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# Going bust two ways? Epistemic communities and the study of urban policy failure

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## ABSTRACT

Urban geographers are becoming more concerned with “policy failure”. This raises questions about how “policy failure” should be conceptualized. The public policy literature, with its detailed classifications and categorizations of policy failure, is an obvious potential resource for urban geographers. However, supplementing predominant urban geographical analysis with public policy frameworks presents significant epistemological challenges. The literatures belong to different disciplinary traditions, making a simple combination of the two difficult. To demonstrate, the paper presents two contrasting accounts of a recent case of “policy failure”: the 2008 bankruptcy of the City of Vallejo, California. The accounts are distinguished by their epistemological orientations, one based in theoretical explanation (geography) and the other concerned with practical explanation (public policy). When we acknowledge these epistemological differences, we are forced to assess the limits to synthesizing different types of urban policy failure analysis. In conclusion, the paper discusses the pragmatic approach to epistemological choice.

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“In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” – *variously attributed*.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The above adage summarizes the problem urban geographers face in their consideration of “policy failure” (Jacobs, 2012; Lovell, 2019; McCann & Ward, 2015; Webber, 2015). Theorizing about urban policy making and understanding how policies are practiced are prospectively not incompatible. But, in practice, they often are. The reason, I argue, is that undertaking these tasks usually involve employing different types of reasoning; theoretical and practical. In urban geography, a longstanding concern with how urban policies reflect dominant ideologies has meant the intricacies of policymaking and implementation are often not the focus of collective epistemological projects. Policies become successful in their realization of ideology: stadia are built, waterfronts reinvested, neighborhoods gentrified (Lovell,

**CONTACT** Mark Davidson  [mdavidson@clarku.edu](mailto:mdavidson@clarku.edu)  School of Geography, Clark University, 950 Main St, Worcester, MA 01610, USA

2019). Urban geographers therefore tend to write critical accounts of realization, not detailed studies of policy formulation and implementation (e.g. Newman & Ashton, 2004).

Examining policy failure represents a different challenge. Often a policy fails precisely because it does not create change (Jacobs, 2012). Or a policy partially fails, making it difficult to assign responsibility for complex urban changes (Clarke, 2012). These challenges have led some to adopt conceptual and methodological approaches from other (sub)disciplines. For example, Lovell (2019) has borrowed from political science, science-and-technology studies (STS), and economic geography to study policy mobilities failure. Lovell argues these fields offer the conceptual and methodologies resources required for urban geographers to understand policy failure:

“political science, economic geography and STS scholarship provide direction and insight for the study of policy failure mobilities ... the way forward involves not just better methodological balance and attention across policy successes and failures, but also further conceptual development within policy mobilities research.” (ibid. 13)

These arguments (Lovell, 2019; also see, 2016, 2017b) for interdisciplinarity are convincing. However, there are significant epistemological challenges that come along with this project.

Some of these epistemological challenges are reflected in prior debates about policy relevance (Hamnett, 2003; Markusen, 1999). These debates were instigated by claims that urban geography had become progressively disconnected from the world of policy-making (Dorling & Shaw, 2002; Martin, 2001). The result being that geographical knowledge is now rarely heard or understood by policy-makers (Dorling & Shaw, 2002). Imrie (2004) developed a more sympathetic critique, arguing that the epistemological orientation of urban geography has often made it inapplicable to the world of “evidence-based decision-making”:

“... urban geographers ought not to be defensive about their subject, or necessarily apologetic to those who claim that they fail to engage with the real world of policy and practice. Such claims tend to be made on the basis of ill formed judgements, which lack evidence about what geographers are doing, or how and where geographical ideas are making a difference to policy and practice.” (705)

This paper picks up the connection between sub-disciplines and epistemological traditions by exploring recent attempts to incorporate methods and theories from other (sub)disciplines into urban geography’s examination of policy failure.

The paper begins by comparing the study of policy failure in urban geography and public policy. Public policy offers urban geographers a range of tools for understanding policy failure (see Bovens & ‘T Hart, 2016; Dunlop, 2017; Howlett, Ramesh, & Wu, 2015; McConnell, 2010). However, in illustrating the epistemological orientations of the two fields, the paper shows how the two subdisciplines tend to develop distinct knowledges. Urban geographers are often concerned with the development of theoretical explanation (Bridge, 2014), whereas public policy is concerned with understanding governmental action within specific contexts (Gibbons, 2006; Taylor, 1989). To illustrate the consequent epistemological differences, the paper develops two contrasting interpretations of the 2008 bankruptcy

of the City of Vallejo, California (Davidson & Kutz, 2015). In conclusion, the paper discusses the need for urban geographers to think about policy failure reflexively and calls for an assessment of how epistemological choices impact utility.

### **Epistemic communities and explanations of policy failure**

Across the social sciences and humanities, there is an ongoing conversation about the potentials and pitfalls of interdisciplinary research (see Jacobs, 2014). This conversation often highlights the problems associated with bringing together research communities who operate with differing epistemologies. Some have suggested that an embrace of “epistemic pluralism” is permissible and necessary due to the representational limits of language (Lyotard, 1984) and the role of epistemological privilege in colonialism (Teffo, 2011). Others are more cautious (Boghossian, 2007). Brister (2016, p. 89) has argued that epistemological traditions create significant challenges for interdisciplinary research, highlighting “disciplinary capture” as a pressing problem. This problem involves facets of a disciplinary approach conditioning the overall design and findings of interdisciplinary research: “Disagreements about facts, evidentiary standards, the nature of causal claims, and the role of values are often exacerbated through the research process because they form integrated bundles of self-reinforcing epistemological commitments and beliefs.” As urban geographers mine other fields to study policy failure, an concern about disciplinary capture is pertinent. We must identify (a) the modes of reasoning in urban geography and related fields, (b) understand how epistemological frameworks orientate us towards certain forms of explanation, and (c) develop the requisite practices of epistemological reflection.

