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The region in political economy

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THE REGION IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

JOHN HARRISON

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY
LOUGHBOROUGH
LEICESTERSHIRE
ENGLAND

LE11 3TU

J.HARRISON4@LBORO.AC.UK

T: +44(0)1509 228198

F: +44(0)1509 223930

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ABSTRACT

A decade ago regions were the hot topic in political economy. Convinced by accounts of how regions were competitive economic territories *per excellence* and crucial sites for promoting a plural society, the ‘new regionalism’ ascended to a position of orthodoxy in political economy. Today the memory of these halcyon days is but a distant one with the past decade seeing regions be the site for a number of topical debates which appear at first sight to challenge the regional concept: the collapse of the new regionalist orthodoxy; the theoretical ascendancy of relational approaches to conceptualising spatiality; and, the political ascendancy of the ‘city-region’ concept. All of which suggests that the regional concept may be under threat in contemporary political economy. But it also prompts the need to confront searching questions as to whether we are in fact witnessing the awakening of a new geography of the region. This paper emphasises the latter, arguing that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a new era of ‘relational regionalism’ in political economy.

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THE REGION IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

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30 “Something funny happened in the early 1980s. The region, long
31 considered an interesting topic to historians and geographers, but not
32 considered to have any interest for mainstream western social science,
33 was rediscovered by a group of political economists, sociologists,
34 political scientists, and geographers...It was asserted that the region
35 might be a fundamental basis of economic and social life ‘after mass
36 production’. That is, since new successful forms of production –
37 different from the canonical mass production systems of the postwar
38 period – were emerging in some regions and not others, and since they
39 seemed to involve both localization and regional differences and
40 specificities (institutional, technological), it followed that there might be
41 something fundamental that linked late 20th-century capitalism to
42 regionalism and regionalization.”

43 Storper (1997, 3)

44

45 “Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of
46 modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of
47 the word ‘orthodoxy’...The word ‘orthodoxy’ not only no longer means
48 being right; it practically means being wrong.”

49 Chesterton (1905, 11-12)

50

51 Introduction: the new regionalist orthodoxy

52 A decade ago regions were the hot topic in political economy. Under the
53 banners of ‘regional political economy’ and the ‘new regionalism’ writers and
54 commentators noted how the rise of dense vertically disintegrated industrial
55 districts, such as Baden-Württemberg, Emilia Romagna, and Silicon Valley,
56 presented the region as the focal point of post-Fordist, flexible, learning-based
57 production systems – the emerging face of capitalist accumulation. Convinced
58 by accounts of how regions were competitive economic territories *par*
59 *excellence*, academics, political leaders, and practitioners increasingly
60 believed that we were living in a ‘regional world’ – with regional economies the

61 building blocks for a globally networked society (Storper 1997). Territorial
62 platforms from which growth and prosperity accumulated in the post-Fordist
63 economy, regions were also deemed a crucial site for promoting a plural
64 society, centred on participatory democracy, active citizenship, and civic pride
65 (Keating 1998, Putnam 1993). Promoting the dual dividend of economic
66 prosperity and democratic renewal, the new regionalism ascended to a
67 position of orthodoxy in the study of political economy, offering both a
68 “convincing theoretical explanation of recent and future regional economic
69 development and also the best approach to policy formation” (Lovering 1999,
70 380).

71 Today though, the memory of these halcyon days is a distant one. Not
72 the fashionable banner that it once was, the latest annals of political economy
73 no longer has the ‘rise of the region’ as its cover story. First, the conceptual
74 standing of the new regionalism has been eroded, with critics arguing that the
75 orthodoxy afforded to the region was achieved without sustained rational
76 theorisation and rigorous empirical testing (Lovering 1999). Second, the
77 notion of regions as territorially bound spatial/scalar entities has been
78 theoretically challenged by those advocating a relational approach to spatiality
79 – the notion that there cannot be a single ‘essential’ definition of a concept
80 (e.g. the region) since its meaning can only be defined by its relational context
81 (Allen et al 1998). Thus, depending upon your position, the merits of
82 scalar/territorial approaches have been challenged, flanked, overtaken, or
83 replaced by relational approaches to understanding sociospatiality. Meanwhile
84 and related to this, the emergence of newer state spaces have also presented
85 a threat to regions (Brenner 2004). Notable here has been the (re-)emergence

86 of the 'city-region concept' (Scott 2001) and the ongoing debate within political
87 economy as to how city-regions relate to/differ from regions (see Harrison,
88 2007). All of which suggests that the 'regional concept' may be under threat
89 both theoretically and politically at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
90 But it also prompts the need to confront searching questions as to whether
91 what we are witnessing is actually the regional concept under threat, or the
92 awakening of a new geography of the region in political economy.

