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Book Section:
Deas, I. and Hincks, S. (2017) Conclusion. In: Deas, I. and Hincks, S., (eds.) Territorial Policy and Governance: Alternative Paths. Regions and Cities . Routledge , Abingdon, Oxon , pp. 220-232. ISBN 9780415661379

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Territorial Policy and Governance: Alternative Paths on 1/3/2017, available online:
http://www.routledge.com/9780415661379

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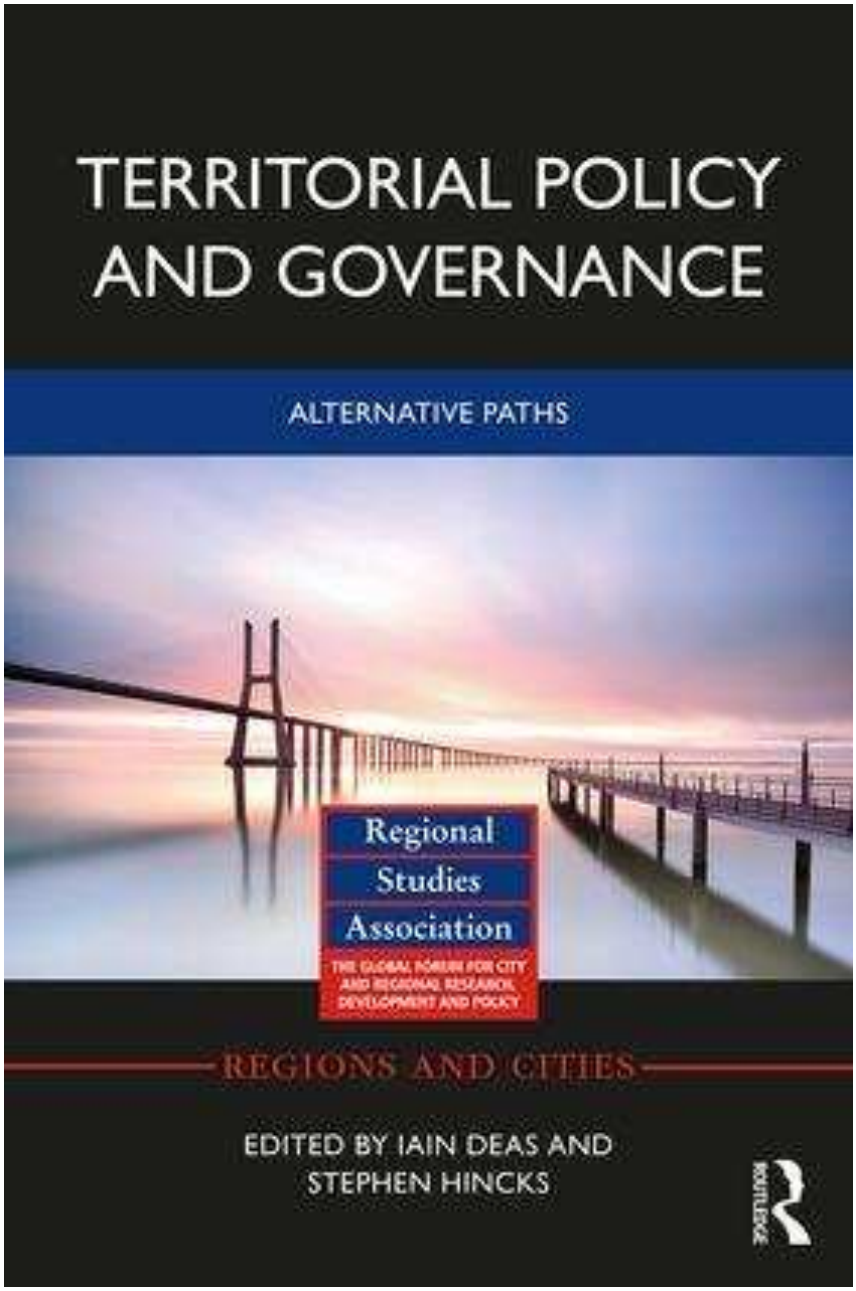

Territorial Policy and Governance:

Alternative Paths

Edited by Iain Deas and Stephen Hincks

2017

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Chapter 12: Conclusion

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> "Something funny happened in the 1980s. The region, long considered an interesting topic to historians and geographers, but not considered to have any interest for mainstream western social science, was rediscovered by a group of political economists, sociologists, political scientists and geographers" (Storper, 1997, p. 3).

