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## INTRODUCTION



# Trajectories of geography and public policy

Shaun Lin<sup>a</sup>, James D. Sidaway<sup>b</sup>, Michiel van Meeteren<sup>c</sup>, Mark Boyle<sup>d</sup> and Tim Hall<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>NUS College, National University of Singapore, Singapore; <sup>b</sup>Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore; <sup>c</sup>Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands; <sup>d</sup>Department of Geography, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland; <sup>e</sup>Department of Policing, Criminology and Forensics, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK

### ABSTRACT

Amidst political and institutional demands for a focus on ‘translational’, ‘applied’, ‘useful’, ‘relevant’, ‘impactful’ and ‘engaged’ research, this Special Section revisits and resituates the question of geography’s relationship with public policy and asks how do we respond to these societal demands? We need not start from scratch; in fact, there exists a substantial established literature on the geography–public policy relationship and its actual and potential trajectories. These debates need to be recontextualised and supplemented so that they are more thoroughly situated and sensitized to contemporary conjunctures, risks and opportunities.

### KEYWORDS

Applied geography; critical geography; geographic thought; relevance debates

## Introduction

This Special Section of *Space and Polity* re-engages with a long-standing debate on the relationship between geography and public policy. In an era of uncertain societal transformations, questions about the contributions of an academic discipline invariably emerge. Engaging with public policy invokes a long-standing dilemma for geographers (Ackerman, 1962). On the one hand, such engagements offer geography legitimacy and funding, but on the other there are risks of complicity in processes many geographers would rather remain critical commentators of. The Special Section comprises papers that examine the geography and public policy dilemma from different vantage points in the discipline. They were first presented in a panel on ‘Geography and Public Policy’ convened by the authors at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) in August 2021. This introduction, a continuation-outlined in the second edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Boyle et al., 2020), situates the papers in the longer standing debates on the topic.

The body of work collated in this Special Section seeks to reflect a sense that a new moment in the political geography of applied geography is upon us, amidst heightened political and institutional demands for ‘translational’, ‘applied’, ‘useful’, ‘relevant’, ‘impactful’ and ‘engaged’ research. On the face of it there appears little to fret over.

**CONTACT** Shaun Lin  [shaunlin@nus.edu.sg](mailto:shaunlin@nus.edu.sg)

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Geographers already find themselves in the thick of contemporary endeavours to tackle vital public concerns – spatial justice and inequalities; pandemic politics; geopolitics and cost of living crises; climate and energy transitions; migration, development, and populism, to name but a few. But the value of these contributions is (once again) being calibrated in and through what Staeheli and Mitchell (2005) referred to as a ‘complex politics of relevance’. Having failed to do so too many times and at critical moments in the past, the challenge facing geographers now is to take custody of the relationship between geography and public policy so as to steer the discipline through this politics of relevance and engage public policy in terms which are critical, moral and efficacious.

It is tempting to say that we have been here before; certainly, this is not the first time that geography has been coerced if not compelled to demonstrate its policy relevance and societal value. In consequence, much ink has been spilled by geographers, variously extolling, critiquing and debating this relationship between geography and public policy. Human geographers have amassed a reservoir of intellectual resources that ought to help the discipline navigate a path. But in truth there is no playbook wholly attuned to present conditions. And so, if we are to put past scholarly debates and the intellectual tools we have at our disposal in the service of crafting a critical but fruitful engagement with public policy today, these debates and tools need to be recontextualised and sensitized to contemporary realities, risks and opportunities – in short considered anew and rejected, affirmed or revised.

Informed by the history of geography’s entanglements with public policy – and the periodic post-mortems undertaken by human geographers thereafter – but mindful of shifting conjunctures, this Special Section provides further sustained introspection and interrogation of the relationship between geography and public policy. This introduction and the seven papers follow and critically dissect the stock of wise counsel geographers have banked from past reflections on the contribution of the discipline to public policy. By refracting these hard-won insights through the prism of present conditions, we scope productive strategies for building a new generation of applied geography capable of unlocking the munificence of geographic thought in the search for solutions which genuinely serve the public good.

## Revisiting the trajectories of geography and public policy

The enactment of applied geography and indeed even rumination by geographers over when, where, how and why they might engage public policy communities predates the so called ‘relevance debates’ of the late 1960s and 1970s (Johnston & Sidaway, 2016, pp. 308–344). But there can be no doubt that these debates spurred a level of introspection about the politics, morality and efficacy of its engagement with public policy. It is simplistic to suggest that critical self-reflection has given birth to three categories of geography and disingenuous to suppose that any one category has a particular ambassador or champion. But for the sake of securing some orientation, as we peruse again the relevance debates, we might speak in highly qualified terms about the ideal types of pure geography, applied geography and critical geography. But let us be clear that in reality a wide spectrum of at times highly nuanced and complex positions exist on the relationship between geography and public policy.

