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Introduction

This chapter forms part the ongoing project to research the governance of local and regional economic development in the United Kingdom following the era of political devolution and constitutional change. Since 1997, the political geographical processes of the UK have been altered through the granting of an elected Parliament for Scotland, a National Assembly for Wales, an Assembly for Northern Ireland, an elected London Mayor and Greater London Assembly, alongside Regional Development Agencies for the eight English regions. Each of these institutions are, to varying degrees, charged with responsibilities for generating and orchestrating economic development, against which they are being judged within the contemporary uncertain political climate.

As we have argued elsewhere (Jones and MacLeod 2004; MacLeod and Jones 2007), when analysing such an asymmetrical political landscape of economic development, it behoves researchers to appreciate the particular economic, cultural and political discourses, practices and inflections around and through which its nations and regions are, in Anssi Paasi’s terms, institutionalized. In other words we need to appreciate the socio-spatial processes through which certain territorial units emerge as a part of the spatial structure of society and become “established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness” (1986: 121).

Stretching this terminology further, the post-1997 institutional accomplishments enacted in the name of devolution have led the UK to undergo a substantial re-institutionalization of the policy landscape for governing economic development. This has proved to be a particularly interesting process for generating research over the past decade (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmedinger 2006).

Our chapter introduces two theoretical approaches that in recent years have been deployed to interpret UK devolution and related prospects for economic governance. First, we examine how UK devolution has come to be conceptualized as a re-configuration and rescaling of the territorial state. We then consider an alternative approach, which has in part arisen out of a backlash against such territorial and scalar perspectives, and which advocates a self-styled ‘relational’ approach to space and topological as opposed to topographical conceptualizations of spatiality. Following a synthetic overview of these two approaches, we aim to transcend this potential theoretical impasse.
by demonstrating how each can offer a fruitful analysis of different expressions of devolution and the governance of economic development across the UK landscape. This argument is then presented through a discussion of: (1) the struggle to institutionalize the South West of England as a geopolitical unit; and (2) endeavours to foster a definitively new region called The Northern Way. Through these case studies we underline how these alternative territorial and topological perspectives can offer compatible – as opposed to entirely antagonistic – approaches for interpreting the process of devolution, state structuring, and economic governance.

**Territorial approaches to the geography of devolution**

One of the most discernible endeavours to conceptualize UK devolution, particularly among political economic geographers and planners, interprets it as a rescaling of the state and a territorial reworking of the geographies of government and governance. This has been a key message in some analyses of England’s Regional Development Agencies (Jones and MacLeod 1999; Deas and Ward 2000; Gibbs and Jonas 2001) and the creation of Regional Spatial Strategies (Haughton and Counsell 2004; Bianconi et al. 2006). Others inspired by the neo-Marxist state theory of Bob Jessop (2002) conceptualize this rescaling of economic governance as part and parcel of a ‘hollowing out’ of the national state and a corresponding ‘filling in’ at other scales such as England’s regions, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Welsh Assembly and its Regional Divisions (MacLeod and Goodwin 1999; Goodwin et al. 2005; Jones et al. 2005; cf. Shaw et al. 2009).

To date, however, many of these scalar-informed analyses of UK devolution have deployed a relatively superficial reading of the concept of rescaling. We contend that a deeper engagement with the now highly enriched theoretical vocabulary on the “politics of scalar structuration” (Brenner 2001, 2004, 2009) might prove instructive in examining the territorial character of UK devolution. This approach “connotes a developmental dynamic in which the basic structures of collective social action are continually reproduced, modified and transformed in and through collective social action” and in doing so, highlights how “[p]rocesses of scalar structuration are constituted and continually reworked through everyday social routines and struggles” (Brenner 2001: 603).

