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Region, Place, Devolution: Geohistory Still Matters

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Introduction

In an article published nearly 15 years ago, MacLeod and Jones (2001) carefully reviewed, situated, extended, and above all celebrated the enormous intellectual contributions of Anssi Paasi to the scholarly project of doing ‘regions in geography’. Situated within, and going beyond, the ‘new regional geography’ movement in human geography and the social sciences more broadly, they looked at Paasi’s thinking on regionalization processes, abstracted in four stages, which collectively allowed them to advance (as they claimed) a meaningful understanding of regional change. Rolling forward the research clock to the likes of the Northern Powerhouse and other ‘devolution deals’ and events across the UK, we maintain that Paasi’s framework *remains* a cutting-edge theoretical framework in and through which to examine region-building processes and practices—particularly the relationship between region and place in a ‘foregrounded regional studies’ (Paasi and Metzger, 2017). This chapter accordingly looks at the ‘new new localism’ and suggests the need to think about the dawn of a ‘new new regional geography’. In doing so, the chapter suggests that city-regions involve a new politics of place-making, which opens up new ways of thinking about place vis-à-vis region. The implications of this are outlined.

New New Localism

City-Region-based agglomerations are currently riding high on the political and policy agenda across the world. Their emergence is not accidental; they are being built in direct response to the deep ideological and thinking exposed in key documents such as the World Bank's *World Development Report 2009: Reshaping Economic Geography*. This set in train a series of 'new economic geography' influenced arguments closely following the work of policy-advisors such as Krugman and Glaeser (Peck, 2016). These collectively claim that, firstly, urbanization is a global phenomenon to be embraced at all costs and within this, city-regions are the principal scale at which this happens and people experience lived reality. Secondly, somewhat provocatively, the economic basis of city-regions rests on concentration and specialization, which allows spatial agglomeration to take place. Thirdly, cosmopolitan policy management is required with a bold and confident voice, working with the grain of market logistics and new 'spatial orderings' (such as governance frameworks) to lubricate agglomeration and provide efficiency by lowering transaction costs and promoting proximity, and thereby liberating growth and allowing it to spread geographically (for an overview, see Storper, 2013).

In the UK, this motif is clearly evident in interventions over the last few years in the wake of RSA's City Growth Commission, which argued for the unleashing of metro growth, through a series of city-regions, or 'metros' – defined as the '*larger constellation of cities and towns that constitute a functional economy within build up areas*' – as the main drivers of economic growth in an increasingly knowledge-driven, global economy (RSA, 2014). The UK Conservative Government, through policy discourses and narratives of devolution, localism, rebalancing, and the Northern Powerhouse, is taking these agendas forward as a response to

hold-down the global and also finding a way around the messy nature of austerity and local state restructuring (see Conservative Party, 2015; Jones, 2019).

The authors have been involved in a three-year research project, which is probing on the missing socially and spatially disembedded sphere of these competitive relationships, equilibrating tendencies, and critically the vacuum around the policies and politics of assembling city-regions. In short, there is little research being undertaken on *City-Region Building*, i.e. which civil society stakeholders are involved and what the motives are for engagement or a lack of engagement. Added to this, there is no critical assessment of whether and how marginalisation (by interest groups and by geographical location) and uneven development (the relationship between regions, cities and places) operates, and in turn whether this fuels, sustains, or destroys economic agglomeration, development, and growth. The project is, therefore, addressing this gap within the research field of human geography and the social sciences more broadly.

The authors have deployed case study research—based on three sites in Wales (Cardiff Capital Region, Swansea Bay City Region, and the North East of Wales) and two sites in England (Sheffield City Region and Greater Manchester City Region). This involves interviews with around 20-25 stakeholders in each location—and we are currently undertaking a comparative study of stakeholder and civil society organizational involvement in the *City-Region Building* agenda. By focusing on the institutions of economic governance, the project is specifically looking at those involved in Local Enterprise Partnerships, various City Deals, Enterprise Zones and city-region development in general. The following research questions are being asked: what policy, strategy, and institutional changes have taken place, and are currently taking place, in the landscape of economic development since 2010 in

England and Wales? How do these changes affect and involve civil society organizations? What are the narratives of devolution and community engagement in the LEPs, EZs, City Deals and City-Regions? How are these being worked into policies and procedures for stakeholder engagement? Who is involved in the new localism and how does this relate to forms of associational life and political engagement? In turn, what are the compositions of LEP, EZ, City Deal and City-Region boards, and their sub-groups and other structures of engagement? And, how successful are the *City-Region Builders* and the new localism in realizing the objectives of agglomeration, economic development and growth, and social empowerment?

