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Re-reading the new regionalism: A sympathetic critique

By John Harrison

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a sympathetic critique of the new regionalism – currently one of the leading debates taking place in English speaking human geography. By unpacking the new regionalism from its dual origins in economic geography and political science, I engage with some of its inherent lines of weakness by: (i) developing a critique arguing that it is inappropriate on the part of the new regionalism to neglect the role of the state in the resurgence of regions in the reconstituted capitalist space economy; (ii) exploring the accusation that the new regionalism has become enmeshed in multifaceted scalar politics and associated tangled policy hierarchies; and, (iii) arguing that through policy-transfer programmes, path-dependency, social capital, and soft institutionalism, the new regionalism has been constructed on inadequate foundations. Finally, in developing this sympathetic theoretical and methodological critique towards the new regionalism, this paper speculates how new regionalists should actually go about ‘doing’ regional regulation.

KEY WORDS: **New Regionalism** **Multifaceted Scalar Politics**
‘Doing’ Regional Regulation

Re-Reading the New Regionalism: A Sympathetic Critique

“The New Regionalism “is a set of stories about how *parts* of a regional economy *might* work, placed next to a set of policy ideas which *might* just be useful in *some* cases” (Lovering, 1999: 384 emphasis original).

Since the mid-1990s there has been a discernible shift towards a ‘strong institutionalist’ literature seeking to locate localised processes within a global context. Indeed, it has recently been suggested that there is a need to “consider the nation-state in relation to its scalar manifestations” in order to navigate a path away from the fixation of processes and events at particular scales (Jones, 2001: 1202).

The resurgence of the region as an object of investigation, and the institutional approach to understanding (Martin, 2000) within institutional perspectives has sought to critically investigate the dynamisms and mechanisms of this phenomena. Under the titles of ‘regional political economy’ (Agnew, 2000; MacLeod, 2000) and the ‘new regionalism’ (Amin, 1999) there has been a greater critical engagement with accounts of an economic resurgence of regions within an increasingly globalised arena. In particular, new regionalists go so far as to claim that contemporary capitalism and its territorial configuration are best regulated and governed in and through the decentralisation of socio-economic decision-making and associated policy implementation to sub-national institutional frameworks and supports (Cooke and Morgan, 1994; Florida, 1995; Storper, 1997; Scott, 1998). In making this claim for the new regionalism, however, we need to be clear that this does not in any way deny that the state has a critical role to play in the regulation of contemporary capitalist societies.

Increasingly within economic geography – and more specifically the new regionalism – there is a growing acknowledgement that the successful regional

economies which have grown rapidly in many parts of North America and Western Europe have been supported by a set of unique and very specific local social conditions. Of course, the very acknowledgement that place specificity and unique local conditions are key to this opens up serious questions regarding the applicability of theoretical generalisations within the new regionalism.

Largely preoccupied by the angst created by Lovering's hard-edge and negative critique, I would argue that the new regionalism has been deterred and distracted from serious regional theoretical analysis. Lovering's scepticism towards the new regionalism is premised upon a line of attack, which is at best misplaced and at its worst, naive. By attempting to use a simplistic peripheral empirical case study (illustrated from the case of Wales) to wholly dismiss empirical case studies in regions such as Baden-Württemberg and Silicon Valley is theoretically guilty by association. By dropping his theory, and then by trying to use his own simplistic case-study to critique other more detailed case-studies, Lovering has managed to effectively 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'.

While sympathetic to the general tenor of new regionalist thinking, this paper argues for a more synthetic approach to understandings of the significance of the region as an effective arena for positioning economic governance. It argues that current research in the new regionalism is becoming chaotic by bundling together too many diverse theories for it to be a coherent intellectual project. United by a common rejection of the unsatisfactory methodological and theoretical work of traditional regional analysis, this paper argues that the new regionalism currently finds itself lost within a web of uncoordinated and politicised 'islands' (Section 1, cf. Purcell, 2003).

The remainder of the paper then expands upon these narrow and insular readings of particular aspects of the new regionalism by highlighting some of the

critical debates that remain either absent or poorly expressed. In Section 2, I argue that while the term ‘region’ has been an object of mystery, and that ‘regional change’ remains an elusive concept, a critical reappraisal of the nature of both regional spaces and regional change can be achieved through their study *in relation to* other scales of inquiry. Section 3 interrogates the unfolding role of the region and the regional scale in the ongoing reconstitution of the capitalist space economy, arguing that there are a set of macro-economic insights which highlight a greater force operating above and beyond the policy-oriented focus of the new regionalism. Whilst sceptical of imported policy solutions, Section 4 shows how policymakers find themselves paradoxically drawn (almost by definition) to favour policy ideals which are informed by the experiences of prosperous regions. Tackling the accusations that the new regionalism has been constructed upon inadequate foundations, I advance the case for adopting empirics-based, intensive single-region case-study research. Finally, in Section 5, the paper highlights how the theoretical and methodological foundations upon which the new regionalism is founded actively require a new self-reflective critical engagement.

1. Unpacking the New Regionalism

As I have begun to detail above, the new regionalism has evolved into a rather ‘chaotic concept’ (see Section 5). This section therefore seeks to unpack the new regionalism further by tracing its emergence through its dual origins in economic geography and political science. What follows constitutes only a synopsis of some of the key schools of thought that have coalesced under the banners of ‘economic’ and ‘political’ new regionalism.

1.1 *The 'dominant': economic new regionalism*

The new regionalism has undoubtedly emerged with an overt economic focus, drawn out through its close links with institutional economics, economic sociology and evolutionary political economy (MacLeod, 2001b). In contrast to earlier geographical analyses which privileged inquiry of the national scale and the nation state (Peck and Tickell, 1992), these geographers sought to interrogate the mesogeographies of economic life, and the reflexive 'frameworks' in and through which economic development is being constituted and governed.

Firstly, the influential work of Amin and Thrift on the 'new institutionalism' highlighted how the economic success of a region is not exclusively the domain of a narrow set of economic factors. Coining the phrase 'institutional thickness', they offered a rebuttal of cruder versions of the dominant discourse of globalisation contending that the local merely reacts to global economic realities. Drawing on a combination of institutional economics and economic sociology, the authors explicitly focus on the ability and capacity to territorially embed global processes *in place*. Building upon the study of 'growth poles', they articulated that although economic factors are important, social and cultural factors also "live at the heart of economic success" (Amin and Thrift, 1994: 14). Key to this 'thickening' process in regions is not the *hard institutionalism* through the presence of the institutions themselves, but the *soft institutionalism* (through the build-up of social capital) that underpins and stimulates a digressive entrepreneurship.

Secondly, Cooke and Morgan's (1993; 1994) work created the belief that interactive networking, and not just the state, facilitate economic growth. Their approach is particularly important because through the highlighting of different structures of governance occurring in the dynamic growth economies, policy

templates can be formulated to stimulate less-favoured regions (such as their focus on neo-Conservative Wales, cf. Cooke, 1997; Cooke and Morgan, 1998; Morgan, 1997). Employing the ‘institutions of innovation’ metaphor, they explain how operations at the regional scale revolve centrally around a networked hub of both private and public sector institutions to produce ‘regional innovation networks’ that stimulate economic growth (Cooke and Morgan, 1998). Following the work of the evolutionary economist Lundvall, at the heart of this canon of work is the belief that “knowledge is the most strategic resource and learning the most important process” (Lundvall, 1994). It is argued that through the creation of both hard institutional structures and the formation of soft institutional processes ‘intelligent regions’ emerge, which possess the capacity to develop regional prosperity.