There is no single understanding of policy failure within urban geography (see Jacobs, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2015). However, there is a predominant concern with how urban policy is determined by neoliberal ideologies. This has meant policy failure is usually discussed in the context of certain policies producing problematic social outcomes, as opposed to analysis assessing whether policy objectives are achieved (e.g. Hubbard & Lees, 2018). Where more detailed policy analyses are performed, urban geographers have tended to view policies as derivative of governmental context (Cook, 2015). This often shifts focus onto policy programs that are acutely reflective of prevailing regulatory regimes. Rarely are policies studied as practice-based interventions, where cause and effect are assessed in isolation from broader processes of social (re)production. Urban geography therefore tends to understand policy success/failure using heterodox politico-economic theories that situate policy outcomes within, and as resulting from, processes of economic and social reproduction (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010).

This reflects Bridge’s (2014) view that “[T]he theoretical wellspring of critical theory in urban studies has been Marxism and neo-Marxist theory” (1–2; also see Oswin, 2018). Bridge (2014) elaborates by locating urban geography’s theoretical orientation within the Western Marxist traditions of the Frankfurt School:

“... in this approach critique had to be theoretical and separate from practical reason because practical reason operated in everyday contexts of domination and deceit. Critical theory was comprehensive and scientific and beyond the limits of lay knowledge. It did not require validation from any particular audience. This was a moment of epistemological privilege. The task, then, was to take the critique to others who may well have false beliefs about their practices.” (4-5)

Frankfurt School theorists, such as Horkheimer and Adorno, famously took up the challenge of developing Marx’s concepts of alienation and false consciousness at the dawn of advanced capitalism. As Bridge (2014) suggests, this meant critiquing exploitative social processes that the working classes could not themselves identify. In the absence of exploitation being an intelligible part of the everyday, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002[1947]) would work to reinvigorate theoretical explanation, claiming:

“... the blocking of the theoretical imagination has paved the way for political delusion. Even when people have not already succumbed to such delusion, they are deprived by the mechanisms for censorship, both the external ones and those implanted within them, of the means of resisting it” (xvi).

Although Bridge (2014) identifies theoretical reasoning as a distinguishing part of the critical theory tradition (also see Brenner, 2009), the distinction between practical and theoretical reason does not originate in mid-twentieth century Western Marxism. In philosophy, the distinction is often associated with Aristotle’s division of knowledge into practical and theoretical (Anagnostopoulos, 1994). Disciplines that are practically orientated focus on understanding how to act. This imposes conditions on what kind of knowledge is valued. Crucially, it demands that knowledge be specific; it being able to inform the situated complexities of practical action. Theoretical disciplines place emphasis on understanding causation and therefore tend towards producing explanations that are abstract from situated complexities (Jay, 2014). This demands rigorous, logical explanation (*ibid.*), but not the requirement to inform practical action. For example, when a fiscal policy fails, practical reasoning would focus on the actions that led to failure; accounts left unfiled, poor investment decisions etc. Theoretical disciplines would seek to explain why certain conditions permitted various forms of failure; poor democratic processes, neoliberal fiscal disciplining etc.

These explanatory differences are not necessarily open to synthesis since they serve different purposes; one regulating action and the other regulating belief (Jay, 2014). Any effort to synthesize away this difference confronts the problem that belief and action are not always congruent (Anagnostopoulos, 1994; Kant, 1788[2009]; Sen, 2009). Put differently, the limits to knowing demand different types of reasoning: “The distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge is based primarily on a finite manner of knowing and in terms of two basic kinds of objects: a necessary, non-operable object and a contingent, operable object.” (Oesterle, 1958, p. 161). The promise of importing public policy concepts and methods into urban geography is, in large part, that they can inform and deepen our theoretical understandings of urban policy. But these imports are generated within epistemological communities who conceptualize the object of analysis differently. The result is, as the following accounts demonstrate, that more fine-grained analyses of policy failure can serve to complicate, and not enhance, our understandings of how and why urban policies fail.

### ***Theoretical explanation in critical urban geography***

Brenner's (2009, p. 201) description of critical urban theory demonstrates its theoretical orientation: "It is characterized by epistemological and philosophical reflections; the development of formal concepts, generalizations about historical trends; deductive and inductive modes of argumentation; and diverse forms of historical analysis." The two theories that have been central to studying policy successes (and failure) in urban geography have been the Marxian theory of accumulation and neoliberalism (Brenner, 2009; Bridge, 2014). David Harvey's (1978, 1989) work on the urban process under capitalism is exemplary. Harvey's (1978) theory of capitalist urbanization begins with the following postulates: "I hang my interpretation of the urban process on the twin themes of accumulation and class struggle. The two themes are integral to each other and have to be regarded as different sides of the same coin-different windows from which to view the totality of capitalist activity" (101). This is a textbook example of theoretical reasoning. The framework conditions subsequent inquiry, making questions relating to why certain actors might perceive, for example, housing development necessary (e.g. supply/demand, affordability, equity, slum clearance etc.) ideological concerns, since drivers of the urban process have already been deduced.

Harvey's (1978) seminal theorizations have been extensively developed (see Jessop & Sum, 2000; McGuirk & Maclaren, 2001). Iterative developments of the framework have introduced new understandings of urban policy and created a sophisticated vocabulary for studying urban political transformation (Peck, 2014a). City government is now contextualized as constitutive of macro-economic and politico-ideological changes (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck, 2014b), enabling urban geographers to understand how neoliberal ideology has converted into governmental demands and incentives at the local level. Notably, this involves the assumption that cities are conditioned to be "entrepreneurial" (Harvey, 1989):

"If, for example, urban entrepreneurialism (in the broadest sense) is embedded in a framework of zero-sum inter-urban competition for resources, jobs, and capital, then even the most resolute and avant-garde municipal socialists will find themselves, in the end, playing the capitalist game and performing as agents of discipline for the very processes they are trying to resist" (Peck, 2014a, p. 5)

With urban policy formulation and implementation derivative of neoliberal capitalism (see Lauermaann, 2018), studies of policy failure in urban geography have generally taken three forms.

