

## Debates and Developments

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# Taking City Regions Seriously? Response to Debate on 'City-Regions: New Geographies of Governance, Democracy and Social Reproduction'

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### Abstract

*This article takes up the invitation extended by the co-editors of the recent IJURR debate on city-regions for others to join them in 'a wider dialogue over the constitutive role of politics in the brave new world of 'city-regions'. It begins by considering the extent to which the collection was successful in describing this 'brave new world' and in populating it with the variety of social and environmental concerns which, the co-editors claimed, have so far been neglected in recent debates about the significance of city-regions. Adjudging the debate to have been only partially successful in these respects, the article goes on to argue that the goal the co-editors strove for — effectively to liberate 'city-regionalism' from its ostensible captors — is unlikely to be achieved unless and until its critics (1) engage more explicitly and seriously with claims that are made for the significance of changes in the material circumstances of city-regions, and (2) recognize that there is nothing inherently 'neoliberal' or regressive about the concept of the city-region or the way it is used. These arguments are illustrated with reference to the economics of city-regions and the politics of city-regionalism in England.*

### The city-region as neoliberal plot

The debate on 'City-Regions: New Geographies of Governance, Democracy and Social Reproduction' that appeared in this journal earlier in the year represented a laudable attempt to broaden current debates on the notion of the city-region and to establish what is missing from recent ways in which academic and professional commentators have employed the term. The collection's co-editors took their cue from Swyngedouw (1997) whose insistence that there is nothing natural or immutable about any territorial scale beyond the legitimacy and mobilizing power that is accorded it at any one point in time is a good starting point for analyzing the re-emergence of the idea of city-regions. Geographical boundaries, Swyngedouw reminds us, from the 'hard' and legally

Editor's note: This debate was co-edited by Jonas and Ward (2007), *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.1. Further responses and contributions to the debate will be published in forthcoming issues.

sanctioned to the 'fuzzy' and imagined, are always provisional and have resonance only whilst they do comparatively useful work for those that identify with and defend them. Jonas and Ward (2007: 176), in their introduction, borrowed this observation and applied it to city-regions:

[W]e argue for the need to conceptualize the emergence of 'city-regions' as the product of a particular set of economic, cultural, environmental and political projects, each with their own logics . . . [T]here is a need to discover for which interests city-regions are necessary and for whom this new territoriality is merely contingent.

This conceptualization suggested that the challenges of understanding why the notion of the city-region has enjoyed a recent resurgence, and with what effect, lie in identifying the various projects associated with it and assessing the logics that underpin them. In principle, work along these lines could provide an informed basis for critiques that could challenge the 'logics' and question the desirability and effects of the 'projects' across a range of potential criteria. The first problem with the collection, however, was that although contributors introduced a range of evaluative criteria, they did not apply the co-editors' analytical guidelines consistently and systematically or live up to their claim that '[e]ach [article] looks at both the discursive and material transformations underway' (*ibid.*: 170). The bulk of the debate, in fact, concentrated upon discursive rather than material change and even then discursive transformation was largely assumed rather than demonstrated empirically. Of the five papers in the main body of the collection, only two dealt with the 'politics' of city-regionalism to any significant degree, in the sense that they identified certain 'agents' of city-regionalism, described the mechanisms through which agents attempted to influence change and discussed the 'narratives' they employed in order to help bring about the effects they desired.

Those two papers described city-regionalism in and for Austin, Texas, and Sydney, Australia, in very different ways. McCann (2007: 193–4) adopted a bottom-up perspective which focused attention on 'ongoing negotiations between the local state and various activist groups aimed at mitigating the negative effects of rapid urban growth on fragile landscapes and on low-income people'. The perceived city-regional challenge for Austin and its hinterland, as McCann described it, was to introduce more effective and equitable local management of the city's rapid, high-tech-driven growth through protection of its surrounding, amenity-rich countryside from commercial and residential overdevelopment and the deflection of development pressure to comparatively (but not uniformly) poor downtown areas. The mechanisms through which the city authority attempted to achieve its 'smart growth' aims, apparently inspired by the work of Florida (2002), comprised (1) the use of its (Texas) state-sanctioned 'extra territorial jurisdiction', through which it can regulate land-use in the surrounding area, and (2) various neighbourhood planning exercises through which residents can influence the form that downtown redevelopment takes in their 'patch'.

M<sup>c</sup>Guirk, by contrast, interpreted city-regionalism as more of a top-down phenomenon delivered primarily through a set of changes at federal government level — market liberalization, micro-economic reform and deregulation — which were 'place blind' in principle but spatially uneven in their effects, and especially economically advantageous for greater Sydney, in practice. Against the backdrop of the financial and business service-driven boom, these federal reforms helped nurture in and around Sydney, M<sup>c</sup>Guirk argued, 'a loosely allied discourse community of strategic political actors including state agencies, local government, business groups and newly formed coalitions of business leaders' (M<sup>c</sup>Guirk, 2007: 181), which developed the idea of the Sydney city-region as Australia's 'golden egg' and lobbied for policy changes that could protect and enhance this ostensible national status. As a result, the New South Wales (state) government established an unprecedented metropolitan planning regime for the Sydney city-region which, as in Austin, seeks to achieve a balance between developmental and distributional demands.

A comparison of these two articles begs some interesting substantive questions about what 'city-regionalism' is and why it should arise from different sources in two roughly comparable, geographically extensive and federalized countries. It also highlights some key methodological dilemmas regarding how city-regionalism is studied and the explanatory power of independent case study-driven approaches. The rest of the collection, however, contributed little to this potentially informative cross-national exchange. This was not because the concerns of the other authors were not interesting or important in their own right. Rather, it reflected their tendency to operate on a set of simplifying assumptions about the origins, nature and purpose of city-regionalism and to find it silent and/or problematic in relation to themes they consider important.

