

AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of an article originally published by _____
in _____
(ISSN _____; eISSN _____).

OpenAIR takedown statement:

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies>) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC _____ license.

Policy Translation: an invitation to re-visit the work of Latour

Paul Spicker

Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland¹

The analysis of policy-making and policy transfer is hardly virgin territory. Political science offers us a wide range of competing analytical concepts to understand the process of policy making and the influences that come to bear. Laying aside narrative and sequential accounts, the leading views currently include:

- *Advocacy Coalitions*. Policy is seen as the product of a negotiation between different factions, arguing for views and approaches within different policy domains.
- *Policy Streams*. This is a complex view, which holds that policy is influenced by debate in three different areas: the identification of problems, policy debates, and the political forum. In each, there is constant debate about policy, and a shared vocabulary or discourse within which it is discussed. Received views about the agenda and options for development emerge through a process of interaction.
- *Path dependency*. Because institutional and administrative processes are complex and difficult to engage with, there is a tendency to inertia; existing practice and pragmatism shape the conditions in which new decisions are made, and steer policy discourses down well-worn tracks.
- *Punctuated equilibrium and paradigm shifts* There may be long periods of 'equilibrium', when nothing happens, punctuated by sudden and rapid change as the paradigms change or new external factors come into play.²

Equally, in terms of policy transfer, there is a wide range of competing explanations for policy convergence, including historicism, functionalism, globalisation and structural dependency, regime analysis and rational choice, as well as the interactionism implied by the models in the political science literature. At the level of theory, there may be a case for the construction of new syntheses, but the bar is high; the field is already crowded, and the competition is stiff.

The purpose of this paper is explained as being to enhance "the analysis of processes of movement of ideas between multiple actors and in the process of implementation of social policies." The core argument made by Latour is, as I read it, that networks are interactive

¹ Correspondence: p.spicker@rgu.ac.uk

² See P Sabatier, C Weible, 2014, *Theories of the policy Process*, Boulder Colorado: Westview Press; P John 2012, *Analyzing public policy*, London: Routledge.

and extendable, and that across the associations of a network, "Every network surrounds itself with its own frame of reference, its own definition of growth, of referring, of framing."³ Policy transfer is based, consequently, on the development of a common discourse through a process of networking.

ANT is primarily a contribution to sociological theory. Latour's work offers, through his development of the concept of networks, an alternative resolution of the dilemmas posed by emergence.⁴ Callon bases his generalisations about the identification, engagement and mobilisation of actors on an examination of the interactive processes they undergo.⁵ The identification of actors is "radically indeterminate".⁶ That analysis can be seen as complementary to accounts of the process of policy making, in so far as it establishes conditions under which the process takes place, and the relationships between the actors; but it is not an explanation of structural or institutional influences on politics, or of the content of the policy process. The case for extending actor-network theory beyond its role in analysing actor engagement and mobilisation depends on the argument that it can in that context add value to analysis or interpretation, offering something that existing paradigms don't. Analysing the contribution of actors, or the content of policy, is not however what the theory has been developed to do.

The explanation of Conditional Cash Transfers calls, I think, for rather more than actor-networks or translation - or indeed any form of explanation primarily dependent on political interaction, such as advocacy coalitions or policy streams. In recent years, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the way that governments understand their responsibilities to their citizens. In Africa, there have been sweeping improvements in public service⁷: some are attributable to the spread of democracy,⁸ others to technological advances.⁹ International organisations which formerly promoted neo-liberal economics have committed themselves to the promotion of participative engagement in strategy; the Monterrey Consensus has moderated the previous enthusiasm for competitive markets with a commitment to basic social policies;¹⁰ the World Bank has encouraged the growth of social assistance and social

³ B Latour, 1990, On actor-network theory: a few clarifications plus more than a few complications, obtained at <http://www.cours.fse.ulaval.ca/edc-65804/latour-clarifications.pdf> :

⁴ **Error! Main Document Only.** R Sawyer, 2005, Social emergence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁵ M Callon, 1986, Some elements of a sociology of translation, in J. Law, Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge? London, Routledge, 1986, pp.196-223.

⁶ M Callon, 1998, Actor-network theory: the market test, Sociological Review 47(S1) 181-195

⁷ **Error! Main Document Only.** S Radelet, 2010, Emerging Africa? Baltimore, Maryland: Center for Global Development

⁸ **Error! Main Document Only.** A Sen, 1999, Development as freedom Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁹ Radelet, 2010.

¹⁰ **Error! Main Document Only.** United Nations, 2003, Monterrey Consensus on Financing for development, www.un.org/esa/ffd/monterrey/MonterreyConsensus.pdf

protection.¹¹ None of that is enough to explain the 'quiet revolution'¹² which has seen the widespread adoption of social assistance, a development as significant for emerging economies today as the creation of national insurance systems were in Western Europe in the last century. These are powerful societal developments, and there is nothing in the 'radical indeterminacy' of actor-network theory that helps to explain their scope, breadth or generality. Actor network theory may have some role in analysing the politics; but it's far from clear that the application of actor/network theory has the power to explain the formation or implementation of policy.

There has been a tendency to over-state the analytical force of actor-network theory. "Latour and others", we are told, "have been insisting on a notion of politics as the common composition of our world which includes both questions of who and what." And so they might, working in a language that uses the same word for politics as for policy. In English writing, by contrast, there is no question that these are different things, even if the boundaries between them are sometimes blurred; the main complaint about the terminology has been that the differentiation between the elements is nothing like fine enough. Public policy analysts have sought to clarify the competing understandings and sources of influence, at macro, meso and micro levels; Hogwood and Gunn begin with ten competing definitions of 'policy'.¹³ In the field of public policy, the vocabulary through which policy is analysed has routinely been augmented with concepts such as operationalisation, implementation and a clutch of terms related to evaluation.

Inevitably, imitating or transferring policies requires some form of adaptation to the institutional and administrative circumstances where the policies are implemented. That is fairly obvious, and the existing literature on policy transfer would not be worth much if it had not already taken the process of adaptation into account. The idea of 'translation', at least in the terms ably expounded by Freeman¹⁴, is part policy transfer, part operationalisation, part implementation. What the idea of 'policy translation' offers us is, at best, a word that can help us to refer to a process; but it is rather too generic and broad-brush to clarify the steps in that process, or say anything specific or distinctive about them.

¹¹ World Bank, 2012, REsilience, equity and opportunity: the World Bank's Social Protection and Labour Strategy 2012-2022, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/280558-1274453001167/7089867-1279223745454/7253917-1291314603217/SPL_Strategy_2012-22_FINAL.pdf,

¹² **Error! Main Document Only.** A Barrientos, D Hulme, 2009, Social protection for the poor and poorest in developing countries, Oxford Development Studies 37(4) 439-456.

¹³ **Error! Main Document Only.** B Hogwood, L Gunn, 1984, Policy analysis for the real world, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ R Freeman, 2009. What is Translation?. Evidence & Policy 5 429-447.