Thirdly, drawing inspiration from the wider Atlantic economic arena, Storper’s ‘regional world action framework’ argues that there is a new era of reflexive capitalism whereby the sharing and networking of information is replacing market-based competition. Defining contemporary reflexive capitalism, Storper describes it as “a system that manufactures new kinds of risks...In the economic sphere, these risks are expressed through the redefinition of competition - what it takes to win and how it is possible to lose”. Furthering this, he further contends that “[W]inning has become a much more complex target, because the conditions...in order to win are manufactured and remanufactured more thoroughly and more rapidly than ever before, creating a moving target for success and a shifting minefield of risks and failures” (Storper, 1997: 30).

Contrasting the approach adopted by many economic geographers in the privileging of the national scale, Storper (1997: 5) draws on the theory of conventions

to analyse the micro-geographies of social identities and the participative nature of the economic actors involved so that the role of the region is as:

“[T]he locus of what economists are beginning to call ‘untraded interdependencies’, which take the forms of conventions, informal rules and habits that coordinate economic actors under conditions of uncertainty; these relations constitute region-specific assets in production. These assets are a central form of scarcity in contemporary capitalism, and hence a central form of geographical differentiation in what is done, how it is done, and in the resulting wealth levels and growth rates of regions.”

Elements of Storper’s thinking here originate in the new economies of technological change of the 1980s, which argued that such knowledge or practices are not fully codifiable. Moreover, the particular firms that succeed in the acquisition of such knowledge are inherently tied into various forms of networks with other firms through a combination of formal and informal exchanges (‘untraded interdependencies’). As we can see, regions were increasingly becoming defined as ‘learning regions’ with their capacity to act as collectors, mediators and re-distributors of knowledge, ideas and innovation (Florida, 1995). For Storper, the regional scale is the “key, necessary element in the ‘supply architecture’ for learning and innovation” (Storper, 1997: 22). Furthermore, success in knowledge creation and innovative learning processes can lead to an economic territorialisation whereby an activity’s economic viability is rooted in practical and relational assets that cannot be easily replicated or imitated in other places and that are not available in many other places.

In an argument that I pick up on later in this paper, it is interesting that in a recently co-authored paper, Storper does appear to offer a case for the building up of regional institutions (including ‘government agencies, civic associations, and private-public partnerships’) as a window of locational opportunity which represents a “critical domain of beneficial policy intervention” (Scott and Storper, 2003: 587).

However, Scott and Storper (*ibid.*, 588) seem quick to offer a qualifier to this, rightly stating that the “regional components of economic development policy under contemporary conditions pose a knife-edge dilemma” between on the one hand designed and coordinated policy to strengthen regional agglomeration economies, and on the other hand highlighting the dangers of such isolated policies for region-specific policy.

1.2 *The ‘other’: alternative new regionalism*

The alternative to economic new regionalism provides a theoretical insight from the political-sciences which is concerned with the powerful challenges to the nation-state and the territorial structures of economic governance, arguing that a *progressive* new regionalism has been sweeping across Western Europe since the mid-1980s (Keating, 1998). Keating proposes that these challenges to the authority of the nation-state – as the prime regulator and controller of economic governance and the anchor of cultural identities – has seen the rise of the regional-state as a viable and forthright partner in the search for a successful compromise between state and market. Keating offers a similar perspective to Jessop’s hollowing-out of the state by promoting a territorial transformation of the state where its power is being eroded from above by internationalisation, from below by regional/local assertion, and finally by lateral advance of the market and civil society¹.

Identified in MacLeod’s (2001b) paper, there are three independent political economic tensions that provide the framework for Keating’s progressive new regionalism: functional regionalisation, institutional regionalisation and political regionalism. Drawing together the three different strands of Keating’s progressive

new regionalism, regions are viewed as the sites and arenas for generating post-national identities and instilling social cohesion through the re-shaping of political space and encouraging new forms of socio-political mobilisation. While Keating's depictions offer profitable conceptual ideas from ethno-nationalism to regional identity, the political reality of new regionalist inspired policies in countries like Britain has been their explicit nature as being driven (by the state) through top-down forms of economic regionalisation, with ideas of political regionalism their implicitly.

1.3 *Towards a critique*

The new regionalism provides a strong diversity of empirically supported research into the trial-and-error search for the best socio-spatial fix for advanced capitalism. However, homogeneity and orthodoxy in political and economic theory is never as close to the truth as many accounts in academia would make us believe, with the new regionalism being no exception. In the case of the new regionalism, its orthodoxy has been transformed in recent years towards a series of obligatory theoretical and methodological rear guards. This transformation in outlook and direction was inspired by Lovering's (1999) *Theory Led By Policy: The Inadequacies of the 'New Regionalism'*, which is universally seen as the theoretical and empirical springboard from which the new regionalism – and moreover, critical regional studies *per se* – began to reappraise its own internal rubric (see Section 5). Lovering critiqued the new regionalism as a shorthand explanation for highlighting the significance of the region as a prospective challenger to the nation-state as an effective arena for locating the institutions of post-Fordist political-economic governance (Boyer and Hollingsworth, 1997).

¹ For Keating the redefinition of the social and economic understanding of territory in Western Europe is being contextualised not only by the state but also by the changing international market and an

The new regionalism *has* emerged as a fashionable banner offering “both a convincing theoretical explanation” and for its followers “the best approach to policy formation” (Lovering, 1999: 380). Lovering has extreme difficulty in accepting why the new regionalism has been afforded such a lofty position within institutionalist political-economic geography. In its broadest terms, he views the new regionalism as a highly selective amalgam of ‘all things good’ in the regional economies of the world today. Arguing that the empirical case-studies of the regional growth economies of Western Europe and North America merely “tells an attractive and persuasive story”, Lovering posits from the viewpoint of Wales that the authors of the new regionalism are living out an academic fantasy (*ibid.*, 380).

Drawing on the critical stance adopted by MacLeod (2001b) this paper attempts to partially *rescue* the new regionalism from its own lines of weakness by picking up the theory through a sympathetic critique. In the next section, I begin to uncover some new and emerging themes by suggesting that the new regionalism has neglected the full and necessary engagement with relationships between the region and the state.

2. Regions and Multifaceted Scalar Politics

The chaotic nature of the new regionalism – generated by bundling too many diverse theories together – has led to inherent structural weaknesses that begin to appear in the earliest lines of inquiry. This section argues that the term ‘region’ is an object of mystery and that ‘regional change’ remains an elusive concept. My purpose here, however, is not to argue that the prerogative of new regionalists is to attempt naïve accounts of what regions are in the traditional sense (for that would be a major

step back). Instead, I want to move the argument forward towards a critical reappraisal of the nature of both regional spaces and regional change *in relation to* other scales of inquiry.

2.1 *The region: an object of mystery*

Whilst urban geographers have had a struggle to define the limits of the city and the locality geographers of the late-eighties struggled to define locality as more than simply place, regional geographers have struggled to define the boundaries of their key constituent term: notably, what is a region? The plurality of approaches and the diversity of theories that constitute an increasingly chaotic new regionalism have only served to exacerbate this weakness. Whereas *economic* new regionalists conceptualise regions as urban-metropolitan agglomerations invoked out of political-economic interdependence and focusing on commonalities of production patterns, labour markets and market linkages (Scott, 1998), *political* new regionalists commonly represent regions as territorial and political subnational administrative units (Keating, 1998). Allen et al. (1998: 2) encapsulated these ambiguities and difficulties when they stated that:

“[Regional] studies are always done for a purpose, with a specific aim in view. Whether theoretical, political, cultural or whatever, there is always a specific focus. One cannot study everything, and there are always multiple ways of seeing a place: there is no complete ‘portrait of a region’. Moreover, ‘regions’ only exist in relation to particular criteria. They are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, they are our (and others’) constructions.”