Thus, Purcell (2007: 197) noted in passing that '[u]rban scholars have analyzed in detail how neoliberal globalization has negatively impacted upon cities and city-regions' before introducing the issue of scale to the theme that appeared to concern him most — the relationship between neoliberalism and democracy. Interesting though his discussion of this broader theme was, his unsurprising conclusion on the more specific matter at hand was that 'governance institutions at the city-regional scale could both promote and hinder democratization, depending on the agendas those institutions empower' (*ibid.*: 203). Jarvis, similarly, found an assumed city-regionalism culpable of not acknowledging, far less tackling, the issue that interested her most — a general socio-political tendency to undervalue non-commodified labour — and justified that position with the somewhat sweeping and unsubstantiated claim that 'the "quality of life" pursued within city-regionalism corresponds with the language of neoliberalism where market competition pursues the efficient allocation of resources' (Jarvis, 2007: 209). Krueger and Savage (2007), likewise, forged a tenuous link between the collection's ostensible subject and the main concern of their paper — their contention that closer links are needed between the notion of sustainability and social justice — by claiming that controversy over the merger of two hospitals in Boston, Massachusetts was somehow symbolic of city-regional politics.

In none of these three cases did the notion of the city-region do significant work for the article. Indeed, the word 'city' could have been substituted for the phrase 'city-region' throughout without making much difference to the authors' arguments. Instead, a lightly specified city-regionalism was effectively set up as a straw man against whom authors could measure their antipathy to an equally under-specified 'neoliberalism' and signal their commitments to particular forms of democracy and social justice. In adopting this approach, authors took their cue from the co-editors who had followed up their observation about the need to study the real-world complexity and diversity of city-regionalism with the immediate, paradoxical proclamation that '[t]he *universal* logic underpinning diverse city-region formations in different parts of the world is the territorial restlessness inherent in the capitalist system' (Jonas and Ward, 2007: 176, emphasis added). From these totalizing, economic foundations, it was but a short step to characterizing '[c]ity-regions and metropolitan areas . . . [as] . . . important sites of policy experimentation around new regulatory structures and spaces of governance . . . deeply inscribed by neoliberal policy discourses and practices' (*ibid.*: 173).

In viewing the way the notion of the city-region has recently been used, discursively, as symptomatic of a broader neoliberal project, the co-editors clearly wished to point the way to a more progressive urban politics. They did not, however, suggest where that new politics might arise from or what, if anything, might be 'city-regional' about it, even though McCann and McGuirk found variants of actually existing city-regionalism to be characterized by political debate that takes the social and environmental implications of actual and potential economic change rather more seriously than would be expected from the introduction to the special edition. Neither did the co-editors or most of the authors identify much in the way of 'neoliberal policy discourses and practices'. With the honourable exception of McGuirk, whose citation of various primary sources allowed the curious reader prepared to search them out to make up his or her own mind about what certain professional 'city-regionalists' have said, there was virtually no reference to

policy documentation on city-regions in the collection. Instead, readers unfamiliar with recent debates were asked to take it mainly on trust that the bulk of recent writing on city-regions has been produced either by people who, deliberately or unwittingly, are part of an ill-defined neoliberal plot or by others who are sufficiently enlightened to see this plot for what it 'really' is.

Seen as belonging to the latter camp were various critics who view recent spatial policy changes and subnational institutional reforms as evidence of support — be it enthusiastic or reluctant — for a more materialistic, territorially competitive, unequal and uncaring world. Lumped together in the former camp were certain populist, quasi-academic authors like Ohmae (1995) and Peirce *et al.* (1993) who have made grand claims about the 'rise' of the city-region and the 'decline' of the nation-state along with others (e.g. Scott, 2001; Scott and Storper, 2003) who adopt a less normative and more careful analytic-descriptive approach to the role played by city-regions in recent patterns of spatial economic change. The co-editors justified the relative neglect of authors whose claims about city-regions and/or city-regionalism are built upon detailed economic analysis by asserting that '[o]ur intention is not to debunk an approach to the city-region in which it is analysed as a force of agglomeration and territorial development' (Jonas and Ward, 2007: 170–1). The second and more serious problem with the debate, though, is that it is hard to see how an emergent politics of city-regionalism can be judged without first 'debunking' — or, to put it more neutrally, 'considering' — the emergent economics of city-regions.

The remainder of this article responds to Jonas and Ward's invitation to contribute to a wider debate on the politics of city-regionalism by focusing upon a recent, inconclusive, discussion of the role that the notion of the city-region can play in informing changes to subnational spatial development policy and governance in the UK, especially in England. It makes two broad arguments that contrast with the approach adopted in the edited collection. First, it insists upon the fundamental importance of material transformations and the way in which the economics of city-regional development interacts with the practical as well as discursive politics of city-regionalism. Second, it warns against the assumption that the politics of city-regionalism can simply be 'read off' from a broader, loosely defined global neoliberal project. Indeed, the evidence from England, it suggests, is that further, explicit political mobilization around the notion of the city-region, far from playing into the hands of those who consider the intensification of spatial disparities to be inevitable and 'necessary', can help lay bare the assumptions and potential consequences of an evolving, national and implicit city-regionalism which comes close to adopting exactly that position. Seen in this light, it is arguably the weakness of English city-regional politics rather than their strength that is more likely to lead to the further growth in spatial inequalities that many take to be a defining feature of neoliberalism. The paper ends with a brief summary of what this alternative 'take' might mean for research on city-regions and city-regionalism.