It is striking that in all major Anglophone works on geography and public policy published in the last decades, the relevance debate (now half a century old) constitutes a touchstone, informing, framing and inspiring the ways in which geographers think about public policy (in, for example, the work of Keith Hoggart, Jamie Peck, Ron Martin, Kevin Ward, Alexander Murphy, Doreen Massey, Danny Dorling, Rachel Pain, Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, Jamie Peck and Michael Pacione). There are other scholars too, such as Weidong Liu, Dennis Wei and Hyun Bang Shin, who may not have contributed directly to the relevance debate of geography and public policy, but their works inform us nevertheless of similar threads where geography and public policy overlap. As we note (more below), viewed from elsewhere, the relationships between geography and public policy can look rather different. The upshot however is that whilst blossoming into a multi-faceted landscape, debate on geography and public policy continues to pivot around two core vectors and tensions – rooted in the dualisms of what we might term as ‘applied-pure geographies’ and ‘applied-critical geographies’.

In our Encyclopaedia entry (Boyle et al., 2020, p. 90) we noted: ‘The relationship between geography and public policy has loomed large from the establishment of the modern discipline. Arguably, however, the balance of pure and applied work is cyclical, given further impulse by internal and external contexts and events.’ This tension between applied and pure geography has a long vintage. In Germany, there was a debate in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century about the extent to which geographical knowledge ought to be organized according to the logic of states (*Staatengeographie*) or according to a more natural, ‘pure’, logic (*Reine Geographie*) (Preuß, 1958). In practice, that pure logic was often based on physical geography and originally had strong teleological undertones. The two currents crystallized in a political geography based on political regions and a physical geography on ‘natural regions’. (De Pater & van der Wusten, 1996, p. 35)

When geography was institutionalized as an academic discipline, in the late nineteenth century, this dual structure was hotly debated. Political geography was clearly useful to the governing of states and empires, and to the fortunes of commerce. Physical geography appealed to the scientist and the teacher. But as Halford Mackinder (1887, p. 160) argued, ‘to divide the scientific from the practical [... will result ...] in the ruin of both’. It is clear that for Mackinder ‘political geography’ described a domain of knowledge that was human geography writ large. The prefix ‘political’ indicated the target audience the knowledge was deemed useful for. Political geography was geographical knowledge useful to intellectuals of statecraft, ‘commercial geography’ was geographical knowledge useful to businesses, ‘military geography’ is geographical knowledge useful to armed forces and so forth (compare Bowman, 1934, pp. 200–216). Indeed, reading Bowman’s (1921) *The New World*, subtitled, *Problems in Political Geography*, is a summary of all the post-World War I (cultural, economic, political and social) geography that he deemed crucial to the education of a US foreign affairs policy maker.

Nevertheless, as Mackinder’s (1887) lecture already indicates, a primary focus on the practical and the applied inevitably leads to accusations of lack of scientific rigour. This was a major drive for scholars like Richard Hartshorne to increase, as he saw it, the scientific character (see Barnes & van Meeteren, 2022), and thus the standing of political-geographic work (Hartshorne, 1935, 1950). In order to be more scientific and professional, geographers needed to narrow their domain of expertise (Ackerman, 1945), which helped

establish the thematic specializations (economic geography, political geography, cultural geography, etc.) and connections to other – sometimes interdisciplinary – fields, such as regional studies, planning and urban studies, that we know today.

The result of the tension between applied and pure geography is that the discipline tends to be pulled in different directions at different moments. Tracing the pendulum empirically, Pacione (1999) identified three waves of applied geographical praxis. The first, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, saw the establishment of the modern discipline against the backdrops of imperialism, nation-building and commerce. This is the world of Mackinder (1887) and Bowman (1921, 1934). The locus was predominantly in Europe and in North America and other states configured by settler colonialism. It was also rolled out across the European empires, although that imperial dissemination continued into what Pacione had identified as a second applied period, between the two World Wars, when notions of geography as an applied discipline for land-use planning developed. Given their history of tooling geographical knowledge to the needs of the state, geographers were keen to adapt their expertise to meet the demands of increased state involvement in planning (Van Meeteren, 2022).