The chaotic nature of the new regionalism has served to increasingly distanciate regional economic geographers² from explicit engagement with their ‘supposedly foundational concept’ (Lovering, 1999). Scholars of the new regionalism have, I argue, sought implicit engagement with the region because it has served as the backdrop/tool for promoting their theoretical concepts of innovation, learning, and knowledge-based economic frameworks. It is worth emphasising that many of these scholars are not regional geographers *per se*, but economic geographers (Scott, Storper), economists (Krugman), and business gurus (Porter, Ohmae), whose work has seen them both incorporated into, and become creators, of the new regionalism. However, the question remains: where does the future of the region lie within the new regionalism? Again, I do not seek to provide a definitive answer to this question, but merely offer a sympathetic appraisal of two potentially untapped avenues of theoretical engagement.

Firstly, there seems an inherent and immediate need within the new regionalism to reincorporate the work of the ‘new regional geography’ into our new regionalist theories. This author concurs with others in that the work of Anssi Paasi (1986; 1991) and his interpretative geohistorical approach could provide the entry point needed to re-inject the region into critical regional studies (MacLeod, 1998; 2001a; 2001b; MacLeod and Jones, 2001). The work of Paasi and the new regional geographers provides a strong reminder that an overt focus on political-economic definitions of the region and the regional scale are truncating possible understandings of the events and processes occurring at the regional level. Secondly, the social constructivist work of Allen et al. (1998) on the shift away from ideas of fixity and stasis in the neo-liberal heartland of England’s South West region, offers significant

² I say regional *economic* geographers here deliberately because I would give partial exemption to these accusations because Michael Keating and his colleagues in the political-science strand of the new

scope for new regionalists to consolidate their current work through working in closer conjunction with the re-emergent scalar debates (see Marston, 2000; Brenner, 2001).

Moreover, while a range of often multi-disciplinary approaches have informed how, in a climate of economic regionalisation, political-administrative regions are strategic territories in a complex multiscalar political fix, these are being challenged by relational approaches “where emerging spatial configurations are not necessarily or purposively territorial or scalar but are constituted through the spatiality of flow, porosity, and connectivity” (Jones et al., 2006). While assessing the respective merits of alternative conceptualisations of regions (territorial and topological) is fundamental in enhancing new regionalist research, we must not stop there, because taken together these avenues point towards and identify the next structural weakness that requires critical reappraisal.

For a canon of work struggling to explicitly incorporate its foundational concept into its theories, the new regionalism has an even greater challenge to surmount. As Purcell (2003: 318) clearly iterates: “[O]ne cannot understand a particular scale without analysing its relationship to other scales, since the meaning and importance of each scale is unavoidably embedded in its interscalar relationships”. Critically, if we are seeking to comprehend the nature and fabric of what a region is, then we must move beyond the singular studies that have treat the[ir] region in relative isolation.

2.2 *The Absent State*

While diversity and debate within critical regional geography is essential, persistent division and lack of collaborative working with scholars investigating

regionalism have been more explicit in their attempts to do this.

processes and relations operating at alternative scales is detrimental to its understanding. What is required are a series of explicit steps taken by new regionalists in order to create distance from singular readings of the[ir] regional scale³. Regional analyses therefore need to focus more clearly on the changing relationships among different scales. Within new regionalist analyses I see the particular need to explore through more rigorous approaches the relationship between the region and the nation-state. In view of this context, I concur with Markusen's (1999: 871) claim that "[I]f state activity, based on complex politics and inter-bureau competition, is central to the evolution of regions, it must be built into our theories".

Recent research has already done much to recognise the urgent need to consider the shifting nature and scalar configurations of the state but expansion on these ideas remains necessary (Jones, 2001; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999a; 1999b). There is still the need to move *beyond* the accusation that the new regionalism is "a poor framework through which to grasp the real connections between the regionalisation of business and governance and the changing role of the state" (Lovering, 1999: 391). State theorists have been arguing through the 'hollowing-out' thesis that what we are witnessing is a shift away from the one-nation state interventionism of Fordist-welfarism towards a newly emergent regulatory mode (Jessop, 2002).

Following this development of the 'hollowing-out' metaphor in the analysis of economic and political restructuring of the state, authors such as Goodwin et al. (2005) have sought analytically to consider and extend Jessop's strategic-relational approach by arguing that it is no longer sufficient simply to refer to a multivariate 'hollowing-out' of the nation state. Empirically supported by the recent wave of

³ The idea of a singular reading of the regional scale is taken from the work of Neil Brenner (2001) who used the same concept to critique an earlier paper by Sallie Marston (2000) which he argued treat

constitutional change in Britain, and the authors' desires to explain and understand the new institutional geographies of the British State, Goodwin et al. rightly argue that:

“‘Hollowing out’ refers to the delegation of powers *away* from the national level, and makes no explicit claims about the organisational or institutional forms that may result from this. In other words, it *refers to the beginnings of a process in motion*, and one needs other conceptual devices to help in the understanding about how and why that process subsequently unfolds...This focus means that ‘hollowing out’ is unable to give one much purchase on the processes of state restructuring that takes place at different territorial scales.”
Goodwin *et al.* (2005: 424 emphasis added)

In furthering their critique, the authors forward the argument that processes of devolution and decentralisation represent a geographically uneven ‘filling-in’ of the state’s institutional and scalar matrix, which leads to an increasingly complex spatial division of the state. Where Jessop’s strategic-relational approach only offered a lens on the shifting powers away from the nation state at the beginning of the process of restructuring, Goodwin et al. offer a new conceptual tool which enables researchers to investigate both the scalar recipients of these powers (i.e. the view of the state and the region), and to critically speculate on the processes which facilitate these transfers:

“The use of the concept of ‘filling in’, then, *focuses on the manner in which power is being transferred*, and on the scales it is being transferred to. In other words, the very process of ‘filling in’ is geographically constituted and spatially constructed – in contrast to ‘hollowing out’, which can imply an abstract sense of restructuring away from one level only (the national). Above all, ‘filling in’ is illustrative of a state that is a political process in motion.”
Goodwin et al. (2005: 424 emphasis added)

For new regionalists, however, it is imperative to recognise that this should not be seen as a privileging of their scale of inquiry though, but acknowledge the

the household in isolation from other scales.

arguments purveyed through the relativisation of scale (Collinge, 1999; Brenner et al., 2003).

In recent times, a third wave of conceptualising the state role in post-war capitalism has tentatively begun to emerge whereby for the state to be an effective animateur it must be reconstructed rather than dismantled as was the case in second-wave neo-liberal ideology (Morgan, 1997; Scott, 1998). Adopting the language of Cooke and Morgan (1998), this third wave concentrates on enhancing a state's capacity rather than its size, and has been termed the 'associational repertoire'. Although some variants of associational theory would have state almost wither away (Hurst, 1994; Ohmae, 1995), a state that withdrew from 'direct intervention to indirect animation' need not be a weak or ineffective state (*ibid.*: 23). Moreover, if regulated delegation of state competencies – through the devolution of power and the delegation of certain tasks – to local/regional actors results in policy goals being met more effectively, then the state can actually become stronger by doing less and enabling more. Contemporary state restructuring should, therefore, be seen as the most recent political-economic strategy attempting to rescale state intervention. Adopting an intermediary position juxtaposed between the classical state-centred and neo-liberal repertoires privileging of the state and the market respectively, the key issue for associational theory is not the scale of intervention *per se* but the mode of intervention.

