

Spacecraft and the spatio-temporalities of policy processes

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In this paper, we develop the notion of ‘spacecraft’ as a means for examining the ‘spatio-temporal’ dynamics of policy processes. Building on recent policy sociology scholarship concerning processes of ‘scalecraft’ and ‘policy assemblage’ (e.g., Papanastasiou 2020; Savage, Di Gregorio and Lingard 2021), we examine how a twin focus on the spatial and temporal dynamics of policy processes can provide a rich foundation from which to research policy development and enactment. We argue that this is especially the case within federal systems like Australia, where policy is typically imagined and assembled at specific scales (e.g., subnational, national).

To pursue this analysis, we consider the development of ‘school autonomy’ policies in the Australian federation, with a particular focus on developments in the states of Victoria and Western Australia, as well as the ways these developments have been influenced by federal government initiatives. We argue that school autonomy policies can be understood as the product of complex socio-technical relations that have resulted in unique subnational policy manifestations. To understand how these unique policy assemblages have emerged and evolved, we argue that a focus on scale is required, especially in terms of interactions between national scale policies (driven by the federal government) and subnational scale policies (driven by state governments). However, we argue that scale alone does not go far enough, as to adequately understand how these policies work (and thus what the policies actually “are” in practice) attention is needed to the particular ways in which policies are interpreted and crafted within subnational spaces, as system leaders, school leaders, educators and other stakeholders relationally negotiate and seek to enact autonomy policies (which includes distinct practices of autonomy through school boards and other school-based technologies of governance).

Based on this analysis, we argue that the concept of spacecraft is generative to develop, as it provides a means through which researchers can capture the spatio-temporal processes involved in policy assemblage and enactment in ways that can (but do not necessarily need to) attend to scalar imaginations and practices. In other words, spacecraft provides a broader optic than scalecraft, fixing our attention on the ways in which political territories and policies spaces are socially

crafted, but also on the ways policies are differentially interpreted and enacted at specific sites.