
– ARTICLES

– REAL GEOGRAPHIES, REAL ECONOMIES AND SOFT SPATIAL IMAGINARIES: Creating a 'More than Manchester' Region

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Abstract

This article develops a framework for analysing region-building processes as spatiotemporal constructs, involving competing spatial imaginaries and attempts at consolidating these through institution building. Central here is the performative role of what we refer to as 'soft space imaginaries' in the 'phased' building of regions for planning and economic development over time. We demonstrate how this understanding can be used to examine the phased enactment of successive waves of region-building by tracing the evolution of multiple soft spatial imaginaries in north-west England. The analysis exposes the variable logics, alliances of actors, and tactics used to build momentum and secure legitimacy around preferred imaginaries which advocates often promoted on the grounds that they somehow reflected 'real geographies' or 'real economies'. In this context, soft space imaginaries are seen to play an integral role in intellectual case making about the contemporaneous form and purpose of subnational governance. Yet our analysis also exposes the durability of past soft space imaginaries and their continued impact on efforts to build new soft spaces. What emerges is an understanding of soft space imaginaries as more than just superficial representations. They can help determine where government investment is channelled and into what kinds of policies.

Introduction

The impulse to create and promote new regional identities based on new regional geographies remains strong in many parts of the world. Whether dreamed up by backroom teams of planners, celebrity architects, private businesses, environmental lobbyists or ambitious politicians, there is no shortage of recent examples of attempts to argue that existing political boundaries for cities and regions do not reflect, for instance, the changing realities of a globalized economy (MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Deas, *et al.*, 2014; Harrison, 2014; Headlam, 2014). Sometimes these interventions simply fade away, but on other occasions they gain sufficient momentum and backing to lead to sustained efforts to develop a new regional identity. In Europe, for instance, we have seen a recent surge in attempts to create new transnational regions, such as the Baltic Sea Region, as well as cross-boundary regions within nations, from the Randstad in the Netherlands to the Thames Gateway in the UK (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2014, 2015; Haughton and

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Allmendinger, 2015). In North America and Australia too, the making and remaking of new regional spaces continues apace, most noticeably involving planning for metropolitan regions (Searle and Bunker, 2010; Bishop, 2014; Keil and Addie, 2015).

There have been two particularly rich strands to the region-building literature, often drawing inspiration from each other. The first is rooted in the scalar politics of region-building in light of established debates on relational and territorial spaces (e.g. Allen and Cochrane, 2007; MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Keating and Wilson, 2014; Addie and Keil, 2015), while a second has focused on the role of boundaries and identity creation (e.g. Paasi, 2002; 2009; Messely *et al.*, 2014; Vainikka, 2015). Drawing inspiration from both strands has been recent work attempting to conceptualize the role of 'soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries' in region-building (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009) and work on spatial imaginaries (Boudreau, 2007; Jessop, 2012; Varró, 2014). There have been two recent calls to develop this body of work, the first proposing 'phase space' as a means of developing a more nuanced understanding about how region-building activities develop over time (Jones, 2009), the second calling for greater emphasis on the multiple logics involved in region-building (Harrison and Growe, 2014). Addressing these issues, this article develops a framework for analysing region-building processes as spatiotemporal constructs, involving competing spatial imaginaries and attempts at consolidating these through institution building. Central to this reading is the role of what we refer to as 'soft space imaginaries' in the 'phased' building of regions for planning and economic development purposes.

Empirically we seek to apply this framework to a succession of attempts to create new regional spaces around Manchester over the past 50 years, with a particular emphasis on those initiatives that have sought to establish a strategic framework which embraces both Manchester and the neighbouring city of Liverpool, arguably with limited success (Deas, 2014; Headlam, 2014). The reason for choosing Manchester as the focus is primarily because it has been a fertile testing ground for new ideas about how to create new urban-regions for the past 50 years or so, involving a succession of initiatives. Initially, these focused on addressing the legacy issues of urban industrial decline in the 1970s, but more recently Manchester has emerged at the heart of the government's plans to build the so-called Northern Powerhouse: an initiative without a strong institutional base and a soft space with indeterminate boundaries (Lee, 2016). Crucially, in this latest phase of region-building, the leaders of the Manchester city-region have been seen as setting the agenda for the devolution of powers and resources to new city-regional government arrangements across northern England, drawing on economic imaginaries constructed around a reading of agglomeration economics that privileges the role of large cities (Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Kenealy, 2016).

Soft space imaginaries for planning and economic development

Conceptual developments at the interface of debates on territorial and relational spaces have informed recent work on a variety of soft, informal and 'in-between' spaces of governance. Summarizing a rich but already well argued set of debates, attempts to reconceptualize subnational planning and economic development spaces as relational have led to a productive dialogue between those advocating the 'boundlessness' of space (Allen *et al.*, 1998; Amin, 2004) and those who point to the everyday reality of 'performing' local and regional development (Paasi, 2002; 2009; Jones, 2009). The 'polymorphic' nature of space is now widely recognized in the production of strategies, policies and laws that often involve the interaction of bounded territorial units with unbounded political, economic and social processes (Jauhiainen and Moilanen, 2011; Varró, 2014).