In many places in Europe, fascism offered fertile soil for applied geography – as histories of geopolitics (Atkinson & Dodds, 2000) and *Hitler's Geographies* (Giaccaria & Minca, 2016) document. In the USA, the involvement of geographers in the World War II intelligence community was a key boon to the disciplinary development and professionalization (Barnes & Farish, 2006; Barnes & van Meeteren, 2022). But also, outside Europe, some parallels can be found, for instance in the history of Japanese geography (Nakashima et al., 2022). Pacione (1999) had discerned a third wave in the 1980s, in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s, but here debates on applied geography started to take on board issues around environmentalism and social justice, bringing in debates on critical geography.

As noted, debate concerning the relationship between geography and public policy gained particular impetus in the late 1960s and early 1970s on foot of the so called 'relevance debates' (Johnston & Sidaway, 2016). These debates revolved around a second axis of tension, alongside the pure-applied tension, that has played an increasingly important role in debates around geography and public policy: the applied-critical tension (Hall & Moore-Cherry, 2022). A key articulation of this tension was formulated in the intervention of David Harvey (1974) where he posed the question 'What kind of geography for what kind of public policy?' Harvey's article began with reference to the Chilean dictator General Pinochet. Pinochet's deep immersion in Latin American variants of classical geopolitics offered ideological frames for his regime – in particular the murder of leftists – whilst his economic and social policies (an early and brutal deployment of neoliberalism) remade Chilean society. Harvey (1974, p. 18) also noted that:

General Pinochet is a geographer by training, and by all accounts he is successfully putting geography into public policy. As President of the military Junta that overthrew of Salvador Allende in Chile on 11 September 1973, General Pinochet does not approve of 'subversive' academic disciplines such as sociology, politics and even philosophy. He has asked that 'lessons in patriotism' be taught in all Chilean schools and universities and he is known to look with great favour upon the teaching of geography – such a subject is, he says, ideally suited to in in the virtues of patriotism and to convey to the people a sense of

their true military have taken full command of the universities and frequently supervise instruction in the schools, it appears that geography will become a very significant discipline.

Harvey's striking opening was prescient. Anti-communism was a well-established active force across the Global South and in Mediterranean Europe, fostered by Cold War strategists in Washington, DC, and other leading Western capitals (Barnes & Farish, 2006; Bevins, 2020). What Pinochet was referring to was an earlier political geography, that of Bowman and Mackinder, to produce 'useful knowledge' to state and empire building. Indeed, Neil Smith's (2004) weighty biography of Isiah Bowman investigated how his work was intertwined with the formation of the American empire, of which the Chilean *coup d'état* was one of the darkest episodes.

But Chile turned out to be the advance guard of neoliberal policies too that would soon be rolled out in swathes of the Global South as the 1980s debt crisis reinforced the power of the IMF and World Bank. The 'reform and open-door policy' in China from late 1978 and – just over a decade later – the collapse of state socialism in the Soviet Union and its allies also reframed economic, social and political conjunctures around 'markets'.

The extent of the engagement of geography with public policy would make the discipline complicit in (geo)political-economic entanglements has dominated much of the debate on geography and public policy since the Harvey (1974) intervention (for overviews of these debates, see Castree, 2002; Johnston & Sidaway, 2016; Ward, 2005). Many scholars took a more reflective stance on the subject, tracing policies critically rather than participating in their production (Peck, 2004).

### Provincializing trajectories of geography and public policy

Travelling to Chile and understanding the geopolitics of the geography and public policy debates, draws us into reflecting on how much our discourse on applied geography is shaped by a Western view on the development of geographic praxis. It is imperative to broaden these conversations to trajectories of geography and public policy in other places (cf. Bailly & Gibson, 2004) and provincialize distinctions, for instance around the applied-pure and applied-critical analytical vantage points. While most of the work that we draw from in this Special Section concerns the UK or the USA, and one of us is based in a British university and from the countries in which the rest of us work (Ireland, the Netherlands and Singapore), the parameters of debate do have different inflections. And viewing the gyrations on these two vectors of geography and public policy from elsewhere, for example from China, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, South Africa or Turkey (to name just six notable loci of geographical thought and praxis) would yield very different turnings and timelines. In many cases, all geography is applied and to speak of pure and critical human geography is to introduce forms of knowledge production which are foreign to local geographical traditions. In the context of China for example, Liu et al. (2022, p. 119) argue that:

Chinese economic geographers, for instance, know too well from our disciplinary history that we need to have applied values in order to survive and gain respect. Significant Chinese economic geographical knowledges are produced through active participation in China's local, regional and national practical tasks, such as regional development planning.

This is not simply a matter of strategies and tactics for courting disciplinary patronage and investment – this after all has been endemic to the western tradition from the days of the first imperial cartographers. It is a recognition that China's political and intellectual history places in question the very intelligibility of the idea of an applied geography that is distinguishable from a 'pure' Other.