93 A decade ago the task of fielding questions on the position, role, and
94 future of the region in political economy would have proved a relatively
95 painless exercise, with regional geographers (in particular new regionalists)
96 seen to be at the forefront of dynamic research debates on deciphering the
97 new politics of economic development with transitions in the regulation and
98 governance of contemporary capitalism and its territorial configuration.
99 Notions that we were living in a 'regional world' were suggestive of a bright
100 future. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, the new regionalist orthodoxy of
101 1990s was not the stable foundation that many assumed it to be. As is often
102 the case, the strengths which enabled the new regionalism to ascend to such
103 a lofty position within political economy would prove to be its undoing. Under
104 threat theoretically and politically, the future of the region appears less clear in
105 present day political economy. And yet, it could be that the regional concept is
106 stronger now than it was a decade ago.

107 This paper argues that while the region has been under threat over the
108 past decade, this does not presuppose its erosion from political economy.
109 Rather it is suggested that it marks the emergence of a new geography of the
110 region based upon new developments in the study of state spatiality, which

may at first appear to threaten the regional concept, but which serve to highlight its importance in political economy. To illustrate this, the paper begins by recounting the rise and fall of the regional concept. In particular it details how the regional concept has repeatedly reinvented itself, constantly shifting its focus to accommodate, and be accommodated by, the evolving discipline of geography and perhaps most importantly, the changing nature of the world that regionalists decipher and conceptualise. In essence, history suggests that when the regional concept has been under threat, it emerges from this as a much stronger and more robust concept. This paper investigates whether this trend is likely to continue in light of emerging and perceived threats to the study of regions in political economy.

The rise and fall of the regional conceptⁱ

Of intrinsic value to a number of academic disciplines, it is with the discipline of geography that the region is most commonly associated. The focus of its own particular branch of the discipline, 'regional geography' has been an ever-present sub-discipline of geography, and as such, integral to the development of the geographical discipline. However, this long and distinguished history of regions in geography should not belie the fact that the regional concept has also endured some challenging times. Yet it is from these challenging times that the region has emerged a stronger and more robust concept. Indeed it is suggested here that the rise and fall of the regional concept in geography holds important pointers for understanding the current role for regions in political economic debate.

135 Pioneering work by Herbertson (1905), Fleure (1919), and Vidal de la
136 Blache (1926) on the particular nature of individual regions, and later
137 Hartshorne (1939, 1959) on the nature of geography as a regional discipline,
138 ensured that regional geography flourished in the first half of the twentieth
139 century. Establishing itself with its own regional tradition in geography, this
140 understanding of the region was, however, to come under threat during the
141 postwar years with the advent of spatial science and the search for laws of
142 spatial behaviour. Standing in opposition to the established 'regional
143 geography' of the time, the advance of spatial science presented itself as a
144 real threat to the future of the regional concept in geography. But what was
145 first perceived as a threat was to mark the birth of a new brand of regional
146 geography.

147 Highlighting the functionality of regions (Haggett 1965, Isard 1960) and
148 their practical importance in postwar planning, the emergence of a new
149 scientific regional geography contributed to the recognition that the regional
150 concept was the fundamental backdrop for all geographical studies (Dickinson
151 1976). Yet following the steady drift away from (regional) spatial science in the
152 1970s, the regional concept was soon seen to be of diminishing theoretical
153 and practical use (Holland 1976). One commentator even went so far as to
154 suggest that regional geographers were the 'last of the handloom weavers'
155 (Paterson 1974) – a group with little or nothing to offer a discipline that was
156 broadening its horizons, incorporating new and exciting developments in
157 critical geography, and leaving traditional geography (of which regional
158 geography was a bastion) behind. The regional concept was, in other words,
159 past its sell by date. And yet in the three decades that have passed since this

view was first expressed the regional concept has remained central to the advancement of the geographical discipline.

