United States, to fight wars of deregulation, and back to Eastern Europe, to fight the wars of reforming socialism . . . [It] was the hybrid and dialogic origins of neoliberalism, rather than the arrogance and might of a Western monologue, that helps explain the course of the radical and rapid transition to capitalism in Eastern Europe, once communism fell. (Bockman and Eyal, 2002: 336–337)

Parallel roles – as dialogic spaces in the production, circulation, and reproduction of neoliberal policy rationalities and programming technologies – were being played by the global network of Mont Pelerinians and their affiliates in the free-market think tanks (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010). Together, these constitute some of the foremost transaction spaces for what Mirowski and Plehwe term the ‘neoliberal thought collective’. Yet, for all their quasi-scholarly trappings, these have hardly been entirely rarified sites of learning. Rather, their tentacles have reached deep into sites of grounded policy practice, not to mention centers of political power, in order to: codify, critique, and corral emergent forms of policy practice; rationalize and recirculate preferred strategies, in the form of sanctioned experiments, ‘best’ practices, and selectively rewritten policy histories; and, most importantly, exploit openings, disturbances, and crises in extant policy regimes. Of course, there is a strategic and programmatic side to these efforts, especially among the blue-chip think tanks that occupy the most expensive real estate in the world’s political capitals (Peck and Tickell, 2007), but these have always

coexisted with much more prosaic forms of practice – the daily work of policy-making.

The production of policy innovations and ‘models’, in the context of late neoliberalization, would therefore be mischaracterized as a diffusionist model, beginning with an immaculate moment of local invention and ending in diffuse forms of emulation and adaptation. It more closely resembles a multipolar regime of continuous (re)mobilization, which is animated and reanimated as much by the failures of earlier waves of misintervention and malregulation as it is by ‘blue-sky’ strategic visions. In Hall’s (1993) terms, these represent historically distinctive forms of first- and second-order policy adjustment, operating within a neoliberal policy paradigm which combines dogged resilience with serial vulnerability to crisis. But rather than some inexplicable paradox of neoliberalism, this condition seems instead to lie close to its contradictory heart: crises not only for, but *of*, the neoliberal policy regime repeatedly generate the impetus and the rationale for ‘reform’, recalibration, and renewal, just as their very urgency seems to further embolden policy-makers, while justifying the need for speed. Hurricane Katrina provided just such an opportunity for improvised reinvention, even though on face value it represented a damning indictment of the neoliberal project itself (Peck, 2010; Somers, 2008); the financial crisis of 2008–2009 may have yielded something similar, on a grander scale (see Brand and Sekler, 2009; Peck et al., 2010).

V Conclusion: A new order of things?

[T]here is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. (Machiavelli, 1992 [1532]: 24)

When the full force of the financial crisis hit the United States, in the Fall of 2008, the sleep-deprived chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, was heard to observe that, just as

there are ‘no atheists in foxholes [there are] no ideologues in financial crises’ (quoted in Baker, 2008). As he spoke, supposedly pragmatic resolutions to the crisis were being speedily engineered, largely in private, in conjunction with various architects and beneficiaries of the failed system. Circumstances apparently demanded a swift, expert response, though the initial forays would turn out to mark only the beginning of an escalating series of bailouts. And, again, there was apparently no time for public deliberation, congressional oversight, or legislative accountability. A series of technocratic fixes, engineered on increasingly colossal scales, began imperfectly to fill the supposedly post-ideological vacuum. As the ‘liberalized’ network of financial markets degraded into cascading crises – for which there was barely an adequate explanation, let alone a solution – the fast-policy complex lurched into overdrive in what was to become a curiously post-political crisis (Watkins, 2010). The experts were now, quite literally, working through the night, striving to reboot a flawed system, mired in a very public legitimacy crisis.

The frenzied pace of policy-making continued to accelerate in the early months of the Obama Administration. Days after the presidential election, the incoming White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, was publicly declaring: ‘Rule one: Never allow a crisis to go to waste ... They are opportunities to do big things’ (quoted in Zeleny, 2008). The unmistakable echo of the Machiavellian injunction – ‘Never waste the opportunities offered by a good crisis’ – has not been lost on political observers; indeed, for some critics, it represents the ‘semi-official motto of the Obama administration’ (*Washington Times*, 2009). Indeed, the sheer speed with which these opportunities have been exploited became something of a standing joke, especially during the administration’s hyperactive first 100 days. The punchline of the President’s speech to the Washington press corps, in May 2009, implied that, if anything, *policy time* was going

to become even more compressed: 'I believe that my next hundred days will be so successful I will be able to complete them in 72 days', Obama remarked, 'And on the 73rd day, I will rest' (WHCA, 2009).

