

Towards an urban policy analysis: Linking urban politics and public policy

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Introduction

We propose to study urban policies and processes by linking public policy theories with urban politics literature. Public policy scholars analyze local policies often without reference to theoretical frameworks developed by urban politics scholars; likewise, urban politics research often examines urban policies, but without reference to public policy theories (Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007). We propose to bridge this gap to explore what makes the “urban” dimension of urban policy distinctive, and how such an understanding can, in turn, deepen knowledge and theorizing of public policy more generally.

Clarence Stone reminds us, “cities are not the nation state writ small” (2015, 117). Thus, we could say that urban policies differ from policies formulated nationally, subnationally, or in suburban or rural areas. Additionally, policy scholars, such as Adrian Kay (2006, 8), stress that ‘policies cannot be analysed apart from the policymaking process’. Thus, urbanists that study urban policies could profit from studying policy formulation and implementation. Taken together, we wonder how policy processes, policy designs, and policy implementation differ when undertaken by urban decision makers and advocates, as opposed to those at the national or supranational levels; whether contextual differences in institutions, actors, or ideas generate a distinctive type of policy at the urban scale. Even the same policy could operate differently or hold different meanings at the urban scale compared with the national scale, for example.

Wolman (2012, 145) defines urban policies as policies generated and implemented by city governments through local political processes (i.e., distinguishing them from policies that originate at the federal or national level but that affect or are directed at cities). However, since urban policies are often at the forefront of tackling complex societal problems, urban policies themselves travel beyond city boundaries, to other levels of government and to other regions of the world. Furthermore, public, private and intermediary actors on multiple scales take part in urban policy-making. This means a simple definition of “urban policy” containing it at the local level limits our analysis by hiding its actual complexity.

In the course of this paper, we discuss what may be distinctive about ‘the urban’ and thus about ‘urban policies’. We then develop why urban policies are complex and why the city is an arena in which problems manifest themselves. Against this background, we discuss how policy theories might be transformed when they are used at the urban level. In the last section, we revisit our initial questions and set the stage for the workshop and the discussions we hope to have about next steps.

What is distinctive about “the urban” and urban policy

Whether responding to climate change, migration, poverty, or addiction, whether aiming to generate growth or reduce the negative impacts of growing inequality, cities are often posited as policy innovators. Yet they also are characterized as adapting to, and complying with, the needs and interests of global capital, in the process slighting the well-being of everyday residents and especially the most vulnerable. Cities clearly are active policy makers and policy implementers, whether progressive, innovative, neoliberal or regressive. Yet a specifically “urban” policy analysis seems as yet to emerge. There are several interrelated reasons that make the study of urban policies distinctive and particularly relevant.

First, societal problems accentuate themselves in densely populated spaces. Cities are spatially concentrated expressions of societies that “reflect the social and economic conditions of the moment and are arenas where socioeconomic transformations, developments, and problems first become manifest” (Kübler and Wälti 2001, 35). Thus, urban policies tackle relevant societal problems on the ground. Various examples have shown the high relevance and sometimes trailblazing impact of urban policies that were later copied by other cities and other levels of government. For example, Swiss cities in the early 1990s were at the forefront of designing strategies to cope with their open drug markets. Swiss cities implemented harm-reduction strategies by helping to pioneer heroin maintenance treatments and by providing clean syringes and needles (Kübler 2001; Kübler and Wälti 2001). A more recent example is the effort of U.S. cities to curb greenhouse gas emissions in light of few tangible efforts on the national level (Hughes 2017). In Germany, cities are important actors in designing proactive refugee and integration policies after Germany took responsibility for over 1 million refugees in 2015 (Mayer 2017). U.S. cities on the West Coast have enacted living-wage ordinances due to campaigns of low-wage worker organizations (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

