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Tess Lea (ed.) (2020) Wild policy: Indigeneity and the unruly logics of intervention

Many geographers work with policy's effects and explore how its formulation, enactment, legacy, and modes of opposition influence how people, places, and things relate. In coming to terms with these relations, we often engage in evaluations of social policy to ascertain what 'good' has come from it, what lessons can be gleaned, and how aspects of it might be recast to materialise better outcomes. At the foundation of Tess Lea's argument in *Wild Policy* is a caution that such evaluative attempts "reinforce myths of original policy coherency" (p. 24). That policy is both inherently chaotic and wild underpins the unfurling of relations that this book lovingly and sometimes tragically presents.

Wild Policy is quite simply a triumphant experimentation for tracking the 'shape-shifting trickster' that is social policy. Lea employs a style of ethnography that could be thought of as multi-sited and multi-scalar, and that has taken place in the years since the Australian Government's Northern Territory Intervention. But this method is not merely an anthropological ethnography, nor an in-style, multi-sited venture. Instead it is intentionally fragmented, "vertiginous and incoherent" in order "to circumvent the pursuit of holism" (p. 25). As such, the chapters unfold as such, addressing core questions as to the nature of social policy writ large, and hooking each chapter into a lyrical weave grounded by the voice and presence of John Singer—long-term collaborator and Director of Australia's oldest remote-area Aboriginal-controlled health service, Nganampa Health Council.

Six interlude sections stage common encounters between Indigenous people and the tentacles of policy, which are subsequently developed in the chapter which follows. The first interlude places the book on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, on the tri-border of South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory. Each section reads as an extended ethnographic vignette, with all of them articulating John's situatedness within webs and processes of Indigenous policy and reflecting on thick descriptions of meetings with bureaucrats and policy brokers. Declarations of the 'new' by policy makers signify protracted impasses—men wearing suits "proposing a new salvation for Aboriginal affairs, a new committee, a new project trial, a research project or even new funding," who come without "familiarity with the issues and well-earned community trust" (p. 7).

In Chapter 1, the reader is asked a central question that comes in and out of focus throughout the book: Can there be good policy? Frustratingly, if one requires definitiveness, the answer is both yes and no insofar as the 'good' is regularly ill-defined and the energy required to extract any good is always the burden of Indigenous people—whose bodies, lands, and institutions could be directed in the service of opposition and futurity but are worn down from the accumulation of policy interferences. In abstracting this insight to other realms of policy impact, the contention here is that even "if we knew what we meant by the terms *good* or *policy*, there are no vital dependencies on getting social policy consistently 'right' " (p. 22). This devasting argument stays with the reader throughout: that there is nothing incentivising good policy for the benefit of particular people in society; or similarly, that policy's

mandate to fix is mostly subverted by its tendency to create complex and chaotic extractions that are impossible to fully map.

While the prose is poetic, there is here theory-work that neatly unfolds. First, there is an understanding that policies are best conceived as contingent relations of human and other-than-human actors. For geographers, this contingency is a fact of all relational processes and things, and therefore, the most appropriate methodological stance is to approach policy ecologically. Second, there is no panacea in Indigenous social policy because, like all social phenomena, it is connected to and impacted by countermanding global extractions and enclosures such as mining and capitalism. Third, we must reject the orthodoxy of policy teleology that assumes coherency in the process, that we can somehow (or that it is useful to) locate the coordinates of policy failure in order to recall and reset the process all over again.

The entire book is informed by a methodological-cum-analytical frame that Lea terms policy ecology. Within this are three fundamental ontologies of policy: (1) the *artifactual*, which delineates the black-letter material records and documentation of policy; (2) the *hauntological*, which is an awareness that policy sediments in place and in social worlds, always lingering long after the 'new'; and (3) its *ambient* distribution, whereby policy saturates places, bodies, and things through affect.

Chapter 2 begins to deploy some of this theoretical work, and Lea describes entering a field that is embedded in the offices of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), the largest policy program of the Northern Territory Intervention. This is what Lea terms a "carpet world" or a "policy haunt." In this space, where private conglomerates mix with big government, policy fixes are quickly pronounced, and housing emerges as the cure-all. Poor housing is theorised in these policy spaces as connected to all forms of social and sexual dysfunction and is therefore a brick and mortar cure for all manner of psychic things. It helps settlers that remote Aboriginal housing is so intimately tied to land tenure and offers an opportunity for private–public bureaucracies to undo collective land tenure and spawn economic development. Growth town designations are created whereby funding for new homes became contingent upon the transfer of Aboriginal title to the Crown. Scandals embroil various heads of the policy, and changes of government herald the refinement of scope and implementation of the program. Eventually, after four weeks of covert ethnography, Lea is ejected from the carpet world.