Geographers have positioned the above as part of a ‘new localist’ political and policy discourse, given the arguments around the reanimation of place-based civil society as a means of stimulating localist economic development (see Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Clark, 2014; Jones, 2019). As the localism is not new though: it is a reworked policy narrative (see Peck, 1995), and one that will doubtless recur again, and I prefer to note this as an instance of ‘new new localism’ (Jones and Jessop, 2010). This is because the latest variant of localist thinking draws extensively on some key antecedents. According to the ‘Big Society’ guru, Norman, localism ‘*is a coherent and logistical expression of a conservative tradition which goes back to the 18th century*’ (Norman, 2011: 201). Edmund Burke’s ‘*little platoons*’ pepper this literature and are presented as progressive enablers for a democratic form of civil society-centred economic and social policy. The Conservative’s new localism, then, stresses a ‘*three-way relationship between individuals, institutions and the state. It is when this relationship is functioning well that societies flourish. This requires each element in the triad to be active and energised in its own right... Societies should be thought of as ecosystems*’ (ibid: 201).

We would like to suggest in this chapter that Paasi’s treatise on regions and places

increasingly allows a window into the study of such ‘new new localist’ ecosystems, thereafter raising questions on how we construct and deploy notions of place and region as spatial concepts and constructs.

New New Regional Geography

If the new regional geography (Gilbert, 1988) was launched to capture a coalescing concern with local responses to capitalist processes, cultural identifications, and identifying the region as a medium for social interaction, then Anssi Paasi’s has clearly gone well beyond this; hence the suggested label of a ‘new new regional geography’. As noted previously (MacLeod and Jones, 2001), Paasi (1986: 110) sought to transcend the dualism between Marxism and humanism by seeing regions ‘not as static frameworks for social relations but as concrete, dynamic manifestations of the development of a society’. Areal extent though is a misnomer, as regions are to be analysed reflexively within the context of their very cultural, political, and academic conception (Paasi, 1991, 1996, 2010). Notions of *institutionalization* come into play here, which is not a short-hand with the study of institutions; instead, attention is paid to *geohistorical* socio-spatial processes during which territorial units emerge as part of the spatial structure of a society and become established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness. They are at once lines on the map and also geographical reference points in popular and political culture. This is operationalised through a methodology of abstraction: abstract to concrete and simple to complex in the identification of phenomenon (cf. Brenner et al, 2003; Sayer, 1992).

Stage 1

Paasi has deconstructed the regionalisation process by abstracting four stages, which rather than implying a linear sequence, of course, are to be understood as mutually constituting,

reciprocal and recursive processes of structuration only distinguishable from each other analytically for the purposes of grounded research, hence why they are abstractions. The first of these concerns the assumption of territorial awareness and shape, where a territory assumes some bounded configuration in individual and collective consciousness and becomes identified as a distinct unit in the spatial structure of society. At the heart of this stage one can point to a series of struggles relating to cognitive mapping and the hegemony of one geographical imagination over others, the politics of scale, difference, identity and subjectivity, and the stretching and bounding of power relations (MacLeod and Jones, 2001).