Moreover, a more situated rendering of the philosophy and intellectual history of useful knowledge might also want to refract debate on the relevance of geographical research through sub-disciplinary lenses. These internal divisions of labour – or better still systematic branches – have been conceived and propagated by the Western academy and publishing houses. Of course, health geography, population geography, rural geography urban geography, cross-cutting fields like environmental geography and GIS, as well as feminist geographies and the advancing field of Black geographies (see Bledsoe, 2021; Hawthorne, 2019; Noxolo, 2022) are all political geographies. They are political in the sense that it is knowledge assembled as relevant to their constituency and that choices in that assembling process reflect situated power relations. Simultaneously, these thematic subfields have already grown in fully fledged subdisciplines with their own theoretical and methodological registers, as well as differing sub-disciplinary cultures and different traditions of being involved and engaging critically with public policy. So how should we respond to the claim that applied geography is a parochial scholarly endeavour and intellectual practice?

We must recognize that both the practice of applied geography and debates over the ethics and efficacy of applied geography that pivot upon the dualisms of 'pure-applied geography' and 'applied-critical geography' are Anglo-American centric. The idea that there is such a thing as pure geography and that pure geography is distinctive from applied geography has emerged in particular historical-geographical contexts. So too is the idea that there exists a critical geography which is distanced by principle from policy facing research. We would, however, argue that Western traditions of applied geography need to be put in its place but not dismissed. They constitute both a powerful and indispensable albeit insufficient and partial knowledge formation.

### Scoping trajectories of geography and public policy

The vectors of pure-applied geography and applied-critical geography certainly thread through the papers that follow. But these papers do much more than simply rehearse debates of the past. Although diverging in focus and argument, they combine to offer critical counsel to applied geographers as they navigate through the exciting but fraught terrain of knowledge exchange in the 2020s. We bring them together here as a repository of reflection and practical wisdom on where, why and how geographers ought to be applying their expertise.

Tackling the discipline as a whole, Harrison (2022), writing from the UK, and Moore-Cherry (2022), writing from Ireland, suggest *how* we could engage public policy better in specific settings and pathways. First, Harrison (2022) aims to widen our thinking of the relationship of geography and public policy beyond the research angle to geographical teaching. He is concerned with pedagogical impacts on students (whether they major in geography or not), and what we as geography instructors expose our students to. Here he touches on an aspect of the literatures of applied geography that has been



relatively little developed to date, but which is also explored in Hall and Moore-Cherry's (2022) recent symposium in *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. The exposure to students as Harrison argues should be more of introducing 'what geographical research is (for) to our students and others who are maybe engaging with our discipline for the first time' (ibid, p. 4), actively showcasing geographers and their informed work influencing or shaping public concerns. It resonates with the observation by Banfield et al. (2022, p. 163) that:

students increasingly demand practice-grounded educational experiences that reach beyond scientific technicalities and intellectual critiques to working through real-world challenges, to prepare them with skills as much as knowledge for their aspirational policy roles.

A shift in the lines of pedagogy as discussed here could then help in crafting curriculum design and improving the delivery of classes and expanding geography's relationship with public policy into more critical and perhaps 'impactful' higher education experiences for students and faculty.

Next, Moore-Cherry (2022) identifies three pathways for geographers to take responsibility in shaping public policy, via critique and activism at distance, agenda setting and empowering publics. In particular, the second pathway of agenda setting is important for geographers to act upon. Moore-Cherry argues that geographers should identify opportunities to work *with* policy-makers rather than waiting to be invited in. She recounts her own experiences (albeit uncomfortable at times) to engage with policy-makers and reshaping their ideas and policies pertaining to urban and regional development in Ireland (ibid., pp. 4–5). Like Harrison's pedagogical suggestions, she adds that if opportune, this agenda setting could be extended to students involving in internships and project-based learning.

The remaining five papers transect specific topics within geography and its subdisciplines. Stewart Barr (2022), reflecting mostly from the UK, explores geography's engagement with the concept of sustainability in relation to public policy. He highlights three lessons in terms of questioning our academic relationship to sustainability, the role of geographers in generating impact for sustainability, the accompanied expectations, and the 'scholar-activist' approach that draws upon the vocational role of geographers in local environmental contexts. The 'scholar-activist' approach advocated by Barr is relevant for geographers in playing such roles, not just on the macro-scale, but in the context of micro-scale environment and sustainability and within local communities and livelihoods. There is the potential for geographers working with other academics from cognate disciplines and policy-practitioners to highlight pressing environmental challenges that impact scores of people and potentially recommend (partial) solutions.