First, a voluminous literature now documents how economic reforms implemented over the last four decades have failed to deliver on their promises (see Harvey, 2005). At the city scale, global capitalism has been read as manifest in urban development that ignores social need and prioritizes rent extraction. For Clark (2014), urban developmental policies have valorized dubious investment over apparent social needs: "... with the speculative construction of place rather than amelioration of conditions within a particular territory as its immediate (though by no means exclusive) political and economic goal" (8). Second, and related, urban geographers have documented the deleterious social outcomes of urban entrepreneurialism (Xue & Wu, 2015). Policies often proclaimed as "successful" have been shown to heighten social disparities, stoke social antagonisms and inflict harm on marginalized communities (Barnes, Waitt, Gill, & Gibson, 2006; Dikeç, 2006; Lees, 2008; Wyly & Hammel, 1999). Third, urban

geographers have shown how policy failure has not stymied policy mobility where urban elites have found use for certain policies (McCann & Ward, 2011). Here, the role of celebrity consultants such as Richard Florida and Ed Glaeser are viewed as important in generating the ideological cover necessary to impose revanchist renewal agendas (Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Peck, 2014a, 2014b).

### ***Practical explanations in public policy scholarship***

Where many urban geographers have focused upon understanding how neoliberal capitalism has shaped urban policy (see Hackworth, 2006), public policy scholars have been interested in how failure occurs during formulation and enactment. The public policy literature has focused on questions of action and practice: how policies do, or do not, generate the desired changes. The result is a public policy literature that features growing analytical sophistication (Howlett et al., 2015), but no agreement over what causes policy failure (see McConnell, 2015). This contrasts to the critical urban geography literature, where there is significant agreement on why (neoliberal) policies fail (see Storper, 2016).

In their recent review of the public policy literature on policy failure, Howlett et al. (2015) identify the three basic conceptual frameworks used (also see: Bovens & 'T Hart, 1995; McConnell, 2010, 2015): “The earliest writing on the subject of policy failure conceived of policy success and failure either as purely technical issues amenable to easy solution [...], as highly complex politico-administrative phenomena resistant to change [...], or as purely relativistic constructions or interpretations impossible to address in any meaningful way ...” (Howlett et al., 2015). The three concepts – technical failure, institutional failure and subjective failure – all make failure a function of problematic actions within the policy process. Resources can be misallocated due to errors (Brudney & England, 1982), institutions difficult to reform due to engrained bureaucratic cultures (Brown, 2005; Dunleavy, 1995; Scharpf, 1986), and policy outcomes are hotly debated (McCann, 2002). Since the 1990s, these frameworks have been used to develop a series of further distinctions. They have identified variables to explain policy failure (Howlett et al., 2015), classify types of failure (Guy, 2015; McConnell, 2015), and separate out different dimensions of policy failure (McConnell, 2010).

The work of Allan McConnell (2010, 2015, 2016) has been particularly instructive (see Little, 2012 for critique). In 2010, McConnell claimed “[T]he policy sciences lack an overarching heuristic framework which would allow analysts to approach the multiple outcomes of policies in ways that move beyond the often crude, binary rhetoric of success and failure.” (346). In response, McConnell (2010, p. 346) proposed we divide policy “in process, program and political dimensions” and assess success/failure in each dimension (also see Howlett, 2012). The conceptualization of policy failure is therefore separated, with different stages of the policy process being assessed individually according to the following criteria: (i) the policy should achieve its goals, (ii) not be overwhelmingly criticized and (iii) gain widespread support.

Dissecting the policy process in this way has led to various types of failure being identified. While different adjectives have long been applied to failed public policies (Dunleavy, 1995; Guy, 2015), Howlett et al. (2015) recently developed codified descriptions:

“These included situations whereby good plans are not executed properly; those where good execution is wasted on poorly developed plans; those where poor planning and poor execution lead to very poor results and those where even the most rigorous analysis and execution still did not result in the achievement of goals, against all reasonable expectations, due to limitations in the existing policy paradigm.”

These typologies (see Howlett et al., 2015; McConnell, 2010) demand that policy failure be precisely described. For Howlett et al. (2015) six dimensions of policy failure must be considered: extent, duration, visibility, avoidability, agreement and corruption. For each case of policy failure, Howlett et al. (2015) argue we can identify and measure the: (i) extent of the failure, (ii) how long it lasted, (iii) how much public attention it garnered, (iv) how avoidable the failure was, (v) how much agreement within a particular community exists with regards to whether the policy failed, and (vi) the amount of corruption (e.g. crime, fraud) that contributed to the failure. If empirical indicators can be developed for each dimension, the possibilities of systematically analyzing and comparing policy failures are prospectively enhanced.

This disaggregation of policy failure creates significant theoretical challenges. McConnell (2015) has claimed that although public policy analysis has developed a rich appreciation of the complexities of policy failure, it has not delivered a scientific approach. He argues that: “once we conceive of studying policy failure as ‘art and craft’, we are better placed to navigate the messy realpolitik of types and degrees of failure, as well as ambiguities and tensions between them.” (1). Such conclusions suggest that although the public policy literature has sought to bring precision to the study of policy failure, it has produced few convincing theoretical explanations.

With this detail-orientated analysis failing to produce verifiable data and testable theories (McConnell, 2015), the public policy literature continues to find it difficult to identify what actions cause policies to fail. This presents a problem for urban geographers interested in using political science concepts and methods in their examinations of policy failure (see Lovell, 2019). The classificatory schemes of political scientists cannot be expected to add detail and nuance to urban geography frameworks since they have not delivered empirically-derived theoretical conclusions. This tension reflects how public policy scholars have operated with different epistemological assumptions compared to urban geographers. Public policy scholars have sought to identify incidents of failing action (i.e. practice) within the policy process. Policy failure is examined as an internal affair, embedded in the practical actions of government. Urban geography has considered policy failure chiefly from the perspective of critical theorizations of capitalist urbanization (Bridge, 2014). This approach does not tend to concern itself with whether a policy achieves its stated objectives, directing attention towards how policies serve, in success or failure, the structural politico-economic processes that drive policy-making (Peck, 2014a).