Drawing on these debates, the concept of soft spaces has emerged from research undertaken in the UK and Ireland (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton *et al.*, 2010), and has since been widely adopted across different European planning

and economic development contexts (see Jauhiainen and Moilanen, 2011; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). At the heart of this concept is the idea that while territorial governments work to clearly defined territorial boundaries, such as those of local government, the boundaries of many 'governance' initiatives tend to avoid following those of single local government jurisdictions, with a variety of alternative geographies summoned into being instead. Opening up the governance arrangements to actors from outside government as well as within, for instance private sector leaders or environmental groups, has been seen as important to the process of generating new approaches to planning or regeneration and challenging previous ingrained practices and ideas, a process that some actors claim might be facilitated by creating a new governance space (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

Though still evolving, the value to date of work on soft spaces has been in providing a framework for understanding the multiple rationalities and practices adopted by actors for creating new spaces (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015), with early work tending to emphasize the governance aspects of soft spaces (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). This has suggested that the creation of new planning and economic development spaces is often a process of experimentation involving trial and error in managing and testing evolving policy agendas (Haughton *et al.*, 2013), leading to a growing interest in how soft spaces evolve, sometimes into firmer institutional and territorial forms (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012). As more studies have emerged using this framework, it has become apparent that not all soft spaces involve new governance formations immediately, with some attempts to launch soft spaces largely prefigurative, attempting to create a critique or propose an agenda. Debate and elaboration of the intellectual basis for an emergent agenda might then be followed at a later stage with bids for funding and institution-building activities (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015).

While early work on soft spaces reflected an era where, in the UK at least, initiatives were often seen as imposed and top down, since the election of Conservative-led governments in 2010 there has been a move towards open calls from central government, inviting local actors to create their own new governance spaces, rather than predetermine what these should be. For example, in June 2010, the government:

invited businesses and councils to come together to form local enterprise partnerships whose geography properly reflects the natural economic areas of England ... The vision is in direct contrast to the previous arrangements, which were based on administrative regions that did not always reflect real functional economic areas (HM Government, 2010: 12-13).

Crucially, while central government left the choice of geographies to local partners, this came with the proviso that these would be expected to involve more than one local government area.

This shift from a largely top-down to partly bottom-up approach is to some degree a reflection of the changing political complexion of central government, but also reflects practical issues linked to the potential tensions that emerge when proposing a new soft space. Any new soft space involves a redistribution of powers and resources, which can create tensions with existing actors, particularly those in local government who might fear loss of authority or resources. Local governments are important not only because of their democratic mandate, but also because they tend to be more durable than soft spaces which are more readily discarded. Despite the possibility of tensions, soft spaces can be viewed positively by many of those involved, and indeed some soft spaces result from bottom-up rather than top-down initiatives (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). For their supporters, soft spaces can be crucibles of creativity and innovation that help to stimulate debate about future visions for policy development. Alternatively, they can fulfil less progressive functions, on occasion serving to stifle debate and undermine

democratic accountability vested in competing statutory institutions (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012).

In conceptual terms, extending investigation of soft spaces beyond the link with governance opens up the possibility of drawing on recent work on cultural political economy to understand the performative work of soft spaces. Of particular relevance here are spatial imaginaries, which provide selective readings of highly complex realities that allow individuals or groups to make sense of the world around them (Jessop, 2012; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015). Their appeal rests in part on their imprecision and flexibility, allowing policymakers to construct particular readings of a problem and to propose appropriate solutions depending on their viewpoint. While this flexibility can engender disagreement or contestation between various actors owing to their different conceptual reference points (Jonas, 2014), the process of creating and refining spatial imaginaries can also bring different actors together, allowing them to negotiate complex and contested issues and in doing so helping to secure agreement on ways of moving forward (Wetzstein, 2013). For our purposes, it is important to emphasize that spatial imaginaries exist alongside a range of other possible imaginaries, including economic, political, social and ecological imaginaries (Sum and Jessop, 2013). Indeed, we would argue that spatial imaginaries can always contain elements of such other imaginaries in their claim making and credibility building. Using agglomeration theory to support particular clusters, be it finance or hi-tech industry, is a case in point, involving an economic imaginary based around improving productivity to compete in a global economy. In effect, there is a competition for ideas embedded in all new soft space imaginaries, involving an implicit or explicit critique of what went before and a reimagining of what might yet come, combining intellectual scrutiny of the limits of the status quo, and claims about the value of thinking in new ways and of devising new geographies within which to create ensembles of like-minded actors to construct new state strategies.

