

BOOK REVIEW**Mobile Urbanism: Cities and Policymaking in the Global Age****Edited by Eugene McCann and Kevin Ward****Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011**

Reviewed by Sergio Montero

In *Mobile Urbanism*, McCann and Ward have compiled a variety of high-quality articles by prominent scholars that examine urban policy circulations from a critical human geography perspective. In contrast to the burgeoning and more orthodox “policy diffusion” and “policy transfer” literature in political science and sociology, often based on assumptions of rational policy diffusion among nation-states, the authors of *Mobile Urbanism* build on the emerging interdisciplinary “policy mobility” approach that explores policy formation, transformation, and mobilization as a politicized, power-laden and socially constructed process that can happen at different government scales (Peck and Theodore 2010). Drawing from David Harvey’s (1989) fixity/mobility dichotomy and Doreen Massey’s (1991) idea of “global sense of place,” and looking specifically at *urban* policy mobilities, McCann and Ward advance an original theoretical framework to study cities in relational and territorial terms by focusing on how local policy is constituted by both connections to other places and local ‘political’ contestations. Their work contributes to a newly emerging scholarship in city planning which looks at the circulation of planning ideas, expertise, and knowledge (Healey and Upton 2010).

The different articles of the book come together with a strong internal coherence despite the variety of approaches to study policy circulations taken by the authors. The articles in this volume discuss and illuminate important methodological questions for the study of inter-city policy circulations. Two key characteristics differentiate the articles compiled in *Mobile Urbanism* from authors in the policy transfer/policy diffusion literature: 1) The policy actors that mobilize urban policies are broadly defined beyond bureaucrats and policy elites and include private and non-profit agents such as policy professionals, practitioners, activists and consultants, among others; and 2) There is a strong emphasis on qualitative research methods, with all authors making use of ethnographic or qualitative methods of inquiry combined with policy and discourse analysis.

Although skeptical of grand narratives, most of the articles included in the volume acknowledge the importance of examining the institutional-

regulatory frameworks and political economy forces in which the everyday practices of policy actors are embedded. Particularly prominent in most articles is the influence of neo-Marxist approaches to space and state rescaling, namely the “politics of scale” literature (Agnew 1997; Swyngedouw 1997; Brenner 2004; Sheppard and McMaster 2004; Leitner 2004) and the “neoliberal urbanism” literature (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Leitner et al. 2007). As a way to combine ethnographic methods of inquiry with political economy analysis of the city, McCann and Ward propose to look at cities as assemblages, i.e., as “parts of elsewhere” that are relationally and territorially constituted (Allen and Cochrane 2007). In looking at cities as assemblages, Ward and McCann also draw from the important literature on spatial assemblages that has emerged in the last two decades (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) and that has been especially prolific in recent years in anthropology, economic geography, and urban and regional studies (Ong and Collier 2005; Sassen 2006; Allen and Cochrane 2007).

The cities studied in *Mobile Urbanism* span over the Americas, Western Europe, South Africa, and South East Asia, and the policy areas examined include urban economic development policies, city strategies, and drug and health policies. “Green” and urban sustainability policies are remarkably absent, despite being a paradigmatic example of policies that have been widely circulated in recent years through novel inter-city arrangements (see e.g. Bulkeley 2005 for the case of climate change). While a significant number of the authors also use and encourage relational comparisons between cities situated in the North and the South, cities in English-speaking countries are certainly overrepresented and policy circulations that do not involve an Anglophone city are most likely ignored. Barcelona, for example, is hardly mentioned despite its influence in urban renewal strategies; also absent are analyses of widely mobilized urban policies originating in cities of the southern hemisphere such as Curitiba (environmental planning), Porto Alegre (participatory budgeting), Singapore (congestion pricing schemes), or Bogotá (non-motorized transportation policies). Another notable absence is an in-depth discussion of the role of the “public” in policy debates and in legitimating the policy alternatives mobilized by policy actors. *Mobile Urbanism* tells us little about how policy mobilizations are limited by the preferences, discourses, and information about policy alternatives available to non-organized citizens. While McCann and Ward are quick to dismiss the political science literature on “policy transfer,” some recent work in political science around issues of state legitimacy as well as the literature on new institutionalism (Lowndes 2009) could provide important insight to the “policy mobility” approach regarding how policy is legitimized, institutionalized, and made authoritative over time.

The authors included in *Mobile Urbanism* have devoted significant energy in the past to critique the literature on global cities and its hierarchical

classifications of cities and city-regions based on financial capital networks (Sassen 2001; Scott and Storper 2003). By looking at the territorial and relational processes that co-produce all cities, the articles in this volume move away from endless deconstructions and reconstructions of what makes a city global or non-global toward new and more productive fields of inquiry. Looking into the transnational, networked, and multi-scalar nature of urban policy mobility allows us to contemplate a new kind of global urban system, one that transcends hierarchical classifications of cities based on North-originated financial flows in favor of a more diverse, fluid, and open set of multi-directional inter-city connections. The relational-territorial re-conceptualization of the world urban system that *Mobile Urbanism* proposes through the study of policy circulations opens the door to new and exciting research pathways in urban studies that reveal power relationships and transnational collaborations which connect cities in the north and the south in complex yet not incoherent ways.

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