

DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Introduction to a Debate on City-Regions: New Geographies of Governance, Democracy and Social Reproduction

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to a special Debates and Developments forum on city-regions, we argue that the recent revival of interest in city-regions has been constructed around a rather narrow set of empirical and theoretical issues relating to exchange, interspatial competition and globalization. The 'new' city-regionalism results in a reification of the city-region as an autonomous political agent of the global space economy. We outline an alternative approach to investigating and understanding geographies of city-regionalism, highlighting: a politics of governance and state re-territorialization around the city-region; the role of democracy and citizenship in city-region politics; and tensions around social reproduction and sustainability across the city-region.

The most striking forms of agglomeration in evidence today are the super-agglomerations or city-regions that have come into being all over the world in the last few decades . . . These city-regions are locomotives of the national economies within which they are situated (Scott and Storper, 2003: 581).

The city-region concept: establishing the terms of a debate

A disparate body of academic and policy literature has attempted to identify and understand recent and profound changes in the territoriality of capitalism associated with the restructuring of political and economic spaces (MacLeod, 2001). In the apparent vacuum created by the collapse of Fordist-style economic institutions and Keynesian-welfare states, where they used to exist, new territorial structures and imaginaries are being produced; one of which is the notion of the 'city-region'. This is not to say that urban and regional scholars have happened upon this concept only recently or by chance. On the contrary, there is a well-established tradition in the planning and geography

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literatures, which is devoted to looking at functional relationships between cities and their surrounding regions or hinterlands; and work in this tradition is ongoing, albeit adapted to new strategic and spatial imperatives (Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Healey, 2004). These days, however, city-regions are increasingly examined in terms of their functionality for creativity, innovation, development and competition within a globalizing economy. They are theorized as the architectural, social, cultural and spatial building blocks of the global economy, drawing down regulatory authority and territorial control from sovereign nation-states (Scott, 2001; Scott *et al.* 2001).

Although there is much to admire in work on the new city-regionalism, the working premise of this Debates and Developments forum is that there has been an under-emphasis in the city-region literature on how new territorial forms are constructed politically and reproduced through everyday acts and struggles around consumption and social reproduction. An especially notable lacuna is serious treatment of the role of the state and an associated politics of distribution constructed around various sites, spaces and scales across the city-region. In some respects, this silence on matters of politics and collective social agency arises from a tendency to reify the city-region itself as an agent of wealth creation and redistribution. This comes at the expense of knowledge about the people, interests, and socio-political agents who populate and work in city-regions. Our overall intention, then, is to recover aspects of the 'ordinary geographies' (see Amin and Graham, 1997) of city-regions in a systematic fashion and thereby we hope to open up fruitful new avenues of enquiry.

We set the stage for the individual contributions that follow by reviewing recent writings on resurgent city-regions. These indicate that the rescaling of the economy around globally interconnected urban–regional agglomerations is associated with a profound re-territorialization of the state. We proceed to unpack three different aspects of this re-territorialization. First, we consider the changing ways in which cities are governed, identifying the particular ways in which state activity and politics have been rescaled at, around, and within city-regions. Second, we turn to issues of democracy, and examine neoclassical ways in which the term has been understood and used in Western debates over the right to the city, before widening the debate to include different democratic models. Third, and finally, we move on to examine the living city: the ways in which the imaging strategies of urban boosters compare with the practices of those who have to live and work in city-regions, negotiating their way through rush hours, and balancing work and non-work commitments. Here we touch on recent discussions about social and environmental sustainability, and how struggles around sustainability and the work–life 'balance' have infused tensions within city-regions.

It is our hope that this forum will open up for discussion a series of issues that tend to drop out of the writing on resurgent city-regions: the marshalling of the term both in political circles and everyday discourses, struggles and practices. This collection of essays draws on first-hand empirical research generated from a range of geographical situations in North America, Europe and Australia.¹ It provides a series of situated accounts, which we believe to provide an informed understanding of the general and the specific in the reworking of state territoriality and social life around and across city-regions. Each study looks at both the discursive and material transformations underway, and the ways in which each works through the other to produce the conditions under which actually existing politics occurs. Our intention is not to debunk an approach to

1 We note that one of the problems with recent writings on city-regions is a tendency to infer general processes of economic change and state re-territorialization from a select few places (usually global city-regions) in the global north (Robinson, 2002). See Robinson (1998) and Benjamin (2004) for examples of how some of the issues discussed here play out in the global south. In order to provide some sort of focus to our own argument, we have chosen not to engage in a critical examination of the 'global' city-region as if such a conceptual category can be said to exist. Instead, we are interested in abstracting some general spatial structures and social processes from the diversity and variety of city-regional geographies.

the city-region in which it is analysed as a force of agglomeration and territorial development, but rather to reveal the variety of generative conditions and circumstances through which city-regional geographies are produced, reproduced, and struggled over.