For any soft space imaginary to gain traction, then, it will need to compete with previous and parallel imaginaries, including those of territorial government or other soft spaces (Olsen, 2012; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015). The more resonance a particular imaginary has at multiple sites and scales, the more likely it is to be translated into tangible strategies, practices or projects—which may eventually lead to it securing hegemonic status (Jessop, 2012). In this context, Metzger and Schmitt (2012) illustrate how creative advocacy helped to secure legitimacy and hegemonic status for the Baltic Sea region soft space as advocates aligned resources and political capital in support of a powerful imaginary.

Yet simply achieving a degree of resonance in the mindset of policymakers does not guarantee that a particular soft space imaginary will have widespread support or the capacity to withstand the challenge of counter-hegemonic claims from other soft spaces or territorial units (see Olsen, 2012). For a soft space imaginary to build momentum, advocates need to define its scope and develop a clear and convincing logic to support its existence (Zimmerbauer, 2013). In some cases the logic of the imaginary might reflect a particular economic, political, social, cultural or environmental concern. In other cases, an imaginary might have a hybridized logic, emerging out of multiple concerns (see Harrison and Growe, 2014). For instance, Geppert (2015) reveals how the spatial imaginary of the Strasbourg-Ortenau tri-national soft space in the Upper Rhine is underpinned by a logic that combines economic growth with mobility and environmental concerns. Although the current iteration of this soft space has a recognizable identity because of a heritage dating back to the 1960s, its lack of formal institutionalization means it is still dependent on mobilizing often precarious support networks to help cement its authority and legitimacy.

The link between institution building and the making and stabilizing of spatial imaginaries is a critical factor in the likely success and longevity of a new soft space

imaginary (see Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008; Jessop, 2012; Sum and Jessop, 2013; Wetzstein, 2013; Baker and Ruming, 2015). Particularly important is the shift from early unstable stages of support, building towards more stable ensembles of actors working towards a common agenda in an effort to draw in further resources and powers. As a result, there is a need to understand attempts at institution building associated with soft space imaginaries and the ways in which this creates tensions with existing institutional forms as actors seek to reconcile alternative claim making or refute each other's claims, in effect battling to secure credibility, recognition and resourcing to advance a particular world view (see Boudreau, 2007; Wetzstein, 2013; Jonas, 2014; Baker and Ruming, 2015).

Crucially, soft spaces are peopled entities, often led by elite actors who circulate around multiple institutions as workers or board members, taking with them ideas which may not have been successful at the time, but which later come to seem prescient and timely. Examples exist of active soft space imaginaries falling from favour and fading from institutional memory, but which are later appropriated and reenergized, often in a mutated form, by new advocates for their own ends (Geppert, 2015). Alternatively, previously instituted imaginaries may recede to such an extent that they no longer feature in the thinking of different actors as a new imaginary gains primacy.

The consequence of this process of creation and destruction is that over time there will be a layering of multiple structures, relations, activities and imaginaries related to different territorial configurations (*ibid.*). This process involves the superimposition over time of a 'succession of different "phase portraits" ... formed through the passage of events, legacies, and practices' (Jones, 2009: 500). This temporal layering of different soft spaces and territorial units may be accompanied by a succession of different spatial imaginaries, each reflecting various political, economic, social or cultural logics, and each with particular semiotic and extra-semiotic characteristics (Jessop, 2012; Sum and Jessop, 2013). The interplay between past and current imaginaries may in turn mean that seemingly distinctive contemporary regional initiatives in fact embody lessons learned from previous initiatives.

This suggests that the study of present day regional institutions and policy initiatives should not ignore the often complex legacy of past region-building efforts, even those considered obsolete and dismissed as merely of historical interest. In the following sections we seek to demonstrate how this understanding can be used to examine the phased enactment of successive waves of region-building in north-west England. In tracing the evolution of multiple spatial imaginaries, we explore from a broad perspective how variable logics came to underpin each imaginary, and how different actors employed diverse tactics to build momentum and secure legitimacy around their chosen imaginary at the expense of alternatives.

The Mersey Belt: an embryonic territorial imaginary

In 1973 a Joint Planning Team was created for north-west England to oversee the development of the *Strategic Plan for the North West* (SPNW) (North West Joint Planning Team, 1974). This document was jointly commissioned by central government, local planning authorities, and the North West Economic Planning Council. Its purpose was to identify sites with capacity to accommodate future population and employment growth and to promote the physical, social, economic and environmental regeneration of the urban industrial belt that connected Manchester and Liverpool. In the process of developing the SPNW, the Joint Planning Team evaluated six alternative spatial imaginaries, choosing the Mersey Belt as the preferred option. The Joint Planning Team justified their decision on the grounds of pragmatism, arguing that the Mersey Belt option made the most effective use of existing transport infrastructure and labour market potential (Rodgers, 1975). Initially, the geography of the Mersey Belt was imprecisely defined as policymakers sought to build support for the project without committing to



FIGURE 1 The Mersey Belt and local authority boundaries (redrawn from *Strategic Plan for the North West*, North West Joint Planning Team, 1974)

specific boundaries. In later representations, however, boundaries were coterminous with those of local authorities as it became apparent that local political buy in was needed to drive forward the objectives of the SPNW (Figure 1).