Second, and relatedly, policies addressing urban problems that find no majorities on the national and/or sub-national level (i.e. state, province etc.) may be nevertheless pushed forward by cities. Again, the prime example is environmental policies and climate protection efforts of U.S. cities. As Hughes (2017, 365) explains: “In the face of policy stagnation at the international and, in the case of the United States, national levels, many city governments have been developing plans of their own”. Under the auspices of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, cities pledged to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in the spirit of the Kyoto protocol that the U.S. never ratified (Sapotichne and Jones 2012, 442–44). Further examples are the so-called sanctuary cities that refuse to cooperate with national immigration enforcement agencies and forbid city officials from inquiring into an individual’s immigration status (Gonzalez, Collingwood, and El-Khatib 2017). Irregular migrants tend to live in cities given that urban settings facilitate job opportunities and the possibilities to tap into social networks. Therefore, cities have an interest in protecting immigrants who are directly affected by the negative consequences of harsh national immigration policies.

Third, structural economic pressures down-scale policies to the local level. For example, economic development policies are down-scaled to regional or local levels. Cities are forced to be geographical spearheads for economic growth (Brenner 2000, 2004). As a consequence, cities have been pressured to become entrepreneurial and city leaders often respond by formulating neo-liberal urban policies (Harvey 1989, Weaver 2016). We can observe that cities develop a variety of locational policies to strengthen their competitiveness in global interurban competition (Kaufmann and Arnold 2017). Thus, urban policy is often seen as, first and foremost, oriented towards (re)producing the conditions for economic development (Edwards and Imrie 2015). However, emerging literature on shrinking cities and slow cities, alongside earlier work on progressive cities, proposes alternatives to pursuit of large-scale growth (e.g., Mayer and Knox 2006; Joo and Hoon Park 2017).

Finally, urban policy features global and conceptual dimensions that broaden “the urban” and thus must not be restricted or localized to one city. With what some scholars have called “planetary urbanization” occurring (e.g. Brenner and Schmid 2015), globalization and the transnational flows of knowledge enable the travel of policy ideas, so that leaders in Porto Alegre, Brazil, or Mexico City can assist mayors in Chicago or New York (Peck and Theodore 2015). Simultaneously, local opposition movements are connected with each other and informed by each other; claims of “rights

to the city” are made locally but also in concert with movements worldwide (Purcell 2014; Huchzermeyer 2017). Global connections, however, do not mean necessarily that cities across North and South can be studied in the same way, or have the same relevant dimensions for policy analysis (Roy 2009). How can urban policy analysis be attentive to global power relations at the level of knowledge-production? As well, conceptualizations of urbanism derived from geographic space and human experience of that space, refer as much to frames of mind or perspectives on power and social order/disorder, ways of life, ways of interaction that distinctively incorporate diversity, complexity, chaos, flexibility, ongoing change – even ungovernability that perhaps defies policy analysis as conventionally construed (Simone 2004; Magnusson 2010). Cities are relevant for the policies and policymaking that occur within them (thereby affecting the majority of the world’s population who live in cities) but also because the urban transcends “the local.”

Historical linkages between urban politics and public policy

Although urban politics and public policy are separate subfields in many professional associations, with their own sections, journals and conferences, these fields share common interests and orientations to research that could lead to more explicit dialogue. Both subfields share an awareness of complexity and a related openness to interdisciplinarity. The problems that policy seeks to address, and the urban environments that scholars seek to understand, emerge from complex webs of factors that often can only be understood through multidisciplinary inquiry. Key journals in both of these subfields not surprisingly feature work by scholars across the social sciences. As well, at least within political science, these subfields share some intellectual origins in the ideas of Bachrach and Baratz (1962). The community power debate in the 1950s and 1960s was an important intellectual dispute over the nature and organization of power in Western democracies. Floyd Hunter (1953) developed an elitism theory by demonstrating the dominance of senior business leaders in Atlanta’s politics. Robert Dahl (1961) offered a pluralistic picture of urban politics in New Haven. Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963) objected that the concept of power remained incomplete if power in the agenda-setting process, and especially if non-decision-making, was not considered. These works influenced the development of urban regime theory (Stone 1989, 1993), as well as theories of agenda setting within public policy studies see for example Hacker 2004; Knill and Tosun 2012, 110; Pierson 2004, 37, 2015; Weible 2017, 8), in a way joining together the study of cities with the study of public policy.