The resurgence of regionalism in many countries from the late-1980s reflected the increasingly visible ascendency of regions and city-regions as key nodes in a globalising world (Agnew, 2000). With this came a growing focus by policymakers on bolstering the economic competitiveness of regions and latterly city-regions. This involved efforts to promote more cohesive regional governance arrangements and focus policy support more directly on harnessing the opportunities afforded by the internationalisation of economic activity. Advocates of what was termed the new regionalism articulated the contentious view that by modernising institutional infrastructure and tailoring policy to reposition regions in the context of a global economy, all regions ultimately would benefit.

In reality, evidence suggested that regional policy in different countries often involved concentrating support on areas of existing or potential dynamism, sometimes exacerbating longstanding interregional disparity (Jonas and Ward, 2002; Harrison, 2008; Muštra and Škrabić, 2014; Martin, 2015). Nevertheless, the suggestion that all places could benefit from globalisation came to constitute a powerful and pervasive narrative that was to inform policymaking in subsequent years (see Bristow, 2005, for a critical review). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that over successive decades there have been periodic bursts of region-building. What has distinguished much of this from earlier eras is the increasingly complex, loose and network-based character of regional policy and governance, and its more fluid geography (see Amin and Thrift, 1994; Allen et al, 1998; Blatter, 2004; Deas and Lord, 2006; Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Cox, 2010; Harrison, 2013).

In retrospect, the period from the late-1980s until the aftermath of the global financial crises of 2007-08 represented the apogee of this form of 'new' regional governance and policy. As we outlined in chapter 1, regionalist projects have been under attack across the world in recent years (Fioramonti, 2012). In the UK, for instance, the era of ordered and systematic regional governance and policy associated with the Labour governments of the 1990s and 2000s proved less durable than originally anticipated, seemingly reaching a decisive end with the British General Election of 2010 (Bentley et

al, 2010; Herrschel, 2012). Yet it is our contention that regional governance and policy endures, even in places like the UK where it is thought to be in decline. As chapters documenting experience in Britain, continental Europe and North America demonstrate, regional governance territories of different types have proved more adaptable than is sometimes anticipated. Regions, the ideas that underpin them and the collective identities that sustain them, have often shown a resilience in the face of efforts to dismantle institutional structures or curtail the powers and resources available to regional policymakers. Reflecting the relational basis on which regions are at least in part founded, regional thinking and regional consciousness are durable entities that can outlast structures and policies.

It was recognition of the persistence of regionalism and the malleability of regional governance structures and policy initiatives that prompted us to collate this volume. The aim was two-fold. First, we set out to identify the lineaments of the new forms of sub-national policy and governance beginning to emerge in what some commentators speculated might be a post-regional era of state territoriality characterised by an ever more complex, variable and localised array of relational spaces (see, for example, Herrschel, 2012). In what ways were these spaces – and the structures, policies, people and perceptions that defined them – constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed? And how might their empirical experiences, in different contexts, be interpreted in conceptual terms?

Alongside this, the second aim, as detailed in the introductory chapter, was to explore some of the wider debates and dilemmas about regional (or post-regional) governance and policy and consider the repercussions of reform for policymakers striving to respond to the geographically uneven effects of the economic crises of the early twenty-first century. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, we try to address these aims by synthesising findings across the earlier chapters, and in doing so highlight remaining priorities for future research. We draw conclusions under four principal headings.