A fundamental premise of this approach, then, is that geographical scale is conceptualized to be socially constructed rather than ontologically pre-given, and that through this process geographic scales “are themselves implicated in the constitution of social, economic and political processes” (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 93). Perhaps, then, we could pre-empt the claims from ‘relational space’ thinkers (below) by underlining how this is very much a relational approach to scale (Swyngedouw 1997; Howitt 2003), whereby scale is conceived as unfolding “relationally within a community of producers and readers who give the practice of scale meaning” (K. Jones 1998: 27). It also infers that spatial scales – such as localities and regions and all those others associated with the territorial organization of the state – are not merely the settings of political conflicts but one of their principal ‘stakes’ in this struggle (Brenner 2004). Thus, as cogently argued by Neil Brenner:

> traditional Euclidian, Cartesian and Westphalian notions of geographical scale as a fixed, bounded, self-enclosed and pregiven container are currently being superseded by a highly productive emphasis on process, evolution, dynamism and sociopolitical contestation.

(Brenner 2001: 603)

In accordance with this foundational principle, Swyngedouw had earlier made a
compelling case for an ontologically process-based approach to scale that:

does not in itself assign greater validity to a global or local [or we would add national or nation-state] perspective, but alerts us to a series of sociospatial processes that changes the importance and role of certain geographical scales, re-asserts the importance of others, and sometimes creates entirely new significant scales. Most importantly, however, these scale redefinitions alter and express changes in the geometry of social power by strengthening the power and the control of some while disempowering others.

(Swyngedouw 1997: 141–142)

Furthermore, Jones (1998) informs us how this process is performed through a politics of representation whereby political agents discursively present their political struggles across scales; action that, in turn, implicates spatial imaginaries like regions, localities, cities and nation-states to be continuously implicated as ‘active progenitors’, offering an already partitioned geographical ‘scaffolding’ around and through which such practices and struggles take place (N. Smith 2003; Brenner 2001, 2009). In our view, this framework unlocks considerable potential for analysing the geohistory and contemporary spatiality of a process like devolution; what we might term state spatiality (Brenner 2004). For on one level, it offers scope to examine the crucial role of nationalist and devolutionary political campaigners – as in the Scottish Constitutional Convention and the Campaign for a Welsh Assembly – to discursively present their territorially oriented political struggles through a scalar narrative but also across scales, stretching to London and beyond. Instructive in this regard is Agnew’s work on Italy, where political parties have been central players in “writing the scripts of geographical scale […] and where] …The boundaries they draw […] define the geographical scales that channel and limit their political horizons” (Agnew 1997: 101).

A politics of scalar structuration approach might also enable us to understand how England’s regional planning boundaries, which were established during wartime in the 1940s, came to represent active progenitors in shaping the post-1994 map of Regional Government Offices and the post-1999 Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). And, in turn, through the introduction of particular spatially selective policies and state strategies – state spatial strategies (Brenner 2004) – England’s newly revived regional scales are given additional licence to become both the objects of state policy and active subjects in delivering policy (Jones and MacLeod 2004; Raco 2006). Not that any of this should imply some Russian Doll-like neatly layered structure of territorial spheres each containing a discrete package of political powers and responsibilities. For as lucidly outlined by Jamie Peck, political strategies and policy endeavours explicitly tangle and confound scales, with the result that:

the scalar location of specific political-economic functions is historically and geographically contingent, not theoretically necessitated. Functions like labor regulation or the policing of financial markets do not naturally reside at any one scale, but are variously institutionalized, defended, attacked, upscaled, and down-scaled in the course of political-economic struggles. Correspondingly, the present scalar location of a given regulatory process is neither natural nor inevitable, but instead reflects an outcome of past political conflicts and compromises.

(Peck 2002: 340; emphasis added)

Deployed in this way, it may be that the theoretical and methodological principles of this politics of scalar structuration perspective can uncover the ways in which contemporary devolution is characterized by a
rescaling of policy and planning responsibilities alongside the formation of new, revived, or strengthened state spaces and the extent to which associated strategies to enact territorial development are intricately intertwined with the redefinition of state intervention (Brenner 2004).