Lees (2022), in revisiting her long-standing work on gentrification, predominantly in North America and the UK, argues that urban scholars (geographers and beyond) should engage more purposively with urban policy-makers and other institutional actors in making research on the negative impacts of gentrification known and to develop alternative and better policy practice. She thinks that gentrification research 'needs to be synthesized and made readable in different ways for different audiences', and must be relevant to public officials, whilst adding the need for scholars to understand policy and governance processes and be engaged in building long-term relationships (ibid., p. 3). Although noting that theoretical discussions have taken place across the Global



North and South, Lees has urged scholars to operationalize a theory of change attuned to different parts of the world. This should inspire urban geographers and scholars in/of such as Asia, where gentrification has become especially legible in the contexts of condensed urbanization and rapid economic development (see, for example, Shin, 2018).

Moving to health and medical geography, Planey et al. (2022) discuss the potential for health and medical geography to contribute to a policy-relevant geographical research agenda that remains attentive to social theory debates. Their case study from the US South illustrates the importance of time as a social determinant of health and reflecting on inequities in spatial access to acute care hospitals amid rural hospital closures, conversions and mergers. They highlight how time is an unevenly distributed resource across racialized backgrounds. Consequently, the importance of both temporal and spatial equity has to be considered in public policy debates around health geography and the value of space–time modelling that enables clear communication of such complex modelling to relevant politicians and public officials, needs to be appreciated.

Verweijen (2022) examines the the role of political geographers in public policy spheres, regarding violent conflict. Through her research experience in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and in particular preparing a recent report on the armed violence together with a group of Congolese researchers as part of series of analyses commissioned by a major development agency, she highlights the not so straightforward public policy engagement that political geographers may face in engaging public policy amidst a range of state and non-state actors. She considers how political geographers should engage with policy-makers and governmental institutions, noting the dilemmas that one could risk reinforcing (neo)colonial structures and epistemologies or faces inadvertently facilitating or legitimizing military intervention. Verweijen gives useful cautionary advice for (political) geographers to be careful in their vocabulary in meetings and reports, adapting accordingly where non-academic audiences may have narrower definitions or understandings of a particular issue.

Lastly, Wong (2022) considers UK regional development plans. She points to the lack of coherent spatial thinking in policymaking in the UK due to various political and economic considerations, such as the involvement of multiple local agencies – diverse mandates. She explains ‘spatial thinking in planning terms is simply about the process to explore, understand, interpret, and express patterns of spatial distribution and relationships and to articulate the spatial configuration of such relationships in maps and plans’ (ibid., p. 2). As such, she highlights the problems around duplications of effort over the development of regional and local development strategies. She argues that academics have an important role to play to expose inequitable spatial outcomes and to hold government to account and to shape critical public debate, therefore serving as a ‘critical friend’ of the policy community to engender mutual learning.

Whilst Dorling and Shaw (2002) pointed out that public policy is something that tends to be studied rather than practised by geographers, it is worth noting that several of our contributors based their suggestions for geographers and geography to engage public policy in specific measures on primary research over substantial periods. The insights collated in the Special Section reflect perspectives constructed from extended commitments to public issues, places and communities. In their engagement, they show how the actual practice of coupling geography with public policy invokes the resonance of the debates around pure-applied and applied-critical axes. At the same time, they

illustrate how the absolute poles of these distinctions and the barriers they establish are often unhelpful and blinding to the engagement practice of geography and public policy. In the geography of the future, they therefore need to be regarded as sensibilities (rather than classifications), that invite further discussion, from different geographical contexts and intellectual traditions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Shaun Lin* is a Lecturer in NUS College at the National University of Singapore. His current research agenda focuses on geography pedagogy, geography and public policy, environmental politics, and border studies.

*James D. Sidaway* has served as Professor of Political Geography at the National University of Singapore since 2012, having previously worked at several British universities and the University of Amsterdam. His most recent book is: Paasche, T.F. & Sidaway, J.D. (2021) *Transecting Securityscapes: Dispatches from Cambodia, Iraq and Mozambique*, University of Georgia Press.

*Michiel van Meeteren* is an Assistant Professor in Human Geography at Utrecht University, Netherlands, having previously worked in Belgium and the UK. His current research agenda focuses on the past, present, and future of geographic thought and practice in society, education, and academia.

*Mark Boyle* is Professor of Geography at Maynooth University in Ireland. He has an interest in historiographies of debates on relevance within human geography and specifically urban theory and its relationship with urban policy.

*Tim Hall* is a Professor in the Department of Policing, Criminology and Forensics, and Social Sciences at the University of Winchester. His current research focuses on the geographies of crime, with a particular focus on the ways in which geographers have explored transnational organised and cyber crime.

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