Rolling things forward, this clearly connects with the drawing of, and designation of, the city-region boundaries of Sheffield, Manchester, Swansea and Cardiff noted above, where power-holding actors in a territory (or outside it even) have defined and symbolised the spatial and social limits of membership and create the discourses and practices for inclusion and exclusion, to the extent that territorial shaping refers not only to the creation of boundaries but also to their representation, to their roles both as social institutions and symbols of territory. Relatedly, territorial awareness and shape can be used to shine light on the ongoing and somewhat cul-de-sac debate in English-speaking human geography on territorial (seemingly bounded) versus relational conceptions (networked and mosaic) notions of space and statehood (see Jones and MacLeod, 2011). The illuminated perspective is that these processes are co-constituted: not either/or, but and/both, and the balance between them depends on institutionalisation practices and the balance and roles of those actors involved and their geographical dependency (see Jones and Paasi, 2013, 2015; Paasi, 2010, 2013).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 and FIGURE 2 HERE]

In following Paasi's first stage, Figure 1, highlights well both the bounded, mapped nature of producing city regions but also the ways in which this can be contested. The city region as a whole is largely based upon what it termed the 'functional economic area' surrounding Sheffield, which in turn focusses upon commute work patterns and employment opportunities (see Etherington and Jones, 2016). This represents the city region as whole but as Figure 1 suggests, this is far from simple when trying to create a contiguous city region. Here, the economic geography of the region has been contested by the cultural and historical identities of the different Local Authorities. This means that only Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield chose to constitute themselves within the SCR and be part of the 2018 Mayoral elections (Figure 2), whereas the remaining local authorities (with interests in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire) chose to wait for a possible future devolution deal with their historic county regions. In Chesterfield, these overlapping senses of 'regionality' (Painter, 2008) became set against the regionalisation of the city region within the context of austerity. The following letter represents the deep geohistory of Derbyshire in Chesterfield:

What on earth is our council thinking? Chesterfield is in Derbyshire. What a plan, live in Derbyshire and be controlled by Sheffield...I do hope, fingers and toes crossed, they choose the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire path (Derbyshire Times Letters March 3rd 2016).

Whereas the response from the Chesterfield Borough Council took a different approach choosing to follow the potential offer of the city region, emphasising the economic necessity of the decision:

Full membership would align with Chesterfield's economic geography and provide opportunities for new and existing businesses on a footprint that makes sense to them... Chesterfield would be able to benefit fully from the two existing SCR devolution deals, including the £30m p.a. additional funding over 30 years, and continuing negotiations with government for further devolution (Chief Exec. Unit, 25th Feb 2016).

Therefore, the cognitive mapping and the economic hegemony of the city region is disrupted by the pre-existing geohistory, this in part contests the processes of regionalisation in play with by SCR. It causes the SCR to split, as Figure 1 highlights, creating an uneven geography moving forward.

Stage 2

For Paasi, of course, this leads on the second stage, the formation of the conceptual and symbolic shape of regions, which is neither pure nor uncontested but is instead subject to continuous negotiation, translation and a hybridity of cultural expression. That said, power holding elites will endeavour to press that such negotiations and translation manifest in a hegemonic territorial grid of meaning whereby only a selection of invented traditions, histories, and remembrances are established and creatively implicated in the constitution of a territory's social relations. Paasi's work mentions the importance here of power-laden symbols such as cartographies, flags, memorabilia, histories etc. (Paasi 1996, 2013), but in relation to my research on city-regions, attention is also drawn to the very naming of a region, which helps to connect its image and place consciousness both of insiders and of outsiders. The case of city-region building in South Wales is important in this regard.

In 2011, the Welsh Government established a task and finish group in to consider the potential role of city-regions in future economic development. The task was to decide, on the basis of objective evidence, whether a spatially focused city-region approach to economic development, as opposed to the (national) Wales Spatial Plan, could deliver an increase in jobs and prosperity for Wales. Drawing on evidence mainly from Europe and North America, three arguments for adopting a city-region approach were made: improving the planning system; improving connectivity; and driving investment through a stronger and more visible offering from an agglomerated wider region (see Jones et al, 2015). Two distinctive city-regions were proposed – the South East Wales City Region and the Swansea Bay City Region – with the proviso being that all this has to be about creating urban engines and power-houses of growth by harnessing the beneficiaries of transport, housing, inward investment and funding opportunities. In following Paasi’s tract, the South East Wales City Region naming history is illuminating, as over time it has morphed to being called the Cardiff Capital Region (see Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

This was initially to purposefully distinguish Cardiff from neighbouring Newport for external promotion purposes, then later to the full renaming of the city region in order to acknowledge both capital city power status and the stretched-out variegated geography of city-region building. This points to a metro centric focus upon Cardiff, as the agglomerative centre to the region, and highlights the way in which city region governance is funnelled with regards to the future growth of the city region.

