Regional spaces, spaces of regionalism: territory, insurgent politics and the English question

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Amid the globalization of economic life and a myriad of powerful challenges to Westphalian traditions of political statehood, it is now routinely contended that regions are ‘in resurgence’. Nonetheless, much of the debate on this purported regional renaissance is bedevilled by confusion over what scholars and activists mean by regions and an analogous mystification as to why some regions are ‘successful’, ‘lagging’ or ‘different’. Our paper aims to instil some coherence to this debate by distinguishing between what we term regional spaces and spaces of regionalism. It then draws on this distinction to explore the institutionalization of England’s South West region, highlighting some tensions which prevail over its economic future, its political representation, its territorial shape and cultural vernacular. In undertaking this, we demonstrate how the formation of any given regional map is reflective – and indeed constitutive – of an unevenly developing, often overlapping and superimposing mosaic of economic practices, political mobilizations, cultural performances and institutional accomplishments. This prompts us to question the currently fashionable inclination to fully jettison a scalar and/or territorial approach to the theory and practice of spatiality in favour of relational/topological/non-territorial approaches.

key words South West of England/Cornwall devolution/insurgent regionalism relational space/scalar politics identity/consciousness

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The geography of UK devolution and England’s ‘new regionalism’

Throughout the last two decades, Britain – or The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – had gained notoriety as one of the most centralized state-societies in Europe. Shortly after New Labour’s landslide sweep to power in 1997, this unitary but multinational state was granted a comprehensive programme of constitutional modernization, featuring an elected Parliament for Scotland, a National Assembly for Wales, an Assembly for Northern Ireland, an elected Assembly and Mayor for London, alongside Regional Development Agencies for the eight English regions. This devolution of institutional capacity from London has been couched in a language of democratic opportunity. Indeed, for the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the government’s progressive programme of constitutional reform1 is now moving us from a centralised Britain, where power flowed top-down, to a devolved and plural state. [He adds that] A new Britain is emerging with a revitalised conception of citizenship. (Blair 2000, 1 emphases added)

Devolution thus promises a more inclusive politics, helping to realign the relationships between the territorial organization of the state and civil society.
 Nonetheless, even a cursory glance across to certain federal Western European states reveals the extent to which the United Kingdom's refurbished representative democracy assumes a strikingly uneven territorial expression. Given the complex geohistory of the United Kingdom (Davies 1999), this is perhaps inevitable and is fully acknowledged in post-devolution debates (Hazell 2003; Jeffery 2001). To date, though, it seems that a disproportionate amount of academic research has been concerned to examine the Celtic nations and the London city-region, although this is hardly surprising in view of their rich syntax of institutional and cultural expression (MacLeod and Jones 2001). However, we contend that England's more modest form of devolution offers some equally absorbing questions for academic debate and policy-relevant analysis. Not least in that (at the time of writing) with the exception of the London city-region, England is the only country in the UK not in receipt of additional elected political representation and, by implication, new institutional spaces through which to foster the revitalization of citizenship so audaciously enshrined in the discourse of New Labour.

For unlike Scotland's Parliament and the Assemblies of London, Wales and Northern Ireland, England's Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are non-elected bodies— their remit being strictly limited to economic development. Introduced during 1999 in an initiative seemingly informed by the sustained prosperity enjoyed by regional economies like Silicon Valley, California, and the German and Italian districts that form part of the EU's 'blue banana' (Amin and Thrift 1995), their key objective would appear to be 'quite literally the production and constitution of regional economies' (Painter 2002, 129). In this context, RDAs can be conceptualized as the latest in a long line of initiatives designed to remedy England's long-standing regional 'problem' (cf. Massey 1979). However, this politically motivated project demonstrates little appreciation of the differential social forces through which the fêted regional economies of North America and the EU have been constituted (Storper 1997). Quite simply, RDA boundaries align with an administrative geography established during the 1940s for managing a pre-Fordist economy during wartime.

