

## Reflections

# Moving policy out of time – commentary to Refstie

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This paper is prompted by Hilde Refstie's lecture on co-production and the role of academia in the search for sustainability in times of fast policymaking. My aim is to keep the conversation going by reflecting on how policy researchers negotiate all kinds of tensions and contradictions when traversing academic and policy worlds. It seems to me that those involved in making and researching fast policy are – in rather different ways – moving out of time: there is an urgent search for 'solutions' to the many, different crises we are now facing. Yet, the very existence of political alternatives requires holding open the possibility of interrupting the now all-too-familiar rhythms of fast policy. While calls for 'slow scholarship' may push back against the increasing tempo of the neoliberal academy, if we are not careful such appeals risk reproducing existing exclusions and inequalities, not least among those struggling by on temporary contracts. Confronting these dilemmas and antagonisms may help go some way towards reconfiguring research relevance in the present political moment.

Keywords: co-production, fast policy, neoliberalism, policy mobilities, slow scholarship, sustainability

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## Introduction

Sometimes it can seem like academics are so sure about what is going on that they dismiss ideas before the conversation has even got going. Perhaps the rush to coin new terms in academia also encourages hasty, and often rather ungenerous, critique? Or maybe, it is just all-too-easy to be cynical these days? This certainly seems to be so when dealing with concepts gaining traction beyond the narrow confines of academia. 'Co-production' is one such example. It is a malleable idea that has found its way remarkably smoothly into policymaking worlds – spanning everything from climate crisis to healthcare reform – and I must admit I have always been a little bit suspicious.

And so, it is a joy to engage with Hilde Refstie's (2021) lecture on co-production and the role of academia in the search for sustainability in times of fast policymaking. My own hesitations towards the concept of co-production were carefully yet critically prized apart in effort to salvage its more radical potential. This produces a wonderfully generative and reflexive appeal to hold open the possibility of other ways of doing 'policy relevance' to help imagine more hopeful futures. As Refstie outlines, there are of course all kinds of antagonisms and ambiguities in the turn towards co-production gathering pace over recent decades. But rather than try to tidy everything away, what if we take time to work through those tensions to rethink what policy researchers do – and what they do not or will not do – through their research practices?

In this reflection piece, I take up Refstie's call to keep the conversation going by thinking through the rather awkward relationships between fast policy and fast research. There is, no doubt, something really important in the need to redefine and reconfigure research relevance. Although, as Refstie (2021, 163) insists, in order to do so meaningfully, the "workings of power in co-productive spaces must therefore be continuously interrogated". And it is here where I want to begin.

### Working the spaces of power

Throughout her lecture, Hilde Refstie constantly reminds us to be alert to power and politics when moving across academic and policy worlds. On my reading, at least, this is a call for academics to be relentlessly critical without ever slipping into cynicism or fatalism. I do sometimes worry, for example, we still give a little too much weight to concepts like neoliberalism in a way that can become utterly dispiriting, and sometimes analytically limiting, too.

For me, Refstie is making an appeal to a particular kind of *openness* encouraging researchers to work within, beyond and against 'mainstream' spaces of politics and policy. As such, I could not help but be prompted to read this in conversation with Newman's (2012) *Working the Spaces of Power: Activism, neoliberalism and gendered labour* and the insistence to continuously negotiate the many ambiguities and uncertainties of research rather than assuming an all-knowing position. Bringing these into dialogue with Refstie's lecture prompts us to pay attention to how the themes of "making visible", "generating public conversations" and "creative labour" (Newman 2012, 4) can help academic-activists forge alternative political visions and policy agendas.

It is important therefore that Refstie's call to rescue the radical potential of co-production demands we raise questions over how we might overcome silences in research and who is otherwise made absent. Studying fast policy 'from within', as well as the depoliticising dynamics of co-production, really can narrow the focus of research, making it impossible to raise some topics or ask particular kinds of questions. Those concerns about the "questions never posed, the articles never written, and the collaborations never formed" (Refstie 2021, 168) resonated strongly with the many conversations I have had over the years with other fixed-term contract researchers entangled within the worlds of 'policy relevant' research – many of whom have since left academia entirely as their contracts ran out. Making visible, then, is not just about what questions are asked, but also *who* is asking the questions.

And this relates to another challenge of co-production in fast policymaking – who are researchers actually talking with? As Newman (2012) insists, conversations with a wide range of publics are not only crucial for winning support for particular policies or forcing legislative reform but can become vital cultural-political work to help shift the balance of forces in the present moment. For a progressive or radical politics involves more than simply finding ways of addressing different audiences – all those uneven and unresolved relationships playing out through the turn to co-production. Rather, generating public conversations can help build new connections and alliances that make other kinds of politics possible. This is, I think, precisely the double-meaning of *articulation* that Stuart Hall advocated (see, for instance, his interview with Grossberg (1996)).