The rescaling of urban and regional analysis around the city-region

Arguably, one of the most prescient analyses of present possibilities can be found in Jane Jacobs' writings and especially her polemic on *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (Jacobs, 1984). Therein Jacobs laid out a powerful argument to the effect that cities, rather than nations, are agents of wealth creation (a position in fact traceable to the eighteenth-century Scottish political economist and philosopher Adam Smith). This, she suggested, is because of the strong relations of trade that bind together the city and its 'regional' hinterland, which might extend to all sorts of places around the globe. This 'city-region' world economy is made up of independent producers specializing in making and trading in particular commodities and services. A competition between urban regions emerges in which further specialization occurs as cities and regions develop new products and services, and are able to substitute imports with their own products and services (Jacobs, 1984). Jacobs argued that city-regions are by their very nature functional economic territories: more functional than the nation-states in which they are located.

Whilst Jacobs' treatise is ultimately flawed from the standpoint of understanding how processes of global expansion are unleashed from capitalist social relations of production, it nonetheless captures an essential theme in recent understandings of city-regions; namely, it recognizes their dual economic (trade) and political (regulatory) functions. City-regions are, firstly, economic territories because of their role in stimulating trade, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurialism and, second, political territories because within them can be found autonomously developed regulatory and decision-making capacities. From this emerges a neoliberal view that region-states (Ohmae, 1993) and city-states (Pierce, 1993) are experiencing resurgence even as the sovereign, territorial nation-state withers away, a view which finds succour in free-market economics and ideas of limited government (Friedman and Friedman, 1979: 25–6).

According to the likes of Scott and Storper (2003), city-regionalism amounts to a new phase in capitalist territorial development. This phase is often described as post-Fordist or post-national because the political and regulatory authority of the nation-state is threatened by the rise of the new super-agglomerations that comprise global city-regions. Thus economic globalization itself depends upon and is driven by the forces of spatial agglomeration that occur around city-regions. Agglomeration, in turn, creates positive externality (third party) effects at the urban–region scale. These effects include *inter alia* the development of intra- and inter-urban cooperation networks and alliances, dense congeries of labour and labour markets, the sharing of strategic assets, infrastructures and resources, and, more generally, the existence of certain social and cultural economies of agglomeration (Gordon, 1999; Begg, 2001; Fujita *et al.*, 2001; Porter, 2001).

Heavily inscribed in such interpretations of the new city-regionalism is the idea that these territories are functional economic spaces. What is perhaps less clear from these accounts is the constitutive role of politics — especially struggles around social reproduction and distribution — and the diverse forms of governance and political participation that contribute to the organization and management of city-regional territories. To be sure, city-regions are places where new cooperative forms of governance *might* have emerged to reinforce the strategic development role of city-regions (e.g. new metropolitan authorities and public–private partnerships) (but see Leibovitz, 2003; McGuirk, 2004; While *et al.*, 2004). Yet all too often the city-region

is seen as an autonomous political and economic space: what is left after the nation-state and its decision making and democratic authority has been curtailed by the forces of economic globalization and spatial agglomeration. Elsewhere, we have argued that this view is derivative of a neo-Smithian or exchange relations interpretation of contemporary territorial developments (Ward and Jonas, 2004). The new city-regionalism takes forward into the twenty-first century a well-established debate about the democratic and administrative roles of the city-state (which now replaces or flanks the nation-state). Instead, we want to argue for an analysis that understands the political and social constitution of the city-region as an integral component in the wider re-scaling of states: not an input, nor an output, but part of the process and politics of state re-territorialization.

That there is a relative decline in the power of the nation-state vis-à-vis the emergent power structures of city-regions is an argument whose empirical referents are limited to a select group of 'global' city-regions (Robinson, 2002; McCann, 2003). It might indeed be appropriate in these contexts to ascribe to city-regional development patterns the forces of global competition. However, these very same competitive forces may well exacerbate conflict and more often throw into sharp relief spatial contradictions around the social reproduction of workers, communities and neighbourhoods across the city-region (Gough, 2002). These conflicts and tensions need to be mapped out, not just onto city-region spaces but also at the national and international scales. They may be played out 'locally' but they reveal the wider circuits of conflict that connect together geographically discrete places, and that are essential elements in the restlessness of capitalism, and efforts by states of all stripes to manage its inherently uneven consequences.