As urban geographers become concerned with policy failure and search out conceptual and methodological resources in other disciplines (Cook, 2015; Lovell, 2019) it is necessary to assess the extent to which these resources contain different epistemological assumptions. When we acknowledge that importing conceptual and methodological resources impacts upon the questions we can ask about policy failure, we must also face the question of what we want to know about policy failures. To illustrate this need for epistemological reflection alongside interdisciplinary conceptual and

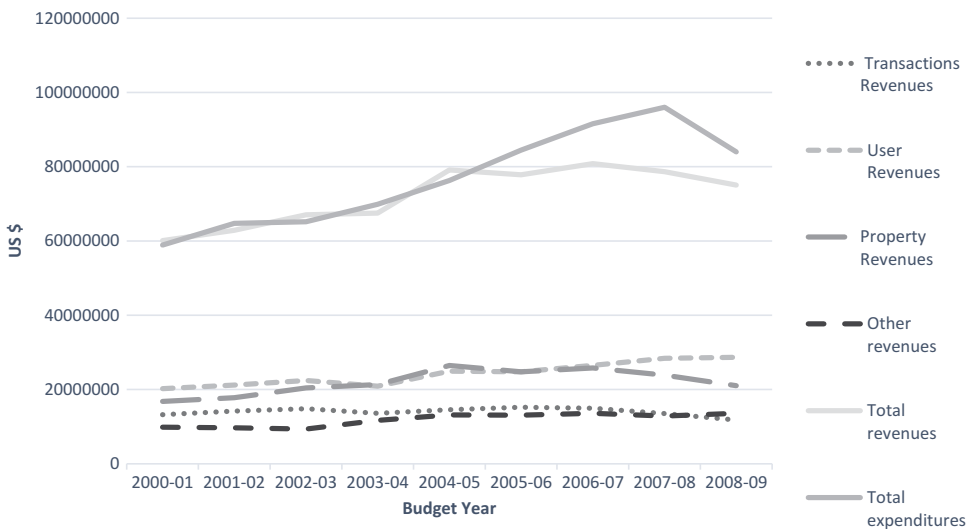


methodological borrowing, the next sections of the paper develop two contrasting interpretations of a recent policy failure: the 2008 bankruptcy of the City of Vallejo, California.<sup>2</sup> The two interpretations show how epistemic differences produce different research problems and forms of explanations.

### The city of Vallejo’s 2008 bankruptcy

The City of Vallejo has a diverse population of approximately 120,000 and is situated on the northern San Francisco Bay. Until the early 1990s, the city was home to a major shipyard and naval base. When the US Navy left town in the mid-1990s, Vallejo ran into fiscal problems. Disinvestment stimulated many attempts at renewal, but these did not replace the shipyard economy. Of course, disinvestment is not unique to Vallejo. When the city filed for bankruptcy in 2008, it reflected not just the stressors of uneven development but also the failure of the City to manage decline. Bankruptcy is one of four definitions of failure in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary and Vallejo’s bankruptcy has been described as a case of failure in media (Vekshin & Braun, 2010) and scholarly (Peck, 2014b) accounts. Vallejo became the first city to file for chapter 9 bankruptcy after the 2007–8 financial crisis. Amid the Great Recession, the City faced a \$17m shortfall in its \$80m General Fund budget (see Figure 1). In a situation where the City did not have enough funds to cover payroll expenses, the City Council voted to make an unprecedented chapter 9 filing. Never had an American city filed for chapter 9 because it could not afford its employee salaries (Trotter, 2011).

Two different interpretations of Vallejo’s bankruptcy are now presented. Given the space constraints these interpretations are illustrative, not comprehensive. In the first



**Figure 1.** Breakdown of Vallejo’s revenues and overall expenditures, 2000–2009. (Source: City of Vallejo Annual Budget Statements, 2002–3–2010–11).

interpretation, the bankruptcy is presented as a consequence of speculative tendencies inherent within the entrepreneurial urban system (Davidson & Ward, 2014; Harvey, 1989; Peck, 2014a). In the second interpretation, attention focuses on policy decisions leading up to and during bankruptcy to search out specifically where failure occurred.

### ***Take one: a failing neoliberal paradigm***

Between 2005 and 2008, Vallejo's General Fund ran yearly deficits of \$3.2m, \$4.2m and \$4.2m, leaving the City with no reserves to face a 2008 budget deficit (Mayer, 2008). In early 2008, the City's staff were projecting a \$13.8m deficit in the General Fund, with larger deficits forecast for subsequent years. In the context of the Great Recession and California's property tax limiting Proposition 13, substantially increasing revenues seemed unlikely and so the City Council focused on winning concessions from labor unions (City of Vallejo, 2006). The recession left the City with two options, drastically restructure labor agreements or insolvency.

Vallejo's insolvency reflects what Davidson and Ward (2014) describe as the speculative character of contemporary entrepreneurial urban governance. They use the concept of speculative urbanism to describe the recent growth of financial risk in municipal budgets (also see Peck, 2011): "Cities have had to indulge in ever more risky forms of speculative urbanism, understood here as the ways in which cities speculate on future economic growth by borrowing against predicted future revenue streams to make this growth more likely." (ibid. 84) In Vallejo, the growth of financial risk meant that the City had consistently been betting on its ability to raise new revenues. Critically, this revenue growth was not predictable, but would come from cyclical sources given the constraints of California's governance regime (see Bardhan & Walker, 2011). Speculation was therefore based on the City's fees, permits and taxes. Two parts of this speculative budgeting are particularly important to examine here. First, growth of City revenues had become focused in predictably cyclical sources. Second, the City's economic development efforts had continually struggled to successfully utilize the tools of the neoliberal urban system.