Unless academics give voice to concerns resonating beyond the academy, we risk existing in separate worlds from where policy is made and where political struggles take place. For me, this is expressed in Refstie's comments on those critical academic voices that may often be recognised yet their reports are filed away and gather dust on bookshelves somewhere else. I do not, however, take this as a gesture towards a kind of middle-of-the-road liberalism nor an appeal to technocratic

consensus-building. Rather, in the terms of Janet Newman and the many voices in *Working the Spaces of Power*, Refstie's lecture appeals to the need to thinking creatively: "making new things and generating the possibilities of alternative ways of living, working and practising politics" (Newman 2012, 4). After all, there are all kinds of different ways academics might intervene, be that interacting with (and opposing) municipal or national governments, the everyday struggles of grassroots activism, or phoning up radio talk shows to make an argument, as just a few examples.

This will no doubt be punctuated by all kinds of frustrations, antagonisms and failures. But rather than retreating to an uncompromisingly certain position, perhaps we might follow an approach inspired by Refstie whereby policy researchers have to instead try to get to grips with the many different tensions and contradictions that register within their own research practices.

### **On the urgency of fast policy**

There has been remarkable expansion of interest in 'fast policy' in recent years (Peck & Theodore 2015). In fact, such is the enthusiasm among critical geographers, anthropologists and others researching how policy moves in a globalising world, it has been hard to keep up! But for anyone studying policymaking, it is difficult to ignore the seemingly ever-expanding cast of policy intermediaries – think-tanks, management consultancies and, of course, academics – circulating the latest 'models' and 'exemplars' in a bid to provide shortcuts to help 'solve' the latest crisis.

In these times of fast policymaking, Refstie (2021) underscores how the notion of 'sustainability' can be mobilised in almost any direction. And when combined with 'co-production' in the name of sustainable solutions to this, that or the other, it is hard to not nod in agreement over how this can be appropriated into a form of 'washing'. It is funny how the grand claims of 'radical transformation' really can be used by policymakers to promote business as usual. We need only look to social media to observe the pivot to 'inclusive growth' among policy intermediaries who only a few years ago were promoting more-or-less the same policy ideas simply badged in terms of bolstering 'growth'.

And this points to another key issue raised in Refstie's lecture: there are all kinds of contradictions bound up with accumulation strategies proclaiming sustainability. This is neatly illustrated through different cities and their advocates proclaiming to be learning from and promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals in *extremely visible* ways to compete with other cities to attract globally mobile capital. It is probably not wholly surprising, then, that many self-declared 'world-leading' universities have also been drawn towards sustainability fixes binding together contradictory claims of promoting 'business and entrepreneurship' whilst fostering 'social justice and responsibility'.

Some ideas seem to be difficult to resist in the worlds of fast policy. Such is the urgency for 'sustainable solutions' to all kinds of different crises – so often combined with appeals to co-producing knowledge, however ambiguous or weakly-defined – there appears to be no time for questions, we just need to act now! And herein lies the problem for researchers responding to policy problems that have already been pre-determined by other 'stakeholders' somewhere else. As Refstie rightly emphasises, if policy researchers arrive at already-defined research questions, we risk being bound to the policy agendas and short time-frames of a clientelist politics, be that election cycles or time-sensitive profit maximation.

In short, 'policy relevant' research is increasingly conditioned by the co-productive dynamics of *fast policy*. That should really make us stop and think. How academics are enrolled into the search for policy relevant research "can therefore not be divorced from discussions of the systems that guides them" (Refstie 2021, 167). And this is a concern I take up for the remainder of the commentary.

### **Making fast policy move otherwise?**

It is important that Refstie concludes her lecture, informed by anti-colonial and feminist politics, calling for collective action resisting the acceleration and intensification of the neoliberal academy. As noted, 'slow scholarship' is not about speed *per se*, but rather the structuring forces of marketisation, competition and notions of individual self-reliance that – among other things – condition what kinds of research are possible (Mountz *et al.* 2015). Calls for slowness are by no means new. In fact, the

pressures of time run throughout many conversations I have had with precariously-employed university workers and how this is precisely the stuff of the first volume of Marx's (1867) *Capital* we're talking about here!