All of which raises critical questions about the prospects for generating meaningful economic prosperity in England's regions. But it also prompts us to confront searching questions about the politics of territorial representation. For within New Labour's programme for English devolution, no meaningful attempts have been made to debate the 'geographical basis of regions' (Regional Policy Commission 1996, 2): indicative of the staggering lack of imagination punctuating New Labour's thinking over the territorial representation of England (MacLeod and Jones 2001; Tomaney 2000). Nonetheless, this theme has been given a political hearing in the struggles to implement region-wide Constitutional Conventions and recent proposals for elected English Regional Assemblies (DTLR 2002; ODPM 2003). Moreover, certain street-level events expose the tensions between New Labour's centrally orchestrated regionalization and demands for a locally rooted regionalism more receptive to questions of political participation, citizenship and culture. Our paper analyses the nature of these ambiguities through the case of England's South West Region, and derives out of contextual analysis drawing simultaneously on theorization and versatile empirical materials. In particular, we examine how the economic imperatives lying at the heart of the RDA regionalization project are being confronted by a disparate array of regionalisms being mobilized through a contested politics of identity in this 'non-standard' region. Most notable in this regard has been the enactment of the South West Constitutional Convention, which has created a zealous power struggle between the Regional Development Agency, Mebyon Kernow (The Party for Cornwall), and other grass-roots regional movements.

We also envisage these empirical events to touch on non-trivial questions of theory. Not least in that the struggle over regionalization and regionalism in the South West represents a living embodiment of how regions should be conceptualized as relatively permeable, socially constructed, politically mediated and actively performed 'institutional accomplishments' (Philo and Parr 2000). Nonetheless, much contemporary research continually fails to pay lip-service to this axiom, leading to frustration over what we mean by regions and confusion as to why some regions are 'different', 'successful', 'problematic' and so on. In the second section we bring some clarity to the debate by drawing a distinction between regional spaces and spaces of regionalism. We then discuss the complex geohistory of England's 'territorial enigma', briefly contrasting the long-run nature of English regionalization with the political strategy of New Labour and a range of dissident discourses fermenting in English civil society. The
fourth section then analyses these versions of ‘insurgent’ regional consciousness being performed in England’s South West and their strategies to institutionalize diverse visions of a territorial, symbolic and representational ‘shape’ (Paasi 1996 2001). In light of this, we conclude with some cautionary remarks about the currently fashionable inclination to adopt a relational/topological/non-territorial approach to the theory and practice of space, place and spatiality (see Amin 2002; Amin et al. 2003).

Regional spaces, spaces of regionalism: recovering a territorial perspective

New regional spaces, new spaces of regionalism

John Agnew surmises that far from disappearing amid contemporary globalization, ‘regional economic and political differences seem, if anything, to be strengthening’, implying that regions must be viewed as ‘central rather than merely derivative of nonspatial processes’ (2000, 101). This argument is offered powerful supporting evidence in several landmark scholarly works that have variously alerted us to a rise or re-emergence of regions (Keating 1998; Scott 1998; Storper 1997). Debate on regional change thus continues to be dynamic, insightful and often cross-disciplinary. It is, nonetheless, often shrouded in confusion. On one level, this is the fault of researchers neglecting to clarify their interpretation of ‘the region’. On another level, though, even as influential perspectives offer unambiguous interpretations of this ‘elusive concept’ (Keating 1998), their primary arguments are often selectively appropriated by actors keen to satisfy particular academic or political positions: a factor that serves up misleading research and unrealistic policy prescriptions (Lovering 1999; MacLeod 2001). In these analyses, Putnam’s (1993) ideas on ‘social capital’ are proving particularly influential in identifying the role of local stakeholders engaging in mutually beneficial systems of cooperation while fostering a shared civic identity and a renewal of prosperity and democracy. With such upbeat endorsements it is not difficult to see how the region is regularly canonized in academic and political discourse as a ‘functional space’ for economic planning and governance and/or as a space with which to cultivate performative citizenship (Keating 1998; Scott 1998).

Drawing on this distinction allows us to offer some cautionary remarks on these ‘new regionalist’ bodies of thought. First, while it may be possible to relate successful regional economic performance to an institutional thickness or a flourishing regional civic engagement, it would be seriously misleading to imply some necessary relationship between regions, economic prosperity and civic associationalism (cf. Hirst 1997). Second, the prototypical regions in much new regionalist discourse vary in terms of their geographical scale and in their physical, administrative and political shape. For as Keating (1998) identifies, much of the literature on industrial districts refers to economically integrated areas like Silicon Valley and the so-called ‘Route 128’ in geographical complexion of a globalizing economy (Cooke and Morgan 1998; Scott 1998; Amin and Thrift 1995). Not surprisingly, these accounts have sparked a host of normatively charged claims about how less illustrious regions – such as those in Northern and Western Britain – might learn from these success stories and develop an infrastructure with which to confront today’s globalizing quicksilver economy (Jones and MacLeod 1999; Lovering 1999). Analysis of these (new) regional spaces has also gained attention in economics, sociology, business strategy and popular political economy (MacLeod 2001).