Regional geography was not only to survive the threats of the 1970s, but it was to become the vehicle through which many of these new debates took shape. First the work of Marxist inspired academics focused attention on the region once more as they sought to explain how regional variation was intricately bound up with capitalist accumulation, and from this, how economic activity responded to geographical inequality in the conditions of accumulation (Harvey 1982, Massey 1978, 1979, 1984). And second, advances in cultural geography alongside geographers' deeper concern with place – the social construction of place, and human subjects sense of place and emotional attachment to place – led to a 'new regional geography', which conceptualised regions as the meeting place for systems of culture, politics, and economy to coalesce at different spatial and territorial scales. Radically different from the previous tendency to view space as passive, the 'new regional geography' of the 1980s contributed to wider debates on how spatial difference was not simply an outcome but integral to the constitution and reproduction of society (Gilbert, 1988). Contributing to a vibrant debate on how regions are formed and subsequently develop unevenly, the 'new regional geography' has become somewhat overshadowed in recent years by debates pertaining to a 'new regionalism' in economic development and territorial representation. With its claim that the region, and not the nation-state, was the key site at which economic management was to be conducted, social welfare delivered, and for political subjects to be citizens, the new regionalism became the buzzword for political-economists in the mid-to-late-1990s. From academic discussions and

185 scholarly writings to political pamphlets and policy documents, the new
186 regionalism quickly gained a captive audience such that its architects were not
187 only lauded for their insight, they became authorities on connecting the new
188 politics of economic development with transitions in the regulation and
189 governance of contemporary capitalism and its territorial form. Across North
190 America and Western Europe, moves to devise policies to embrace the
191 orthodoxy surrounding the new regionalism became an institutionalised task.

192 Today the memory of these halcyon days is a distant one with the so-
193 called 'rise of the region' no longer to the fore in political economy. Over the
194 past decade growing academic concern over the conceptual standing of the
195 new regionalism has been fuelled by further reflection on the events and
196 processes occurring in Baden-Württemberg, Emilia Romagna, and Silicon
197 Valley, but more particularly, the relative success and failure of policy
198 measures devised to copy the success of these so-called 'exemplar regions'
199 in gaining competitive advantage in the global economy (Christopherson
200 2003, Harrison 2006, Jones 2001, Lovering 1999, MacLeod 2001b). As a
201 result, the past decade has seen the region become the subject for a number
202 of topical debates – some theoretical, some methodological, and some
203 political – which have highlighted a number of potential and/or existing threats
204 to its continued relevance in political economy.

206 **Regions under threat?**

207 While a wide range of potential and/or existing threats could have been
208 highlighted here, there are three that appear particularly noteworthy and
209 warrant closer examination: the collapse of the new regionalist orthodoxy; the

theoretical ascendancy of relational approaches in conceptualising spatiality; and, the advance of city-regions in the political praxis and development planning of countries throughout North America, Western Europe, even parts of the developing world (OECD 2007, Scott 2001, Segbers 2007, Simmonds and Hack 2000). The next section explores each in turn.

The collapse of the new regionalist orthodoxy

At the end of the twentieth century the new regionalism had reached a crossroads. For no sooner had the new regionalism reached its zenith in political economy than its orthodoxy began to wane. Points of weakness were beginning to emerge and the conceptual standing of the new regionalism was beginning to weaken. Of these points of weakness, four are particularly noteworthy. First, the new regionalism was deemed an extremely ‘chaotic concept’ (Sayer 1992) that bundled together too many diverse theories for it to be considered a coherent body of work. For the region was not just a focal point for geographers at this time, but also for business gurus, economists, political scientists and the like. The result was a perceived lack of engagement and consistency in the application of what was actually meant to be the object of focus – the region. Second, and barring a few exceptions, the new regionalism was seen to have “disregarded the changing role of the state or implied that, amid the current round of globalisation-regionalisation, it was inevitably in terminal decline” (MacLeod 2001a, 806). Third, the new regionalism was identified as becoming enmeshed in multifaceted scalar politics and tangled policy hierarchies. And finally to paraphrase Lovering (1999), it was suggested that the policy tail was wagging the analytical dog so

235 hard that much of the theory was being shaken out of the new regionalism.
236 Not just superficial scars, these critical points of weakness undermined the
237 very foundation upon which the new regionalism had been conceptually
238 constructed. As the twentieth century drew to a close a low point had clearly
239 been reached in the new regionalism.