At the global scale, though, this was looking less and less like a 'good crisis'. G20 symbolism aside, the goal of international political cooperation was to remain elusive, for all the talk of the moment's world-historical urgency. Meanwhile, beneath the surface, new forms of policy coordination were being hurriedly fashioned between treasury officials and multilateral actors around the world. Maybe this was a technocratically reasoned, rather than unreasoned, form of mimicry (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), though the process itself seemed no more transparent than those proverbial whispers in the prince's ear. Disconcertingly, the transformation of economic-policy instruments, their settings, and in some respects their goals, was continuing apace, even as politically leaders publicly distanced themselves from (self-serving representations of) the neoliberal paradigm (Peck et al., 2010). The 'proven' models of the 1990s may have suddenly been discredited, but their nameless successors were being actively reformulated, in effect, by the very same fast-policy modelers.

It is circumstances such as these, often encountered in real time, which confront the new generation of critical policy studies. This heterodox body of work is beginning to forge distinctive approaches to the problematics of policy mobility and mutation. In the service of this effort, this paper has engaged critically with three bodies of literature concerned with issues of policy transfer and transformation, in order to determine where lessons might be drawn – both positively and negatively. The three lines of work considered here are summarized in Table 2. The first of these, the diffusion paradigm, represents something of a foil against which social-constructivist approaches have subsequently developed. Its vision of rational actors operating in relatively denuded policy-making spaces is seriously

limiting, and leaves largely unexamined the *social* processes of policy formation and the context-dependent settings in which 'borrowing' and 'learning' take place. There is much constructively to be taken, in contrast, from theories of transition and from the latest crop of neo-diffusionist studies, which in a break with the diffusionist paradigm seek to contextualize policy-making behaviors in more historically and geographically sensitive ways. If orthodox readings of policy transfer tend to naturalize conditions of modernizing equilibrium, these alternative approaches seek, instead, to understand moments of rupture, transition, and transformation. The postcommunist 'transitions' of eastern and central Europe and Britain's lurch into monetarism both provide examples of such disjunctive and disequilibrating episodes. These ostensibly 'abnormal' settings have been invoked, not to give license to some alternative 'transition model', but in order to denaturalize the institutional 'environment' of the policy transfer process, to problematize the institutional-ideological milieu within which (different forms of) policy mobility are generated, and to question the implicit universalism of orthodox theories.

What might be called the 'objects' of policy transfer – policy ideas, innovations, technologies, and models – do not float freely in some unstructured universe, to be picked over selectively by a faceless elite of continuously learning policy-makers. Rather, the field of policy transfer is itself socially and institutionally constructed, being populated by a wide array of actors and institutions; it is sharply contoured and striated, in the form of shifting landscapes of conjunctural openings and preferred channels; it is structured by relatively enduring policy paradigms, which establish intersubjective frames of reference and institutionalized centers of authority; and, perhaps above all, it is saturated by power relations. These intensely contested and deeply constitutive contexts, which have their own histories and geographies, shape what is seen, and what *counts*, in terms of policy

Table 2. Three approaches to policy mobility

	Diffusion models	Theories of transition	Neodiffusionist approaches
Privileged subjects	Learners	Reformers	Networkers
Social action	Rational-instrumental	Embedded-imperative	Strategic-adaptive
Actor communities	Bounded: policy functionaries	Spreading: politicized cadres	Sprawling: epistemic communities
Motive forces	Policy-making choices	Ideological imperatives	Technocratic practices
Change processes	Behavioral modification	Paradigmatic transition	Postparadigmatic transformation
Prevailing logic	Continuous assimilation	Disruptive consequentiality	Isomorphic conformity
Diffusion mechanisms	Choice/imitation	Coercion/contagion	Competition/emulation
Analytical ethos	Policy scientism	Structural sociology	Social constructivism
Analytical optic	Decision fields	Transformational sites	Relational connections
Analytical object	Border-crossing innovations	Restructuring tendencies	Circulating norms
Representational mode	Taxonomic classification	Causal analysis	Eclectic parsing
Temporal dynamics	Incremental modernization	Punctuated transformation	Continuous adaption
Spatial dynamics	Centrifugal dispersal	Uneven translation	Mutual interconnection
Methodological scales	Federal-national	National-international	Transnational-national
Geographical imaginary	Isotropic zones of adjustment	Conjunctural sites of transformation	Multinodal spaces of integration
Market order	Assumed/naturalized	Constructed/ascendant	Normalized/embedded

innovations, preferred models, and best practices. They also frame those narratives of ‘policy failure’ that establish the premises and preconditions for policy experimentation, and which variously animate and constrain the search for new institutional fixes. In such situations, institutional frames perform a ‘preceptorial’ function, licensing some cognitive and political behaviors, and enabling some patterns of ‘learning’, while disciplining or even excluding others (Lindblom, 1977); they establish ‘supraintentional framework[s] for appropriate action’ (Offe, 1996: 201); they frame and filter policy-making imaginaries (Blyth, 2008). Yet these frames do not merely exist, as it were, behind the backs (or above the heads) of policy actors. Regularized patterns of policy action and moments of innovation are constitutive elements of those

institutionalized circulatory systems (with their own expert networks, sedimented styles of practice, structures of authority) that tend to stabilize along with different policy paradigms. So, for example, Bismarkian social-security systems were propagated one way, linking particular polities with particular consequences, while post-welfare social-policy innovations seem to be spreading according to a different logic, making different connections, and with very different consequences (Jayasuriya, 2006; Noël, 2006; Peck, forthcoming).