A relational approach to the geography of devolution

In recent years, the merits of a territorial or scalar approach to the understanding of political economic transformations have been questioned, largely though not exclusively from a coterie of geographers based in England who advocate a more radically relational approach to space (see inter alia Allen et al. 1998; Allen and Cochrane 2007; Amin 2002, 2004; Massey 2004, 2005). The critique has two dimensions. The first is concerned with normative democratic politics and has been most explicitly articulated in a pamphlet entitled Decentering the Nation: A Radical Approach to Regional Inequality, where the authors (Amin et al. 2003) disavow the ‘spatial grammar’ that punctuates the debate and the practice of UK devolution. Indeed they proclaim that by following the well-trodden path of a territorially rooted political discourse and strategy, New Labour’s devolution – particularly in relation to England – has done little to disturb the London-centrism that has characterized the business of politics and economics for over the last 100 years.

In order to confront this entrenched hegemony of London, they advocate replacing the territorial politics of devolution with a ‘politics of dispersal’. This envisages different parts of England playing equal roles in conducting a more mobile politics, perhaps involving national institutions like Parliament travelling from London to the various ‘provinces’, although presumably this very process would lead such regions to no longer be peripheralized as such. Amin et al. deem that these acts of dispersal would instil new spatial imaginaries of the nation – multi-nodal as opposed to deeply centralized – enabling regions to become effective national players while also stretching the cognitive maps of regional actants to embrace external connectivity in fostering economic prosperity and social and cultural capital. Amin (2004: 37) has since argued that, in contrast to conventional mappings where devolution politics is territorially “grounded in an imaginary of the region as a space of intimacy, shared history or shared identity, and community of interest or fate”, this relational spatial grammar works with the variegated processes of spatial stretching and territorial perforation associated with globalization and a society characterized by transnational flows and networks.

This leads directly on to the second dimension of the critique of a scalar or territorial logic: the possibility of an alternative ontology and conceptual orientation towards relational processes and network forms of organization that defy a linear distinction between place and space (Amin 2002). Amin’s reasoning for this relates to how:

In this emerging new order, spatial configurations and spatial boundaries are no longer necessarily or purposely territorial or scalar, since the social, economic, political and cultural inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution. […] The resulting excess of spatial composition is truly staggering. It includes radiations of telecommunications and transport networks around (and also under and above) the world, which in some places fail to even link up proximate neighbours. […] It includes well-trodden but not always visible tracks of transnational escape, migration, tourism, business travel, asylum and organized terror
which dissect through, and lock, established communities into new circuits of belonging and attachment, resentment and fear. [...] It includes political registers that now far exceed the traditional sites of community, town hall, parliament, state and nation, spilling over into the machinery of virtual public spheres, international organizations, global social movements, diaspora politics, and planetary or cosmopolitan projects.

(Amin 2004: 33–34)

Viewed through this ontology of relational space, cities, regions and nation-states thereby come with no automatic promise of territorial integrity “since they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity, and relational connectivity” (ibid.: 34). In turn, Amin cautions against fetishizing places as ‘communities’ that “lend themselves to territorially defined or spatially constrained political arrangements and choices” (ibid.: 42; also Closs 2007). Moreover, and without wishing to denigrate any calls for building effective regional voice and representation, he is deeply suspicious of any assumption that there is a defined ‘manageable’ geographical territory to rule over.

This mode of reasoning certainly offers a fundamental challenge to perspectives on the politics of scalar structuration, whose language of ‘nested scales and territorial boundaries’ is deemed to omit “much of the topology of economic circulation and network folding” characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Amin 2002: 395). It also places on trial a range of territorially oriented concepts such as community, locality as well as those of urban, city and region. Moreover, as highlighted by Raco (2006), relational thinking provides some alternative avenues for conceptualizing the identity spaces and the emerging ‘space–place tensions’ of devolution (cf. Taylor 1999): not least in that if spatial identities are indeed fostered through a mixture of flows and connections across different scales, “then any attempt to ‘fix’ them through policy initiatives will be characterised by over-simplification and an inability to capture their dynamism and ever-changing character” (Raco 2006: 324).