240 Yet through the work of a new generation of theorists, a second wave
241 of research emerged which sought to provide new insight into the 'rise of the
242 region' in political economy. Heavily influenced by the Regulation Approach
243 this new body of work acknowledged how the rise of the regional state was
244 not necessarily or purposively at the expense of the state, but as a new form
245 of 'spatial selectivity' by the state (Brenner 2004, Brenner et al 2003, Jones
246 2001, MacLeod 2001a, 2001b, MacLeod and Goodwin 1999a, 1999b). Less
247 eye-catching and politically savvy than predecessor writings in the new
248 regionalism, this political economy approach to the study of regions solidified
249 the conceptual standing of the new regionalism by unpacking the territorial
250 and scalar relationships that existed between regions and other spaces/scales
251 of political economy activity. Heavily influenced by the levels of state
252 restructuring occurring in the United Kingdom, this political economy
253 perspective was indicative of the complex dynamics of territorial restructuring
254 and political change occurring throughout Europe at the time (Bache 1998,
255 Hooghe 1996).

256 Informing how political-administrative regions are strategic territories in
257 the reconstituted governance of contemporary capitalism, these
258 territorial/scalar approaches were seen to take the new regionalism and
259 regional political economy from a position of conceptual weakness to a

position of (relative) conceptual strength. But for all that this new body of work has done to provide new insight, it too has come under threat recently from those advocating relational approaches to conceptualising spatiality.

The relational approach to conceptualising spatiality

For a regional geographer the hardest questions to answer focus on the very nature of their object of inquiry. There is no easy answer to the question: What is a region? Nor for that matter are there easy answers to the questions: How is a region (trans)formed? Why do regions (dis)appear over time? Why do regions emerge in certain places at certain times, and not in other places? All fundamental questions that face the regional geographer on a day-to-day basis, but at the same time they are not easy questions to answer. Of the four points of weakness highlighted in the new regionalism it is the first – the chaotic nature of lack of consistency with what is meant by ‘the region’ – that is the most fundamental, but also the most difficult to overcome. But what of the new regionalism and its lack of engagement with the ‘region’.

At one level, the dominant strand of new regionalist thinking popularised in economic geography (Scott 1998, Scott and Storper 2003, Storper 1997) led to claims that the region was *the* territorial platform for securing competitive advantage in the global economy. Regions were given single ‘essential’ definitions and lauded as the fundamental building blocks of a ‘regional world’ (Storper 1997). By way of contrast, a second strand of new regionalist thinking popularised in the writings of political-scientists such as Keating (1998) acknowledged the variety of regions (cultural, economic, administrative, political, governmental etc) and how they are fundamentally

different, but then fell back into the 'essentialist' trap of focusing primarily on regions as actually existing political and/or governmental units. A weakness across the new regionalist writings, the region was an easy target for those advocating a relational approach to conceptualising spatiality.

More than statistically or administratively convenient constructs, advocates of the relational approach to conceptualising spatiality argue that there are no fixed, pre-existing regions 'out there waiting to be discovered', but that regions take shape in particular contexts and from specific perspectives (Allen et al 1998, 2). Written at the height of the new regionalist orthodoxy, Allen et al's pioneering study of south east England demonstrated the analytical capacity of relational perspectives when, having analyzed four different mechanisms of growth (finance, consumption and debt, high technology, and state policies), they noted how the boundaries of the region varied depending upon which mechanism of growth was being analysed, and moreover, how none coincided with the region's official administrative boundary. Over the past decade, this and subsequent work on relational thinking has resulted in the emergence of a new 'spatial grammar'.

Suggestions that we are living in a 'regional world' (Storper 1997) and single 'essential' definitions of the region have been put firmly into the shadows by the recognition that spatial configurations are not necessarily or purposively territorial or scalar, but constituted through the spatiality of flow, porosity, and relational connectivity associated with globalization (Amin et al 2003, *Geografiska Annaler* 2004, Massey 2005). In a relationally constituted modern world, capital accumulation and governance is deemed to be "increasingly about exercising nodal power and aligning networks at large in

310 one's own interests, rather than about exercising territorial power...[for] there
311 is no definable regional territory to rule over" (Amin 2004, 36). As a result, a
312 lively debate exists between those who advocate territorial/scalar approaches
313 to conceptualising spatiality and those advocating a relational approach. All of
314 which is presenting a real challenge to those analysing regions. But it also
315 prompts the question of whether the 'relational turn' is presenting an
316 opportunity for regions to be a focal point in the empirical demonstration and
317 theoretical amendment of the way(s) in which space is currently
318 conceptualised. Indeed, it can be seen that regions are already proving to be
319 an important object of inquiry in the development of these theoretical debates.

