**“Translating STS concepts to Critical Policy Studies”**

Review article: **Making policy move. Towards a politics of translation and assemblage**, by John Clarke, Dave Bainton, Noémi Lendvai and Paul Stubbs, Bristol/Chicago, Policy Press, 2015, 261 pp., ISBN 978-1-4473-1337-3

When policy moves among institutions, across geographies, or from organizations to so-called recipients, it undergoes changes. Policy cannot be carried from one place to another; the policy is reassembled in new—even surprising—ways and made to mean something in new contexts. In other words, it is *translated*. This, in short, is the perspective of “Making policy move. Towards a politics of translation and assemblage”. In their creative book, authors John Clarke, Dave Bainton, Noémi Lendvai and Paul Stubbs urge scholars to discard the policy *transfer* idea. Ideas do not simply transfer; something happens when they move. But how do policies move and how can analysts grasp the changes they undergo? These questions are at the core of the book, and its major contribution to critical policy studies (CPS) is to offer a new conceptual vocabulary for thinking about them.

Although the authors situate themselves within CPS, they make some good arguments for pushing the field further regarding meaning making, the role of language, and closure in the research process. First, they argue meaning making is not enough of a focus for policy analysts – meaning making becomes interesting only when we highlight its contested character and the “forms and relations of power and authority implicated in the making and remaking of social worlds” (p. 19). Second, they take from the argumentative turn the productive capacity of language but assert that, because of an over-focus on rhetoric, other elements like the relations among practices, actors, and objects too often elude the analyst’s lens. Third, they assert that existing CPS theories assume the productive effects of discourse too quickly. For research results, this implies “the danger of deciding, too early, that we know what something means, and of making decisions that provide closure to the research process” (p.52).

To offer a solution to these dilemmas, the authors borrow and deploy concepts from outside of policy studies, including *translation* and *assemblage*. Translation refers to re-representation, re-ordering and to meaning making between different linguistic or cultural contexts; but also to an active process of interpretation and contestation. The concept is used in several disciplines (e.g., linguistics), and the authors refer to several of these disciplines, among others science and technology studies (STS), in which actor network theory (ANT) has used ‘translation’ as a central concept. Drawing moreover on post-colonial perspectives, the authors see translation as an intrinsically political process that allows for both domination and contestation. As can be seen in the title, they also include the concept of ‘assemblage,’ which in ANT refers to open and ever-changing entities of associated humans and non-humans. They acknowledge ANT for stressing displacement and dislocation, for foregrounding processes of association, and for its concern with radical uncertainty about effects and outcomes.

After setting out this way of thinking in the first two co-authored chapters, each author applies it in a case study. Paul Stubb’s topic is social policy and child care reform in Southeast Europe. Analyzing his own consultancy experience from a translational lens, he shows how narratives are made to fit the region, constituting a kind of childcare system reform assemblage, marginalizing, but never completely silencing other, more critical narratives. John Clarke analyses what management talk does to universities and what universities (and their employees) do to management talk. He concludes that we can observe resistance in how management is assembled differently than intended. Noémi Lendvai then studies how EU governance of social inclusion is translated in a Hungarian policy context, and Dave Bainton’s chapter is devoted to his ethnography of translating education in non-Western contexts.

The book closes with a powerful normative demand for doing not only policy research otherwise but ‘policy otherwise’. With this the authors mean that, if we acknowledge that policy translations are assemblages of the various aspects of people’s lives, then we should also try to act on this knowledge. For example, in Bainton’s chapter, it becomes obvious how ways of living become deconstructed because of Western ideas of education, prompting us to ask how education policy could better reassemble livelihoods. The authors conclude that we should try to do policy otherwise; they give examples of alternatives from their case studies but they also stress that this is not a final point. Instead, they see the book as being part of an ongoing dialogue (this is represented quite literally at the end of the book) and a device to draw more people into this dialogue.