## The economics of city-regions

City-regions are locomotives of the national economies within which they are situated, in that they are the sites of dense masses of interrelated economic activities that also typically have high levels of productivity by reason of their jointly-generated agglomeration economies and their innovative potentials (Scott and Storper, 2003: 581).

Metropolitan spaces are becoming, more and more, the adequate ecosystems of advanced technology and economy . . . [T]he decrease of communication costs does not by itself lead to a spreading and diffusion of wealth and power; on the contrary, it entails their polarization (Veltz, 2004: 1).

A surprising feature of the recent literature that the co-editors of the debate declined to debunk is an awakening of interest within mainstream economics, which has

traditionally struggled to account for the comparatively high productivity — indeed, even the existence — of cities, in the importance of agglomeration. The intricacies of the ‘new economic geography’ (see, e.g., Krugman, 1991a; 1991b; Fujita *et al.*, 1999; Fujita and Thisse, 2002; Baldwin *et al.*, 2003) need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that this literature does not, *pace* Jonas and Ward, ‘reify’ cities or city-regions and see them as a ‘force of agglomeration’. Rather, the line of influence is seen to run in the opposite direction; changes in the ways in which agglomerative forces operate are argued to have encouraged shifts in the locational preferences of a broad range of economic agents — workers, households, firms — on a scale sufficient to underpin a new wave of urbanization, generally, and the growth and/or resurgence of the larger, economically diverse and best-connected urban centres of the developed world in particular.

There is, of course, nothing new about the notion of agglomeration. It has long been employed by urban economists and spatial scientists to explain urban morphologies and the development of urban systems, either within particular national contexts or on the assumption that politico-administrative boundaries are unimportant. What is new about the new economic geography and a broader literature on spatial variation in patterns of contemporary urban development is the argument that the balance between forces of economic dispersion, which encourages the development of a large number of relatively self-contained urban centres, and agglomeration, which is associated with the concentration of economic activity within a few, has recently tipped in favour of the latter to the economic advantage of the larger cities.

There is no consensus between commentators on the factors that have encouraged the strengthening of agglomeration tendencies or on their order of importance. For those whose analysis is rooted in international trade theory, for example, the key factor has been a fall in trade costs which has meant that those territories whose development was facilitated by barriers to trade — be they physical/infrastructural, technical or political — have grown less quickly than those for whom those barriers were, or have become, less important. For others, the ‘new agglomeration’ is seen to be based more upon factors such as falling communications costs, which enable a variety of inputs to production processes to be assembled more easily and cheaply over larger distances; changes in the organizational structures of firms, which have intensified the importance of inter-firm linkages and proximity; the high level of risk inherent in new, knowledge-intensive and innovative production and the way in which the density of potential suppliers and partners available in large urban areas helps to offset it; changes in labour market participation and household formation and the way in which the volume of high-level employment opportunities in the larger conurbations maximizes career development opportunities and minimizes the risk of under- or unemployment, particularly for double-income households; and housing market change and the extent to which household locations in high-value residential areas maximizes the accumulation of capital wealth that can be ‘traded in’ during later phases of the lifecycle.

For current purposes, the absence of consensus within the economics-inspired literature over what has encouraged an apparent intensification of agglomeration tendencies is rather less important than two key observations that arise from this discussion. The first is that it is difficult to ascribe many of its ostensible triggers, unambiguously, to ‘neoliberal policy discourses and practices’ or, indeed, to public policy change in any direct and obvious sense. So, for example, whilst it is possible to see falling trade costs as being partially driven by the evolution of tariff-free international trading blocks, it requires a considerable leap of imagination to attribute this phenomenon to ‘neoliberal’ politics unless we are prepared to tar political regimes that range along a continuum between a (currently) neo-conservative USA to a deeply social democratic Finland with the same brush. And it is harder still to see how changes in policy or governance have driven, rather than simply reacted to, the growing preference on the part of firms or households to base themselves in, or near to, dominant metropolitan centres because they see such a choice as functional to maximizing business opportunities or life chances. The second is that if new economic geographers

are right and the spatial economic development trends they point to are set to continue, we appear to be heading towards what Veltz (1996) has characterized as a global 'archipelago economy' in which agglomeration advantages gain in importance, national and international urban hierarchies become increasingly 'stretched', and the gap between the more and less economically successful/efficient/dynamic city-regions continues to grow.

In assessing whether this scenario appears likely on the basis of recent trends, let us briefly examine patterns of spatial economic change within the UK over the last decade or so. The first observation to make here is that the UK experience does not fit comfortably with Purcell's summary of recent urban scholarship to the effect that 'neoliberal globalization' — assuming it applies to the UK as much as anywhere — has had routinely negative effects on cities and city-regions. Instead, in an unprecedented period of consistent, recorded national economic growth, the picture is one of pronounced but highly uneven, city-focused economic renaissance. A visual impression of the spatial nature and implications of recent change is presented in Figures 1 and 2, which depict gross value added (GVA) data — the standard indicator of economic output used in the UK — at the 'NUTS 3' level, a common data collection unit used by the European Commission which, in the UK case, groups a number of local authority areas together at a scale that is typically smaller than administrative 'regions'. NUTS 3 areas do not correspond to 'city-regions' in any simple sense but when their GVA 'performance' is mapped in this way it is possible to see how they relate to one another across wider territories. The figures are shaded to illustrate gradations between the highest and lowest values in each case.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of GVA across the UK as at 2004, the most recent year for which data are available. It illustrates clearly how those areas that contain the largest concentrations of total economic output are disproportionately grouped together in the south of the country, in the metropolitan area of London and its immediate neighbours in England's southeast and eastern regions. Outside southern England there are lesser but significant concentrations of economic 'weight' in northern England, particularly around the cities of Manchester and Leeds and in Lancashire (whose relatively high GVA reflects the continued importance, compared with the major cities, of manufacturing), the English midlands (around Birmingham) and, on a smaller scale, around Bristol, in southwest England, Newcastle, in the northeast, Glasgow and Edinburgh, the principal cities of Scotland, and Aberdeen, the northern Scottish focus of the UK oil industry.