320 Already noted to be central players in the development of a political
321 economy approach to the study of regions, MacLeod and Jones (2001)
322 observed that while the new regionalism had done much to revive debate
323 about regional change, it concealed fundamental questions relating to political
324 struggles and the contested social and cultural practices through which
325 societies assume their regional shape. Drawing inspiration from work in the
326 'new regional geography' tradition (most notably Paasi 1986), MacLeod and
327 Jones (2001, 669) argued the need for a 'renewed geography of regions' to
328 unravel the culturally embedded institutionalisation of regions and advance a
329 meaningful understanding of regional change.

330 As part of their ongoing endeavour to renew the geography of regions,
331 Jones and MacLeod (2004) have recently drawn distinction between 'regional
332 spaces' and 'spaces of regionalism' – the former referring to the
333 regionalization of *economic* activity; the latter to processes of *political*
334 mobilization around notions of increased civic identity and cultural expression.

335 Rather than see the conceptualisation of spatiality in either/or terms, Jones
336 and MacLeod (2004, 437) argue that relational accounts are most convincing
337 when they focus on “*economic* flows and interchange” but that they “bend the
338 stick too far” when it comes to spaces of *political* regionalism where ‘political
339 action’ is mobilised territorially (cf. Amin et al 2003, Allen and Cochrane 2007).
340 So rather than adopt a territorial/scalar or networked/topological
341 conceptualisation of spatiality, Jones and MacLeod argue for “a retaining of
342 territorially oriented readings of political economy *and when appropriate* their
343 conjoining with non-territorial and/or relational socio-economic and political
344 strategies” (2004, 448 emphasis added, see also Hudson 2007, MacLeod and
345 Jones, 2007).

346 Looking beyond the confines of regional geography for one moment,
347 this position appears to be supported by a number of other influential
348 geographical commentators. Work on deciphering the geographical nature of
349 the ‘global economy’ by Dicken et al (2001, 96-97) suggests that adopting a
350 networked approach to analyzing the economy should not lead us to
351 “denigrate the role of the territorial state in global economic processes”
352 because “national regimes of accumulation continue to create a pattern of
353 ‘bounded regions’” such that territories and networks interact in a “mutually
354 constitutive process”. Swyngedouw (2004, 25) adopts a similar view, arguing
355 that “both the scales of economic flows and networks and those of territorial
356 governance are rescaled through a process of ‘glocalisation’...[such that] the
357 proliferation of new modes and forms of resistance to the restless process of
358 de-territorialisation/re-territorialisation of capital requires greater attention to
359 engaging a ‘politics of scale’”. In step with Jones and MacLeod’s (2004)

distinction between politics and economics, and thus how these spaces are conceptualised, “the clear implication is that they operate according to different kinds of logic and in relation to distinct domains: economic flows in the case of networks and political institutions in the case of territories” (Painter 2007, 6).

Yet a number of leading geographical commentators remain firmly rooted to positions which challenge the notion that spatiality should be conceptualised as territorial/scalar – instead preferring to distance themselves completely from territorial/scalar conceptualisations of spatiality. The most striking element of this collective of academics is the sheer diversity of intellectual backgrounds and research agendas that have come together to form this scholarly commune. Now it is clearly a difficult task – one that stretches far beyond the capabilities of a paper such as this – to adequately cover the full spectrum of approaches that have been developed to theoretically speculate, empirically demonstrate, and conceptually amend the call for non-territorial, topological and relational approaches to conceptualising spatiality. However in the context of this paper, there are four notable observations to make.