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of Vallejo's revenues between 2000 and 2009. Revenues are divided into four categories: transaction taxes (sales and hotel taxes), user taxes (licensing and user taxes), property-related taxes (real estate taxes and property development related taxes) and other taxes (miscellaneous). Revenues are distinguished in this way to decipher taxes that are cyclical (i.e. transaction taxes), set by government assessments (i.e. user taxes), related to property markets (i.e. property-related taxes) and other smaller streams that are less impactful to the city's bottom line (i.e. miscellaneous). Between 2000 and the city's bankruptcy, property-related taxes had grown 94%, compared to 6.3% for transaction taxes, 18.9% for user taxes and 30.6% for other taxes. As the City struggled with year on year deficits, its financial wellbeing had therefore become reliant on a buoyant property market and new housing construction.

Record transfer taxes and permit fees enabled the City to meet its spending commitments. In 2007, Vallejo's property-related and transaction tax revenues started to decline and, consequently, the city's deficit became an intractable problem. In 2004–5 and 2005–6, at the peak of the housing bubble, Vallejo collected over \$5m in Property Transfer Taxes (PTT). In 2007–8, PTT revenues were below \$1.7m. Likewise,

Type	Budget Year	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Transaction	Sales Tax	11,304,600	12,056,800	12,742,000	12,145,303	13,156,015	13,819,405	13,353,505	12,021,086	10,467,821
	Transient Occupancy Tax	1,928,200	2,125,300	2,100,000	1,447,810	1,402,835	1,405,410	1,618,954	1,497,237	1,328,873
	Transactions Revenues	13,232,800	14,182,100	14,842,000	13,593,113	14,558,850	15,224,815	14,972,459	13,518,323	11,796,694
	Year on Year Change	-	7.2%	4.7%	-8.4%	7.1%	4.6%	-1.7%	-9.7%	-12.7%
Government Assessment	Utility Users Taxes	11,109,600	11,209,600	12,000,000	11,707,589	11,749,465	12,488,855	12,504,321	13,208,564	12,766,945
	Franchise Taxes	1,912,300	2,169,900	2,248,000	2,289,454	2,344,994	2,377,793	3,061,529	3,992,171	4,866,294
	Business License Tax	1,014,100	1,229,000	1,337,000	1,218,595	1,323,987	1,298,046	1,388,111	1,364,571	1,533,454
	Motor Vehicle License Fees	6,193,400	6,596,400	6,843,800	5,688,734	9,523,694	8,592,520	9,536,759	9,850,561	9,492,807
	User Revenues	20,229,400	21,204,900	22,428,800	20,904,372	24,942,140	24,757,214	26,490,720	28,415,867	28,659,500
	Year on Year Change	-	4.8%	5.8%	-6.8%	19.3%	-0.7%	7.0%	7.3%	0.9%
Property	Property Tax	10,039,700	11,243,200	11,761,900	12,681,006	13,623,535	15,857,808	18,776,182	19,473,533	17,670,610
	Property Transfer Tax	2,470,100	2,379,800	3,214,800	4,020,000	5,481,108	5,106,488	3,778,090	1,696,396	1,973,068
	Real Property Exercise Tax	998,500	1,142,000	1,859,900	842,000	2,054,766	256,438	662,491	91,039	44,770
	Development Fees and Permits	3,280,200	3,023,400	3,589,600	3,787,919	5,300,475	3,543,898	2,578,731	2,613,218	1,329,205
	Property Revenues	16,788,500	17,788,400	20,426,200	21,330,925	26,459,884	24,764,632	25,795,494	23,874,186	21,017,653
	Year on Year Change	-	6.0%	14.8%	4.4%	24.0%	-6.4%	4.2%	-7.4%	-12.0%
Other	Other revenues	9,850,000	9,696,400	9,354,300	11,691,590	13,173,488	13,076,709	13,578,086	12,866,059	13,576,336
		-	-1.6%	-3.5%	25.0%	12.7%	-0.7%	3.8%	-5.2%	5.5%
Total revenues		60,100,700	62,871,800	67,051,300	67,520,000	79,134,362	77,823,370	80,836,759	78,674,435	75,050,183
Total expenditures		58,898,800	64,733,200	65,191,784	69,873,353	76,308,950	84,467,987	91,579,625	96,026,974	84,003,809

**Figure 2.** City of Vallejo’s audited revenue streams, 2000–1 thru 2008–9.

(Source: City of Vallejo annual budget statements, 2002–3–2010–11).

Development Fee and Permit revenues peaked in 2004–5, with over \$5m being collected. In 2008–9, this revenue fell below \$1.4m. Deficits that could be managed by drawing down reserves in previous years (Mayer, 2008) had become large enough to cause insolvency. Reliance on property-related revenue growth proved unsustainable. In this respect, the City’s bankruptcy appears a consequence of the speculative governance paradigm: when predicted future revenues did not materialize (see Davidson & Ward, 2014) it became a clear candidate for neoliberal austerity restructuring (see Peck, 2014a).

The second dimension of the speculative paradigm relates to Vallejo’s economic development program. The most significant economic event in Vallejo’s recent past was the closure of the Mare Island Naval Base in 1996. Shutting the 5,200-acre military facility meant Vallejo lost its largest single employer and had to begin significant economic restructuring. Many policymakers, bureaucrats and citizens associate the City’s bankruptcy with its inability to establish an economic future after the shipyard closure. As a City Councilor described:

“This is a long-term turnaround that will take at least 20 [more] years to achieve. It involves changing the culture of the city. When I first moved here, people were quite happy being a military town. They really didn’t care about what was happening outside. It was quite a cut off place ... Many people still have the mindset that we will rebuild industry on Mare Island, that the gas facility or a shipbuilder is coming in. It is hard to get people to think differently about development, having us be more creative ... ” (Interview T3, 2017)

The City has been successful in supporting a university campus, light industry and new housing development on Mare Island, but most of the peninsula awaits redevelopment. Vallejo is just one city among many that continue to struggle with post-industrial economic restructuring.