Figure 2, far more revealing for present purposes, depicts (undeflated) increases in GVA per capita for the same areas between 1995 and 2004. The patterns described here, because the data are controlled for population size and illustrate recent dynamics, present a rough proxy for productivity change. The picture is similar to that described in Figure 1 but even starker. The biggest GVA gainers — in effect, the 'hot spots' of the contemporary UK economy — are arranged in relatively continuous growth belts that start in London and fan out from the capital along the major transportation arteries, including the core area of the greater southeast but extending beyond it into the southern reaches of the English midlands and across the southwest into southeast Wales. The only remotely comparable growth belt — albeit less continuous, smaller in size and less pronounced in terms of the rate of GVA growth — is in northern England, broadly following the line of motorway networks that link the areas focused upon the cities of Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. Elsewhere, it is mainly in the areas centred upon the larger, relatively free-standing provincial cities and conurbations — Belfast in Northern Ireland, Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland, Newcastle in northeast England, Derby and Nottingham in the east midlands — that GVA has increased most sharply over the last decade.

Combining the insights from these two figures, it is clear that the recent 'story' of spatial development in the UK comprises two broad trends which have seen faster-than-average output growth in and around each of the largest urban centres in parallel with

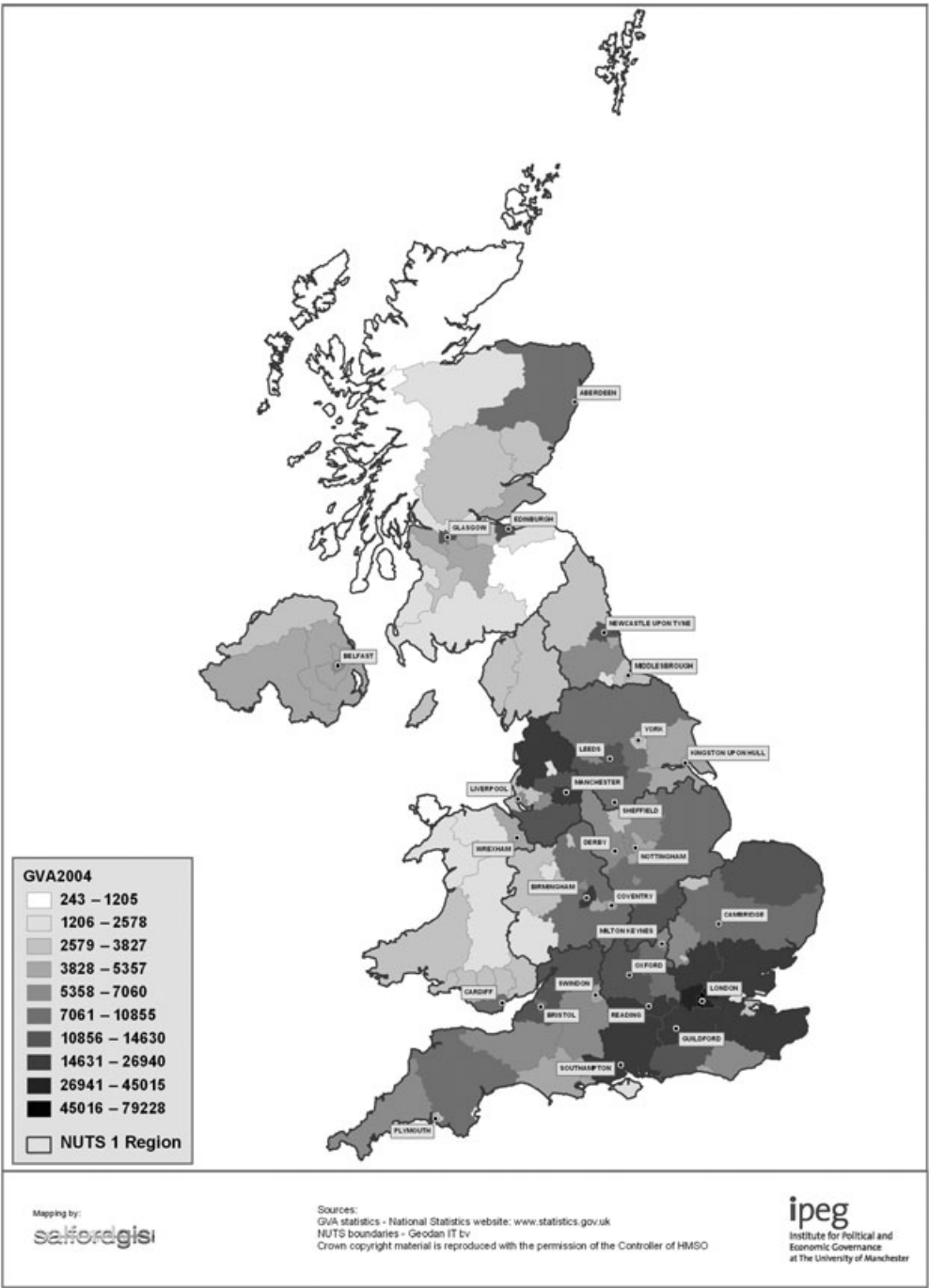
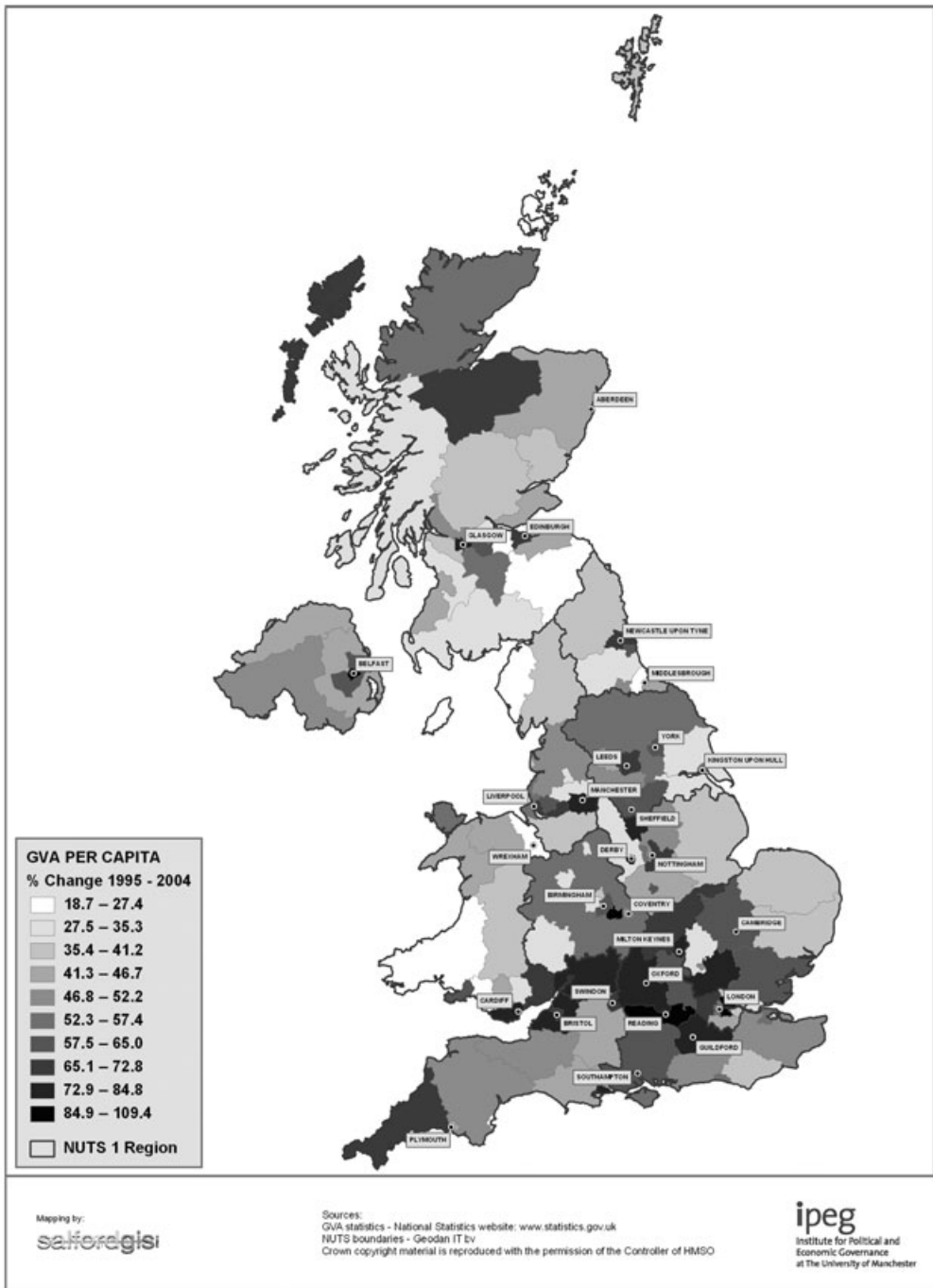


Figure 1 United Kingdom: absolute GVA (source: reproduced with the kind permission of the Northern Way Secretariat: <http://www.thenorthernway.co.uk>)

increased domination of the UK economy by the steadily expanding London super region. Expressed in city-regional terms, there has been a progressive differentiation in economic fortunes whereby London and the super region that surrounds it have outstripped the rest; the city-regions focused upon the larger, economically diverse and



**Figure 2** United Kingdom: GVA per capita (reproduced with the kind permission of the Northern Way Secretariat: <http://www.thenorthernway.co.uk>)

best connected provincial conurbations have performed better than those that relied upon narrower economic specialisms; and smaller cities, towns and rural areas that have seen their specialized economic base decline have fared worst, particularly when they are remote from the capital. These broad trends are not peculiar to the UK but apply, more



or less consistently and irrespective of national economic fortunes, across OECD countries (Harding, 2007). The questions that remain are whether these trends have been driven or exacerbated by changes in policy and governance and where the notion of the city-region fits within such changes.

