

City-Region Building and geohistorical matters: New new localism and the New new regionalism

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Abstract: In an article published nearly 15 years ago with Gordon MacLeod, we 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, we looked at Paasi’s thinking on regionalization processes, abstracted in four stages, which collectively allowed us to advance (we claimed) a meaningful understanding of regional change. Rolling forward the research clock, I maintain that Paasi’s framework *remains* a cutting-edge theoretical framework in and through which to examine region-building processes and practices. This article accordingly looks at the ‘new new localism’ and suggests the need to now think about the dawn of a ‘new new regional geography’.

Keywords: geohistory, institutionalization, new new regional geography

Entry point: 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. 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 such as the 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 currently taking these agendas forward as a response to hold-down the global and also finding away around the messy nature of austerity and local state restructuring (see Conservative Party 2015).

With Ian Rees Jones (Cardiff University) and David Beel (University of Sheffield), I am currently involved in a three-year research project at the University of Sheffield, 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, and within 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 (Jones & Jones 2015).

Deploying case study research—based on two sites in Wales (Cardiff Capital Region and Swansea Bay City Region) and two sites in England (Sheffield City Region and Manchester City Region), and involving interviews with around

20-25 stakeholders in each location—I am 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 civil society as a means of stimulating localist economic development (see Clarke & Cochrane 2013; Clark 2014). 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 & 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). I would like to suggest that Paasi’s treatise on regions increasingly allows a window into the study of such new new localist ecosystems.

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 & 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 analyzed 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 operationalized through a methodology of abstraction: abstract to concrete and simple to complex in the identification of phenomenon.

Paasi has deconstructed the regionalization 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 & 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 symbolized 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 & 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 institutionalization practices and the balance and roles of those actors involved and their geographical dependency (see Jones & Paasi 2013, 2015; Paasi 2010, 2013; also).

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 endeavor 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 – south east Wales (Cardiff, described initially for external promotion purposes to distinguish Cardiff from neighbouring Newport, and later renamed the Cardiff Capital Region to acknowledge both capital city power status and the stretched-out variegated geography of city-region

building) and Swansea Bay 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.

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 organizations rooted in civil society (local media, working clubs, arts and literature organizations), 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 organizations are instituted into an activity such as economic development, the very consciousness of some place-based agendas may be intensified (MacLeod & 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.

Every theory has its limitations and previously MacLeod and I (MacLeod & Jones 2001) noted it was only fair to acknowledge that Paasi's key research objective has been to uncover the more localized 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 & Zimmerbauer 2015). 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 institutionalized 'territorial unit' and as an identifiable constituent in the regional division of society. In practical terms, the region is ready to be mobilized 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 year in England demonstrates the relevance of Paasi's thinking. The full map of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) is now complete, 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-recognized as strategic coordinating bodies) Combined Authorities. 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 internalizes a new scale of policymaking, is becoming an established region. As part of the 'Northern Powerhouse' movement, which has been emerging in the past 12 months as a means of addressing austerity and rebalanced development, Sheffield has recently 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, only the second to be agreed in England, although not necessarily involving additional money, is being presented as a shift in power from Whitehall to the Combined Authorities in the region. This will include 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 (HM Government 2014).

Coda

I remain committed to the position that Paasi's treatise on regions in geography can provide fresh thinking 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 I 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 regionalization of society (MacLeod & Jones 2001). Moreover, by placing the institutionalization 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 regionalization of society.

Further, and in the context of city-region building research, Paasi's framework permits us to problematize the reciprocal relationships that can exist between the whole gamut of institutional forms relating to economic behavior (LEPs, EZs, City-Regions 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', with Anssi Paasi at the centre of this. Anssi Paasi: friend, colleague, and scholar of regions in geography.

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