First, the momentum behind relational perspectives remains as strong today as it has over the past decade, with many of the same scholars who were influential in its development continuing to push the agenda forward (see *Geografiska Annaler* 2004, Massey 2005, 2007). Indeed, a decade on from their pioneering study of south east England (with Massey), Allen and Cochrane’s (2007) latest contribution epitomise this as they reprise their longstanding interest with the south east region to further develop their

argument for a topological understanding of state spatiality – one that goes some way to explaining the ‘politics of scale’ as the outcome of an assemblage of actors (public, private, central, regional, global) ‘lodged’ in national territories, but not bound by them. This is a conceptual debate that is clearly not going away in the immediate future. Moreover, it has fanned the flames for other debates to take flight in recent years.

The concept of ‘scale’ has been a key talking point for geographers for nearly three decades now. In this time, ongoing discussions between different intellectual camps have led to a number of important intellectual developments (for overviews see Herod and Wright, 2002; Sheppard and McMaster, 2004). No more was this the case than in 2005 when Marston et al called for a ‘human geography without scale’ (Marston et al 2005). A bold step, Marston et al took the (relational) argument that if places (e.g. regions) are thought of as the effects of a myriad of social and material networks made up of complex geographies that are not territorially bound, this also expunges the idea that places (e.g. regions) can be framed as/at distinct spatial scales. Proposing a ‘flat ontology’ as the basis for sociospatial investigation, Marston et al’s (2005) vision of a human geography without scale is providing the basis for much debate (for a flavour see Jonas 2006, Jones et al 2007).

Somewhat related to this, but developed from a different origin, Mansfield (2005) added a third dimension to arguments levelled against the work of Brenner and other strategic-relational theorists. Arguing against the prevailing trend amongst scholars of globalization and neoliberalism to turn away from the national as a relevant scale as it is ‘rescaled’ to local, regional and global scales, Mansfield suggests the need to move beyond the notion of

410 'rescaling' to recognize that the national remains relevant in contemporary
411 political economy. For Mansfield (2005, 458), "the rescaling argument treats
412 the national largely as residual, which serves to draw our attention away from
413 complex scalar practices without offering a truly different way of thinking about
414 scalar relations". Given that the strategic-relational approach was lauded for
415 navigating the new regionalism away from its critical points of weakness, it is
416 revealing to note that (albeit in a different context) it too stands accused of not
417 fully recognising the national in contemporary political economy.

418 While Jones and MacLeod's (2004) suggestion that relational accounts
419 are most convincing when they focus on '*economic* flows', the fourth
420 development has seen Amin et al (2003) articulate their vision of a future
421 based on a 'relational grammar of politics'. Extending the notion of the
422 'relational region', Amin et al further challenge conventional
423 conceptualisations of regions by suggesting the need to replace the territorial
424 politics of devolution – the result of policies devised during the 1990s to
425 devolve decision-making and associated policy implementation to regional
426 institutions in line with thinking around the new regionalism – with a 'politics of
427 dispersal' in what they consider to be "an era of increasingly geographically
428 extended spatial flows and an intellectual context where space is frequently
429 being imagined as a product of networks and relations, in contrast to an older
430 topography in which territoriality was dominant" (2003, 6). Developed in the
431 context of the British state, Amin et al take issue with the programmed
432 devolution of powers to politically and administratively bounded regions,
433 arguing that it does little to address the widespread inequality that exists
434 between the regions. Critiquing the new regionalism and its claim that there is

a link between the region and economic competitiveness and democratic renewal, Amin et al proposed a radical change to the spatial geometry of the British state based upon an advocacy of relational approaches to conceptualizing state spatiality. Notwithstanding the arguments as to the various merits of such a radical change to the spatial geometry of the British state, Amin et al provide a thought-provoking insight into the scope for relational perspectives to filter into future political praxis – and by implication the future of the region in political economy (cf. Allen and Cochrane 2007).

Yet if Amin et al's drift into the realm of informed theoretical speculation appears far removed from a policy template ready for immediate implementation, the latest policy developments across North America and Western Europe do suggest that relational perspectives are both informing and reflecting recent political praxis. Most notable in this regard has been the re-emergence of the 'city-region concept' and the rise of a 'new city-regionalism' in political economy.

