City Region and the Dominance of Economic Imaginaries

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The resurgence of ‘city region’

- Reincarnation of an analytical construct

- Justification for rescaling of governance

- But, what is a ‘city region’?
  - Is it a spatial entity out there waiting to be discovered?
• ‘The concept of the city-region, like all concepts, is a mental construct.

• It is not, as some planners and scholars seem to think, an area which can be presented on a platter to suit their general needs.’

Dickinson, 1964:227 emphasis added
Politics of scale

• How are city region imaginaries constructed and institutionalised?

• What forms of knowledge and rationalities are used to legitimize them?

• Why are certain imaginaries of city region privileged over others?
Outline

• The origin the city region concept

• The role of Functional Urban Region approach in producing the imaginary of city region as an economic space

• The interrelationship between FUR mapping and neoliberal economic strategies
CITIES IN EVOLUTION
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOWN PLANNING MOVEMENT
AND TO THE STUDY OF CIVICS

BY
PATRICK GEDDES
MEMBER AND Hon. LIBRARIAN OF THE TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE;
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WITH 59 ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
WILLIAMS & NORRIGATE
14 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN
1915

CONURBATION
A Survey of Birmingham and the Black Country

Patrick Geddes, 1915
Fluid and contingent spatial relations

• ‘The metropolitan region … is primarily a functional entity and geographically it extends as far as the city exerts a dominant influence.’
  McKenzie, 1933

• ‘The boundaries of the modern community, instead of being precise lines, are blurred, if not indeterminate.’
  Hawley, 1950:248
‘There is no such thing as a single, uniquely defined “region” that manifests a full spectrum of city-regional relationships.’

Duncan, 1960:402
• The fallacy of the positivist view of the city regional scale as a fixed entity,

• neatly positioned between the national and the local scales.
• City region scale doesn’t pre-exist our interactions

• It is actively produced through political strategies, institutional framing, analytical practices, social relations and everyday lives.

• Scales are ‘perpetually redefined, contested and restructured.’

Swyngedouw, 1997:141
The dominant imaginary of city region

- Is that of an economic space

- It is constructed and legitimized by Functional Urban Region analysis and maps

- Coined by Brian Berry in 1968, FURs are:
  - seen as self-contained and coherent economic zone
  - defined by mapping people’s daily travel to work
Mapping and institutionalisation of FURs in America: SMSA

- Marked a shift from *population-based* to *economic-based* conception of metropolitan areas (N.B. Gras, 1922)

- The US Census Bureau used FURs to define the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas
Britain’s Conurbations

• **Conurbation** was morphologically defined as:
  – ‘an area occupied by a continuous series of dwellings which are not separated from each other by rural land.’

  (C.B Fawcett, 1932:100)

• Adopted by the General Register Office in 1956
FUR in Switzerland: Stadtregion

- Hans Carol’s 1956 definition of Zurich City region used:
  - functional criteria
  - Central Place theory of a nested hierarchy of services
FURs in Britain: SMLA

Standard Metropolitan Labour Areas

Hall et al., 1973
Wider circulation of FURs
Dominance of FUR

• A deeply embedded imaginary of city regions as economic spaces of employment flows
• Side lining alternative ways of imagining what city regions are, and how they might be defined as:
  – biophysical spaces of ecological interactions
  – cultural spaces of shared memories
  – social spaces of experiences and encounters
  – political spaces of struggle for justice and citizens’ rights
A core-periphery imaginary of Europe

ESDP’s ‘pentagon’, 1999

Brunet’s ‘blue banana’, 1989
Mapping the FURs

• **A top-down, deductive approach:**
  - Starts from a pre-determined set of ‘core cities’
  - Moves out to assign areas to these on the basis of commuting data
  - Is used widely in SMSA, SMLA, ESPON

ODPM, 2006
Components of the city-region

**Inner core:**
- Core
- Centre
- Node
- City
- Urban tract
- The ‘C Zone’

**Outer surroundings:**
- Hinterland (Gras, 1922)
- Umland (Schöller, 1957)
- Metropolitan community (Bogue, 1949)
- Region (McKenzie, 1933; Dickinson, 1947)
- Field of association / Catchment area (Mumford, 1961)
- The ‘S Zone’ (Parr, 2005)
The ‘core city’ in FURs

• A bounded space, defined by its morphological attributes of compactness and contiguous built-up area.

• Pre-selected on the basis of:
  – Population size, economic performance (GDP), accessibility, etc.…

• The weight given to the selection criteria changes the total number of city-regions
The ‘hinterland’ in FURs

- The extent of the FUR is measured by either:
  - Statistical analysis of actual work-related commuting to the core, or
  - Approximation of commuting time-distance from the core
Measuring the actual flows

• The extent of FUR is determined by:
  – The inclusion of localities that have more than certain share of their workers working in the core city

• The lower the threshold, the larger the extent of FUR and vice versa
FURs constructed with a high threshold

- Many areas are **excluded** from the constructed FURs
- Despite their environmental, cultural or administrative ties

ODPM, 2006 (35% cut-off)
FURs constructed with a low threshold

- Many areas are included in the constructed FURs
- Despite their distinct historical, cultural and social identity

ODPM, 2006 (15% cut-off)
York becomes the hinterland of Leeds!

Arrows, lines, and colours make certain things visible, and remove others from sight.
Maps are instruments of power

• Cartographical practices:
  – not only describe where and what a city region is
  – but also prescribe where and what it ought to be

• There is no objective representation of city region.

• All representations are implicated in relations of power.
‘The struggle over geography is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, forms, images and imaginings.’

Said, 1993:7
‘Spatial Fix’

• ‘The inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed through the restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes’
  Harvey, 1985:150

• ‘Capitalism cannot do without its spatial fixes.’
  Harvey, 2000:54

• Rescaling is part of the state spatial strategy

• Politically contested and influenced by dominant ideas
Politics of rescaling

• FUR approach fixes the city regional scale in such a way that is aligned with neoliberal strategies:

  – Obsession with economic efficiency and competitiveness, and agglomeration economies of larger cities
The ‘ripple out’ assumption

• ‘Competitive cities create prosperous regions through a potential chain reaction.’
  ODPM, 2003:6

• ‘Trying to resist the agglomeration effects of big cities is not just a waste: it is actively harmful to Britain’s economy. Better to do the opposite and encourage London and other successful cities to keep growing.’
  The Economist,
‘Liverpool's time is past’...
If we really want to give people in Liverpool, ... opportunities, we need to let many of them move to the south-east.’

Tim Leunig, 16 October 2008, Liverpool Cathedral
• FUR approach is supported by and feeds into neoliberal mentalities

• An example of power-knowledge dyad, where power ‘both prescribes what is to be done and codifies what is to be known.’

Davoudi, 2015:10
FUR as an ‘article of faith’

• Rescaling decisions making raises questions about political legitimacy and democratic accountability
‘Geographies of discontent’

Rodríguez-Pose, 14 July 2017, Cambridge
Performative power spatial imaginaries

- Imaginative geographies ‘are profoundly ideological landscapes whose representations of space are entangled with relations of power.’

  Gregory, 1995:474
• How we imagine the spatiality of city regions has profound impacts on how they are governed, and who decide their futures.