**Governing spatial economies: relational, territorial, networked**

So where do these contrasting approaches take us? Is it appropriate to view the process of devolution as a rescaling of state spatiality and territorial restructuring, or as a topology of spatially stretched, variegated flows and territorially perforating trans-regional networks? Or perhaps it might actually be quite unhelpful to be posing the question in such stark either/or terms? This would certainly seem to be the view of the distinguished political geographer John Agnew. In the process of introducing his theoretical ‘mapping’ of politics in modern Italy, Agnew talks of an ‘intellectual standoff’ between those who perhaps overstate the novelty and impact of networks and those who may remain too committed to the enduring significance of territorial spheres. For Agnew (2002: 2), “[P]art of the problem is the way the debate is posed, as if networks invariably stand in opposition to territories [and, further, as if...] networks are seen as a completely new phenomenon without geographical anchors”.

In an explicit endeavour to transcend this seemingly polarized debate between territorial/scalar and non-scalar or topological perspectives, Harriet Bulkeley (2005) posits two crucial arguments. The first concerns the false assumption that approaches to the politics of scale – or politics of scalar structuration – somehow offer a naïve view of political scales as pre-given, homogeneous and intact. She then adds that such accounts conceptualize the very processes through which such scalar constructions emerge with an emphasis on the fact that they are not neatly bound in territorial terms but take place through various actor networks and...
spaces of engagement (Cox 1998; Jones and MacLeod 2004). Bulkeley’s second objection to the positioning of scales and networks as polar opposites concerns the extent to which networks – at least in terms of the objects which are enrolled in networks and indeed their very scope – are themselves scaled. It then follows that:

once the concept of scale is freed from notions of contained and contiguous territories, it is clear that networks have a scalar dimension, both in terms of the ways in which they operate and the ways in which they are framed and configured by other networks/coalitions of actors.

(Bulkeley 2005: 882)

To this extent, then, any conceptualization of the politics of scalar structuration or of rhizomatic or network topologies should recognize that “scales evolve relationally within tangled hierarchies and dispersed interscalar networks” (Brenner 2001: 605); and, moreover, that “geographical scales and networks of spatial connectivity are mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive aspects of social spatiality” (ibid.).

These claims can be demonstrated in two brief examples. In the case of the South West of England, there is powerful evidence of a scalar politics and territorially oriented praxis, where official governmental organizations and oppositional political actors identify contrasting spatial scales – respectively, the South West regional boundary and Cornwall – around and through which to wage their quite explicitly territorial politics of engagement and representation. And yet we can also interpret that the everyday performance of these political geographies is being conducted through the trans-territorial and spatially variegated actor networks of people, objects such as trains and cars, alongside face-to-face and radiated modes of communicating information, ideas and technologies (cf. Mol and Law 1994). In the second case, that of The Northern Way, we encounter a quite explicit endeavour to establish a pan-regional economic strategy for the North of England forged through a multi-nodal arc of connectivity: a truly networked space. But again, this is a networked topology which interacts around and through the territorial geometries of RDA and Government Office administrative boundaries alongside other scales and territories of government.

‘Programmed spatiality’: building and contesting the South West Region

The Greater South West (GSW) – later termed the South West Region – was created by central government during the 1930s following surveys conducted by the Board of Trade and Ministry of Labour on the UK population and economy. Prior to the era of RDAs, the South West had a number of economic development agencies operating at different spatial scales, thereby creating fragmented partnerships at the standard region level. Accordingly, the South West RDA (SWRDA) received relatively widespread support for its potential to help make the region more economically competitive and more cohesive. However, in some instances this territorializing institutional arrangement has spawned numerous tangled hierarchies and perplexing policy networks which, far from rationalizing the landscape of governance, have intensified its complexity. Indeed the South West Regional Assembly has identified “that the nature of the relationships between the key players within the region and the boundaries between them are at times, unclear” (SWRA 2002: 15). All of which has left some organizations anxiously groping to define a clear sense of orientation and territorial identity.

The most active resistance against this devolved territorial fix has been led by Mebyon Kernow. Formed in the 1950s, Mebyon Kernow is a grass-roots regional
movement, modelled on Breton–Welsh–Celtic lines and combining claims for cultural rights with strategies for economic devolution. Its activists regularly fight general and local elections with low-level success, but throughout the 1990s Mebyon Kernow gained credibility by developing closer alliances with the Liberal Democrats, the hegemonic mainstream party in the South West of England. Mebyon Kernow’s own approach to the RDA model of regionalization is encapsulated in Bernard Deacon’s contention that:

By refusing to debate regionalism the UK government is threatening Cornwall’s institutional integrity. It has placed Cornwall in an artificial regional construct – the South West which is very large and culturally incoherent. 