Data from the programme of semi-structured interviews on which this article draws include testimonies from a number of individuals who had been early career professionals working in Liverpool and Manchester when the Mersey Belt concept first emerged. Their views revealed a general sympathy towards the imaginary and its progressive goals.¹ From the outset, the Mersey Belt was a largely understated affair, confined mainly to the pages of the SPNW, although advocates had some initial success in sharing the imaginary among the region's strategic planners. However, the failure to implant the imaginary among wider policy elites and within the public consciousness meant that it was soon overtaken by a new territorial imaginary that accompanied the advent, in 1974, of metropolitan county councils for Merseyside and Greater Manchester:

Among the planners ... the focus really moved away from [the Mersey Belt] as the '70s progressed because both Merseyside and Greater Manchester were producing their own structure plans. In each case, [planners] were preoccupied with the territory for which they had formal governance responsibilities (interview, former local and regional planner 1).

As these formal territorial units institutionalized and accompanying metropolitan imaginaries bedded in, the Mersey Belt concept fell from favour, having failed to establish widespread support or institutionalize as an independent entity.

1 The research on which this article draws involved 30 semi-structured interviews with leading local and regional policy actors, covering 34 participants from the public, private and voluntary sectors, conducted between 2012 and 2015. In addition, a workshop convened in 2012 drew upon the insights of eight stakeholders from government agencies, NGOs, academia and the private sector to consider the evolution of subregional environmental policy and governance, extending the predominant emphasis of previous research on land-use planning and economic development.

Environmental concerns linked to the corridor of the River Mersey continued to exert influence, however, even as interest in the Mersey Belt imaginary receded. These concerns achieved institutional backing and access to funding with the launch of the Mersey Basin Campaign in 1985, with a focus on addressing the remedial issues associated with decades of water and land pollution. Though predominantly an environmental imaginary, in order to access UK government and European funding the Campaign also ventured into urban regeneration in the form of land remediation to create new development sites. The Mersey Basin Campaign was to prove successful as an environmental soft space over a 25-year period, playing host to a range of workers and board members who moved on to other roles subsequently, thereby disseminating and developing some of the ideas they helped to generate. One of these was that, from the outset, the Campaign was organized around a flexible geography, broadly encompassing the River Mersey and its tributaries. For interviewees who had been involved in driving forward the Campaign, the absence of precisely defined boundaries was said to have been helpful in avoiding political capture and allowing greater flexibility in decision-making.

The Mersey Basin Campaign provides a rare example of a long-term soft space in the region. Its longevity is explained by its mutable geography, its substantive focus on environmental issues of wide-ranging resonance, and its relative institutional independence from hard territorial spaces of local government. Operating at arm's length to the sometimes contentious and politicized urban regeneration experiments imposed by central government in the 1980s, such as the urban development corporations, the Mersey Basin Campaign was able to develop and maintain support among regional policy elites to an extent that belied its modest resources and lack of formal powers.

Some 20 years after the publication of the SPNW, the Mersey Belt imaginary was resuscitated in the early 1990s. The spur was the publication of *Greener Growth* (NWRA, 1993), a document prepared by the North West Regional Association (NWRA) to advise its member local authorities on debates linked to the re-emergence of regional strategic planning and the publication of regional planning guidance for north-west England (GONW, 1996). Once again the geography of the Mersey Belt was imprecisely defined. According to one interviewee, this was a tactic employed in order to allow policymakers to 'test new ideas without marking lines on a map', potentially provoking opposition (interview, former local and regional planner).

A *Mersey Belt Study* was subsequently commissioned by the then recently created North West Development Agency (NWDA) to promote integrated economic planning across the subregion (DTZ Piedad, 2002). Through this study, two new soft space imaginaries were mobilized. The first was the Metropolitan Axis, stretching from the northern extent of Greater Manchester through the urban industrial belt towards Liverpool, in which the intention was to mitigate economic decline, ameliorate its social and environmental consequences and begin to identify new sources of growth. The second was the Southern Crescent growth corridor, aimed at the challenge of accommodating escalating development pressures in the area around Manchester airport and the affluent Cheshire commuter belt. Crucially, this growth corridor excluded the centres of Liverpool and Manchester, both of which had their own development aspirations. After considerable political opposition and intense debate at public inquiry on the draft regional planning guidance, the new proposals were abandoned (Haughton and Counsell, 2004; Deas, 2006).

Looking back at these events, one interviewee, who had helped develop the Metropolitan Axis and Southern Crescent imaginaries, recalled how their prospects were limited from the outset for two reasons. First, they had been unwittingly pitted against each other in the original strategy document, presented as contrasting corridors of growth and (managed) decline. Second, the NWDA had failed to take account of how

the inception of the two corridors would be received by the leaders of the two major cities in the subregion:

I'd drawn this [map of the North West] with this crescent shape south of it running through all the areas with highest levels of skills and so on, connecting Manchester and Chester ... and this guy said to me, 'I think you've got that wrong' ... 'why don't you draw it like that', he said, 'put a smile on the face of the north-west'. And foolishly we ignored him and of course he was pointing to a really crucial issue. If we had anchored that concept with the real political powerhouses, with Liverpool and Manchester at either end of it, then probably it would have been far more palatable and acceptable (interview, former regional planner).