## The politics of city-regionalism

The principle value of the notion of the city-region to the preceding discussion is as a conceptual device that helps to distinguish areas for which there are units of governance — administrative ‘cities’, which generally comprise only the central part of a broader urban area and, in some cases (but only London within the UK) larger, contiguous metropolitan areas — from the broader territories that surround them and with which they have significant interaction. There is no simple way of describing the extent of these broader city-regions statistically and arriving at unambiguous lines on maps because the size and shape of the ‘footprint’ associated with one or more urban centres inevitably depends upon the nature of the particular relationship in question and the degree of interaction that is taken to be significant (Robson *et al.*, 2006). The utility of the notion of the city-region, therefore, is not that it avoids ambiguity, fuzziness and overlapping ‘boundaries’ but that it encourages relational understandings of the internal and external dynamics of territories that have some degree of functional integrity but are very rarely defined administratively. It generates intelligent questions about the interaction between, for example, employment locations, the geography of land and property values, the operation of labour and housing markets and transportation systems and patterns of social segregation rather than providing neat administrative solutions to questions of subsidiarity, accountability and efficiency in service delivery.

This is not to deny that there have been attempts to define ‘hard’ city-regional boundaries for the purposes of public administration. The one significant attempt to do so in England and Wales came at the time of the last major structural reorganization of local government in the mid-1970s. Then, the city-region was promoted by some as the optimal scale at which to deliver strategic, ‘environmental’ as opposed to personal, consumer services in view of its perceived superiority in capturing the variable social and economic geometries of urban development that had arisen, since the previous reorganization 90 years earlier, from rising affluence, increased personal mobility and suburbanization (for a discussion, see Redcliffe-Maud and Wood, 1974). Once the national government of the day imposed its alternative model of local government reform in the face of such ‘expert’ advice, however, the case for city-regional authorities based on scale economies and subsidiarity in strategic service delivery lost momentum and has rarely been raised since (e.g. by Stoker, 2005). Serious interest in city-regions only resurfaced 30 years later in the context of debates that focused less upon local government efficiency and effectiveness and more upon national spatial development priorities.

If the UK spatial development patterns described above had actively been fed by a ‘winner takes all’ approach to territorial competition based upon urban-regional ‘units’, we might expect to find the sort of evidence of state restructuring and spatial policy change posited by Brenner during the period in which his work was most strongly influenced by the notion of neoliberalism (see, e.g., Brenner and Theodore, 2002). National government, we might expect, would demonstrably have identified the country’s most economically competitive urban regions and begun steadily to refashion public policy priorities and subnational governing arrangements in pursuit of two broad objectives: to support improved economic performance in ‘leading’ city-regions on the assumption that this represents the best way to selectively underpin national competitiveness, irrespective of its distributional consequences; and to offload responsibility for addressing the economic challenges of ‘lagging’ subnational territories to subordinate levels of government. In the process, we would expect to find evidence

of the abandonment of the in-principle commitment to territorial redistribution and national solidarity that underpinned subnational policies during the age of 'spatial Keynesianism'.

This narrative is hard to sustain with respect to *formal* institutional and policy changes in the UK, generally, and specifically in England, where interest in city-regions is strongest but has re-emerged only recently and more in response to the rediscovery of arguments for greater spatial equity than their abandonment. So, for example, there have been variable degrees and forms of devolution and decentralization to subnational territories within the UK as a result of the constitutional reforms introduced by national (Labour) governments since 1997, but it is hard to interpret these changes as evidence of a move toward the promotion of unfettered territorial competition. To date, formal institutional changes have affected only a minority of UK residents — those in the non-English nations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) and the metropolitan area of London — and in none of these cases was reform unambiguously driven by a search for better territorial economic performance or accompanied by the surrendering of significant tax-raising powers to the subnational scale. In short, institutional change has neither required nor indirectly forced a dominant focus upon economic competitiveness. Rather, devolution to non-English UK nations recognized territorial claims for greater 'national' autonomy and resulted in the democratization of deconcentrated administrative bodies that already assumed far more significant, mainstream public policy responsibilities (e.g. in health, education, transport and housing) than has ever been the case for English regions. The recreation of metropolitan government for London, by contrast, re-democratized provision of a small number of strategic services — some of them clearly focused upon the management and promotion of economic change, others (e.g. policing, fire and emergency services) not — on the assumption that elected, 'strategic' governance for the capital would improve policy coordination and delivery across the fields in which it is active and give London a clearer and stronger 'voice'.

Within England, outside the capital, recent subnational institutional reforms *have* emphasized territorial competitiveness, but at the somewhat artificial 'regional' rather than city-regional scale. The creation of regional quangos for economic development (regional development agencies) and indirectly elected regional planning organizations (regional assemblies), along with the strengthening of national government's presence in the regions and the national Treasury's interest in encouraging greater regional decentralization of decision-making in areas like transport, housing, planning and economic development can all be interpreted as evidence of growing national government support for greater subnational *competition* as well as competitiveness. This approach is effectively enshrined in a key Public Service Agreement on Regional Economic Performance (REP PSA), which commits the government to encouraging 'sustainable improvements in the economic performance of all English regions'. However, the resources controlled by regional agencies remain trifling compared with major, needs-driven services such as health and education (i.e. there has been no seismic shift in the balance between economic-development-specific and 'social' expenditures). In addition, the new and/or strengthened regional agencies are not the only significant 'players' in subnational development politics; for example, the Core Cities group of local authorities, which represents the eight largest English cities outside the capital — most of them consistently dominated by left-of-centre political parties — has also been actively involved in a variety of policy-development alliances with national government (Core Cities Working Group, 2004). Finally, the same REP PSA that favours maximum sustainable regional economic growth everywhere also aims 'over the long term [to] reduce the persistent gap in growth rates between the regions' in what is the closest approximation to a redistributive, national spatial policy statement produced by UK governments in the last 25 years.