This lack of redevelopment might extend to policy failure when an assessment of the City’s use of development vehicles is considered. Unlike many other Californian cities

that used Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to channel development dollars into the city budget, Vallejo's RDA has been a minor actor in development efforts (Davidson & Ward, 2014). Indeed, in bankruptcy court documents (Mialocq, 2008) it was noted that the City's General Fund had continually subsidized the economic development efforts of the RDA. This contrasts to many Californian RDAs that subsidized the general operations of city government (see DeHaven, 2017). Vallejo has also been a relatively conservative user of TIFs (Davidson & Ward, 2014). Again, in contrast to many cities where TIFs have generated significant, if somewhat contentious, economic development. Vallejo therefore did not use all the development mechanisms afforded by the US urban system. Those who have worked with the City explain this failure as being caused by a lack of bureaucratic support, poor long-term planning and an inability to secure large development deals.

This whistle-stop account of the entrepreneurial characteristics of Vallejo helps to demonstrate how the City's fiscal failure can be related to its governance methods. The City had continually relied on speculative revenues to produce balanced budgets, become dependent on cyclical revenue growth, and not been successful in using neoliberal urban development tools. After bankruptcy, the prevailing entrepreneurial system provided little scope for Vallejo to transform its budget bar austerity and/or more speculation (see Peck, 2014b). So, can we call this a policy failure? If yes, precisely what policies failed, and how? It is at this point that the frameworks developed in public policy might offer help. However, the addition of theoretical and methodological tools from public policy brings with it the problems of epistemological difference.

### ***Take two: the process, programs and politics of policy failure***

McConnell's (2015) three-part characterization of policy failure – process, program and politics – can be used to study Vallejo's bankruptcy. An evaluation of “process” is concerned with how governments get approval for policies and develop standards of assessment; in the case study, how bankruptcy became the policy. “Program” evaluation relates to those specific policies that are “designed to address goals and underpinned by assumptions about appropriate levels of government intervention in society” (ibid.). For example, how the City of Vallejo used bankruptcy to correct its fiscal problems. Finally, “political” is evaluated by the ways in which political conflicts are managed by governments to generate the desired outcomes; for Vallejo, if support for government policies was generated.

#### ***Process***

Before the Great Recession, the City of Vallejo was already experiencing budget stress. On the revenue-side, the City saw a constrained environment. The City claimed: “While we do exercise a level of control over our expenses, in some cases we have little or no control over our revenues” (City of Vallejo, 2006: iv). When looking to raise revenues, the City argued: “[W]hile we are examining a variety of potential new fees and current fee increases, our options for raising revenue are limited by recent court rulings and the need for voter-approved increases (either a simple majority or a two-thirds vote, depending on the tax). Our only realistic option for balancing the budget is to reduce

expenditures” (ibid. vi). With the first signs of the housing bubble bursting, the City was already concerned that revenue growth was slowing.

In the 2006–7 City Budget, around 90 percent of the General Fund had been allocated to employee salaries and benefits. In preceding years, the City had cut staffing levels and reduced operating funds to work within personnel budgets, but this was now not enough. The City therefore presented itself with a stark choice: “The discussion of a reduction in expenditures is a relatively simple one as well, as we really have two choices: cut the budgets of various categories (which, in essence, means a reduction in staffing, as that is our biggest cost) or work to obtain cooperation from employee groups on cost-cutting ideas” (ibid. vi). Although some city councilors and citizens had long voiced concerns about the power of labor unions and their generous bargaining agreements (City of Vallejo, 1993), slowing revenue growth was impressing on the City the need to make labor reforms before the Great Recession.

In early 2006, the City Council motioned to start building a 15 percent revenue reserve. The 2006–7 City Budget stated the intent to make labor agreement reforms. In 2007 and 2008, the City undertook contentious negotiations with its labor unions. This process took various forms, including mediation and arbitration hearings (see McManus, 2008). In terms of evaluating the “process” of fiscal reform leading up to bankruptcy, actors on both sides have different interpretations of its effectiveness. Labor union representatives claimed that the process worked, pointing towards the reforms offered by labor groups that would, according to them, have balanced the budget (ibid.). The fault, for labor representatives, therefore rested with the City Council and its desire to side-step conventional bargaining processes. On the City Council side, the process was broken. Specifically, a chartered commitment to binding arbitration was seen to place the City in an impossible position. As one councilor claimed: “Whatever happened in those negotiations, we always had our hands tied with binding arbitration . . . The City had never won a binding arbitration case, so we knew that we had little leverage until we removed the commitment from the [City] Charter.” (Interview C2 2017). On 6 May 2008, Vallejo’s City Council voted unanimously to file for chapter 9 bankruptcy.

### **Program**

Fiscal reform using chapter 9 therefore became the policy of the City of Vallejo. Given Vallejo’s largest fiscal liability was labor-related expenditures, the City had to win the court’s approval that minimum staffing levels and collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) could be subject to chapter 9 restructuring. This was a complex and contentious issue (see McManus, 2008). However, Vallejo was granted the right to change CBAs in its bankruptcy readjustment plan. If the focus of the bankruptcy was the reduction of labor-related expenditures, it is therefore necessary to assess whether reductions occurred and if the reforms created balanced budgets.

The City opted to renegotiate some CBAs outside of bankruptcy. In 2008, the City came to new CBA agreements with the Vallejo Police Officers’ Association (VPOA) and the Confidential, Administrative, Managerial and Professional (CAMP) labor unions. It would later come to an agreement with the International Associations of Firefighters union (IAFF) and, in the bankruptcy settlement, impose terms on the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). The result was an overall reduction in labor

expenditures but an uneven treatment of workers. Figure 3 shows that VPOA and CAMP employees received salary increases in 2010–11, with only IBEW members seeing salary cuts. New hires on IAFF and IBEW contracts would receive fewer benefits. The most significant reductions came from across the board cuts in retiree health benefits, with existing variable rates being replaced by a capped (\$300/mo) benefit. CBA reductions were also paired with continued cuts in staffing levels. From a pre-bankruptcy high of 155 police officers, in 2010 there were 92 sworn officers in Vallejo. The City also reduced its fire companies from nine to five.