State re-territorialization and the new scalar politics of city-regional economic development

In our view, one of the problems of some received thinking about the possibility for a politics of city-regionalism is a tendency to impute to the city-region itself a certain degree of agency such that the city-region behaves as an autonomous force of global economic and political change. Yet there are very great dangers in reading agency into city-regional institutional developments unproblematically from dis-embedded logics of globalization, spatial competition, or the immanent logic of post-Fordist state restructuring. Such a view amounts in effect to a reification of the city-region as a discrete 'actor-scale'. This in turn leads to a concomitant denigration of causal processes, strategic actions and economic politics that are framed at or around 'other' scales, including those within a more localized spatial context; in other words, this leads to the idea that space is not a contingent outcome but a necessary dimension of new forms of territoriality. This is not to impute to a spatial scale like the city-region an unrealistic level of political autonomy or causal influence; rather it is to recognize *pace* Swyngedouw (1997) that any geographic scale — not least in this case the city-region — cannot be assumed *a priori* to be a necessary outcome of wider political-economic tendencies but nonetheless it might *become* necessary for particular political interests and agencies. As both medium and outcome of the politics of global-local restructuring processes, city-regional territories are always produced through material politics and struggles framed at diverse scales — an accomplishment rather than a necessary outcome, we might say.

Accordingly, our understanding of city-regional development needs to be understood as being simultaneously *downscaled* from the global scale to the level of conditions within the communities and neighbourhoods of city-regions and *up-scaled* from the local geographies of competition and conflict across the city-region in order to make sense of the production of larger geographic processes and territorial structures. These movements challenge us to re-think how we theorize 'scale' and its relationship to

particular sites, interests and spatial practices as these unfold across (in this instance) the city-region (McCann, 2002; Jonas, 2006).

In the first paper, Pauline McGuirk considers the process of state re-territorialization in the context of recent attempts to construct a politics of city-regionalism in Sydney, Australia. She argues that the political construction of this particular city-region as a space of governance is a process that has involved state orchestration, practical acts of discursive production, and active mobilization by a range of actors pursuing strategic-spatial interests within actual material and political-institutional settings. Thinking through Sydney's practical formation as a city-regional space of governance reinforces the need, in McGuirk's view, to reconfigure the dominant arguments in theorizations of the city-region. Instead, city-regions ought to be conceptualized as contingent products of practical acts of political construction and, therefore, as *necessarily* variable according to political interests and thus indeterminate territorial formations.

The need to examine the relations and processes connecting scales of politics is a theme taken up in the paper by Eugene McCann, who takes as his intellectual-critical foil Richard Florida's important and influential work on the creative class and deconstructs the idea that city-regions can be essentialized as places of creativity and innovation. Florida's (2002: 249) typically upbeat account, which argues that city, regional and city-regional 'economic growth is powered by creative people, who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas' is reflected upon in the study of Austin, Texas. What McCann's study reveals is how rather than being a self-evident and generally agreed upon 'fix' to institutional and geographical problems of urban development, the regionalist-cum-liveability agenda actually is the input into and the output of a wide range of urban political struggles. These centre on fundamental — and, in the case of Austin, often racially inflected — questions of social reproduction including wage inequality, increasing costs of housing, fears of displacement, the destruction of longstanding community structures, the character, purposes and class relationships underlying environmental policy, and the unequal provision of recreational opportunities. Conceptually, McCann argues that city-regionalism frequently turns on the development of selective, strategically directional, and politically and historically contingent geographical imaginations. There is no single, stable, and unitary understanding of what a city-region is, but, rather, the making of city-regions needs to be performed, and in making some of the claims that were made in Austin, elite actors made the realization of their objectives more likely.