The rise of the city-region concept in political economy

A point of departure for the new regionalism has been the observation in recent years that the so-called 'rise of the region' coincided with the resurgence of another spatial form – the city. Under the titles of 'global city-regions' (Scott 2001) and the 'new' city regionalism (Ward and Jonas 2004), there has been increased support for a resurgence of city-regions in political economy such that *they* have come to "function as the basic motors of the global economy" and "territorial platforms for much of the post-Fordist economy" (Scott 2001, 4). Where a decade ago it was regions, recognition

that city-regions are seen to be competitive territories *par excellence* is clearly important, but perhaps more important is what it reflects in relation to the connection made between cities and regions in the politics of subnational economic development and governance. Important questions arising include, but are not limited to: What is the relationship between regions and city-regions? Are regions non-city-regions? Are there theoretical differences between regions and city-regions? If so, does this reflect a different and/or alternative conceptualisation of state spatiality? Is the city-region a genuine threat to the region – or are they complementary? And finally, what political implications pertain from this?

In the first instance, the language that has accompanied the advance of city-regions in political economy has strong relational undertones. Where regions were presented to be by and large territorially bounded political-administrative units in the new regionalism, the literature on the new city-regionalism has been quick to emphasise how “the geographic structure of these networks tends more and more to override purely political boundaries” such that city-regions are open, porous spaces, easily permeated by flows of capital, knowledge, and finance, and increasingly free from regulatory control on the part of national states (Scott 2001, 4). Symbolic of a broader shift in conceptualising spatiality from a framework based upon ‘spaces of places’ (territory) to one centred on ‘spaces of flows’ (networks) (Castells 1996), here too it can be argued that the latest transition in the regulation and governance of the capitalist system, reflected in and of recent political praxis around city-regions, has served to reinforce the call for relational approaches to conceptualising spatiality.

485 All of which could suggest that the city-region is a genuine threat to the
486 region as it presently stands. Yet the new orthodoxy surrounding the city-
487 region is itself the focus of much debate. For it can be argued, *pace* Jones
488 and MacLeod (2004), that the new city-regionalism has been at its most
489 convincing when focusing on the economic rationale for city-region
490 development, with a tendency to reify the city-region as an agent of wealth
491 creation and redistribution. More than this there has been an under-emphasis
492 in the literature on how city-regions “are constructed politically and reproduced
493 through everyday acts and struggles around consumption and social
494 reproduction” with a notable lacuna being “serious treatment of the role of the
495 state and an associated politics of distribution constructed around various
496 sites, spaces and scales across the city-region” (Jonas and Ward 2007, 170).
497 Not surprisingly then, the city-region concept has become the subject of much
498 debate in recent months, with the *International Journal of Urban and Regional*
499 *Research* and the *Journal of Economic Geography* both setting up forums for
500 debate – the former on extending the economic logic of city-region
501 development to argue the need to conceptualize the emergence of ‘city-
502 regions’ as the product of a particular set of economic, cultural, environmental
503 and political projects, each with their own logics (*IJURR* 2007; Harding 2007,
504 Ward and Jonas, 2007); the latter on the argument that much of what has
505 been said about city-regions appears as a reworking of what was said
506 previously about regions a decade earlier, and critically, that the same points
507 of weakness which undermined the new regionalism appear to have been
508 collapsed into the new city-regionalism (Harrison 2007). Having opened the
509 city-region concept up for debate, what first appeared as a potential threat to

the regional concept has now become a potential opportunity through which urban and regional geographers can work together to further connect the new politics of economic development with transitions in the regulation and governance of contemporary capitalism and its spatial form.

Concluding comments: the era of ‘relational regionalism’?

This paper has sought to critically analyse the position, role and function of the region in political economy. In doing this, the paper has made a number of observations. First, the regional concept is not the hot topic that it was a decade ago. Gone has the orthodoxy that surrounded the new regionalism to be replaced by a series of new and currently in vogue perspectives within political economy. Theoretically the conceptualisation of regions as territorial/scalar has been challenged by relational perspectives that advocate conceptualising spatiality as networked/topological, while politically, the region has been challenged by the re-emergence of the city-region concept. At first sight, each presents itself as a threat to the regional concept, and yet each time the regional concept has been under threat previously it has emerged from these skirmishes a more robust concept. Despite perceived threats generated by the collapse of the new regionalism, the support for relational conceptualisations of spatiality, and the rise of the city-region concept, this paper argues that there is little to suggest that this cannot happen once more.