This formal, national aspiration to improve the relative economic performance of regions outside the greater southeast of England also underpinned two developments that galvanized city-regionalism in different ways. The first was an ill-fated move by

government to facilitate the creation of elected regional assemblies (ERAs) in those regions where demand was demonstrably highest. The second was the 'Northern Way' development strategy, an idea dreamt up at national government level but defined and 'delivered' primarily through a partnership between northern England's three regional development agencies and whose aspiration, on paper, is to close the 'output gap' between northern regions and the English regional average (Northern Way Steering Group, 2004). The first foundered because, following some adept political juggling which ensured that ERAs would have had a primarily economic brief and that northern English regions were first in line to establish them if their citizens so wished (i.e. the overall effect, at least in the medium term, would have been to address economic imbalances between northern and southern English regions), (1) it proved impossible to secure departmental support, across government, for transferring significant powers and resources to the proposed new bodies, and (2) when popular support for a regional tier of government was tested for the first time, in a referendum in England's poorest region (the northeast), it was defeated so comprehensively by a public sceptical about the need for more politicians that the government abandoned the programme of legislation and referenda that would have enabled new regional authorities to be created (Sandford, forthcoming).

This debacle halted the government's muted devolution programme in England in its tracks and created the political space, which some but not all proponents of city-regionalism have occupied, within which it became possible to argue for city-regional governance as an alternative to English regionalism. The contribution of the Northern Way to city-regionalism was more direct. During the early stages of the development of its strategy a decision was taken, in light of the sort of evidence on spatial development patterns presented above, that it needed not only a set of interrelated sectoral policies but a clear sense of geographical priorities. The political fudge that emerged from bargaining between regional agencies here saw the development and/or strengthening of non-statutory inter-organizational alliances for the city-regions focused upon the largest urban centres of northern England — accounting, between them, for 90% of its population — and the subsequent production of city region development plans for each of them.

A significant debate on city-regions has since taken place in which the key protagonists have included not just these northern city-regional alliances but also left-of-centre think tanks, academic groups and other local government interests largely, but not exclusively, focused upon the larger core cities which see advantages in developing city-regional coalitions and strategies, partly in recognition of the interconnected fortunes of their areas and residents and partly in presenting a stronger united front to government and regional agencies. The forms of city-regionalism these interests have advocated range from new, formal city-regional authorities similar to the (metropolitan) London model (ippr Centre for Cities, 2006), through more voluntaristic forms of horizontal city-regional governance (e.g. Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, 2006), to the creation of vertically integrated policy frameworks and the use of intergovernmental incentives to encourage city-regional coordination and cooperation (SURF-CUPS, 2006). All focus primarily upon the perceived economic benefits of a stronger city-regionalism but invariably as a means of selectively promoting greater spatial economic balance at the national scale in line with the government's longer term REP PSA aspiration. The messages occasionally conveyed by a small number of national politicians and civil servants and through official position statements on the importance of city-regions to national economic prosperity (e.g. HM Treasury *et al.*, 2006) have been critical to creating a climate of expectation around the 'city-regional agenda'. However, the only formal statement of government intent thus far came in a recent White Paper on Local Government (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006) which committed the government only to relatively minor changes in unspecified geographical areas.

If we focus solely upon explicit city-regional narratives and initiatives, then, the story in England is of a relatively weak and patchy 'bottom-up' city-regionalism, tentatively

encouraged by (parts of) government, which is mainly the product of a muted politics of spatial economic disparity. However, there is another, implicit city-regionalism at work whose characteristics resemble those described by M<sup>c</sup>Guirk and whose effects and implications are considerably more powerful. As we have seen, the London super-region in the English/UK context, like Sydney and its environs in Australia, can lay metaphorical claim to being the goose that lays the national economy's golden eggs. In practice, however, 'it' — or rather the disparate organizations and interests contained within it — does not need to make this claim in order to enjoy privileged status in the eyes of private and public sector decision-makers (John *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, the mood within the national Labour Party that led to the ill-fated plan for ERAs and the development of the Northern Way was characterized by unease with the feeling that the government was responding to and actively supporting the growth of the London super-region in a way that had no parallels elsewhere in the country and that tangible evidence was therefore needed that the government, as well as the Party, took the 'needs' of provincial cities and non-core regions seriously, too.

The clearest and simplest evidence of the London super-regional bias that produced this unease is summarized in Table 1. This draws upon official figures on identifiable regional public spending and shows that, in the period in which the government ostensibly became committed to eroding differences in economic growth rates between the English regions, the biggest increases in regional expenditure per capita were in precisely those core regions — London, the southeast and the east of England — that would need to grow more slowly than the rest if this aspiration was going to be realized. Underlying these summary figures are a plethora of policy area-specific decisions — for example, in the fields of transport/aviation, land-use planning, housing, higher education/research and development and national support for key public facilities and 'mega events' — that are not seen as being related to one another but nonetheless add up, however inadvertently, to an implicit, uncoordinated London super-regional growth strategy.

**Table 1** Percentage change in total expenditure on services in each English region, per head, 2000-1 to 2004-5

	Total %
London	41
Southeast	39
Eastern	38
West Midlands	38
East Midlands	37
Northeast	37
<i>England</i>	37
Northwest	33
Yorkshire and Humberside	33
Southwest	31

**Source:** Scrutiny Unit analysis of data extracted from Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (2006), HM Treasury, May 2006, Cm6811 (reproduced in House of Commons Select Committee for Communities and Local Government, 2007)

At the time of writing, in the lead up to the UK's triennial public spending announcement, the trends described in Table 1 are set to deepen as some major public investments in the London super region, for example the £9.2 billion earmarked for the London Olympics, start to come on stream. By contrast, the decision has already been

made that the government's comparatively minor £50 million support for the Northern Way initiative will not be repeated in the next spending period. Were we to impute a logic to this implicit strategy, it would be that not only should the health of the UK's 'golden goose' not be threatened, its diet should continue to be improved on the assumption that the effect of London super-regional growth will eventually be to refresh those parts of the peripheral UK economy that its positive externalities have not yet reached.