Within this context, the revised Mersey Belt imaginary again failed to accumulate sufficient local political support to overcome the resistance from leaders in Liverpool and Manchester.

Ocean Gateway-Atlantic Gateway: a 'less territorial, more relational' spatial imaginary

Whereas the Mersey Belt in its various incarnations was a product of public sector thinking, the Ocean Gateway imaginary that succeeded it emerged from the private sector (Harrison, 2014). Proposed in 2008 by the Peel Group, a major regional private property and landowner with assets including the Manchester Ship Canal, Ocean Gateway was a spatial imaginary aimed at promoting economic development along a growth corridor linking Liverpool and Manchester. Whereas the original Mersey Belt imaginary of the 1970s was underpinned by a redistributive intent, Ocean Gateway was firmly rooted in a market-driven vision for economic growth. Its headline goal was to attract £50 billion of public and private investment over 50 years.

As with the earlier Mersey Belt imaginary, the geography of the Ocean Gateway was deliberately left unclear, with permeable and flexible boundaries. While its boundaries may have been purposely left vague, at the heart of the spatial imaginary of Ocean Gateway was the Manchester Ship Canal corridor between Liverpool and Manchester. The expectation was that this area could capitalize upon changes in trade patterns following the widening of the Panama Canal, provided that local port, rail and road infrastructure in north-west England could be improved. Peel Group, as owner of the Manchester Ship Canal, the Bridgewater Canal and also the Mersey Ports, would therefore play a central role in this process. At the same time, as a result of its acquisition strategy over a period of some 25 years, Peel had secured extensive land holdings in the area, some of which formed the basis for the development sites prioritized as part of the Ocean Gateway strategy.

Ocean Gateway's scale and extent, and the bold and farsighted ambition it was intended to embody, helped to secure support from central government and others outside the region. With many of the proposed sites located in Merseyside, the authorities there tended towards pragmatic acceptance of the strategy. By contrast, the level of buy in from Greater Manchester local authorities was more limited, with some reluctant to commit to an initiative perceived to focus on proposed projects that fell outside their administrative boundaries. For critics, a key concern was that although Ocean Gateway purported to be a long-term and strategic subregional vision, it was felt to be opportunistic, overly dominated by private sector interests, and too project based (Deas *et al.*, 2015).

In *Ocean Gateway Prospectus* (Peel Group, 2009), effectively a promotional brochure aimed at both footloose international investors and the local public sector, local sensitivities were addressed by representing Ocean Gateway in a map that lacked

any clear boundaries. While it would be easy to dismiss this representation as merely a stylistic decision by Peel to reduce the complexity of the map for marketing purposes, the choice about where, or even whether, to depict lines on a map is important because of its role in helping to mould the political-economic narrative of the space in question (Harrison, 2013).

One private sector interviewee closely involved with the process argued that it had been a deliberate choice to avoid depicting or working to local government boundaries, instead preferring to create a new geography that better reflected their needs and aspirations:

a commercial geography, an economic geography, and a real geography ... The political spaces are important to us because they are where decisions are made in terms of public investment ... But our [interest] is in private investment and we have to get our own space organized in a way that promotes [our] investment (interview, private sector actor 1).

While economic and political logics were used explicitly to frame the Ocean Gateway imaginary, interview data also reveal the integral role envisaged for environmental improvements. Peel's environmental agenda was described by one interviewee, with a direct involvement in promoting Ocean Gateway, as 'the glue that holds the rest [of Ocean Gateway] together' (interview, private sector actor 2). This embrace of environmental issues was in part rooted in a corporate agenda that recognized the need to offset some of the negative impacts associated with new development projects, but also reflected a view that a good quality environment would enhance the attractiveness of the area for investors looking to relocate.

The environmental imaginaries created by Peel have been very different to those of the Mersey Basin Campaign. While the latter focused on remedial and preventative actions to address a legacy of aquatic and terrestrial pollution, the Peel Group rooted its approach initially in some of the green infrastructure work in the north-west region developed originally in the 1990s. This centred on the potential for landscape scale initiatives to address some of the anticipated impacts of future climate change, such as managing drainage and minimizing or preventing flooding by organizing around integrated river catchments. At the core of this approach was work initially formulated by regional institutions, in the form of a report *Adapting the Landscape from Liverpool to Manchester* (NWDA, 2009). When the report's initial sponsor, the NWDA, was abolished in 2010, Peel decided to take this work forward. It aimed to do so by establishing a community environment fund: a 1% voluntary levy on new development paid by nominated partners and which was intended to help Peel fulfil its environmental ambitions. Reflecting concern about the disjuncture between where the environment levy was generated and where it might be spent, a revised strategy, *Atlantic Gateway Parklands: The Landscape for Prosperity* (Atlantic Gateway, 2014), moved to create a series of parklands rather than attempt to cover a whole region. As the subtitle suggests, the changing ecological imaginary was accompanied by a strong economic emphasis. As some interviewees observed, the parklands approach can be traced back to the 1974 SPNW, providing an illustration of the longevity of earlier thinking and the role played in maintaining it by the junior planners of yesteryear. While most interviewees tended to support these environmental ambitions, some interviewees were critical of what they perceived as the cynical way that Peel had appropriated environmental agendas and selectively mobilized them to help advance its sometimes contentious development proposals.