Shadow regions and the persistence of regionalism

The recurring message throughout this book is that regions, not only in terms of the structures through which they are articulated but also – and to an even greater degree – the thinking that underpins them, are more resilient than might be expected. Regionalism, despite recurring prophecies of its demise, continues to exert a powerful lure on policy actors (Harrison, 2008). This durability applies to regional ideas, to identity (especially among policy elites) and to processes and structures, the legacy of which can remain in evidence over long periods of time (Martin et al, 2015). Even where regional structures have been abolished, and where national governments explicitly reject the idea of regional spaces as a basis for organising some aspects of public policy, there is evidence of much in the way of continued energy and innovation in respect of sub-national territories of governance (Harrison, 2012; Bellini et al, 2014).

The result, as detailed in earlier chapters, is several examples of what might be termed 'shadow regions', where regionalist consciousness continues among policy actors and infuses institutional structures and policy initiatives in a way that is more than merely vestigial. The geography of shadow regions in some cases matches now defunct formal governance territories, providing a sometimes obscure but subversive alternative to state-authored public policy. In other instances, regionalism endures in the form of regions configured with new and different boundaries, both soft and hard. As Haughton and Allmendinger (chapter 5) note, new policy initiatives based on soft spaces have emerged to occupy the void left behind by the abolition of formal regional institutions and policies. In some cases, like the city-regions in England's Northern Powerhouse discussed by Harrison (chapter 4), emergent regional bodies, both soft and hard, may seek to work in tandem with central government, but nevertheless provide an important way of continuing regional thinking at odds with the notion of a post-regional world.

In some respects, the continuation of regional thinking, or the existence of shadow regions, is not a new phenomenon. It would be unrealistic to expect the abolition of policies or structures to extinguish the ideas that underpinned them in a clear-cut way. Historical experience of regional policy in countries such as the UK supports such a contention. The Thatcher governments of 1979-90 were in most senses resolutely opposed to regional governance and policy, viewed as an obsolete relic of earlier statist experiments in economic planning and land-use strategy (see, for example, Baker et al, 1999). Yet even at the zenith of Thatcherism, regionalism continued in a variety of forms, from grant funding for 'enterprise' in assisted areas to support for inward investment promotion by regionally-based organisations (see Martin, 1993). Even regional strategic land-use planning – later derided by a Conservative minister as "Soviet tractor style top-down planning" (DCLG, 2010, n.p.; Lord, chapter 8) – came to be championed by some within the Thatcher administrations as a necessary means of reconciling intergovernmental conflict and managing land release in areas where housing shortages were impeding economic growth. It is often forgotten that the initial impetus for the system of statutory regional planning in England that was subsequently to provoke the ire of later generations of free-marketeers derived from the Conservatives' tentative experiments with light-touch regional land-use strategy, and the publication in 1988 of Regional Planning Guidance for the South East of England (Department of the Environment, 1988).

The continuing resonance of regionalism is a function of more than just the unavoidable circularity of policy. It demonstrates the striking extent to which the ideas and innovations of the past influence those of the present (Larner and Walters, 2002; Fawcett, 2004). This may appear a pat conclusion, but it is important not to let the apparently repetitive rhythm of policy evolution conceal the continuing influence of earlier rounds of region-building or the persisting relevance of regionalist ideas. As Lord

(chapter 8) notes, apparent innovation and experimentation in respect of governance and policy models often conceals more important threads of continuity. Urban and regional initiatives that purport to be pioneering, Lord argues, often constitute a repackaging of earlier policy endeavours, in doing so reinforcing dominant policy goals and reproducing established modes of working.

Sometimes, earlier policy preoccupations may accord with those of their contemporary successors. But they can also jar against the policy zeitgeist. Case study evidence in England (Harrison, chapter 4) demonstrates how stability and continuity in terms of the actors steering spatial policy reform mean that the legacy of now largely forgotten experiments in regional policy occasionally injects a discordant note into present day debate. For example, it is tempting to view the Northern Powerhouse as an expression of a set of deep-rooted neo-liberal orthodoxies about agglomerative growth (Lee, 2016), but the continuing involvement of policy opinion formers with experience of policy initiatives some decades in the past means that goals linked to social justice or environmental improvement feature to some extent (albeit a subordinate one) in contemporary policy-maker deliberation (Deas et al, 2015).