Institutional killjoys are catalysts here for the failure and renewal of policy, Lea argues. Those who speak plainly and pragmatically about the mechanics of policy often suck the life out of magical metrics and targets that politicians gleefully repeat. In Chapter 3, the inconvenience of these metrics comes back to 'haunt' policy makers, as Indigenous communities labour in keeping record of promises as a form of guerrilla accounting. It is not necessarily radical or compliant; it is just necessary to hold the fastness of policy to account. Just as settler governance is inherently forgetful, there seems to be nothing at stake for policy makers to remember. Continuity is a burden placed on the other, whereby the promise of a different future gives rise to the task of accounting for the past. A different style of settler-colonial politics is articulated in this chapter. By reference to the use of 'militarism', the reader is versed in the historical dispossessions of the Warnindhilyagwa at Groote Eylandt, an island off the north-east coast of the Northern Territory, where some of the world's richest manganese deposits are extracted and shipped globally. Militarism describes the geo-political forces (inherently extractive and violent) that come to bear on all places and may stand in for what others might term imperialism.

Chapter 4 brings a new materialism to policy and describes the role of activism from 'outside' in eking out the 'good' from policy. Karrabing Film Collective is predominantly a Darwin-based Indigenous media group that Lea assisted in founding, along with Elizabeth Povinelli. Their struggles in attracting philanthropic funding and arts grants are narrated as a way to describe a format of story-telling and knowledge that is unrecognisable to the apparatus of institutional decision-makers. The temporality and rhythm of policy creates labyrinths that eradicate possibility. The Karrabing foreground a process of 'survivance' that produces alter-rhythms and affects that policy-normativity finds all too difficult to assimilate. In other words, these resistances (creative works) are in part always encounters with policy, and they always reshape it. It is in these closing parts of the chapter that we really start to empathise with the purpose of considering policy more ecologically, as to multiply the entry points for analysis and action. This space where action multiplies is termed the 'mesospace' of policy and is taken from Stenger's notions of the meso-political. We never quite break free of the structure-agency dichotomy, the micro or macro, but in the meso, we reshape possibilities to live. Activation of the mesopolitical space might not end policy entrapment—empty promises of progress—but may energise new and ongoing analytics of it.

In Chapter 5, the militarisation of social policy develops upon the unsettling of the structure-agency dichotomy by describing policy as simultaneously spatially embedded and having no source of origin. The only inherent truth to policy is that it is imperfectible and that

reproduction of itself is in its base code. While its permanence is implied, it is not inevitable. Policy is always an experimentation, from manganese extraction on Groote Eylandt, which is essential to the military-industrial complex, to its entanglement with uranium extraction, disposal, and nuclear testing on Aboriginal land, Indigenous people live within 'toxic sovereignty.' To be the Indigenous subject of militarised social policy is to be similarly experimented on, the arena of Indigenous affairs is where mainstream politics auditions.

The interludes stage encounters with policy, but Interlude VI breaks with this format to describe John Singer's backstory through presenting a raw transcript of an interview conducted after much of the book was written. In a conversation between John and Tess, the reader gets a rare glimpse of the ethical quandaries of writing up controversy, avoiding defamation and balancing the citational politics of academia with accessible writing. This is also aided by clever cartoons and humour in the footnotes throughout. Both this interlude and the concluding chapter change the rhythm of the book and, in Chapter 6, the reader is offered some sense of how to wrestle the good from policy. The Wild Policy Manifesto:

Step one: Stop asking for better policy.
Step two: Relieve the burden of being the otherwise.
Step three: Care for the micro.
Step four: Collectively leverage the meso.
Step five: Reject policy normativity.

Wild Policy is beautifully written and expands the fields of possible policy research and action beyond the normal evaluative impulse. It develops a field of inquiry that backgrounds extractivism and militarism in every transaction of modern life, the cost of which is calculated in the carpet worlds of bureaucracy and shifted into Indigenous affairs. It fills a gap in geographical work that looks at policy mobility, such as Peck's and Theodores's *Fast Policy*, by slowing down and embedding policy's affect and effect on the relationship between people and place, and how to fight back. It doesn't so much correct geography's reliance on the representational aspects of policy, or providing a deep exploration of policy 'spaces,' but rather, it traces the tangents of policy at a meso-political scale, both wayward and anti-teleological.

My reading was supported by the Critical Policy Reading Group at the Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University. For those who do geographical research with policy and in policy contexts (we all invariably do), then this is essential reading.

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