In this regard, the state does not lose its unique status as the institution with overall responsibility for the national innovation systems and social cohesion. In this regard, one effect of after-Keynesian welfarist experiments has been the exposure of regions, through the erosion of national fiscal support, to an intensification of inter-spatial competition. Compelled to experiment with Schumpeterian supply-side

policies, regions have emerged as a territorial expression of the wider programmes of state restructuring (Martin and Sunley, 1997; Lipietz, 2003). The net outcome of state restructuring is that:

“Particular forms of economic and political system privilege some strategies over others, access by some forces over others, some interests over others, some spatial scales of action over others, some time horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others” (Jessop, 1997: 63).

My immediate concern here is with the positionality of the new regionalism within this broader context of political-economic geography. Touched upon previously, new regionalists have become largely confined to a particular ‘island of practice’ (Purcell, 2003) whereby their analysis has become entrenched in treating the region in relative (singular) isolation from other scales of inquiry. This being true, new regionalists are not studying a scale *per se*, but some other sociospatial entity (e.g. a site, an arena). This is both deeply problematic and quite inadequate if we are to fully explore the events and processes occurring in the regional world. However, it would be an unfair to label the new regionalism as wholly unprogressive in this field since it has ventured towards asserting the region as embedded in other scales. My argument here would be that this should not suffice if we are to engage in truly critical regional studies. It is here that I want to turn briefly to the recent scalar debates, especially the work of Brenner (2001) and Purcell (2003), to introduce some explicit steps towards creating a new regional framework for analysis.

Whilst Brenner (2001) made implicit his defining limits to scale, Purcell (2003) clarified these through a series of more explicit statements: (i) asserting that a particular scale is embedded in other scales is very different from developing a full analysis of how scalar inter-relationships were produced and reproduced through

political struggle; and, (ii) scholars are quick to acknowledge the importance of other topics beyond their particular focus, but therefrom fail to take the explicit steps required to push their analysis beyond the limits of their particular ‘island’ (Purcell, 2003: 327-328). In my view, both these statements hold deep resonance in their support for the earlier argument that a lack of engagement with the state (and more often than not, the local state also) is a major structural weakness at the heart of new regionalist analyses. By way of example, incorporation of these arguments/claims could only serve to advance new regionalists knowledge surrounding the key argument regarding the operations of multi-tiered structures of governance: are the events and processes at the regional level actually resolving the problem, or, are they simply rescaling them? These debates could not only profit from engagement in full analyses of how scalar inter-relationships are produced and reproduced through political struggle, but they are a necessity for a critical regional studies.

Furthermore, in this evolving framework the policy lineage is inescapable in the new regionalism with the theoretical ideas generated intimately dovetailing at the regional level. Unwittingly the new regionalism is firmly rooted in a dangerous paradox: the state remains the primary channel through which regional policy is co-ordinated and mediated, yet we are accused of failing to incorporate the state into our theories. This association with the state and its policy lineage is undoubtedly at the kernel of the problem facing the new regionalism.

3. Geographies of State Intervention and Tangled Policy Hierarchies

The historiography of regional policy shows a number of important trends that are too often overlooked by its academic and political proponents. It is worth mentioning at the outset that the significance of regional level co-ordination has

shown itself most clearly at times of national crisis, in attempts to consolidate the national state power at the centre (Paddison, 1983). Furthermore, the emergence of the so-called ‘motor-regions’, which have dominated empirical accounts within the new regionalism, are now in a period of relative decline compared with their much vaunted exploitation of the post-Fordist regime of flexible specialisation (see MacLeod, 2001b: 808). Finally, these prosperous growth regions are all located within the stronger *national* economies, which makes the link between state and region all the more important.

In this section, the article turns towards answering a further problematic within the new regionalism regarding the unfolding role of the region and the regional scale in the ongoing reconstitution of the capitalist space economy and its related public policy dynamics. Drawing extensively on the writings of David Harvey in *The Limits to Capital*, this section on multifaceted scalar politics is split twofold: the first part examines the role of regions within crisis theory, while the second part looks at the interesting ideas surrounding interregional competition and its policy implications.

3.1 *Regions and the State*

Providing a Marxist-oriented polemic on capitalism and its associated socio-cultural system, Harvey’s (1982) *The Limits to Capital* still sheds important light on (regional) political-economic geography. Harvey’s usage of the region is as an economic container that harbours an important role in the dawning crisis of the capitalist production system and mode of regulation. ‘First-cut’ crisis theory relates to the inherent instability of the capitalist mode of production and the tendency of profit-levels to rise and fall predominantly through labour exploitation. ‘Second-cut’ crisis theory introduces temporal elements, where the displacements of internal crises of a

stalling capitalist system are reconfigured through financial arrangements and the creation of credit systems. 'Third-cut' crisis theory is the attempt to juxtapose both the temporal and spatial displacement of crisis, forcing society to seek relief through a form of 'spatial fix' (*ibid.*, 427).

Critical to the new regionalist project is the implicit link between Harvey's theoretical speculation contained within his 'third-cut' theory of crisis and the recent acknowledgement that through the erosion of national fiscal support, regions and localities have been opened up to intensified inter-spatial competition; and, therefore, forced to experiment with Schumpeterian supply-side policies designed to exploit the *after-Fordist* knowledge-based economy. If we are in agreement with this, the exposure of regions to external possibilities will become more than a little confused with 'inner' and 'outer transformations' becoming blurred as regional boundaries become increasingly porous to both capital and labour (Harvey, 1982).

"The region, far from resolving its problems of overaccumulation through the creation of external relations, may be forced into even more savage devaluation through outside pressure. Interregional competition becomes the order of the day. And the relative strengths of different territorially based alliances become an important factor." (Harvey, 1982: 427).

As Harvey warns, the "geography of uneven development helps convert the crisis tendencies of capitalism into compensating regional configurations of rapid accumulation and devaluation" with the possibility existing that "the global pace of accumulation can be sustained through compensating oscillations within the [regional] parts" (*ibid.*, 428).

MacLeod's (2001a; 2001b) analysis of 'thin political economy' in the new regionalism builds on this concern by stressing the need to focus more closely on the role played by the state in the remaking of both regional economies and their

structures of governance. The heavy emphasis on Schumpeterian supply-side innovation and the creation of increasingly flexible and less formal networks of economic governance have largely been responsible for new regionalists implicit, if at times absent, theorisations of the capitalist state.

To extend this further, I see future research in the new regionalism having a necessary obligation to (re)incorporate these themes into their work in order to examine the increasing complexity involved in the way that the state produces, reproduces, and articulates the scalar and spatial sites of economic governance (Brenner, 2004). Utilising Harvey's macro-theoretical insights into the operative nature of capitalism will continue to be important for the new regionalism whilst the region is seen as the temporary socio-spatial fix for contemporary crises in the capitalist system.

3.2 *Interregional competition*

For some there is a capitalist logic behind interspatial and therefore interregional competition, due to inherently induced spatio-temporal crises in the mode of production (Harvey, 2000; cf. Massey, 1979). MacLeod (2001b: 819) has rightly pointed out that new regionalists have occasionally become obsessive in their quest to characterise the individual processes and form of 'popular' regions, resulting in the diversion of attention away from the "complex multi-scalar re-territorialisation of institutional capacity". This is particularly apparent across the political spectrum where a false consensus has emerged that national and regional competition is the *only* pathway to prosperity. Superficially convinced by discourses of intelligence, innovation and knowledge-based economies, there is a dangerous obsession circulating that *all* regions can be winners. To take just one example, a leading edge

policy development occurring within England through the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) illustrates this fallacy:

“Past policies have failed to resolve the underlying weakness of the least successful regions and have failed to capitalise on their strengths. It is time to reverse what has in some cases been decades of under performance and decline and to put in place policies that will widen the winners circle.” (Stephen Byers, *Secretary of State for Trade and Industry*, 2000)

“[T]he role of central Government must be to ensure that all regions and communities have the resources and capability to be winners.” (Department of Trade and Industry, 2001: Para 3.3)

Regional competitiveness also has the practical implication that it can create inherently poor public policy if it fosters a wasteful zero-sum game. More worryingly, cost-based competition remains absent from our theories with new regionalists viewing it as incompatible with conceptualisations of flexibly specialised agglomerations (Christopherson, 2003).