Gladly accepting this invitation to join the dialogue, I will in the following argument, take the book and its conceptual considerations as a departure point to suggest that the book could have been even better if it had focused on a more thorough conceptual work. I would have to admit that, at times, the book seems saddled by ramblings that strike me as distractions. The authors claim to want to expand the existing analytical repertoire of critical policy studies because they experienced it as insufficient to grasp their questions. But, rather than laying out a broad spectrum of concepts (e.g., articulation, performance, narrative, contact zones, multiplicity, heteroglossia, emergence, and affect), the authors could have been more helpful to the reader by going into depth into one or two concepts instead of offering so many terms. I think the concepts *translation* and *assemblage* as used in STS would have been ideal candidates for an in-depth exploration because these concepts are partly already used in policy studies (e.g., Freeman 2009). The authors could have clarified how the existing uses of the concepts translation and assemblage in CPS is insufficient and in what way they developed the concepts further.

By focusing on the conceptual work, I do an injustice to the book and its authors. It was never their intention to offer a strict theoretical framework, nor do they exclusively draw on *STS’s* notion of translation and assemblage because they play with different ways of opening up our understanding of policy and of enabling us to tell the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the effects of policy. Let me say that my more narrow focus on a theoretical point diminishes neither the worthy contribution this book makes, nor my joy in having read it.

*Translating translation*

In which way do the authors use the ‘translation’ concept and how could going into depth of ANT’s interpretation of the concept have helped develop an analytical framework for CPS?

A characteristic of analytical concepts is that they are different from common sense ideas and that they are part of a bigger explanatory construct, that is of theories. The authors of ‘Making policy move’ enact the ‘translation’ concept in at least four different ways. First, they use it in the commonsense meaning of the word: translating between languages. Second, they stress, not so much what is lost, but also what is produced in linguistic translation. Thus, they highlight that translation implies a performative dimension. For example, a main topic in Noémi Lendvai’s chapter focuses on language and problems in linguistic representations of EU policy documents in member states and how social inclusion policy produced social togetherness policy. Third, and referring to post-colonial studies, they draw attention to “translation as intrinsically political and contentious process in which forms and relationships of power are always at stake” (p. 189). Finally, translation is used as a concept, rooted among others in STS, in interplay with the term ‘assemblages’. Let us have a brief look at what ‘translation’ as used by ANT has to offer for analysis.

‘Translation’ is a key concept in actor-network theory (ANT), which focuses on how relations among actors change when things, ideas or practices move and what the effect of this is. Translation captures how relationships between heterogeneous elements are established (Callon 1986b:26, Law 1999:8). Callon (1986) and Latour (1987) stress the importance of getting other actors on board by interesting them, enrolling them (translating their wills), aligning them in order to prevail against opponents (i.e., in scientific controversies) and ensuring that something is done (i.e., that one’s technological invention is taken up by others). In his famous scallop text from 1986, Callon, for example, outlined a four-step model of translation, starting from problematization, and moving to interessement, enrolment, and finally to mobilizing. Latour’s 1987 typology focused on persuasion strategies. ANT considers ‘translation’ a dynamic, never-ending process that leads to uncertain transformations. In Latour’s words, the specialized meaning that translation takes on in ANT is this: “a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexistence” (Latour 2005:108).

We see that ANTs ‘translation’ concept can indeed be useful for policy analysts trying to grasp how policy ideas and relations among actors reassemble in policy practices because it is part of an actor-based approach suggesting that one could elicit persuasion strategies, enrollments and interessement, and it acknowledges performative transformations. If Clarke et al. had submersed themselves in this literature, they would have seen that, for example, performance, articulation, and affect are already embedded in the notions of translation and assemblage. Also, Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation — “the mobilization of discursive and political connections into dominant formation and blocs” (Clarke et al. 2015:54) — resembles what Callon (1986a) wanted to describe with ‘mobilising’ as part of translation and what Latour (1987) refers to in his persuasion strategies. Besides, their ascription of translation to the sphere of language and of assemblage to the sphere of materiality and practices (Clarke et al. 2015:50) falls short of grasping how translation and assemblage are intertwined. Assemblages are the effect of translations. Let us look closer at this material aspect of ANT’s ‘translation’ concept.