There is a collective memory here about past waves of institutional and policy reform that can be missed if the focus of research it too exclusively on contemporary aspects of region-building (see Fawcett, 2004; Geppert, 2015). As Harrison (chapter 4) also demonstrates, many of the regional policy elites who provided support for the formal regional spaces of old continue to play a prominent role in the more complex arrangements that now exist. This reiterates the conclusion that regions, as relational entities as well as formal bounded structures, cannot simply be expunged; the story of regional policy is often one in which territories, linked to particular constellations of actors, morph in sometimes subtle, complex and hidden ways that are at odds with crude periodized accounts of the birth and death of hard, formal regional initiatives over time.

The polymorphous nature of regions

A second and related set of conclusions concerns the shape and form of regional institutions and policy initiatives (see also Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Tomaney, 2014). The increasingly polymorphous nature of regional governance and policy provides a substantial part of the explanation for its resilience. Earlier chapters documented territorial governance and policy in its multifarious forms, from the mega-regional spaces of the EU chronicled by O'Brien, Sykes and Shaw to the tightly bounded Business Improvement Districts discussed by Ward and Cook. It is this polymorphous character, and the ability of territorial governance and policy solutions to adapt to changing circumstances, which explains what might otherwise be its surprising longevity. For Jones (chapter 2), localities – including regions – are by definition multifaceted, dynamic and contingent entities that

can be shaped in different ways, whether according to the specificities of local socio-economic circumstances or the objectives of political elites.

Earlier chapters exploring the evolution of the EU's regional policy illustrate something of pliable nature of regionalism. Redistributive regional policy might have been expected to be dismissed as a waning feature of spatial Keynesianism, yet as O'Brien et al (chapter 3) demonstrate, multiple regionalisms have come to coexist with the continuing spatial policy of targeted compensatory support for lagging or declining regions. The notion of multi-level governance, long at the heart of Europe's regional project, means there is scope for multiple types of regional policy organised around a variety of territories and with different substantive emphases (Marks, 1993; Hooghe, 1996; Benz and Elberlein, 1999; see Jessop, 2016 for a critical repositioning of EU multi-level governance through the lens of multi-spatial meta-governance). Whereas at least part of the rationale for the EU's regional policy in the past was about narrowing interregional inequality, subsequent forms of regional intervention have sought to advance the competitiveness of the continental economy and promote its functional integrity, and more recent forays into regional policy have been tied to efforts to promote what O'Brien and colleagues refer to as 'place-based' agglomerative growth (see also Gardiner et al, 2010; Avdikos and Chardas, 2016).

This repurposing of regional policy is also evident in respect of many of the regional spaces established to facilitate cross-border cooperation (see, for example, Scott, 1999; Perkmann, 2003; Perkman, 2007; García-Álvarez and Trillo-Santamaría, 2013). Many of these originally emerged as part of wider efforts to create and complete the single European market, but as Colomb et al (chapter 6) demonstrate, their utility has sometimes been reinforced by an increased emphasis on their role in enabling labour mobility in a managed way that balances sometimes conflicting economic and political concerns.

Elsewhere, the continuing need for a regional economic policy is thrown into sharper focus by the economic crises in Greece and other member states, some part of which reflected the difficulty in applying continental monetary policy in a context of Europe's highly uneven economic geography (Muštra and Škrabić, 2014; Nicholls, 2015). Regional and interregional initiatives have a continuing resonance in light of longstanding patterns of uneven development which have recently begun to undermine the integrity of the single European market, provoking for a time what looked to be an existential crisis for the Eurozone (Lapavitsas et al, 2012; Nicholls, 2015). Against a backdrop of Euroscepticism in several countries – most notably Britain, as evidenced by Brexit and the referendum vote in 2016 to secede from the EU – continuing efforts to establish the Eurozone as an optimal currency area mean that regional policy remains an obvious complement or alternative to politically less palatable fiscal transfer.