Even more ambitious reading of the new regionalism’s portrayal of learning, innovation, and knowledge, argues that beneath this veneer of uniformed success is a deeply unsafe political-economic base that is premised upon uneven development, ‘savage’ interregional competition, rapid accumulation (resulting in overaccumulation and devaluation), and finally geographical inertia (Harvey, 1982: 426-428). If these warnings are to be taken serious and “the upshot is that some regions boom while others decline” (*ibid.*, 427), then new regionalists must build both sides of the argument it into their theory.

4. Policy Ingredients: A Recipe for Disaster?

Presently, the new regionalism finds itself deeply rooted in a vicious circle of conflicting interests. Sceptical of imported policy solutions, new regionalists find

themselves paradoxically drawn (almost by definition) to favour those policy measures which are informed by the experiences of prosperous regions, characterised by their embedded local interdependencies. While some regulatory institutions may in a structural sense be duplicated, their operation and effects most certainly cannot be repeated. This paradox currently endangers the quality of new regionalist inquiry because: (i) institutions do have effects, but they can't be guaranteed; (ii) policy imitations of successful regions do not account for the effects of state regulation; (iii) the effects of institutions is dependent upon contingent local conditions; and (iv) the time lag between the creation of institutions between successful and less favoured regions cannot be accounted for. Thus, a perception of enjoying the profits of local economic development through the cloning of an amalgam of institutional arrangements coveted from successful regional economies is simply a misnomer, and has led Lovering (1999: 390) to coin the catchy but powerful metaphor that the 'policy-tail is wagging the analytical dog'. In this regard, I acknowledge that while my argument here is for regional analyses that bring geography back in, the reality is that policy emulation has become part of the orthodoxy of practice.

For its proponents, these serious accusations strike at the very heart of *how* we presently go about *doing* our research. Both sympathetically and critically, the remainder of this section debates some of the so-called 'ingredients' that make up the policy frameworks inherently associated with new regionalist ideology. Finally, I attempt to advance the case for adopting empirics-based intensive single-region case-study research in order to move beyond some of the current policy trajectories.

4.1 Path dependency: an historical weakness

The rise of institutional and evolutionary economics and economic sociology have jointly stressed that economic life is both an instituted process, a socially embedded activity, and therefore context-specific and path dependent in its evolution. In contrast to previous orthodoxy with economies believed to have the capacity to return to equilibrium through the actions of rational actors, processes of institutionalisation now take on the mantra of stabilising an inherently unstable and irrational economy (Amin, 1999). Historically, political-economic commentators have taken institutions for granted and naturalised their existence and role.

“Path dependence means that history matters. We cannot understand today’s choices (and define them in the modelling of economic performance) without tracing the incremental evolution of institutions. But we are just beginning the serious task of exploring the implications of path dependence” (North, 1990: 100).

Furthermore, as Storper laments:

“[W]hat we do is path-dependent, that is, truly historical; it is not the result of a series of action on spot markets, where the long term can be reduced to a series of disconnected instants.” (Storper, 1997: 18).

Michael Porter’s cluster programme is the most prominent example that has in policy circles contradicted the institutionalist stress on context specificity and path dependency. Irrespective of regional histories and economic characters, cluster programmes have become a standardised practice that have taken away from regions the potential capacity for development through deeper assessments of their institutional and socio-cultural specificities. Interestingly, Porter’s most recent contribution argues this: “regions should focus on upgrading the productivity of clusters in which they have a meaningful position, rather than attempting to migrate more ‘desirable’ clusters” (2003: 571). However, Martin and Sunley (2003: 24) are

quite right to point out that the widespread applicability of a concept as elastic as the cluster results in its analytical explanations of causality and determination in relation to regional and local economic growth becoming increasingly blunted and stretched towards breaking-point.

“There is a fundamental tension between the public policy desire to include as many firms as possible and the notion that policy interventions can be more cost effective if they are targeted in some way. But if the policy is too targeted, then it starts to look like old style industrial policy and too close to the discredited notion of ‘picking winners’.”

My argument here is not with the concept of clusters or cluster policy *per se*⁴, but with the relationship that exists between them and their institutionalisation. As such, the policy community faces a problematic conundrum which to date it has preferred to defer judgement on. It is increasingly important from both an analytical and public policy perspective to be able to “distinguish between the conditions under which industrial spatial concentration will take place and the conditions under which it will not” (McCann and Sheppard, 2003: 650). Unfortunately for the new regionalism, the trend that currently holds sway with the policy community is this failure to see beyond the “rewarding lifestyle experiences...based on an image of a high-productivity, knowledge-rich, decentralised, entrepreneurial and socially progressive economy within the reach of local policy-makers” (Martin and Sunley, 2003: 29).

If contemporary analysis is to go further, we need to move beyond the assumption that because there appears to be a link between *some* high-growth economies and spatial agglomeration that this is the only (or main) explanation. Similarly, we need to build upon recent thinking that highlights how the missing link

in the clustering debate is actually their institutionalisation i.e. their inability to travel (Boyer and Hollingsworth, 1997). While clustering and spatial agglomerations have been one of the prime focuses of the policy community recently, a second strand of the new regionalists' work has also transgressed this boundary.

4.2 *Social capital*

Contemporary theorists have argued that there is an economic and democratic dividend that can be achieved through the occupation of institutional voids by weaker economic groupings and civic based third-sector organisations. The leading proponent of these ideas is Robert Putnam whose phrase 'social capital' has caught the imagination of academics and policymakers alike. For Putnam (1993: 179), social capital is defined as:

“[F]eatures of social organisation, such as networks, norms and trusts, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital and is coming to be seen as a vital ingredient in economic development around the world”

Indicative of this theoretical standpoint is the belief that social trust, norms of reciprocity, networks of civic engagement, and successful cooperation are mutually reinforcing and cumulative. Organised collaboration can therefore enable the norms and networks of civic engagement to contribute to economic prosperity, which can in turn be reinforced by that prosperity. In concluding his original conceptualisations, Putnam (*ibid.*, 185) illustrates that although this won't be an easy task, there are also democratic benefits for state accountability: “building social capital will not be easy, but it is the key to making democracy work”.

⁴ For a detailed account of clusters and cluster policy see, *Journal of Economic Geography* (2003) and

For the new regionalism, the operation of institutional routines and their associated societal conventions “are best developed at the regional level because this is the level at which regular trust-building, can be sustained over time” (Morgan, 1997: 501). Cooke (1998: 15) shares this opinion whereby regions can foster “closer interfirm collaboration and, crucially, the soft infrastructure of enterprise support provided by innovative substate governance institutions”. Unfortunately, what is often omitted from contemporary thinking is a critical understanding of the institutionalisation or constitutionalisation of social processes in the building of regions into the social consciousness (cf. Paasi, 1986).