Wherever our starting points, the awkward relationship between fast policy and fast policy research demands closer attention. With the pressure on, academics are increasingly drawn towards seeking funding from new sources beyond more conventional routes to try to sustain their jobs and livelihoods. And as emphasised by Refstie, these conditions play directly into the reinforcing of existing policy and political agendas foreclosing how researchers might foster new and innovative ways of making policy move differently.

Refstie makes an important contribution in calling for reconfiguring research relevance towards the multiple imperatives of being critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable. There is an awful lot to agree with on the insistence that research "should be able to explain phenomena, lead to impact, be anchored with stakeholders, while at the same time explore, expose, and question hegemony and traditional assumptions about power in the pursuit of social change" (Refstie 2021, 165). So, too, is the acknowledgement that achieving all these things even some of the time is perhaps impossible.

I did wonder, though, what might constitute 'rooted research' for policy researchers traversing the circuits of fast policy? This might be quite a troubling question. As Bok (2015) has observed, however critically-minded, fast policy researchers can themselves become the jet-setting intermediaries perpetuating a similar elitism they set out to critique when following the policy. But if we are to imagine a progressive politics of place beyond place (following Massey 2011), we perhaps risk 'rootedness' being problematically understood in rather introspective terms of *localness*. To articulate political alternatives attuned to spatial difference, 'translation' might remain a useful framing for researchers navigating the worlds of co-production and fast policy (Clarke *et al.* 2015).

This speaks directly to ongoing debates within policy mobilities scholarship over the role of academic researchers – and their institutions – becoming intermediaries themselves circulating and reworking policy in motion. As the municipal official in Refstie's (2021, 165) lecture puts it, just "where is the line between being a research institution and a consulting company?" Such boundaries can be troubling for those researching fast policy. Indeed, as Baker and Temenos (2015, 841) ask:

What role do institutions such as universities play in the transfer of policy ideas and promoting 'best practice' models? How is our own work implicated in the mobility and immobility of certain policy ideas? How do researchers' engagements with elected officials, policy practitioners, activists and the like see them embroiled in the very process under investigation?

These are unsettling questions. Unsettling precisely because academic policy researchers do not always occupy fixed positions – methodologically and contractually. As I have written about elsewhere, when policy researchers become attached to the policies they are following, the idea of insider/outsider binaries do not easily hold. Rather, fast policy researchers differently negotiate multiple, contradictory subjectivities which, in different times and spaces, may be altogether far more precarious (Lorne 2020).

I agree wholeheartedly therefore with encouraging an expanded notion of public intellectuals – though what capacity exists to hold academic institutions to account today remains uncertain. After all, we must be careful not to romanticise universities, nor slowness, for that matter. With a view from Britain, where protracted industrial action rumbles on, it is not easy being optimistic in terms of what academia might enable in terms of a progressive, *let alone* radical politics. Though we might ask, at what time have universities ever really been a place for challenging prevailing orthodoxies?

It may be uncomfortable for many academics to be confronted by this, not least as it questions the very institutions upon which their own (academic) identities and practices rest – and with it the reproduction of deeply-entrenched inequalities, exclusions and exploitations. There is great appeal, therefore, in Refstie's concluding remarks discussing the public role of universities and what a 'new university' might look like. Not only does this bring into focus existing problems and tensions between the role of universities as employers, as sites of knowledge production and as powerful intermediaries in the legitimising of circulating policy and political agendas, it also holds onto emancipatory ideals of universities as places of collective learning, creativity and contestation. It remains an open question as to whether academic researchers can together make fast policy move otherwise in these troubling times.

## Conclusions

It seems to me that those involved in making and researching fast policy are – in rather different ways – moving out of time: there is an urgent search for ‘solutions’ to the many, different crises we are now facing. Yet, the very existence of political alternatives requires holding open the possibility of interrupting the all-too-familiar rhythms of fast policy. While calls for ‘slow scholarship’ help push back against the increasing tempo of the neoliberal academy, if we’re not careful such appeals risk reproducing existing exclusions and inequalities, not least among those struggling by on temporary contracts. Confronting some of these dilemmas and antagonisms may help go some way towards reconfiguring research relevance in the present political moment.

Thinking across these differences is unquestionably challenging. And whether we like it or not, it can be all too easy for academics to fall into individualist modes of working, rather than fostering a spirit of responsibility and care. Inspired both by Hilde Refstie’s lecture, and the open process of peer review encouraged by *Fennia*, what if we start from a more careful – if no less critical – position of listening and learning, rather than necessarily rushing to critique? And as such, how might we work within, beyond and against fast policy and fast research to cultivate alternative political possibilities? These are questions I have certainly got a lot of time for.

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