Experience of the reorientation of European spatial policy over time therefore illustrates the multiple functions that regional initiatives can fulfil. At an EU level, regional policy has been deployed at different times in support of efforts to reduce interregional socioeconomic disparity, promote economic convergence, facilitate labour mobility and stimulate economic growth in already dynamic local and regional economies. Some of these goals can conflict, but the point is that regions provide a convenient and tractable vehicle through which to pursue a variety of different policies – and it is this that explains a large part of the continuing attractiveness of regional policy and governance solutions. Rather than view changing forms of regional policy as a reflection of a continuing and as yet unrealised desire to agree the right spatial architecture for governance, it may be better to think of regions as expressions of restructuring in other areas of public policy, thereby explaining both the persistence of regional approaches but also their continuing diversity.

Increased diversity in regional structures and initiatives: refining and extending theory

Much of the debate over recent decades on how best to conceptualise contemporary regions has centred on two issues. A large body of literature considers how the processes shaping the division of economic and political space, and their territorial outcomes, have changed in the context of the internationalisation of economic activity. A particularly fertile area of interest has been on the implications posed by new regional spaces for the geographical organisation of the state, and the associated scalar interrelationships between institutions within a changing global-local hierarchy (e.g. MacLeod, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2004). Paralleling this, Jones and Harrison (chapters 2 and 4) engage with a second area of sustained interest, around competing conceptions of regions as bounded territorial units or as relational entities characterised by their often complex and changing networked nature (Castells, 1996; Harrison, 2013; Jones and Paasi, 2013).

Within both sets of literature, there have been efforts to try to identify different types of territory associated with the upsurge of regions. Sometimes, these have drawn on debates about relationality and boundedness, with (as the chapters by Allmendinger and Haughton, Karvonen, and Harrison note) particular focus on the 'unusual' and 'soft' spaces associated with relational conceptions of regionalism. Beyond these important attempts to distinguish between hard and soft institutional forms and policy initiatives, relatively little headway has been made in categorising the multiplicity of regional territories and types. Yet the increasingly disparate nature of regional institutional and policy forms means that categorising regions becomes an ever more important priority. Crucially, it is one that needs not only to go beyond dichotomous conceptions of hard and soft, but to take into account time. As we have seen, snapshot categorisations are problematic because of the tendency of regional

entities to adapt and change, and to endure even in seemingly unpropitious 'post-regional' circumstances (Martin, 2011; Harrison, 2012).

Regions, as is evident throughout this book, are often difficult to delimit in straightforward Cartesian terms. Their geometry can change, they can sometimes be bounded in overt ways but at other times exist in shadow form. Developing more nuanced categorisations of soft spaces in particular is an important conceptual priority, on which earlier chapters of the book began to shed some initial light (see Haughton and Allmendinger, chapter 5). Whilst transience is one of the defining characteristics of soft spaces, we can draw further distinctions which incorporate something of a temporal dimension. What might be termed elemental regions are those in which ideas have yet to translate into any kind of concrete institutional expression, as with many of the soft spaces documented by Haughton and Allmendinger in chapter 5. For these types of regions, bottom-up pressures are of critical importance, but the degree to which they can formalise or institutionalise remains contingent upon an array of internal and external factors. Aspirational regions (such as the Atlantic Gateway concept discussed by Harrison, chapter 4) are those in which institutionalisation is still weak and the link to popular or political consciousness poorly developed, but initial territorialisation has begun to allow regions to move beyond the merely embryonic. Developmental regions (such as the UK's incipient combined authorities, based on city-regions) are those in which a longer-term process of institutionalisation has resulted in more formalised, solidified governance structures that begin to acquire a greater degree of permanence.

Each of these prospective types exists along something of a continuum, sitting alongside existing spaces that benefit from governmental sanction in the form of statutory status. These fully institutionalized regions are formalised to a large extent, with greater legitimacy and political buy-in typically reflected in higher levels of resourcing and frequently greater degrees of popular visibility. However, here too there is a need to incorporate a temporal dimension in trying to develop a meaningful typology of regional spaces. There is a need to understand more fully the multiple paths along which regions travel in the process of becoming. Equally, it is critical here not to assume that there is a final, stable or ideal end point at which region-building concludes. Regions may be characterised by differing levels of maturity, but even longer-established spaces continue to evolve and mutate.