Stage 3

These processes are constituted in particular structures of expectation, themselves critical in facilitating the third stage, the emergence of institutions, where Paasi sought and still seeks to capture the identity-framing vehicles of education, law, local politics, and organisations rooted in civil society (local media, working clubs, arts and literature organisations), as well as informal conventions such as economic ties or proximity and social mores. The entrenchment of these processes into the spatial matrix of society can also foster symbolic shape. For example, as more city-regional scale organisations are instituted into an activity such as economic development, the very consciousness of some place-based agendas may be intensified (MacLeod and Jones, 2001). All of which helps in providing an effective means of reproducing the material and mental existence of territories in question.

This, again, closely connects to the city-region research agenda noted above, particularly the roles played by key activists (either those involved or outside the representational institutional governance structures of the four city-regions) in colouring the territorial consciousness and at the same time reproducing the very power assigned to such institutional roles. Indeed, for Paasi (1986, 1996, 2013), it is the institutions of a territory (and associated infrastructural power as state theorists would put it) that eventually become the most important factors in the macro-reproduction of the region. Within the context of England, there has been attempts to create new 'soft spaces' of governance (Haughton et al, 2013) for city regions through the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). These have sought to bring business into the processes of producing a growth coalition for the city region. It strategically places economic interest at the centre of the regionalisation process framing the way in which sub-national devolution and growth will take place. Within the context of city

regions, this can make LEPs powerful institutions that enable business elites to have a stronger voice whilst at the same time pushing other voices to the periphery:

Trickle down doesn't work for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and you have to have strategies around social regeneration (for want of a better word) alongside economic regeneration. Those two things should come together and I don't think they do because the LEP is very purely focused on the economic policy... Feels like I'm in a rowing boat and my colleagues are in a rowing boat and we're trying to turn round this big tanker (Interview 1, Sheffield, 2015).

The local civil society actor in the quote above highlights how the governance structures and actors involved in the Sheffield City Region shape the processes in a purely economic direction. This means two things for the respondent: one, it fails to address the social problems existing in the city region and two, the civil society actor has little voice in addressing this through the current structures of governance put in place. Hence, a place based agenda for growth is intensified which territorialises the strategic interest of the LEP towards an agglomerative growth model, as it reshapes the representational regime of the city region (Jessop, 1990, 2016).

Stage 4

Every theory has its limitations and previously MacLeod and Jones (2001) noted it was only fair to acknowledge that Paasi key research objective has been to uncover the more localised or bottom-up articulations involved in the reproduction of sociospatial consciousness and regional shaping of society (though see emerging research on spatial planning, Paasi, 2013; Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al 2017). The final stage in this latter process

concerns the establishment of a region in the spatial structure and popular consciousness, where it assumes the form of an institutionalised ‘territorial unit’ and as an identifiable constituent in the regional division of society. In practical terms, the region is ready to be mobilised for such purposes as place marketing or as a weapon in an ideological struggle over resources and power. Further if provided with administrative status, it comes to assume the material expression of the end to which state power is applied (Paasi, 1991).

The last few years in England demonstrates the relevance of Paasi’s thinking. The full map of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) is becoming embedded and is now being superimposed by further voluntary arrangements of local authorities through City Deals and Local Growth Deals with government and proposals for devolution to five initial (indirectly elected but legally-recognised as strategic coordinating bodies) Combined Authorities (see Sandford, 2019). Whilst the result is complex, these point towards the endurance of a *de facto* city region scalar and institutional fix. Indeed, each of the three main political parties appears to be wedded to such a fix, subject to proposing modifications. The South Yorkshire Sheffield City Region (SCR), which straddles the ‘traditional’ administrative geography of counties and regions and internalises a new scale of policymaking, is becoming an established region. As part of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ movement, which has been establishing in the past 5 years as a means of addressing austerity and rebalanced development, Sheffield has secured a deal with the UK Government to transfer more powers over transport, housing and economic growth to the city region. The Sheffield city devolution deal, the second agreed in England (after Manchester), although not involving additional money, is being presented as a shift in power from Whitehall to the Combined Authorities in the region. This includes responsibility for the majority of the adult skills budget, greater control over transport schemes and greater

power to decide which assets to sell for development (compare Etherington and Jones 2016; HM Government 2014).