City-regions: democracy and citizenship in a new political order

Once we recognize the possibility and potential for a politics of city-regional development and its scalar structuration, we have to examine critically those concepts of political participation and democratic practice that have been applied to knowledge of the city-region. It is no coincidence that the resurgence of city-regions as economic spaces has been accompanied by their re-emergence as political spaces. City-regions and metropolitan areas have become important sites of policy experimentation around new regulatory structures and spaces of governance (Brenner, 2002). Whilst such spaces are deeply inscribed by neoliberal policy discourses and practices (Peck and Tickell, 2002), substantive matters of struggles around re-distribution often provide the substance of resistance against such globally hegemonic practices and politics. Such struggles operate within diverse national social formations and carry with them different understandings and assumptions about political participation and democratic praxis. They challenge us to think about our categories of place, space and scale in the light of the geographical 'reach' of these networks.

Deeply inscribed in the making of city-regions is the possibility of a new politics of space associated *inter alia* with the potential threat city-regions pose to the regulatory

authority of the nation-state. To start with, we can imagine a national-scale politics of city-regions where certain places (e.g. Sydney) are strategically selected as national economic drivers (McGuirk, 2004). Yet national differences in the politics of city-regionalism are not simply a function of the political context and discursive rendering of new spaces of competition, nor of the ways in which different state structures are organized into scalar hierarchies (Brenner, 1998). They also arise from struggles around the material conditions of city-regional growth as processes of uneven development work their way through actual geographic contexts (Keating, 1998; Jonas and Ward, 2002). Given uneven development, re-distributional concerns are always at the centre of struggles and strategies around metropolitan and regional state geographies. Here we can expect fundamental questions of taxation, labour regulation, political reform, childcare provision, spatial planning, public administration, environmental sustainability and urban budgets to be implicated in local-scale geographies and politics of state rescaling (Ward and Jonas, 2004; While *et al.*, 2004).

The paper by Mark Purcell considers how our concepts of democracy need to be not just rescaled but also reworked as the debate around city-regions unfolds. In the context of wider neoliberal processes, he argues that there is a pressing need for a normative exploration of the role democracy might play in shaping a more progressive future for city-regions. Drawing attention to how parallel discussions need to be brought into dialogue, Purcell argues that research on city-regions, neoliberal globalization, and democracy have much to say to each other in the project of producing a more just society (see Held, 1995). Not for arguing that this is an easy theoretical or practical task, he reveals 'democracy' as a complex and plural concept, defined and used in a myriad of ways to many ends. The debate about city-regions throws into perspective received assumptions about the geography of democratic practice and challenges formal definitions of 'politics' and its scaling around and through extant state structures.

One conclusion from Purcell's discussion is that the city is not simply the outcome or locus of a rescaled citizenship — a return to a romanticized or idealized form of democracy to be found in the city-state; rather, the very essence of politics (and participation) may be changing, being redefined and rescaled as people struggle to meet the heady demands of daily urban life (Amin and Graham, 1997). This can range from prosaic concerns of access to services, healthcare and the like to a more general struggle around the work–life balance and a socially and environmentally sustainable form of development, issues to which we turn in the third part of this discussion.

City-regions as sites of distribution: new geographies of social reproduction and sustainability

As we have already suggested, the city-region has become an important site of struggle and strategy around the politics of the everyday: of work, living, access to services, rights to public spaces and so forth. Age-old contradictions of spatial growth in capitalism come to rest in and through the territorial structures of city-regions (Harvey, 1989). These contradictions are not resolved simply through a one-way process whereby economic growth can be traded off against matters of territorial distribution, equity, quality of life, and the environment. In some respects, matters of redistribution and collective provision are actively taken up and championed by proponents of city-regional growth, not least through the making of connections between economic growth, on the one hand, and quality of life, on the other. As McCann's contribution suggests, this is the substance of debate and propaganda around notions of the creative class and quality of life.

Contemporary policy discourses of 'enhancing the quality of life', 'promoting liveability' or 'managing the work–life balance' may well capture the importance of this

dimension of city-regionalism, but in our view these received concepts fail to deliver the intellectual power of the concept of social reproduction (see also Gough, 2002). This concept instead captures in a more integral sense some of the changes in the work and domestic spheres, highlighting the causal relationships between the workplace and the living space, and the role of urban politics in the distribution of the social product (Harvey, 1985; Cox and Jonas, 1993).

At the same time, given profoundly problematic issues to do with under-provision, inequality, uneven development and low environmental standards to be found within city-regions, such issues and the strategies households and individuals develop around them cannot simply be explained in terms of the failings of neoliberal policy frameworks. Rather, there is an actually existing politics of distribution taking place across city-regions on an everyday basis, including material demands for collective consumption, social movements around the living place, and the like. In this respect, the social reproduction of city-regions as functionally coherent territorial structures remains under-theorized so long as strategies to secure conditions of social reproduction on the part of inhabitants are not brought into the frame.