(Deacon 1999: 3)

This insurgent venture to disturb the post-devolution governmentized territory of South West Britain was given a major impetus in 2000 with the formation of a Cornish Constitutional Convention (Senedh Kernow) – a cross-party organization supported by Cornwall’s four LibDem MPs, members of political parties, community and cultural activists – and its campaign for a Cornish Assembly (Deacon et al. 2003). By late 2001, over 50,000 people had signed the petition for a Cornish Assembly and this was taken to the House of Commons for the attention of the Minister for Regions. Building on this work, the landmark documents Devolution for One and All (CCC 2002) and The Case for Cornwall (CCC 2003) offer a multidimensional blueprint – drawing connections between territory, identity, politics and economics – for a fully devolved Assembly modelled on the experiences of Wales and the Isles of Scilly and legitimized by Cornwall’s ‘variable geometry’ (ibid.: 10).

The political strategy of Senedh Kernow also combines a territorial politics of scale with a networked choreography of placemaking. For while it is the case that – as briefly alluded to above – most contemporary political endeavours enrol a spatially variegated and trans-scalar topology of actor networks, the very practice of relational networking is brought to life in the CCC’s claim that devolution is about “cutting Cornwall in” to a partnership of the regions of the British Isles, Europe and the world. And also that “strong relationships will need to be established and maintained with Cornwall’s ‘peer group’ of UK regions and nations…. In addition, relationships will need to be renewed with regions and nations along the ‘Atlantic Arc’, and new relationships developed in Europe” (CCC 2002: 7). Nonetheless, in highlighting all this there is little denying that, as recognized by Bernard Deacon from the Institute of Cornish Studies at the University of Exeter, the primary objectives of Senedh Kernow were waged through a politics of scalar structuration:

While being studiously ignored in the Government’s 2002 White Paper on the English regions […], this ‘inconvenient periphery’ provides one of the few explicit examples of a struggle over scale. 

(Deacon 2004: 215)

‘The Northern Way’: enacting a multi-nodal networked region

Since 1999, and in accordance with government priorities, each RDA has worked hard to develop effective regional and sub-regional partnerships and to foster a robust Regional Spatial Strategy (Roberts 2009). However, in recent years, and especially following the rejection following a public referendum in 2004 of a directly elected regional assembly in the North East of England, the government has been encouraging the creation of alternative types of region. This includes three new growth areas: the M11 corridor (Cambridge to Stansted), Thames Gateway (East London–North Kent), and Milton Keynes–South Midlands (Allen and
Cochrane 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton 2009). A fourth invented region is The Northern Way. Prepared by the three northern RDAs — One North East, Yorkshire Forward, and North West, The Northern Way was launched in September 2004 and saw:

The three regions […] unit[ing] in a common purpose – to develop the full potential of the North and narrow the £30 billion economic divide with the rest of England.

(John Prescott, Foreword in NWSG 2005b: 3)

The geographical shape of The Northern Way is particularly interesting given the theme of this chapter. For a start, the RDA boundaries magically disappear. And this trans-territorial porosity is given deeper inflection with those lines that do actually feature: rail and automobile routes and other tributaries emphasizing mobility, linkage, networks. But perhaps the most notable geographical signifier concerns the prominence given to eight city regions: Liverpool/Merseyside, Central Lancashire, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and Humber Ports, Tees Valley, and Tyne and Wear (Gonzalez et al. 2006). These are presented as relational assets and the ‘principal spatial focus’ promoting faster economic growth (NWSG 2004). In substantive terms, the city-regions actually seem to correspond to traditional travel to work areas, shopping catchment areas and housing markets. Nonetheless, again the geographical references of The Northern Way discourse appear to be intentionally fuzzy and the spatial ontology relational, as each node is acknowledged to:

cover areas extending well beyond the city centres at their core [and…]. They contain a spectrum of towns, villages and urban fringe areas, and they have mutually inter-dependent relationships with the countryside around them.