*Bringing in the material*

As mentioned above, ‘translation is a key concept in ANT which is also known as the ‘sociology of translation’ or as ‘material-semiotics’. That is, ‘translation’—as analytical concept—comes as part of a bigger theoretical package that implies an important *material aspect*. It is exactly concerning the lack of materiality that CPS could advance its own empirical and methodological project by drawing further on STS’ concepts. ANT attends to the fact that “the world is *practiced in materially heterogeneous ways*” (Law & Singleton 2014:382). CPS could press ANT’s insights further to explore the creative interplay between materialist and discursive explanations (West 2012), while STS concepts such as *translation*, *boundary object*, or *co-production* could be necessary reminders for critical policy analysts of the role of matter in the midst of discourse (Åm 2015). How does the book fare regarding ‘matter’?

Bainton’s chapter fares best in this regard. He starts with an illustrative ethnographic story, and shows powerfully the role of geography and landscapes in translating education. Unfortunately, he then abandons this materiality, devoting a major part of his chapter to theoretical reflections on translation. This may in fact be a major weakness of the book as such: every so often the authors seem to back into secondary literature and complicated theorizing language instead of placing their empirical research front and center so that the empirical can speak for itself. Also, the empirical examples in the respective chapters often refer back to language and representations, for example in policy texts or issues of labelling. Thus, although the authors want to transgress IPA’s focus on language, they—with the exception of Bainton— somehow cannot themselves escape this focus on rhetorical analysis.

Admittedly, it is not easy to show the role of material objects and technical practices in written accounts of empirical research. Two recent publications in this journal can be mentioned as excellent attempts (Carter 2011 and Aarden 2015). In ‘Making policy move’, John Clarke’s anecdote about filling in timesheets that introduces his chapter may indeed be most telling about ‘The managerialised university’ because it shows how policy ideas of managerialization change the daily enactment of university life.

*Concepts enable conversations*

Let me round off by offering a last argument about why it might be advantageous for CPS to borrow concepts from STS: the mutual use and adoption of concepts can intensify the interactions between these fields which would be of value because of the mutually complementary explanatory power of materialist and discursive perspectives, as mentioned above (West 2012, Åm 2015). That is, STS’ insights can be fruitfully applied in CPS and vice versa: For example, political discourse theory ‘adds power’ to STS, while STS ‘adds practice’ to political discourse theory (Freeman 2012:19). Generating STS’s interest in CPS would be an indirect added value of using STS concepts in policy analysis. STS is already interested in policy but maybe not so much in all the work done in CPS. In their turn to politics, STS scholars immodestly proclaim that they are better suited to study politics than political scientists (see e.g. de Vries 2007, Latour 2007). While de Vries’ and Latour’s thoughts (drawing on e.g. Dewey and Lippmann) by no means are uninteresting, such writing mostly ignores the contributions and work done in fields like CPS. We can take this as an indicator that the interaction between STS and CPS needs to improve, to say the least.

Thus, the translation of STS concepts to Critical Policy Studies has *at least* one important effect: enacting a fruitful cooperation between different disciplines, among various scholars and across geographies. Law and Singleton’s (2014) reference to Clarke’s and Lendvai and Stubb’s translation work illustrates the potential of intensifying interactions through the use of shared concepts (p. 381). The performativity of analytical concepts is also clear in the ‘Making policy move’ book: concepts not only do something to the empirical material, they also do something to the academic community. Clarke et al.’s book shows that the translation concept enabled cooperation among four scholars. Even though they use ‘translation’ quite differently in their respective chapters, the concept worked as something of an empty signifier by enabling their cooperation and holding them together.

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