These processes hence go against the grain of Paasi's fourth stage as a form central government localism is created not a bottom up flourishing of local and regional identity. This has significant impact to the processes of city regional regionalisation because the scalar jumps in governance from the local authority to the combined authority circumvents existing institutions, coalitions, popular identities and civil society actors working at the local authority scale:

At one point they talk about localism but if you look at regionalisation, it's huge, it's huge and actually the local voluntary community sector can't even hope to engage with, let alone deliver against that agenda. Therefore, civil society is finding itself squeezed behind/between a rhetoric that emphasises its importance but a reality which mitigates against its ability to capture the resources to deliver against that agenda (Interview 12, Bolsover, 2016).

The Bolsover respondent above highlights how the scalar change in governance marginalises both their ability to work at the local level (to address the needs of the communities they serve) and their ability to have influence upon processes of governance at a combined authority level. This is further reflected below in Cardiff also:

All of a sudden we become completely insignificant so whereas at the moment locally we can lobby quite hard and push the direction on certain things, all of that power would go away and how to influence rather than power. So that for us would cause

quite a significant problem. If we start working more collaboratively with other similar organisations then great, we can form a nice little consortium and then we can retain the same level of perceived power and all will be well with the world. But it doesn't fit well with how any of us work really; we work with quite defined communities, we do quite tailored things for them (Interview 2, Cardiff, 2015).

Whereby the respondent identifies how changes in the scalar relationship to governmental structures deeply weakens their position as an actor in the local community and state. This means, that despite the language of localism being threaded through the centralised processes of devolution there is in fact a further distancing of the local from the structures of governance created by the introduction of city regions and their combined authority governmental structures.

Conclusion: Rethinking Place and Region

In following Paasi's treatise on regions in geography, we feel this can provide (once again) fresh thinking for today, even 30 years after the original argument was put down in *Fennia*, and in doing so still offer powerful methodological means and conceptual tools with which to advance an imaginative and progressive understanding of regional change. In particular, as MacLeod and Jones (2001) argued previously, Paasi's geohistorical approach still provides much scope with which to unravel the political, economic, and cultural process that enable individual and institutional place-based biographies to coalesce in the form of a distinctive territorial unit with the overall regionalisation of society (MacLeod and Jones, 2001).

Moreover, by placing the institutionalisation process, its multiple and overlapping 'stage', and the critical role played by discourse and symbolic orderings of space at the centre of his

treatise, Paasi still enables us to locate many of the complex forces at work in constructing the regionalisation of society.

Further, and in the context of city-region building research, Paasi's framework permits us to problematise the reciprocal relationships that can exist between the whole gamut of institutional forms relating to economic behaviour (LEPs, EZs, City-Region Boards, Combined Authorities etc.), the politics of representation, political power geometries, scale, and identity, and the sedimentation of these practices into regions. In most accounts of city-regions, questions pertaining to the social construction of boundaries, territorial shape, and the very becoming of region and their associated institutional fixes remain hidden from view (compare Storper 2013; RSA 2014; HM Government 2014). In contrast, Paasi's stress on region building as an active and ongoing processes, rich in political strategy and cultural expression, still sanctions useful insights for researchers and regional strategies alike to uncover the very formation of economic and political life. Perhaps, then, it is time to think about a 'new new regional geography' where the interrelationships between region and place can be considered once more.