In the associational economy, interactive government requires recognising the entitlement and the successful integration of the whole spectrum of political, economic, and civil interests so that the mode of social regulation becomes habitual. Elements of this thinking are pivotal to influential policymakers because while it is almost impossible to calculate the contribution of regional innovation networks and the production of social capital, in policy terms the fact that they are relatively inexpensive does count in their favour (Adams et al., 2003). However, there are a number of dangers surrounding an over-emphasis on concepts such as social capital that require greater understanding. Firstly, often implicitly overlooked by the new regionalism is that these advocated relationships based upon degrees of trust rather than on administrative fiat take time to be cemented.

Secondly, there is an immediate danger that terms like social capital become deployed incorrectly in order to explain all things that remain unseen from analysts and policymakers. As Fine (2001) elicits, social capital is viewed as the “‘missing link’ that can explain any aspect of social, cultural or economic (under)performance,

across time and place”. As I will argue in the next section, this misuse of terminology is deeply damaging for the new regionalism. Finally, there is a disconcerting risk that the institutionalist turn in regional geography and regional policy formation may by overly promoting the privileging of regional capacity building through the mobilisation of local capabilities.

4.3 *Soft institutionalism and the games of risk*

Institutionalist insistence on integrating the ‘softer’ aspects of political-economic restructuring into its theories has undoubtedly increased the richness of regional analysis over the past decade, but it has also led to the inherent dangers of soft institutionalism (MacLeod, 2001a). Soft institutionalism is associated with the new regionalism due to its tendency to read-off institutional developments from successful regional economies that suit their needs and offer profit to their theoretical speculation. It is in considering this misguidance that Lovering (1999) offers a distinction between a ‘sophisticated’ and a ‘vulgar’ new regionalism; the latter fudging the question of abstraction in favour of a rush to make interpretative policy-recommendations from illegitimate and inadequate foundations⁵. Typically, new regionalists through policy-transfer present a universally ‘functionalist’ argument about how institutions (whether ‘hard’ or ‘soft’) make capitalist economies work. Missing here are the causal effects of the processes that are making and remaking the economic and institutional ensemble present in particular geographical locations; the new regionalism quite simply is missing its geography. This being the case, the new regionalism seems to occupy an uneasy relationship with the policy community resulting from the unwelcome political mantra that it offers quick-fix policy solutions.

⁵ MacLeod (2001b: 810) argues at this point that Lovering’s argument loses some of its appeal because nowhere in his article does he identify which new regionalist writers belong to which respective camp.

At no juncture does the new regionalism explicitly state that the creation of networks of untraded interdependencies, or the production of institutional thickness will in isolation create successful economies. In fact, a 'deeper' reading of the new regionalism actually serves to alert the reader that there are very real dangers of adopting many of the strategies that they are reporting as operating in the successful regional growth economies of the world. Firstly, the much vaunted 'social capital' that is inescapable from new regionalist writings over the past ten years actually falls foul of Lovering's vulgar conceptualising. Having transgressed into the world of the policymaker, the term social capital falls into the path dependency trap by arbitrarily focusing on one element in a long historical experience to explain present-day patterns. Simply put, Putnam's social capital is the result of trying to construct a whole theory of social action from a very limited case study and needs to be understood as such.

Storper's 'regional world' framework and his important contribution of untraded interdependencies to the theoretical understanding of soft institutional infrastructures exemplify this particular story. Mentioned earlier, these conventions, informal rules and habits that aid the coordination of economic actors under conditions of uncertainty constitute region-specific assets in production (Storper, 1997). In the form of untraded interdependencies and conventions, Storper's warning is that soft infrastructures are commonly locally-specific regional assets that are in effect non-codifiable. Politically, in contrast to traditional infrastructures such as transport networks and public organisations, the non-codifiable soft infrastructures that are associated with the intelligent learning regions are extremely difficult to transfer spatially from a successful region to other less favoured ones. Noncodifiability makes institutions 'bad travellers' (MacLeod, 2001a), especially

with institutions becoming “interdependent with other institutions, making it very difficult for a society to mimic the institutional arrangements of another country” (Boyer and Hollingsworth, 1997: 455).

All of this prompted Storper to speculate about the possibility that despite its unorthodox nature, social conventions based on interactive communication and the build-up of trust and loyalty are increasingly found at the core of reflexive capitalism’s new heterodox policy framework (Storper, 1997). At the heart of this framework is a series of key dilemmas that face the regionally based policymaker. Adopting a political strategy that seeks to create a specialist learning region with the end-goal of creating an economy that is fully territorialised runs the associated risk of future path-dependence and institutional ‘lock-in’ (Grabher, 1993).

Many new regionalist accounts have targeted ‘soft’ concepts such as trust and loyalty as exhibiting potential benefits as relational assets in building up the social capital and institutional thickness within knowledge-based regional economies. For policy advisors, unlike most other economic assets, trust is a commodity that cannot be bought, but its importance lies in the belief that it has a high value (Fox, 1974). The apparent simplicity of this argument is once again dangerously misleading in the way that it is presented. High-trust relationships amongst regional actors do not automatically confer the economic and democratic gains that many policymakers would believe. Notably, Marx’s insights into the nature of capitalist exploitation simply had no place for concepts of trust and loyalty.

Although agreeing with the notion that this is both a theoretically and empirically untenable position (cf. Cooke and Morgan, 1998), the belief that trust-based relations within capitalist society run out in the face of economic uncertainty is an overplayed and misleading concept. Coalitions formed in time of crisis aren’t built

upon a form of trust *per se* but through an immediate pressure to form larger alliances in order to avoid submission and collapse. A closer look at the regional trust-based relationships in a country such as Britain shows how the important relationships between the state and foreign investors highlights how the so-called trust exhibited is purely a one-way process. The state has shown historically its 'blind-faith' in the loyalty and trust afforded to the foreign investors arriving at its shores (manifested through large locational subsidies and grants) which has had little reciprocity. In a very informative paper on the early observations surrounding the Korean conglomerate LG Electronics in South Wales, Phelps et al. (1998) posit the question: are we 'tying the firm to the region or tying the region to the firm'? This is just one example in many that is illustrative not of trust and loyalty, but of economic *dependency* within new forms of capitalism.

Constructed from this standpoint, Amin (1999) argues that the consequence of this centrality placed upon local capacity and civic interaction is the often-underrated importance that needs to be placed upon the ability of regions to anticipate and respond to the changing external circumstances. This provides a return to the critical argument for new regionalists towards an advocacy of the greater engagement with the processes of scalar and state restructuring. New regionalists must explore the 'management of the region's wider connectivity' because this is the primer for the internal supply-side qualities that researchers have been preoccupied with in the early years of empirical research and theory building (*ibid.*).

In a return to the issues of institutional thickness, civic interaction and soft institutionalism, it is necessary always to attend to the bigger picture surrounding what a number of institutionalist approaches have been arguing, surrounding how the embedded local milieu might ultimately have dangerous consequences for the

regional growth economies. Tying together a number of the strands mentioned earlier in this section, the building of institutional thickness might ultimately lead to an institutional ‘lock-in’ of routines and conventions that become dysfunctional in emerging economic conditions (Grabher, 1993). An important consequence of institutional thickness that has been raised by Hudson (1994: 211) whilst referring to once-prosperous regions (which at their height were also learning regions) is that if such internal connectivity is left unattended it can actually reinforce path-dependencies which become increasingly inappropriate and outdated for the new economic circumstances.

“[I]t is important to remember that the localised thick institutional structures that evolved in the past have often become a mechanism to stifle dissent or hinder opposition to what was regarded as the conventional wisdom of orthodox solutions.”