Rather than presupposing the erosion of the regional concept, this paper suggests that these new challenges to the conventional wisdom of what the regional concept stands for could foreground the emergence of a new era for regions in political economy – the era of ‘relational regionalism’. That the

region is presently the arena through which many of these debates are taking shape does, however, raise a series of important questions regarding the future of the region in political economy. One of the main reasons why the regional concept has provided an important backdrop for the advocacy of relational/topological approaches to conceptualising spatiality is precisely because the orthodoxy surrounding the new regionalism provided an easy target for critique. This, along with broader concerns with territorial/scalar approaches in political economy, has promoted debate on a number of issues for which regional geography has subsequently become an important backdrop: the changing nature of state space under modern capitalism; the transformation of state space under conditions of globalization (in particular the role of cities and regions in globalization); conceptualising spatiality with or without scale; state rescaling or the need to move beyond notions of rescaling; conceptualising spatiality as territorial/scalar and/or networked/topological/relational; the geography of the state; and geographical struggles over democracy, citizenship, and identity. So what of the future for regions in political economy.

A retrospective look at the past decade would suggest that when the regional concept appeared at its strongest, what appeared as strengths quickly manifest themselves as weaknesses. More recently, and by the very nature of the attention that has been directed towards the region in recent years, these new debates on conceptualising socio-spatiality have had the potential to inflict a certain degree of damage to the conceptual standing of the region in political economy. But the velocity at which new conceptual understanding is being generated from these theoretical skirmishes could also

be suggestive of the potential for a more robust regional concept to emerge. Indeed the history of the regional concept in geography might be suggestive of this. For what has often first appeared as a threat or challenge to the conceptual standing of the region has very often provided not only the impetus, but the backbone, for a new era in regional geography. But what of the future?

Writing under the heading “Why (for example) regions continue to matter”, one suggestion has been that (re)thinking regions along these new lines not only reveals “the ‘inbetween-spaces’ of action, which hitherto have been marginalized in work too often preoccupied with global-local binaries, localization/globalization paradoxes or glocalization” but also how,

“the ‘region’ can be seen to operate both as a *between* space and a *mesolevel* concept, which is amenable to thinking about a spatial combination of flows, connections, processes, structures, networks, sites, places, settings, agencies and institutions. This ‘new regionalism’ is not just about trying to explain the production of a particular *scale* of economic and social life but also represents a new way of approaching ‘regions’ theoretically as strategic *sites* in the geography of capitalism after Fordism.”

Jonas (2006, 402)

A revealing insight, but I also believe that there is something extra that highlights why the regional concept and regional geography still matter in political economy. More than simply a *between space*, the interdisciplinary nature of these theoretical, methodological, and political debates sees regional geography provide a unique backdrop, precisely because it is not economic geography, not political geography, not cultural geography, not poststructuralist geography, but a branch of geography which has the capacity to bring scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds together to promote

interdisciplinary debate on how we conceptualise space. As such, the task scholars faced a decade ago remains the same – to connect the new politics of economic development with transitions in the regulation and governance of contemporary capitalism and its spatial form – but where regions were seen as the answer to the question a decade ago, regions may now be the vehicle by which we can uncover those answers. Indeed it is perhaps worthwhile repeating the thoughts of Thrift, who on the cusp of the ‘new regionalism’ called ‘for a new regional geography’ precisely because:

“...grouped around the practice of regional geography can be found most of the important problems than human geography faces today. The invocation of regional geography cannot solve these problems but it certainly brings them into focus, and in the act of focusing, it shows us how far we still have to go.”

Thrift (1994, 200)

Quite clearly much work needs to be done before it can be presented in such a neat manner as this, but the question remains: could we be witnessing the emergence of a new regional political economy centred on ‘relational regionalism’?

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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622 **John Harrison** is Lecturer in Human Geography at the Department of
623 Geography, Loughborough University, UK. His previous writing has
624 focused on the new regionalism, city-regions, and the political economy
625 of English regional policy. He has authored papers in these areas for
626 the *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Geoforum* and *Space & Polity*. He
627 holds an MA and PhD from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

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ⁱ There are two important qualifiers. First, this paper will focus primarily on the UK context, and where appropriate, conjoin this with the development of the regional concept internationally. Though acknowledging the centrality of the UK to this paper, it is believed that the nature of the argument made and the universal relevance of the literature discussed is conducive to international appeal. And second, while acknowledging the norm of academic traditions such as international relations theory to use 'region' to define an area comprising more than one nation-state e.g. the Baltic Sea Region or the Middle East, this paper will deal solely with subnational forms of region.