	Police Union - VPOA	Fire Union - IAFF	Electrical Workers Union - IBEW	Administrators Union - CAMP (Mid- Managers)	Executive (Dept Directors)
<b>Average cost per employee</b>					
Salary, including various differential pays	122,546	115,708	65,858	105,925	185,016
CalPERS pension (normal cost and UAAL)	39,983	32,531	10,990	19,944	43,609
Health/Welfare Benefits	16,642	13,505	12,457	14,178	10,218
Retire Health (normal cost and UAAL)	17,170	7,322	3,580	13,353	7,215
Workers Compensation	21,445	17,264	2,892	2,598	10,623
Other	1,694	1,773	1,802	7,522	7,838
	219,480	188,103	97,579	163,520	264,519
<b>Salary - COLA</b>					
Salary Increase (decrease)	7%	0%	-5%	2%	0%
Water Treatment and Communication Operators			10%		
Furlough Days				6 days (2.3%)	
<b>Pension Benefits</b>					
Existing Employees	3% @ 50	3% @ 50	2.7% @ 55	2.7% 55	2.7% 55
2nd Tier for New Hires		2% @ 50	2.0% @ 55		
Contribution Rate - City	32.66%	28.26%	17.02%	18.82%	18.82%
Contribution Rate - Employee	9.00%	13.40%	10.80%	9.00%	9.00%
	41.66%	41.66%	27.82%	27.82%	27.82%
<b>Health/Welfare Benefits</b>					
Medical (Share of Kaiser rate, including Cafeteria Plan)	100%	75%	75%	100%	75%
Average cost per employee (varies with dependents)	\$14,306	\$11,025	\$9,733	\$11,512	\$8,034
Vision/Dental	100%	100%	100%	100%	75%
Average cost per employee (varies with dependents)	\$2,235	\$2,235	\$2,038	\$1,994	\$1,526
Other - Life, AAD, and/or LTD (varies by group)	\$101	\$245	\$686	\$672	\$658
	\$16,642	\$13,505	\$12,457	\$14,178	\$10,218
<b>Retiree Health Benefits</b>					
Current Benefit	100%	\$300/mo	75%	80%	\$300/mo
If retired before July 2000 (before 3%@50 pension)		75%			
OPEB Funding (assumes future VPOA/Camp reductions)	\$300/mo	\$300/mo	\$300/mo	\$300/mo	\$300/mo
If retired before July 2000 (before 3%@50 pension)	75%	75%			
Contribution Rate (% of payroll)					
Normal Cost	1.70%	1.50%	2.40%	1.60%	1.20%
Amortization of Unfunded Liability (Includes current pay-as-go for VPOA/CAMP)	12.00%	4.90%	3.20%	11.00%	2.70%
<b>Workers Compensation</b>					
Self-insurance rates	17.50%	15.00%	2.4% - 8.7%	2.40%	2.40%

**Figure 3.** City of Vallejo, Salary and benefit assumptions, 2010–11 proposed Budget.

(Source: City of Vallejo annual budget, 2010–11).

The reforms enabled the City to substantially reduce expenditures in 2010. Although labor contract changes were not the only fiscal reform undertaken in Vallejo (see City of Vallejo, 2010), they represented the most sizable. Expenditures on salaries and benefits moved from a projected \$71m to \$59m. Cuts to services and supply expenditures amounted to \$7m, but most of these related to deferred purchases or payments and would have to be covered in future years (Interview T4, 2013). Overall, the City's 2010–11 budget aimed to transform a 22% deficit into a 2% surplus. The audited 2010–11 budget shows that the City was able to achieve this goal. The 2010–11 fiscal year returned a General Fund surplus of \$2.3m and reserves were increased to 9% of expenditures (\$6.3m).

Although many budgetary changes have followed since 2010–11, bankruptcy, either directly (i.e. retiree health care benefit reform) or indirectly (i.e. CBA renegotiation), returned a degree of fiscal stability to the City. In 2013–14, the City was able to project a structurally balanced budget. However, budget forecasts relied on a continued freezing of salaries and benefits, and new pension payments rates imposed by the state pension agency will demand new revenue growth (City of Vallejo, 2017). Although Vallejo can claim limited success in its bankruptcy, the City continues to face severe fiscal problems (Raskin-Zrihen, 2017.).

### ***Political***

McConnell (2015) suggests that a successful policy will have near universal support. If this is the case, Vallejo's bankruptcy is far from an unqualified success. Although the City Council voted unanimously for chapter 9, one City Councilor claimed that: "It was only when the City Council were told that they might become personally liable for the city's debts that support for the filing became unanimous" (Interview T6 2017). Although there was no public vote to approve bankruptcy, the City has recently undertaken two popular referendum on fiscal matters. These give some indication of how much public support there has been for the City's fiscal reforms.

The first referendum related to the article in the City's Charter that committed the City to binding arbitration in CBA conflicts. In June 2010, residents of Vallejo voted on the following question:

"Shall Section 809 of the Charter of the City of Vallejo be repealed to remove the mediation/arbitration process, commonly referred to as binding interest arbitration, that permits an arbitrator, without City Council approval, to make the final decision to resolve disputes between the City and its recognized employee organizations on all matters relating to wages, hours and working conditions and instead to use the method of resolving such disputes set forth in state law"

Only 24 of the 478 Californian cities have City Charter commitments to binding arbitration. It was thought by some members of the City Council that Vallejo's commitment to binding arbitration had been a key factor in the bankruptcy. The City Council voted 6–1 to place the measure on the ballot. The measure received 9,314 (51.12%) "Yes" votes and 8,856 (48.74%) "No" votes. By a narrow majority, the City of Vallejo was able to remove binding arbitration from its Charter.

The second referendum related to a new sales tax proposed by the City Council. Placed on the November 2011 ballot, residents were asked to vote on the following:

“To enhance funding for 9-1-1 response, police patrols, firefighter and paramedic services, youth and senior programs, street and pothole repair, graffiti removal, economic development, and general city services, shall the sales tax be raised one cent, expiring after ten years, with all revenue legally required to stay in Vallejo?”