Possibly in response to early criticisms, the Ocean Gateway was subsequently rebranded as Atlantic Gateway. This coincided with a closer working relationship between Peel and the NWDA, as part of a wider effort to reassure potential partners of

the initiative's strategic, inclusive, cross-sector and collaborative basis (NWDA, 2010a). Jointly, the NWDA and Peel sought to present Atlantic Gateway as a noncorporate policy space around which to develop long-term economic development and planning strategies, and facilitate meaningful cross-sector partnerships. The priorities of the Atlantic Gateway were subsequently incorporated in the NWDA's final regional strategy in 2010 (NWDA, 2010b). Creating joint ownership of the Atlantic Gateway in this way saw the initiative gain some further credibility among public sector actors. Yet for at least one public sector interviewee, this set 'a dangerous precedent' for democratic accountability (interview, senior local authority officer, 2012), adding a veneer of respectability to what remained an initiative whose principal beneficiary was a powerful private sector actor.

Interview data reveal how, between 2012 and 2014, the Atlantic Gateway had begun to permeate the agendas of local authorities and quasi-public institutions in the region—albeit unevenly, with some Greater Manchester authorities continuing to express concern about the initiative's apparently increasing emphasis on major development in and around Liverpool. This was important because the Atlantic Gateway's success required continuing engagement with local government, whose support was often critical to the viability of development proposals. Land-use planning, in this respect, was felt by Peel and its supporters to represent a particular challenge. This was illustrated when Peel's Chairman, John Whittaker, called for the NWDA to delegate planning powers to a specialist team that would focus exclusively on delivering the Atlantic Gateway's objectives: 'Ocean Gateway should have its own planning regime led by the regional development agency and the local authorities so we can overcome individual authority objections' (quoted in Barry, 2010).

Whittaker's suggestion was not taken up by the government, but the election of the new Conservative-led coalition shortly afterwards, in 2010, provided an opportunity for Peel to restate its case. The catalyst was central government's decision to create a national network of local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), the geography of which was to be determined by local partners and to relate more closely to functional economic areas. Peel's response was to propose a 'special purpose LEP' for the Atlantic Gateway (Peel Group, 2010). As well as creating 145,000 jobs and delivering 73,000 new homes, Peel predicted that the LEP would help to generate over £1 billion worth of investment in new infrastructure. The economic and political logic underpinning the spatial imaginary of the Atlantic Gateway LEP proposal was unambiguous in promising prosperity by liberating the private sector from its bureaucratic shackles: 'The private sector must lead in turning the Atlantic Gateway vision into reality on the ground' (Peel Group, 2010: ii). In an immediate collision of ambitions, the proposal met with resistance from many of Peel's ostensible partners in local government. There was particular opposition from within Manchester, where political leaders preferred the creation of a Greater Manchester LEP to further their ambitions to strengthen city-regional scale governance. Concerns were voiced about the prospect of Peel using the creation of a special purpose LEP to advance its development agenda for a broader territory, while simultaneously eroding accountability and transparency. As one senior political figure put it:

There is logic and a degree of support for Peel's role ... The Atlantic Gateway could be a forum for collaboration, but as a giant planning apparatus? No ... not if it takes power away from the local authority (interview, senior local politician).

A matter of days after submitting the bid, Peel agreed to drop the proposal in light of the political tensions it precipitated. Although the LEP proposal had provoked much disquiet among most of the region's local authorities, the rapidity with which it was withdrawn at least allowed Peel to maintain the cohesion of the cross-sectoral coalition of actors that had emerged after the launch of the rebranded Atlantic Gateway. In governance terms, while a bespoke secretariat involved just three people, a more

expansive and inclusive cross-sector board was created, with political representation from across the region. Extending the coalition of actors with a stake in Atlantic Gateway appears to have been effective in offsetting opposition in the aftermath of the abortive LEP proposal. As one senior public sector policy officer commented, although some local authorities retained a suspicion about Peel's motives, 'Atlantic Gateway was simply a matter of reality' (interview, senior planning and regeneration official). The result was that although Atlantic Gateway remained a contested imaginary, it acquired visibility and credibility on a scale sufficient to ensure its continuing presence as a feature of the institutional landscape of north-west England.