In the context of dynamic processes of region-building, the decline or demise of a regional institution or initiative has often been viewed as a decisive end-point (see Hebbert, 1982; Bentley et al, 2010). Yet as we have argued, such finality is often difficult to discern in reality; hard structures may disappear and formal policy initiatives may end, but the people who populated and authored them continue to exert influence, and the ideas that accompanied past policies tend to live on to some

degree (Danson and Lloyd, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Tomaney, 2014). Thinking about the multidirectional paths along which regions are made also ought to mean devoting more effort to understanding the variable trajectories of decline as well as growth for regional governance and policy.

Consideration of the evolution of regions also means understanding the variable adaptability of different spaces and the people, institutions and policies that define them. Karvonen (chapter 9) charts the perennial search by stakeholders for a 'territorial fix' in environmental policy and governance in response to the emergence of different ideologies, logics and regulatory frameworks in different places and at different times. For Karvonen, this process of 'search' has seen the creation of multiple environmental pathways, each underpinned by flexible and malleable logics, which overlap and intermingle in ways that are both synergistic and conflictual. The chapter by Ward and Cook (chapter 7) reveals how processes of mobility have seen the Business Improvement District model, initially deployed in Canada, disseminate in uneven ways to different parts of the United States, Britain and elsewhere. The variable form and application of the model reflects the way in which ideas mutate and adapt as they encounter existing policy frameworks and cultures at their destination. In doing so, the imported idea provides a new frame of reference for policymakers as they look to experiment and innovate in new and exciting ways (see also Lord, chapter 8).

As Harrison also demonstrates (chapter 4), there is often an underlying policy argument that successful regions are those where the capacity to adapt is most thoroughly developed. Earlier chapters have highlighted interregional variability in the nature of responses to austerity, and unevenness in the effectiveness with which regions have responded. Unsurprisingly, less formalised regions have tended to be more successful in an era of retrenching resources because they can be presented as according to a wider narrative about the need for lighter-touch institutional arrangements attuned to the critical issue of inducing private sector led economic growth. As Harrison reveals, England's Northern Powerhouse again stands out in this respect, as a quintessential relational region (its boundaries have never been defined) that has become steadily more prominent on the basis of few dedicated resources but with high levels of both local and national political commitment. At the same time, however, the variable adaptability of harder spaces is also evident in different responses to austerity politics. While some of the city-regional combined authorities in England have presented themselves to government as a means of generating cost savings via enhanced economies of scale in delivering public services across multiple local government jurisdictions, their larger polycentric regional predecessors – established in a context of relatively plentiful resourcing – were unable to avoid abolition driven by a desire to reduce public expenditure (Bentley et al, 2010).

There is in this sense a kind of quasi-market in which particular types of regional structure and policy are able to compete more successfully, positioning themselves as most in tune with the broader thrust of spatial policy. Presentation and advocacy are therefore often critical in determining the ability of a regional initiative to embed, prosper and survive (Pike et al, 2016). This explains why spatial imaginaries, as Haughton and Allmendinger (chapter 5) note, have been important in allowing some soft spaces to move beyond the initial elemental stage and begin to formalise (see also Metzger and Schmitt, 2012). Representation is also important in relation to Lord's argument (chapter 8) that some regions have shown an apparently enhanced capacity for mutability, superficially reinventing themselves to accommodate faddish policy preoccupations but without undermining their basic *raisons d'être*. As Webb illustrates in his chapter on metropolitan planning in New York, case making has been important within regional bodies, in determining the substance of their approaches. Using case study evidence from Plan NYC, Webb shows how competing interpretations of urban climatology science translate via policy actor contestation into specific metropolitan planning provisions. In this sense, quasi-markets apply not only to regional initiatives, but to the ideas that constitute them.