If we take this historical tale seriously, as we surely must, we have to ask ourselves how it can inform the new regionalist studies of contemporary regional growth economies? Prior to the notion of the new regionalism, Granovetter (1985) had already suggested that a network of weak ties could theoretically be more dynamic than those dominated by strong ties of enforced loyalty and contract-based relations. Granovetter utilises the interesting and pervasive example of crime networks to highlight how the strong ties that characterise such organisations lead to sporadic and catastrophic ruptures of the system due to increased pressure and ‘lock-in’. Returning to an argument already made elsewhere within this paper, what we keep returning to is this need for a critical understanding of the processes of institutionalisation.

In view of all this focus and debate within the new regionalism regarding its relationship with policy, it increasingly seems that Lovering's (1999: 390) claim that the "policy tail is wagging the analytical dog" and "wagging it so hard that indeed much of the theory is shaken out" is doing some disservice. It would be naïve to say that the new regionalism does not have an obligation to address the concern regarding the relationship between its theoretical abstraction and its playing up to the policymaking community, but through the examples highlighted in the second half of this paper it would also be difficult to argue that the new regionalism hasn't attempted (at least partially successfully) to address this issue.

4.4 *'Doing' Regional Regulation*

In both theoretical and political domains, it is something of a truism to declare that regions are on the agenda like never before. Until recently, however, methodological debate has been hiding in the backwaters of debates surrounding the resurgence of the region; specifically, the question of how do we approach such research. In fact I would argue that many of the weaknesses identified within the 'new regionalism' and approaches to 'regional political economy' have been reinforced by the methods deployed, and the subsequent lack of rigour in these approaches.

Although Lovering (1999) and MacLeod (2001b) have provided the theoretical impetus for pursuing new avenues of research through their critiques of the new regionalism, I believe that their papers are insufficiently sensitive to the practicalities of actually *doing* regional regulation. In the case of Lovering (1999), his paper is an evocative commentary which explicitly deconstructs the new regionalism, but one which offers little in the way of a framework for rebuilding the component parts of this body of work so as to proffer a way forward. While sympathetic to the

general tenor of Lovering's critique, in MacLeod's own words he seeks to offer some 'sobering reflections on what might be recovered' in an attempt to rescue the new regionalism (MacLeod, 2001b: 805). For MacLeod, this reconstruction of the new regionalism is to be achieved through the development of theoretical work within the regulation approach. In extending MacLeod's reconstruction of the new regionalism beyond his narrow theoretical approach, it is in this spirit that I will sketch a new methodological framework for *doing* regional regulation.

In the midst of a plethora of researchers undertaking many varied conceptual approaches to the study of why some regions work and others don't in the new economic order, Ann Markusen (1999) spoke up against the prevailing research practices being adopted within the domain of regional studies. Markusen argues that while a great deal of new thought has emerged in regional studies over the last thirty-years, with the cross-fertilisation of ideas from geographers, economists, political scientists and so on, enriching the development of research outputs, over the past fifteen years or so there has been a steady slippage in both the rigours of evidence and thus the quality of conceptualisation. In her pertinent methodological critique, Markusen laments three undesirable developments that have/are undermining the scientific integrity and societal relevance of regional studies. In the first instance, Markusen coins the catchy metaphor of 'fuzzy concept'; one that posits an entity, phenomenon or process, which possesses two or more alternative meanings. Second, the standards of empirical evidence are slipping. Third, the fuzzy concepts and the falling standards of evidence increasingly weaken the policy relevance of regional studies.

Picking up on the theme of 'fuzzy concepts', in contributing to a growing body of literature surrounding the engagement of geographers in public policy

research⁶, Ron Martin has been mutually critical of the language deployed within political-economic geography, arguing that they are lost in a 'thicket of linguistic cleverness'. Moreover, he argues that this is fuelled by the distinct lack of rigour in their approaches, relying as they do too heavily on cherry-picked quotations/concepts from a few favourable geographical locations. It takes little interrogation to identify the body of work (the new regionalism) and the concepts (institutional milieu, regional innovation networks, associational regions, intelligent regions, institutional thickness, social capital, untraded interdependencies, and so on) which are being openly criticised here. For both Markusen (1999) and Martin (2001) these 'fuzzy concepts' simply collapse under any serious form of scrutiny or interrogation.

New regionalist commentators have historically deployed conceptual terminology in a more or less interchangeable fashion, understanding little of their genesis, history, differences, or actual fundamental meaning (McCann and Sheppard). Responding to Markusen's original provocations, Lagendijk (2003) justifiably argues that when academic scholars invoke new concepts, they usually reflect a specific contribution that marks their approach as different from previously conventional thinking. In practice, can we actually say that we know a cluster from a spatial agglomeration, an intelligent region from an innovative region, a regional innovation network from an institutional milieu, or for that matter, a network of untraded interdependencies from an associational economy?

For new regionalist scholars, these accusations strike at the very foundations of our work by questioning the very essence of what we do. As I highlighted earlier, the chaotic nature of the new regionalism has served to increasingly distance regional economic geographers from explicit engagement with their 'supposedly

⁶ See *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1999-2000

foundational concept’ (Lovering, 1999); or should we now argue with their ‘supposedly foundational *fuzzy* concept’. Ironically, when you cut your way through the thicket of spurious claims made by Markusen about undertaking research in critical regional studies (see below) she is indeed correct when obliging regional geographers to answer the question: so ‘how do I know when I see it?’ (Markusen, 1999: 871). However, it is relatively easy to level criticisms such as these, and it is Martin (2001: 202) who rightly argues that the ‘difficult part is suggesting what needs to be done’ and ‘how we should move forward’.

While rightly stressing the rigour required between concepts and evidence, Markusen’s techniques are overly simplistic and somewhat backward. Arguing that because our research results are shared among a community of researchers and practitioners, Markusen calls for empirical tests that sample whether important concepts are understood and deployed methodologically in more or less the same way. To take her own example, Markusen argues that by asking the question over and over, ‘how do we know it when we see it?’ we can create a checklist of regional characteristics such that if a number of regions possess these capabilities – be they institutional, organisational, networked, agency-based, structural, and so on – then we can associate them with a measure of success. While it would be a reasonable diagnosis to suggest that this approach embrace the reality that policy emulation becomes part of the orthodoxy of practice, deploying the language of Lovering (1999), the ‘policy tail is wagging the *methodological* dog’ here.

On the face of it, it appears Markusen is advocating that we take a generational step back to our positivist ancestry in seeking generic (apolitical) spatial models. While Markusen promotes this approach as offering ‘original conceptualisations’ of ‘characteristics that could be unequivocally posited in the same

way by all readers’ which ‘meets the demands of sound academic research’ (*ibid*: 870), bearing in mind the inherent lines of weakness detailed in this paper these proposals do nothing to alleviate these problems.

Following the methodological lines of argument surrounding Markusen’s (1999) paper, I want to forward the claim that there should be a place within critical regional studies for single-region intensive case-study research, although one based upon the complex ideas that multiple modes of policy legitimization are acting through the regional state apparatus of the reconstituted capitalist space economy (i.e. one that can reconstruct the new regionalism, rather than purely deconstructing as was the case with Lovering). Drawing on recent arguments (Peck, 2003; Bristow, 2005), I want to forward the argument for undertaking empirically grounded place-specific new regionalist case studies that offer the capacity to allow one to analyse the multidimensional policy trajectories and multiscalar linkages (and interlinkages) occurring in and through regions.