City-regionalism and the indeterminate geographies of the Northern Powerhouse

To understand the faltering progress and uneven support for the Atlantic Gateway imaginary it is important to appreciate the parallel processes underway to strengthen city-region governance in England, particularly since 2007. For Greater Manchester in particular, this should be seen as part of a longer-term process, driven initially by a desire among the 10 constituent local government areas to redress institutional fragmentation in the wake of the abolition of the Greater Manchester County Council in 1986. By creating new institutions such as the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, and later, New Economy, Greater Manchester's local authorities, with the support of leading private sector actors, were able to develop strategies in key areas such as economic development and infrastructure (Deas, 2014). This process has accelerated as central government has increasingly begun to view Greater Manchester as an exemplar of efficient, growth-focused territorial governance (Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Kenealy 2016). The result has been a succession of initiatives by central government to begin to formalize soft city-regional institutions, beginning with the announcement in 2009 that Greater Manchester, alongside Leeds, would become a pilot city-regional authority. In 2011, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) became the first city-regional authority to be granted statutory status, with powers covering economic development, transport and skills training. Over the course of 2014–16, central government committed to further devolution for the management and delivery of nominated public services, together with experiments in enhanced fiscal autonomy. The view in central government was again that Greater Manchester could serve as a trailblazer for city-region devolution more generally (Kenealy, 2016).

The momentum underlying city-regional governance in Greater Manchester has been considerable, with profound implications for alternative spatial imaginaries. Interview data suggest that many city leaders—especially but not exclusively in Greater Manchester—perceived the most important political opportunities to lie in lobbying for further devolution of power and resources to the city-region scale. By contrast, other imaginaries like Atlantic Gateway were seen as potentially dissipating effort and detracting from the city-region case. The words of one political leader encapsulate the view that city-regions continue to offer a more plausible means of developing territorial governance than alternative geographies like Atlantic Gateway:

The thinking behind the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is very simple really. It's based around economic development and the argument that if you are going to do public sector interventions to support economic development you have to do different interventions at the right spatial level. The right spatial level equates to the real economy ... travel to work area, whatever. Greater Manchester, under its current boundaries, I don't think an economist would describe ... as the functional economic area. But it is a reasonably appropriate approximation to that and can work because of the relationships that have been building up now ... over 30 years (interview, senior local politician).

The corollary of this city-region focus was a dismissal of alternative spatial imaginaries, in particular growth corridor proposals: 'Atlantic Gateway is just a collection of projects really. It has no real spatial meaning ... Actually corridors aren't places. Whatever you want to do is always essentially nodal not linear' (interview, senior local politician). What we see at work here are a range of credibility claims around alternative spatial imaginaries, as powerful actors seek to position their own preferred geographies as 'real' when bidding for the attention of government ministers involved in decision-making about how and where to devolve powers and allocate resources.

In 2014, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, made a powerful intervention in this debate, in effect combining nodal and corridor thinking into a new imaginary, the Northern Powerhouse. The Northern Powerhouse concept in its early stages was surprisingly vague, except in one respect: there was an explicit desire to improve productivity across northern England by encouraging urban agglomeration synergies based on the economies of its major city-regions, in particular Manchester. In short, there was a clear economic logic at work, even though the spatial imaginary continued to be blurred. The Northern Powerhouse in its early years remained an ill-defined entity, lacking an independent institutional status, with policy instead managed by civil servants within the Treasury. Its indeterminate geography also meant it remained in many ways a classic soft-space, but with boundaries that were not so much fuzzy as completely undefined. The absence of a clearly articulated geography is important here because it enables central government simultaneously to support alternative approaches to territorial governance at different times or for different purposes. Central government has therefore been able explicitly to support a model of nodal city-region governance, without undermining the case for alternative corridor-based imaginaries such as the Atlantic Gateway.

What unifies both resurgent city-regions and the Northern Powerhouse is an underlying intellectual argument that rests on urban economics (Martin, 2015; Haughton *et al.*, 2016). This involves a particular reading of economics in which a small group of global cities operating within an international economy are said to be the dominant drivers of economic growth. Whether the metaphor of choice is a gateway or a powerhouse, the new imaginaries share in common a view that large-scale urban agglomerations need to be fostered to drive future growth. This new mainstream approach seeks to build upon success by targeting assistance at already dynamic local economies and ensuring that the returns on government investment—via employment creation and improved productivity, for example—are maximized. This approach rejects as costly and ineffective the redistributive goals of earlier generations of urban and regional policy, where funds were allocated based on need. Instead, cities are expected to compete and to grow their way out of decline or stagnation, but to cooperate on a selective basis to procure public resources or capture private investment.