The contribution by Helen Jarvis delves into these issues, and draws on her work about the social reproduction of everyday life (Jarvis, 2005). The 'home-truths', as she puts it, are the ways in which contemporary uses of the city-region are imaginable and realizable only through the failure to value much of the social reproductive work that is performed to reproduce 'the infrastructure of everyday life' (*ibid.*). She makes a plea for an appreciation of the 'whole' economy, which recognizes the full value of unpaid care-giving, volunteering and 'free' environmental resources. Her paper speaks to the issues raised by McCann regarding how 'quality of life' issues are defined and by whom, and by Purcell, over the various ways in which 'democracy' in abstract and in practice is marshalled, and what these uses say about the relationship between democratic impulse and neoliberal globalization.

It is has become increasingly apparent that a city-region's competitiveness is based not only on production but also on quality of life (social reproduction) and the policy measures adopted by many city-regions are frequently couched in a discourse of 'sustainable development'. The contribution from Rob Krueger and Lydia Savage interrogates the possible relationship between city-regions and sustainable development at a conceptual level. Despite progress around the concept of 'just sustainability', current constructions of sustainable development are inadequate to capture the broad array of social and economic issues found in the city-region, not least being the struggle of workers for a 'living wage' (see Walsh, 2000). This prompts Krueger and Savage to initiate a discussion between the sustainability literature and labour geography. They provide a case study of a hospital privatization process in Boston, USA, which has been framed by a politics of city-regionalism. In doing so, they reveal some interesting ways in which new political alliances can be forged around issues of collective consumption and provision across the city-region.

Invitation to a debate

We hope that the papers in this special edition invite responses. That is our intention. We want others to participate, to get involved through empirical and theoretical investigation in a wider dialogue over the constitutive role of politics in the brave new world of 'city-regions'. In this introduction and in the contributions that are to follow, our aim has been to push for an analysis of the city-region, which is grounded in the struggles around social reproduction and political participation. This distinguishes us from some others, who are also working with the concept of the 'city-region'. For these theorists, there is a tendency either to understand city-region formation as a by-product of macro-restructuring, or to conceptualize city-regions, essentially, as possessed of

agency — primarily economic agency. In making our case for an alternative theoretical standpoint we put forward three arguments. First, we 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. The universal logic underpinning diverse city-region formations in different parts of the world is the territorial restlessness inherent in the capitalist system. Yet this restlessness creates spatial interests; so there is a need to discover for which interests city-regions are necessary and for whom this new territoriality is merely contingent. Second, we argue for the need to explore the relationship between the city-region as both a living and as a working place, as Harvey (1985) argued many years ago. This requires certain activities to be investigated more deeply, particularly but not exclusively those performed by women. It also demands an engagement with new spatial representations and politics, including those of sustainability, citizenship, and collective provision and consumption, as well as those more generally, of social reproduction. Third, we argue that there remains a need to analyse the multiple roles the state plays in releasing and constraining the energies produced as the territoriality of capitalism is constantly refashioned. This demands we understand the different infrastructures, environmental, physical and social, which have to be actively produced, through the toil and labour of citizens. Each of the ensuing contributions talks about particular issues in particular city-regional places. They do so, however, as a means of reflecting on what their own findings have to say about these three more general arguments, striking a balance we hope between an appreciation of the virtues of situated knowledge and an appreciation of the linkages that can be forged between the general and the specific. For us this is the most fruitful way forward.

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Résumé

Cette introduction au forum de débat sur les cités-régions ou régions métropolitaines affirme que le regain d'intérêt récent pour ces territoires est explicité au travers d'un ensemble relativement restreint de sujets empiriques et théoriques concernant les échanges, la compétition entre espaces et la mondialisation. Le 'nouveau' régionalisme métropolitain génère une réification de la région métropolitaine en tant qu'agent politique autonome dans l'économie de l'espace planétaire. Ce travail décrit une approche alternative pour examiner et comprendre les géographies du régionalisme métropolitain en faisant apparaître: une politique de gouvernance et de re-territorialisation de l'État autour de la région métropolitaine; le rôle de la démocratie et de la citoyenneté dans la politique afférente; les tensions qui se créent dans la région métropolitaine autour de la reproduction sociale et de la durabilité.