Despite the commonalities of the two subfields, there are today few ties between urban politics and public policy theories (Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007). Public policy theories may not automatically apply to cities, because they are mostly built from analyzing national policy-making (Sapotichne and Jones 2012, 444). Although there are noteworthy exceptions (for example, Rast 2009, 2012; Sapotichne and Smith 2012; Sidney 2003), urban scholars do not typically turn to public policy theories or concepts when analyzing urban policy. To be sure, policies are an important object of urban studies, however, we do not detect many conscious efforts that would link empirical work in cities to public policy theories or concepts. As Trounstein (2009, 613) noted, “we lack a comprehensive body of theoretically driven research that explains variation in policy outcomes (...) at the local level”.

Linking urban politics and public policy

The local level in public policy theory is often seen as a policy arena that reduces complexity¹. There is a tendency in the literature to advocate the delegation of policy-making from national to local actors for this reason (see Geyer and Cairney 2015). This literature perceives policy formulation and implementation on the local level as favorable because local policy-makers are seen as flexible and context-sensitive, allowing them to adopt policies in a rapidly-changing environment. Furthermore, the local arena is seen as laboratory for trial-and-error projects. However, as we stressed above, urban policies operate in a complex environment because they have to address diversity, complexity, chaos, flexibility and ongoing change. In this regard, we disagree about the limited complexity of local or urban policies. Instead, we perceive urban policies as embodiments of complexity and immediacy.

Urban policies are complex because many social, economic, and infrastructural problems manifest themselves first in cities because of their density, diversity and ongoing change. This high density and diversity makes a city and its problems hard to govern (Magnusson 2010). This complexity may be even higher in developing countries given the rapid population growth and the high level of informality in many cities of the Global South (Post 2018). Furthermore, urban policies aim at

¹ This literature on public policy and complexity does not differentiate between local policies and urban policies. However, in our increasingly urbanizing world, local public policies should be understood more and more as urban policies.

target groups on multiple scales, and multiple types of actors (such as governmental actors, NGOs, IGOs, local firms, and multinational firms) are involved in urban policy-making. Thus, there are at least two dimensions – high density and multiscalarity – that contribute to the complexity of urban policy-making and that should be incorporated in urban policy analysis.

At the same time, the local level is where problems are visible and manifest themselves – whether or not politics responds to these problems in a serious way. Urban policies may be immediate given that they operate in problem-prone environment. For instance, breakdowns in public infrastructure happen locally with mostly local consequences and direct social assistance for people in need of help is often provide by local actors and organizations. Given this materialization of problems, the urban arena is also a place of practices of resistance and emancipation. Cities are simultaneously places of struggle as well as sites of political agency (Beveridge and Koch 2017). Protest movements often arise in cities and they are globally connected with similar movements. Examples are Occupy Wallstreet, Black Lives Matter, various immigration right movements or urban movements against the negative implications of tourism.

Thus, urban policies have to address concrete and complex problems and their formulation involves many intervening actors on multiple levels. The most prominent example that illustrates the complexity of urban policies is the urban dilemma to balance the needs of global capital and the needs of their long-standing residents. Many urbanists have written about this dilemma in their analyses of land-use planning, development projects or place-based development and they mostly stress the powerful and rupturing forces of global capital on the urban ground (for example, Logan and Molotch 1987, Stone and Stoker 2015; Weaver 2016; Hyra 2017). This means that an urban policy analysis that does justice to the urban context should incorporate the complexity (density and multi-scalarity) of urban policies and it should discuss how urban policies deal or ignore local problems that can be caused by local, national or global forces.