In response to Markusen’s evocative commentary, I believe that Peck was justified in dragging her arguments back from the brink of advocating singular methodologies based on traditional forms of quantification; which had become an increasing fallacy and distraction to her original argument. Where Peck’s work gains currency with my thoughts in this paper is his recognition that case-study research can be extended as long as the challenge is met “to develop rigorous research designs and validity checks, to set the bar high in terms of standards of corroboration and triangulation, in a fashion that is consistent with the methods and modes that are being employed” (Peck, 2003: 736). Furthermore, in a thought-provoking paper – that seeks to problematise the discourse of regional competitiveness – Bristow (2005: 296) argues that:

“What is missing is any effort to conceptualise regions as territorially defined social aggregations, with very different economic and political structures...[Moreover] more empirical research is needed to understand and identify the conditions which enable some regions to adapt successfully, whilst others remain ‘locked-in’ to a fatal development path”

Bearing in mind the inherent lines of weakness in the new regionalism, and seeking to build upon Peck’s methodological challenge, it is here that I want to begin the reconstruction of a framework which addresses how we can go about *doing* regional regulation.

To briefly look at one example where this extended empirically grounded case-study research may be appropriate, while it is now widely accepted that England is seeking a greater engagement in policies aimed at increasing institutional capacity through a regional institutional framework, critics believe that a ‘thin’ approach is being adopted, whereby politicians are rescaling rather than resolving the economic and democratic deficit (Jones, 2001; Jones and MacLeod, 1999). Bound-up within this, is the concern that deep contradictions exist around normative concerns in New Labour’s policy: (i) that there is a necessary link between economic competitiveness and the regional scale; (ii) that there is a necessary link between regions and increased social participation and stakeholder democracy; (iii) that all the English regions can benefit from sub-national frameworks and supports and improve their regional economic competitiveness; and (iv) that both 1 and 2 can be secured through institutional organisations such as development agencies.

By exploring a number of different policy strands operating through place, I believe that an intensive research project could be used here to look at a single case-study region in order to provide a greater understanding of England’s new regionalism, in its various roles as the incubator of knowledge, learning, and

economic growth. As briefly alluded to earlier in the paper, this cannot be achieved through some of the ‘chaotic conceptions’ or ‘bad abstractions’ that “arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby ‘carving up’ the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form” (Sayer, 1992: 138). Critically, while there may be different forms of new regionalism (concept), single-region case studies are important because there can be no variants to a single identified region (real place)⁷. Moreover, through rational abstractions which both embed single region case studies, and then make the connections between different scales (Peck, 2003; Purcell, 2003), it is possible to advance the theoretical understandings of the new regionalism. This, it is argued, shows just one example of how critical regional geography could actually be engaging with the *doing* of regional regulation.

5. Conclusion: Theoretical Insights and Policy Futures

The belief that dense networks are expected to show better than average growth performances has given hope to those less favoured regions who see this as an opportunity for innovation and competitive advantage that is not based on material, path-dependent factors such as industrial capital. Unfortunately in recent years, many of the regional growth economies that the new regionalism has exposed to such intense empirical research and theoretical speculation have been experiencing a year-on-year decline in their respective growth rates.

The major issue facing the new regionalism today is the need to consider the region in relation to its interconnectedness with other scales and other sites of economic organisation. New regionalist analysis has been overly obsessed with its

⁷ Peck (2003: 736) utilises this structure to argue that while there may be different forms of world city (concept) there can be no variants of New York City (real place).

own belief that the region had somehow attained a new authority in and of itself. This belief in its own press has slowly been shaken (for the better) not only by Lovering, but also by a new generation of theorists who, building on their own particular history of interest with the state, have sought to highlight how the rise of the regional scale is deeply intertwined with the restructuring of the state (Jones, 2001; Jones and MacLeod, 1999; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999a; 1999b; Goodwin et al., 2005).

The nation-state will remain an important arena for promoting and regulating social and spatial cohesion, but the traditional hierarchy with the nation-state at the apex is being modified because although change at the bottom is no longer expected to come about through change at the top, change at the top is called for to consolidate and develop the achievements at the bottom (Lipietz, 1992; Cooke and Morgan, 1998). Critically, if economic development strategies are to be rendered more effective, there needs to be a greater transparency between the state, the region, and localities. This has led Jessop to highlight that if and when this situation occurs, the state's role will tend towards being less hierarchical, less centralised and less dirigiste in character (Jessop, 2002).

As one last reminder of the importance of the state in the future of the new regionalism, it is worth reiterating an interesting theory promoted by Cooke and Morgan (1998) towards their investigation into the knowledge and learning of the associational economy. It is strategically possible for the state to increase and build new capacity by actually doing less. In this way, the state becomes involved in the government of governance, or as Jessop identifies it, meta-governance or meta-steering. This is critically important for actors engaged in new regionalist research because this is a strategy currently being adopted in countries like the United Kingdom with experimental policies of devolution and constitutional change

(Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and functional decentralisation whereby institutions such as the RDAs are being deployed as co-ordinators of coordination (England). The great danger of such a policy, however, is that the central state will simply undertake the first part of this strategy (doing less). It is into this arena that the new regionalism has a vital and fruitful future, and it is an opportunity that must not be missed.

In this paper I have also highlighted how the soft infrastructures that have characterised many of the regional growth economies are important, but they must be built into our theories rather than optimistically cast as solutions. New ideas have already begun transgressing into the work of regions in geography, through such publications as Amin et al's (2003) report entitled *Decentring the Nation*. Rather than drawing down powers from London in the form of devolution – which it is argued has done little to alter the 'spatial geometry' of England – Amin et al. forward a radical proposal dispersing state and public institutions in equal shares throughout the nation. Whilst this proposal is currently constrained to an imagined reality, it's theoretical foundation is thought-provoking in that it seeks to remedy the asymmetrical nature of power and responsibility bedevilling contemporary institutional arrangements for devolution to the English regions. Amin et al. argue that the dispersal of state and public institutions equally throughout the English regions will offer a radically new way of imagining the spatiality of the nation, with the promise of a multi-nodal rather than hierarchical nation, and a method for alleviating both regional economic and political inequality.

In challenging existing urban theories, Amin and Thrift (2002) also present an alternative vision that is deeply rooted in post-structuralist, anti-essentialist and non-representational theory to highlight how cities are formed through practices, mobility

and experiences. Contained within this new reconceptualisation of cities, Amin and Thrift offer new scope to regional geographers in their reading of cities as sites replete of both formal and informal clustering through the incremental agglomeration and increasing density of light institutions. Although they deliberately seek to distance themselves from their earlier conceptual work on the thickening of softer institutions, this new work is actually the reworking and continuation of this older concept⁸. They have, however, made one important conceptual break over the past few years which has seen them distance themselves from the search for a territorial fix (Amin and Thrift, 1994) towards considering territory as relational (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Juxtaposed alongside Scott's (2002) renditions surrounding the mosaic of global-city regions, the new regionalism has opportunities to engage with new theoretical readings of contemporary institutional ensembles. With the advent of institutional turns in political-economic geography:

“Informal constraints matter. We need to know much more about culturally derived norms of behaviour and how they interact with formal rules to get better answers to such issues. We are just beginning the serious study of institutions.” (North, 1990: 140).

Although it has been brought to attention that concepts such as social capital aren't always deployed accurately, its place is relatively secure in the short term because it has come to serve as a useful mechanism for both academics and policymakers. In this sense, it is important that the new regionalism moves beyond what Lovering is prepared to accept, in order to steer a path away from the danger of stagnation. As we know, many of the relations and concepts that new regionalists

⁸ Despite this reworking of an earlier concept, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Amin and Thrift, 2002) is noteworthy for its lack of engagement with the authors own work on institutionalisation, so much so that in the books entirety there is not a single reference to their pioneering work on institutionalisation (Amin and Thrift, 1994).

promote do indeed have inherent flaws, but bearing these in mind and not shelving their existence can still enable pertinent theoretical insights to avail from the pens of scholars prepared to engage in such debates.

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