Mobile institutional designs, best-practice models, and fast policies are not, in some metaphorical sense, molecules circulating within an extraterrestrial space, ‘touching down’ or ‘getting picked up’ by earth-bound policy actors; rather, they occupy the *same* earthly domains

as the policy-makers themselves, as creatures and creations of grounded processes of institutional reproduction, regimes of discursive framing, and contours of political power. Those policies that conspicuously appear to ‘move’ between jurisdictions should not, therefore, be sequestered into some separate category labeled reform ‘model’ or ‘best practice’, diffusing out unidirectionally to lagging sites of catch-up and remediation. The mobilization of favored models and preferred practices presupposes, and in fact requires, politically structured fields of ongoing ‘experimentation’. They must likewise be understood in terms of ongoing and ‘grounded’ forms of institutional-ideological restructuring.

It is at the very least an ironic coincidence that the recent rejuvenation of the policy transfer literature – with its appeals to rational-actor models, its deference to global ‘best practice’, and its anthropomorphization of policy ‘learning’ – should have occurred, historically, during the heyday of neoliberal expansionism. This measurable surge in extrajurisdictional policy-making, self-conscious policy transfer, and technocratic model-making has taken place during a period, *and between places*, when the policy development process has been anything but transcendently ‘normal’. Rather, these new policy mobilities, and the circulatory systems that sustain them, have expanded in tandem with the particular set of institutional and ideological conditions that we have come to associate with neoliberalism (see Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Levi-Faur, 2005; Peck, 2010). To be sure, the intrinsic constitution of these mobile technologies of (market-like) rule and regulation warrants critical scrutiny, but so do the institutional and ideological conditions that variously enable, envelope, and energize their purposeful mobilization. The policy transfer process, for all its trappings of ‘disembedded’ policy development, must itself be understood as an institutionally produced and embedded phenomenon, the character, causes, and consequences of which

are more likely to be recovered in the realms of conjunctural specificity and network relations than in the idealized universe of rational-actor models.

Ultimately, the nascent mobility-mutations approach alluded to here is being constructed upon quite different epistemological and ontological foundations to those of the orthodox transfer-diffusion paradigm. Policies are not, after all, merely being *transferred* over space; their form and their effects are *transformed* by these journeys, which also serve continuously to remake relational connections across and intensely variegated and dynamic socio-institutional landscape. This implies that contemporary phenomena like global policy models and peripatetic best practices, while they be methodologically and politically eye-catching, should not be fetishized by virtue of their evident mobility per se. Policy mobility is but one moment in a wider, transformative process, involving the ongoing *mutation* of policies and policy regimes in a manner that seems to be more deeply cross-referential and relativized than ever before. As a result, there is a need to problematize not only the movement itself – the transferred innovations, the emulated best practices, the mobile policy technologies – but also the restructured macro-institutional environments and relations that such movements necessarily entail. If transfer ontologies typically imply the unidirectional diffusion of policy innovations, and buyers only connecting with sellers for impersonal transactions, the kinds of relational ontologies advocated here should instead call attention to the dialectical reconstruction of policy landscapes. ‘Mobile’ policies, in this sense, dynamically reconstitute the terrains across which they travel, at the same time as being embedded within, if not products of, extralocal regimes and circuits.

Policy-making processes may indeed have been tendentially ‘debalkanized’ in recent decades, as cross-jurisdictional flows of knowledge and practice increasingly define the rule,

rather than the exception, but this does not mean that once-distinct policy-making ‘worlds’ are simply dissolving into the global space of flows. Rather, new geographies of policy are being shaped, and new modalities of time-space policy compression are at work, as mobility and mutation proceed in tandem. New policy world-views are being made in the process. These are certainly not ‘despatialized’ policy-making worlds; they are contested arenas in which new spatialities of policy are being generated at increasing speed. And different historical-geographical conjunctures are apparently associated with distinctive, social forms of policy mobility, as policy ontologies are adjusted and as the ‘churn’ of policy problems and putative fixes roils onward. Fixing the analytical gaze solely on the vectors of mobile policies – and allowing policy-making frames, rules regimes, and institutional environments to blur into the background – does not, on its own, represent an adequate, social-constructivist alternative to the self-limiting paradigm of transfer-diffusion. There is a need, to coin a paradoxical term, to *embed mobility*, to explore the ways in which the restructuring of policy regimes and the mobility of fast-policy fixes are jointly constituted. This would represent a significant geographical contribution to the evolving project of critical policy studies.

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