The measure would raise the sales tax in Vallejo from 7.375% to 8.375%. The additional tax was to be limited to 10 years and revenue allocated to services that had degraded in previous years. The latter was thought particularly crucial by advocates (Interviews 2013, 2017) so residents would trust that tax dollars would reach areas of need. The Measure B ballot returned 9,295 (50.43%) “Yes” votes and 9,136 (49.57%) “No” votes. The City has subsequently expanded public services using the new sales tax monies and made the measure permanent.

In terms of gauging the political success of the City’s fiscal programs, the two referenda demonstrate a consistent split within the city. Although these referenda offer no direct indication of political support for bankruptcy reforms, they do show how related fiscal reforms have relied on a small majority to move forward.

Using McConnell’s (2015) three-part evaluation scheme for policy failure delivers mixed answers. The process of arriving at bankruptcy as a policy program was decidedly messy, appearing a consequence of entrenched local politics as much as entrepreneurial governance. Contentious labor negotiations preceded an economic downturn that transformed a pressing problem into something requiring triage. As bankruptcy became the “program” emerging from the “process”, it ultimately delivered some, if not complete, fiscal stability. Finally, indicators of political support for the City’s fiscal reforms present a mixed picture. Our diagnosis of failure is messy and does not illustrate an obvious connection between policies and the governance regime.

## Conclusions

A concern with policy failure in urban geography has led to interdisciplinary experimentation (Cook, 2015; Lovell, 2019) and consequently generated epistemological challenges. As the contrasting interpretations of the Vallejo bankruptcy show, distinct epistemological traditions construct different inquiries into and explanations of urban policy failure. In the case of urban geography, a long engagement with critical social theory (Brenner, 2009; Bridge, 2014) has given the subdiscipline’s concern with urban policy a theoretical orientation (Imrie, 2004). Producing knowledge to immediately inform the (practical) actions of city governments has not therefore been an overriding priority (*ibid.*). This contrasts to the practically-orientated public policy literature, where attention has focused on knowing where government action goes wrong and how government action might be improved (Howlett et al., 2015).

These differences demonstrate the contrasting objectives of practical and theoretical reasoning (Anagnostopoulos, 1994; Oesterle, 1958). Practically-orientated inquiry focuses on the regulation of action. Attempts to generate knowledge to improve action tend to lack a concern with causation, since the intent is to produce concrete knowledge with relevance to practice. Theoretical inquiry differs in that a concern with causation can mean the production of abstract knowledge that is abstruse for the purposes of acting. For example, if we supplement the geographical



explanation (i.e. speculative entrepreneurialism) of Vallejo's policy failure with an approach derived from public policy, we likely move from a rather unambiguous explanation of causation to a more complicated story of fragmented policy formulation and implementation. Explaining policy failure as a consequence of neoliberalism and informing practical action are often incompatible. It is not that either form of knowledge is invalid (*ibid.*), but rather that they are not necessarily open to synthesis. This acknowledgment of epistemic pluralism not only problematizes the un-reflexive combining of different epistemological traditions (Brister, 2016), but also signals the need for debate about (a) why we are now concerned with policy failures, and (b) what it is we want to know about policy failures? Only by answering these questions can the study of policy failure navigate epistemological difference and make informed choices about epistemological orientation.

Such reflections can lead down many different paths. One such path might be epistemological anarchism (see Feyerabend, 1975). However, an acceptance of epistemological pluralism can be negotiated without resort to relativism. Pragmatist philosophy can be instructive in this regard (also see Marchart, 2007 on post-foundationalism). Pragmatists have long argued that truth is closely related with utility. Rorty (1992, p. 582) argued that rational, scholarly inquiry involves the application of technical reason for the enhancement of tolerance and, thus, freedom. The search for validity in different epistemological perspectives therefore "... only looks relativistic if one thinks that the lack of general, neutral, antecedently formulable criteria for choosing between alternative, equally coherent, webs for belief means that there can be not 'rational' decision. Relativism seems a threat only to those who insist on quick fixes and knock-down arguments." (Rorty, 1991, p. 66). Rorty goes on to argue that we do not have a duty to formulate general epistemological principles, rather we have "a duty to talk to each other, to converse about our views of the world, to use persuasion rather than force, to be tolerant of diversity, to be contritely fallibilist" (*ibid.* 67).

When faced with a choice of epistemological approach, Rorty suggests we can only make decisions over which to work within by "running back and forth between principles and the results of applying principles" (*ibid.* 68). In other words, when we change the means of our inquiries (e.g. adopt the concepts and methods of public policy to investigate policy failure) we must assess how this shift changes the ends of our inquiries. In reflecting on how new means offer different scholarly ends, you can reflexively come to know what you want inquiry to achieve: "you only know what you want after you've seen the results of your attempts to get what you once thought you wanted" (*ibid.* 68). Although urban geography's current concern with policy failure is the cause of significant epistemological challenges, it also offers opportunity for reflection and the forms of skepticism that have brought about modern philosophical and theoretical reorientations (see Lilla, 1993). What precisely geographers have to say about "policy failure" should not be conditioned by unquestioned epistemic traditions or entrenched views on "policy relevance" (see Imrie, 2004). The problem of "policy failure" presses urban geographers to explicitly consider the intended utilities of their inquiries. By acknowledging epistemological differences are not always open to synthesis, a consideration of the objectives and implications of inquiry must play a more significant part in emerging geographical discussions of policy failure.

## Notes

1. The adage has an unclear origin. It has been attributed to the likes of Yogi Berra, Albert Einstein, and Richard Feynman.
2. The paper draws on research conducted between 2010 and 2017 that examined the various fiscal-related reforms undertaken in Vallejo. The research included the collection and analysis of city budget documents, bankruptcy filings, and secondary literature appertaining to the City's bankruptcy. Three field visits to Vallejo (2011, 2013 and 2017) were also undertaken to interview 35 key-informants (e.g. City Councilors, administrators, civic society actors, community organizers) and 11 current and past residents on issues relating to the City's bankruptcy and restructuring.

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