(NWSG 2005a)

The period between the fall of 2004 and late spring 2005 saw the stakeholders in each city-region prepare City Region Development Programmes, which provided:

for the first time an overview of the economic development potential and requirements of the North’s major urban economies. They look at the flow of markets across administrative boundaries and draw out the consequences for the development of policy and investment in a coherent way within these new geographies.

(NWSG 2005b: 9; emphasis added)

The vision of The Northern Way Steering Group (NWSG) was as unambiguous as it was ambitious: “nothing less than the transformation of the North of England to become an area of exceptional opportunity, combining a world-class economy with a superb quality of life” (NWSG 2005b: 6). To achieve this, the NWSG proposed three broad types of action:

Investments that are pan-Northern and add real value by operating across all three regions, such as joint marketing programmes;

Activities which need to be embedded into mainstream programmes in each region, such as meeting employer skills needs;

Potential investments for which further evidence must be developed to demonstrate the long-term benefits which will accrue to the North’s economy, such as major transport infrastructure.

Indeed, of the ten investment priorities that have been identified thus far, three relate explicitly to transport, described as improving ‘the North’s connectivity’. This involves the preparation of a Northern Airports Priorities Plan designed to ‘improve surface access’ to key northern airports; improving
access to the North’s sea ports; and the creation of a premier transit system in each city-region and stronger linkages between city-regions. Other significant initiatives include: three Science Cities (Manchester, York and Newcastle); an integrated technology transfer network structure across the North; the creation of up to four world-class research centres and an enhanced programme of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships; the Northern Enterprise in Education Programme (NEEP); a pan-northern Women into Enterprise Programme; pan-northern projects in chemicals, food and drink and advanced engineering; environmental technologies, financial and professional services and logistics (NWSG 2005a). City-region plans also placed the emphasis on openness, porosity and permeability, with Leeds aiming to “improve city regional, pan-regional and international connectivity”, and Hull and Humber Ports advertising as “a global gateway”. All in all:

The Northern Way represents perhaps the most significant economic development collaboration in Europe in the current decade. Therefore, it has required a new way of working of the three RDAs and their partners in the regions, local partners in City Regions and Government Departments.

(NWSG 2005b: 6)

In some regard, though, these audacious claims demand some critical interrogation. First, this initiative involved a minute budget: one that is top-sliced from existing RDA funds. Second, the old assertions about trans-regional institutional capacity and networking need to be measured alongside the mundane reality of centrally policed and territorially defined targets for mainstream government programmes. In stating this, however, the proliferation of newer regionalisms such as The Northern Way may actually be indicative of how the UK state is seeking to respond to the complex diversity of political and policy-related demands: neighbourhood, local, regional, trans-regional, trans-national, terrestrial, electronic and so on. At the same time, we can begin to identify how relational processes and trans-regional networked forms of governing are being opened up to permit fresh approaches with which different policy actors can communicate and work together more effectively not simply within their sector but across sectors and across scales (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009). In turn, these emerging debates are helping us move towards a more relational understanding of how policy development proceeds.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have discussed two alternative approaches to researching the governance of local and regional economic development in the UK. The first concerns a territorial ‘politics of scalar structuration’. In recent years this has assumed increasing popularity as an approach with which to capture the relationships between a purported rescaling of policy and planning responsibilities and the transformation of existing, or indeed the creation of new, state spaces, themselves deeply intertwined with the geographical specificities of state power and state intervention. In discussing this, we wish to reiterate how the territorialization of political life is never fully accomplished, but remains a precarious and deeply contentious outcome of historically specific state projects. Consequently, spatial, territorial, and scalar relations are neither pre-given nor naturally necessary ‘bounded’ features of statehood but are rather deeply processual and practical outcomes of strategic initiatives undertaken by a wide range of social forces. In the context of the South West of England, the Cornish – in the various guises of Mebyon Kernow and Senedh Kernow – are particularly keen to denaturalize the contemporary territorialization of UK political
life, promoting their brand of nationalist regionalism as a processual and practical route through which to confront the perceived contradictions of statist technocratic regionalization.