## Refining the terms of the city-region debate

What are the implications of this discussion for future debate on the political economy of city-regions and city-regionalism in this journal and for research on the subject more generally? On the former, the answer must properly lie in the hands of the journal's readers and future contributors. On the latter, what follows is inevitably a personal view, founded upon four interrelated pleas.

The first is for a genuinely interdisciplinary debate about the importance of city-region formation and the political-administrative choices that are and could be associated with it. If this is to happen, there needs to be considerably more economics in the political economy of city-regions. What the edited collection demonstrated is that an analysis of city-regionalism derived from abstract, critical state theory is too general to be able to predict, with any certainty, the extent to which the material consequences of contemporary urban-regional development patterns inform, or are informed by, changes in the political salience of city-regions. Any improvement in current understandings of this interrelationship must, as Storper and Manville (2006) have argued in relation to urban theory more generally, take greater account of the variety of ways in which the preferences and behaviour of multiple economic agents are shaped and formed by particular material contexts rather than assume they can be 'read off' from a logic that is invisible to them. It would be particularly helpful, in this regard, if commentators who use the words neoliberal, neoliberalism and neoliberalization — terms that appear more than 70 times in the edited collection — were prepared to say precisely what they mean by them, which economic and social interests advance them, through what mechanisms and with what effects. In the absence of such clarity, the danger is that they continue to be used as catch-all terms of abuse by 'progressive' critics rather than concepts that are useful to empirical research.

The second plea is to take claims about 'the new agglomeration' seriously and to focus greater attention on establishing the extent to which it can genuinely be considered as a function of changes in public policy, regulation, expenditure choices and institutional reform and, if so, how. This is not a trivial challenge but there is now a sufficiently broad range of accounts that attempt to identify the 'causes' of urban economic re-concentration and differential urban-regional growth patterns for it to be possible to 'work backwards' to the public policy contexts and choices that most influence them rather than to assume, as most authors of the edited collection did, that there are common political and ideological factors at work. One key to facing this challenge effectively is surely to get behind policy rhetoric and narrative building and to assess where the 'stories' policy-makers tell come from and the extent to which they are consistent with what they do. There are enough demonstrable inconsistencies in this relationship *vis à vis* the explicit and implicit politics of city-regionalism in England to suggest that empirical work on the uneven spatial effects of public policy is an essential complement to research strategies that are more concerned to understand discursive transformation.

The final two pleas return to the central concerns of the edited collection with the future of progressive urban-regional politics. Thus, the third plea is for a more creative approach to understanding the implications of the development of an 'archipelago economy', be it at the national or international scale. Much of the recent, critical writing on the 'regressive' politics of contemporary urban change implicitly harks back to a time

when comparatively independent nation-states were allegedly able to employ a variety of mechanisms to ensure more even patterns of spatial development and a variety of benign social consequences. Such accounts exhibit a 'golden ageism' which tends to have the unfortunate effect of encouraging conservative, backward-looking approaches to issues of spatial economic management in circumstances that are less suited to nation-specific 'spatial Keynesianism' than ever. What is needed is a much more fundamental rethink of what it means to be 'progressive' in an age characterized by perforated sovereignty and stretched urban hierarchies, on one hand, but increased urban accessibility and more flexible work patterns on the other.

The final and most obvious plea is to allow for the possibility that explicit city-regionalism, as instanced here in England, is not intrinsically devoid of progressive intent or possibilities. Whilst the authors of the special edition were right to characterize the new city-regionalism as primarily concerned with spatially specific economic growth, it is equally true to say that the interests that are advancing this agenda, certainly in the English case, are more conscious than the co-editors of the debate allow of the politically unsustainable and self-defeating nature of city-regional growth patterns that cannot also provide demonstrable social and environmental benefits. What they currently lack are the conceptual frameworks and practical tools which might best facilitate such a balance. There is an important job for critical social science in relation to each of these pleas but if the recent collection provides any indication, there are serious question marks as to whether it is likely to be performed effectively if commentators rely upon abstract critique rather than constructive engagement.

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## Résumé

*Répondant à l'invitation des co-responsables du dernier débat publié dans IJURR sur les régions métropolitaines, cet essai vient 'élargir le dialogue sur le rôle constitutif de la politique dans l'univers idéal des régions métropolitaines'. Pour commencer, il étudie dans quelle mesure cet ensemble d'articles a réussi à décrire ce 'meilleur des mondes' et à le nourrir de diverses questions sociales et environnementales qui, d'après les co-responsables, ont jusqu'alors été ignorées dans les récentes discussions sur l'importance de ces régions. Etablissant que le débat n'a qu'en partie atteint ces objectifs, l'article affirme ensuite qu'on ne parviendra probablement pas au but poursuivi — libérer le 'régionalisme métropolitain' de ses entraves apparentes — à moins que ses critiques (1) ne s'attachent plus explicitement et sérieusement aux arguments sur l'importance des changements apportés aux situations matérielles des régions métropolitaines, et (2) ne reconnaissent qu'il n'y a rien d'intrinsèquement 'néolibéral' ni régressif dans le concept de région métropolitaine ou dans son exploitation. Cette démonstration est illustrée à partir de l'économie des régions métropolitaines et de la politique de régionalisme métropolitain en Angleterre.*