



# Book Review

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**Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism** by **Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore**. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 300pp., £22.50 (p/b), ISBN 9780816677313

This book examines two policies – conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and participatory budgeting (PB) – with the aid of the ‘extended case method’. Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore have conducted interviews with policymakers, experts and activists in 15 countries to provide a portrait of how these political solutions have fared under neoliberalism.

CCTs involve governments paying individuals or families to engage in ‘prosocial’ behaviour, such as scoring highly on a maths test or attending an annual doctor’s appointment. PB entails citizens deliberating in direct-democratic venues to decide how to apportion public spending. The concept of *fast policy* refers to the *velocity* at which ideas now travel and the *interconnectivity* of a global policy space: all policies ‘exist with and in relation to one another, in dense networks of mutual citation’ (p. 225).

A valuable methodological lesson is offered by the authors: scholars must pursue policies wherever they might take them. Static research proposals and nationally circumscribed studies must be scrapped for methods suited to tracking an inherently mutable, elusive object of inquiry.

Peck and Theodore’s logic of case selection allows them to advance a compelling argument. CCTs had a neoliberal skew in their early days, being embedded in the turn to ‘workfare’ policies

in the 1990s and thus promising to reduce ‘welfare dependency’ and circumscribe the alleged moral turpitude of the poor. PB, on the contrary, which is defiantly anti-neoliberal by design, was a product of the progressive left, arising out of the World Social Forum in the early 2000s.

By the mid-2010s, CCTs had a limited track record of success as measured by traditional standards of equitability and decommodification, particularly in Lula’s Brazil. PB, on the contrary, has in many places been reduced to reproducing the status quo. For example, in Germany, citizens have been left to wrangle over cuts to social spending, providing a sheen of popular legitimacy to austerity politics. A central argument in Peck and Theodore’s book, then, is that policy mutation is never unidirectional: while neoliberalism may render harmless even the most radical policy experiments, orthodox policies, such as CCTs, can be retooled to alleviate social suffering.

In this battle of adaptability, however, the anti-neoliberal movement is likely to find itself outgunned by the bearers of orthodoxy. Peck and Theodore hint at a question worth pursuing: whether this multitudinous movement can learn from organisations like the World Bank (with its hierarchies, mobility and prolific output) – and whether advantages accrue to those mirroring the structures which they oppose.

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