In the following, we develop and adopt the multiple streams framework (Kingdon 1995; Zahariadis 2014) to the urban political and policy environment in order to demonstrate how such application may help us to expand our conceptual, theoretical, empirical understanding about policy theories and urban policies. We chose the multiple streams framework because it is comprehensive in scope, and captures how policies are made by governments under conditions of ambiguity (Zahariadis 2014). Ambiguity stresses the dynamic, complex, and chaotic nature of policy-making

that fits our description of urban policy-making. The multiple stream framework proposes that three streams – problems, policies, and politics – flow through the policy system and at critical points in times, at so-called policy windows, policy entrepreneurs may couple these three streams. We consider how one would analyze each stream in a way that incorporates the complexity of urban policy and the many strands of urban research noted above. It is not that we advocate this public policy approach over others, or that we think that a comprehensive consideration of the urban policy process is always preferable – rather the example shows how a well-known public policy perspective can both open up urban policy research, and can itself be opened up by developments in urban research.

The three streams are likely to be distinctive in an urban environment. As already discussed, the *problem stream* seems to be especially relevant for urban policy analysis because of the immediacy, diversity and interdependency of problems in a dense urban environment. Problems manifest themselves on the urban ground, whether these problems are triggered locally, nationally or globally. The *policy stream* seems to be simultaneously locally and internationally oriented. Concrete urban problems may trigger neighborhood initiatives that search for context-sensitive policy solutions. At the same time, we know that cities and its policy-makers are well connected and that transnational flows of knowledge enable the travel of policy ideas (Peck and Theodore 2015) that travel as well from the Global South to the Global North (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015). Thus, the analysis of an urban policy stream may especially study how transnational spaces open up for city leaders. The *politics stream* in an urban environment may be enriched by urban politics and urban governance concepts (for example, Stone 1989, Pierre 2012). These concepts would help to better theorize the interactions between public, private and intermediary actors in the politics streams. For example, the urban regime analysis would point toward the wide array of state and non-state actors to incorporate into a policy analysis beyond local government officials, and complemented with multi-level governance would also investigate interaction across scales and state-non-state boundaries. Policy might originate or be implemented outside the state. That is, the politics stream may be extended vertically and horizontally. The vertical politics stream could analyze how cities try to advance their policies against potential resistance or deadlock at sub-national or national levels or in cooperation with actors from these levels (Kübler 2001; Morel 2018). The horizontal politics stream could study whether and how core cities and jurisdictions in the metropolitan region coordinate their policy agendas (Savitch and Vogel 2009). At the same

time, this analysis points to the informal, non-hierarchical dimension of policy-making, which raises questions about democratic accountability (Peters and Pierre 2004; Pierre 2017). And finally, the concept of policy entrepreneurs could be productively linked with the urban politics literature by examining the role of policy entrepreneurs in mediating between public and private actors in order to establish and maintain urban governance arrangements (Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007). For example, Schneider and Teske (1993) search for antigrowth entrepreneurs that would challenge the growth machine and Stone et al. (2001) study policy entrepreneurs in urban school reforms.

Workshop goals

We convened this workshop to spark conversations about how urban policy analysis is being, and might be, undertaken. We hope to discuss whether and how public policy theories intersect with developments and key contributions of urban politics and policy research in ways that advance empirical and theoretical knowledge. Our papers span world regions, policy issues, theoretical approaches in ways that should advance these conversations fruitfully. Our papers examine urban policy from a lens within the city, and beyond the city. In closing, we remind you of some of our initial questions:

- Which policy theories and concepts can generate insights about urban policy process, designs, implementation, effects? How can this application extend and strengthen understandings of policy at the level of theory? How can urban politics literature inform the adaptation of policy theories to the local level?
- What are distinctive characteristics of “the urban” for purposes of policy analysis? How might the multiple conceptualizations of “urban” drive approaches to urban policy analysis?
- What are relevant or prominent problems, solutions, institutions, and actor constellations in cities?
- How do urban policies travel both in time and space? What are the roles of experts, consultants, supranational organizations?
- Which frameworks are fruitful to study urban policies comparatively and cross-nationally? What conversations should happen across and within Global North and Global South?

- What are prospects for, and examples of, strengthening democracy and lessening inequality at the urban policy scale, as opposed to other scales?

We look forward to working with you to develop collaborative interventions into the scholarship of urban policy analysis.

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