Whether the geography is one of a growth corridor like Atlantic Gateway or a series of linked nodal agglomerations like the Northern Powerhouse, constructing powerful spatial imaginaries and a supportive intellectual apparatus has important shaping effects on how regions are perceived—and ultimately on how policies are deployed and resources distributed among different places. This is problematic for in-between areas, such as smaller towns and cities. As IPPR North (2016) notes, small and medium sized cities account for about 30% of the north's economy and since 2010 have grown as fast as the larger cities. The key obstacle for the Northern Powerhouse strategy may prove not to be its lack of a freestanding governance structure or accompanying powers and resources, but more fundamentally that its underpinning economic imaginary is politically untenable because it relies on continued support from central government as well as an array of local areas, including those beyond the epicentres of agglomerative urban economic growth. Interviews revealed that leaders in Greater Manchester were alert to these issues. The challenge confronting

them is to sustain support from surrounding areas for a process of institutional and policy reform that privileges economic development in Manchester, while also hoping that central government enthusiasm for the Northern Powerhouse is more than just a passing phase.

Conclusion

Developing a framework for studying region-building which links ideas around phase space, soft spaces and spatial imaginaries, this article has attempted to address Harrison and Growe's (2014: 2349) call for work that recognizes 'the plurality of ... spaces operating at different scales and according to different logics'. More than this, however, we have sought to develop a stronger appreciation of how region-building activities work across both space and time.

Taking an overview of successive decades, rather than a snapshot, allowed study of multiple and evolving spatial imaginaries across the Liverpool–Manchester corridor. Each imaginary was framed by distinctive mixes of logics and tactics, constructing these in ways that favoured certain areas and certain alliances of political and economic interests over others as they sought to steer state strategies in particular ways. Crucially, the different spatial imaginaries each performed important political work in framing the need to balance economic growth with social and environmental considerations. One of the findings of the research was that each spatial imaginary was accompanied by distinctive economic, social, political and environmental imaginaries. Intriguingly, the cases for creating a spatial imaginary were often couched in terms of a search for a 'real' geography, one which reflected either 'real' or functional economies. The power of the claims made about new spatial imaginaries rested on the argument that they somehow better reflected reality, and sometimes as part of this, political boundaries were artificial constructs that poorly reflected 'the real world'. The real economy, it seemed, was out there: known or at least knowable thanks to economic models of the world, rather than something under construction. But what this line of argument fails to acknowledge is that these apparently 'real' geographies and economies are actually powerful discursive claims, framing particular spatial imaginaries in relation to specific economic imaginaries (Polanyi, 1944; Sum and Jessop, 2013).

Our work reveals that despite major changes in economic and policy thinking over the past half century about the role of government in shaping regional development, the legacies of earlier attempts to construct spatial imaginaries live on in multiple ways. In some cases, arguments and debates that underlay previous region-building efforts continued to resonate. Patterns of identity, loyalty and belonging among the actors that developed spatial imaginaries proved surprisingly durable given the turbulent policy changes that had been experienced (Zimmerbauer, 2013). As the Atlantic Gateway Parklands example showed, earlier imaginaries can outlast the policy and governance 'innovations' they initially served. Earlier spatial imaginaries are of more than just vestigial importance; their persistence means they continue to impact on contemporary efforts to build soft spaces (see, for example, Geppert, 2015; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015).

Our analysis also demonstrates that different soft spaces, territorial units and their associated spatial imaginaries interact in often subtle ways that are not always immediately evident. The research revealed the coexistence of complementarities and tensions as various soft spaces and territorial units coevolved in complex, unstable, multilayered combinations, involving both cooperation and competition between them (Jones, 2009). While some antagonism was to be expected, and indeed interview data revealed periodic unease, for the most part what was observable was a mixture of active emergence and passive resistance, as new or altered spatial imaginaries were proposed and their backers sought to gain wider approval for them. But in this case study at least, what emerged most powerfully was that despite the considerable work that had

gone into developing new soft space imaginaries, the enduring power of territorial governments proved decisive in determining whether they faltered or thrived. It is the territorial ambitions of the local authorities in Greater Manchester that ultimately appear to have had most impact in changing the policy landscape of the region. The creation of the GMCA was the culmination of a decades-long effort to achieve formal devolution of powers and resources to an initiative primarily shaped around the aspirations of local governments to consolidate and extend their own power.

In this context, the findings reveal the integral role played by spatial imaginaries in intellectual case making about the form and purpose of subnational governance (Haughton *et al.*, 2016). This was particularly evident in terms of the resurgent city-region agenda and the associated Northern Powerhouse concept, which involved a reading of agglomeration economics which privileges city-regions as a preferred fix for subnational territorial governance. Local and national political leaders in England appear to be particularly influenced by readings of the new regional geography and new urban economics that position large global cities as drivers of future growth. This provides them with a set of ideological blinkers to the realities and potentialities of how growth manifests itself (Martin, 2015). In the process, arguments for redistributive policies to address England's growing spatial inequalities have largely fallen off the political agenda.

Spatial imaginaries in this reading are about rather more than just superficial representations. They can determine where government investment is channelled and into what kinds of policies. But, crucially, this article also reveals the limits facing those creating new spatial imaginaries. The parallel processes of creating acceptable social, political, economic and environmental imaginaries need to succeed, leading to sufficient agreement among partners to support strategies backed by resources and a programme of institutional alignment if not institution building.

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