The second approach to spatial politics has thus far been presented as a counterweight to that of scalar structuration. Deploying this topological approach would envision a radically relational interpretation on devolution and constitutional change emphasizing the networked practices and processes of devolution, and would make a case that an ontological focus on territorial boundaries and scales does violence to the actor-networked assembling of such a process. This approach is particularly powerful as a way of interpreting how, in the age of globalizing (post-)neoliberalism something like economic development can be conceived as a highly mobile and radiated process whose lines of flight stretch spatial forms and whose registers spill over fixed territorial boundaries and disturbing any rational sense of scalar hierarchies, tangled or otherwise. The value of this thinking is clearly evident from our brief discussion of The Northern Way. Nonetheless, we contend that many everyday realpolitik acts of spatial politics – as in the case of a central government classifying a region as a ‘problem’ or local activists campaigning for devolved government and cultural rights – often distinguish a pre-existing or aspirant spatial scale or territorially articulated space of dependence through which to conduct their actually-existing politics of engagement (Cox 1998). Thus, when the various objectives and strategic priorities defined in the name of The Northern Way are finally tabled, there is every likelihood that RDA and city-regional territorial boundaries and borders will re-emerge as ‘active progenitors’: with the whole process of ‘who getting what’ type of investment being waged on territorially demarcated and scalar-defined terms.

We thus remain to be unconvinced that these two approaches might be compatible in research strategies (see also Pike and Tomaney 2009). At one level, we consider it both politically naïve and theoretically negligent to ignore the fact that much of the political challenge to devolution prevailing across England and elsewhere is being practised through an avowedly territorial narrative and scalar ontology. However, it would equally be quite absurd to deny that these practices and performances are also often enacted through topologically heterogeneous trans-regional and cross-border networks of ‘fluidity’ and circulation (Mol and Law 1994). In short, then, our bottom line is that mobility and fluidity should not be seen as standing in opposition to territories. As Anssi Paasi has remarked:

There is no doubt that networks do matter, but so do ‘geography’, boundaries and scales as expressions of social practice, discourse and power. Geography, boundaries and scales are not ‘intuitive fictions’ and their rejection/acceptance can hardly be ‘written away’ or erased in our offices but have to be reconceptualized perpetually in order to understand their material/discursive meaning in the transforming world. (Paasi 2004: 541–542)

We, therefore, call for a retaining of territorially oriented readings of political economy and, when and where appropriate, their conjoining with non–territorial or topological approaches (Allen et al. 1998; Amin 2002). And as we have outlined above, the growing body of work on the politics of scalar structuration is explicitly relational in its approach to territorial form. The ongoing rounds of devolution and constitutional change certainly offer the context for stretching these analyses further.

For instance, the Wales Spatial Plan, which since 2004 is providing the basis for economic development and spatial planning, explicitly deploys a relational ‘fuzzy boundary’ narrative. Six regions, governed through ‘area groups’ have been created, some of
which are coterminous with local authority administrative areas, while others cut across these geographies. Conventional cartographies based on administrative regions thus exist alongside fluid relational spaces based on flows of people, goods and services. The Wales Spatial Plan is claimed to enable “partners to work together on common issues in a flexible way” (The Wales Spatial Plan 2008: Foreword), thus breaking away from the “shackles of preexisting working patterns which might be variously held to be slow, bureaucratic, or not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities” (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009: 619).

The research challenge is to use techniques such as qualitative GIS, so that these ‘soft spaces’ (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) of economic development can be mapped by a variety of quantitative (official/survey) and qualitative ( unofficial/stakeholder) data records (Jones and MacLeod 2009). Further, while our chapter is limited to the experience of the UK, we contend that at a time when the governance of economic development continues to be renegotiated in many countries across the world, this conceptual dialogue has a wider resonance (Everingham et al. 2006; Brenner 2009).

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Further reading


Regional Studies 41 (9) “Whither Regional Studies” contains several papers engaging with the implications of territorial and relational perspectives for the study of local and regional development (especially those by Allen and Cochrane, MacLeod and Jones, Morgan).