Based on the discussions here, this has three initial implications for spatial thinking. Firstly, it provides a revised model for understanding place that does not take places and regions as given bounded spatial units, but instead emphasises the contingency and relationality of space. Secondly, approaches, therefore, requires identification and description of the place(s) to be incorporated as an intrinsic part of the research process, rather than treating place and region as taken for granted backdrops. This approach further recognises that the shape, reach and orientation of place might differ according to the research questions being examined. Thirdly, new city-region-making notions consequently demands a new body of research

concerned with establishing the material and imagined coherences of place (see Jones and Woods, 2013), employing mixed-method strategies.

Material coherence here refers to the particular social, economic and political structures and practices that are configured around a place. Thus, material coherence may be provided by the territorial ambit of a local authority, by the geographical coverage of an economic development initiative, by the catchment area of a school or hospital, by a travel-to-work area, by the reach of a supermarket or shopping centre, or by any combination of the above and other similar structures and practices. Material coherence hence alludes to the institutional structures that hold places together and provide vehicles for collective action.

Imagined coherence here relates to collective resident consciousness and the sense of shared identity and affinity with a place, resulting in a perceived community with shared patterns of behaviour and common geographical reference points. Imagined coherence, therefore, makes place meaningful as a space of collective action. There are territorial units that exhibit material coherence but lack a strong imagined coherence (such as artificially amalgamated local authority areas) and there are territories with an imagined coherence but only a weak material coherence (for example, where institutional boundaries bisect contiguous urban areas or where areas with strongly developed popular consciousness exist within much larger institutional units).

But, *both* material coherence and imagined coherence are also important in fixing (through multiple intersections) the scale at which place and regions can be identified. Imagined coherence is framed around perceived shared forms of behaviour, whether linked to common patterns of collective consumption, shared affinity with sporting or cultural institutions, or common geographical/historical reference points. However, this imagined coherence is not

founded on direct inter-personal connection between residents. In this sense it differs from the social coherence of a neighbourhood – which may share some of the above attributes but is framed around the probability of direct interaction between members. It also differs from the imagined coherence of a region, which is a looser affiliation that draws more on perceived cultural and political identities and economic interests. Similarly, material coherence should be denser and more complex than that found at place or regional scale. The material coherence of a neighbourhood will be restricted by its situation within a larger geographical area for employment, administrative and many service provision functions, while the material coherence of a region could be fragmented by the inclusion of several different labour markets, local authority areas, sub-regional shopping centres and so on. These attributes do not easily translate into discrete territorial units with fixed boundaries. Labour market areas overlap, as do shopping catchment areas; residents may consider themselves to be part of multiple places for different purposes and at different times; the reach of a town as an education centre may be different to its reach as an employment centre; and so on. The boundaries that might be ascribed will vary depending on the issue in question (Orford and Webb, 2017). Savage's (2009) work on 'granular space' is illustrative of these concerns:

People do not usually see places in terms of their nested or relational qualities: town against country: region against nation, etc. but compare different places with each other without a strong sense of any hierarchical ordering. I further argue that the culturally privileged groups are highly 'vested' in place, able to articulate intense feelings of belonging to specific fixed locations, in ways where abstract and specific renderings of place co-mingle. Less powerful groups, by contrast, have a different

cultural geography, which hives off fantasy spaces from mundane spaces (Savage 2009: 3).

The application of the approach discussed logically leads us to start by identifying places by their cores—whether these be towns or cities or geographical areas—rather than as bounded territories, and working outwards to establish an understanding of their material and imagined coherence. This process will necessarily require mixed methods, combining cartographic and quantitative data on material geographies with qualitative evidence of imagined coherence and performed patterns and relations. This is more than just an exercise in boundary-drawing. Whilst it may be possible to identify fixed territorial limits for the reach of a locality with respect to certain governmental competences or policy fields, applying proxy boundaries to imagined places must necessarily assume a degree of permeability, and that places may be configured differently depending on the object of inquiry. Through these mechanisms, then, whilst research on place and region can be spatially-focused, it should not be spatially-constrained, and needs to be prepared to follow networks and relations across scales and spaces in order to reveal the full panoply of forces and actors engaged in the constitution of city-region making.

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