Regions, selectivity and inequality

Regional governance and policy historically has been associated in many instances with a series of progressive goals: increasing fiscal equity and delivering public services more effectively and efficiently by integrating urban cores and their suburban hinterland within metropolitan areas; enabling more effective policy-making for strategic issues across functional economic or environmental territories; addressing interregional social and economic disparities; and (more recently) promoting in some US cities the development of a social movement regionalism in which larger territories provide a focal point around which to engage multiple (and sometimes marginalised) groups (Wannop 1995; Pastor et al, 2009). More recently, however, it has been narratives of competitiveness and economic growth that have tended to provide much of the impetus for region-building, particularly in relation to city-regions (While et al, 2013; Deas, 2014; Haughton et al, 2016).

Earlier chapters show that recent policy changes have accentuated this shift from regional policy as a progressive instrument of social and economic change, to one geared towards growth irrespective of wider distributive consequences. At the continental scale, O'Brien and colleagues (chapter 3) note the changing emphasis of European regional policy, and in particular the acceptance of models of urban agglomerative growth. The result has been the increasing ascendancy of policy approaches intended to facilitate further economic development in already thriving areas, linked to the wider goal of ensuring that Europe possesses globally significant powerhouse regional economies. At the national scale, Harrison (chapter 4) highlights the role of the UK government in sanctioning only those

combined authorities that are in in tune with its ideals. The guiding philosophy in this context is again one that tolerates territorial inequality but views spatial policy as an instrument for creating and extending a selective number of rapidly growing local economies (see also While et al, 2013).

These examples of spatial selectivity in regional policy have drawn inspiration from influential (but controversial) academic thinking on the importance of large, diverse and dense agglomerative economies in propelling national economic prosperity (see, for example, Glaeser, 2011; Overman, 2012, and critiques by Haughton et al, 2014, 2016; Peck, 2016, Martin et al, 2015). As Harrison observes, this has been important in underpinning a shift in the territorial basis of regional policy, with policy discourses emphasising more tightly bounded city-regions as opposed to more expansively delimited and often polycentric regions. Accompanying this shift in the geography of regional policy has also been important substantive and conceptual changes. In terms of the substance of policy, the emphasis on city-regions has helped to reinforce the shift away from progressive and redistributive concerns towards a narrower focus on instilling and extending economic growth, particularly in areas of existing or potential economic vibrancy. In conceptual terms, the increasing policy-maker emphasis on city-regionalism has coincided with a shift in researcher interest, moving beyond the study of regions as part of an incipient multi-scalar, local-global hierarchy and engaging more with questions around the networked character of regions, their representational basis and their implications for state territoriality (Jonas, 2013; Harrison and Growe, 2014).

One of the consequences of the dominance of what Haughton et al (2014) term agglomeration boosterism is that spatial selectivity in territorial policy – picking winners – is accentuated. For critics, this perpetuates territorial inequality by concentrating resources and marginalising areas beyond the selected urban economic cores deemed to have the necessary growth potential (Bristow, 2005). A consequence, as demonstrated throughout this book, is that relationships between (city-)regional spaces warrant more attention, extending the long tradition of research interest in central-local relations and the more recent interest in how scalar hierarchies have shifted in a context of changing patterns of state territorialisation. Jones (chapter 2), in rethinking the value of the localities concept, argues that there is a need to think about interactions between regional spaces, thereby avoiding the treatment of individual areas as discrete entities that exist somehow independent of interrelationships between governance institutions or policy initiatives.

Haughton and Allmendinger (chapter 5) contend that a particular priority is to explore more fully how soft and hard spaces of regional governance interact. They note that there is sometimes a tendency to overemphasise conflict between soft and hard spaces, as each look to supplant the other. While inter-institutional competition for resources and legitimacy is an obvious feature of a quasi-market in policy and governance, relationships between differently configured but overlapping territories of

governance can be harmonious. Soft and hard spaces, as Haughton and Allmendinger note, can coexist in sometimes symbiotic fashion. Colomb and colleagues (chapter 6) make a similar observation in respect of cross-border regions, where there is evidence of productive cooperation and mutual benefit. Equally, cross-border regions often exercise limited power in comparison with bounded territories of governance, and amicable coexistence in that light reflects the lack of threat posed by the latter to the former. Understanding how regions interact and how their interactions change over time is therefore an important future research priority as we seek to explore in broader terms the ways in which regional governance and policy continues to evolve.

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