Analogous debates are punctuating political science, political and cultural geography, and certain branches of cultural studies and anthropology – though here the concern has been to uncover what we might define as the new or emerging spaces of regionalism. This features the (re-)assertion of national and regional claims to citizenship, insurgent forms of political mobilization and cultural expression and the formation of new contours of territorial government, especially pronounced in countries like Canada, Italy, Spain and those of the former Eastern bloc (Amin 2002; Bialasiewicz 2002; Keating 2001). In these analyses, Putnam’s (1993) ideas on ‘social capital’ are proving particularly influential in identifying the role of local stakeholders engaging in mutually beneficial systems of cooperation while fostering a shared civic identity and a renewal of prosperity and democracy. With such upbeat endorsements it is not difficult to see how the region is regularly canonized in academic and political discourse as a ‘functional space’ for economic planning and governance and/or as a space with which to cultivate performative citizenship (Keating 1998; Scott 1998).

It is with this in mind that we draw a distinction between regional spaces and spaces of regionalism. The former relates primarily to the work of economic geographers and scholars of regional development who – in deriving theoretical inspiration from institutional economics, evolutionary political economy and economic sociology – have uncovered successful systems of production in ‘sunbelt’ industrial districts and regional economies as a consequence of technological spillovers, inter-firm agglomeration and a locally distinctive stock of institutional assets (Storper 1997). Thus furnished with their own idiosyncratic ‘regional innovation systems’ and ‘institutional thickness’, certain new regional spaces and urban metropoles are prospering to reconfigure the
Massachusetts that do not readily correspond to a regional sensibility in either a cultural or a political sense. Moreover, while some research on Italian districts reveals them to be regional economic spaces premised on civic engagement (Sabel 1989), we should be mindful of how Umberto Bossi’s Lega Lombarda looked to construct the North of Italy as a space of regionalism featuring a reactionary political defence of its affluence against the poorer southern half of the country (Agnew 2002). Harvie (1994) too identifies how Baden-Württemberg’s representatives sometimes resort to a far from civic ‘bourgeois regionalism’ premised on a particularistic defence of economic prosperity.

Third, much discussion about regional change is often bereft of any appreciation about the territorial, economic and political channels through which particular regions are, in Paasi’s terms, ‘institutionalized’; i.e. the ‘socio-spatial process during which some territorial unit emerges as a part of the spatial structure of society and becomes established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness’ (Paasi 1986, 121). Here, for instance, it needs to be noted how, historically, localized economic industrialization was crucial in the institutionalization of England’s geographical regions (Stobart 2001). And for the twentieth century, a distinction may be drawn between two ‘paradigmatic’ cases: Silicon Valley, which represents an imaginary economic space institutionalized through post-Fordist industrial agglomeration, and Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany, whose economic dynamism would appear to be intertwined with the formation of robust political institutions introduced as part of Germany’s federal post war reconstruction (Keating 1998). Moreover, in the early twenty-first century, it seems that European urban elites are promoting the city-region as an appropriate scale for convening economic governance (Scott 2002). All in all, then, as Paasi contends:

While the perspectives of authors may vary from the questions of economy (knowledge economy, economic restructuring) to the questions of administration/governance, from culture and identity to the roles of new institutions in regional development ... the region should not be regarded merely as a passive medium in which social action takes place. Neither should it be understood as an entity that operates autonomously above human beings. Regions are always part of this action and hence they are social constructs that are created in political, economic, cultural and administrative practices and discourses. Further, in these practices and discourses regions may become crucial instruments of power that manifest themselves in shaping the spaces of governance, economy and culture. (Paasi 2001, 16, emphasis added)

The above factors alone should offer a shrill warning shot to those politicians and policymakers earnestly anticipating economic renewal to be hastily initiated by England’s Regional Development Agencies and plans for elected Regional Assemblies.

The relational region: both networked and scalar

In an age of fast ‘reflexive capitalism’ – with its global circulation of economic transactions, political negotiation, cultural insignia, its snaking informational highways and globe-trotting travel routes – some scholars have gone further than Paasi to embrace a ‘relational analysis’, which contends that ‘in principle the conception [of regions] as bounded and undisturbed is incorrect’ (Massey 1995, 64). Drawing on the example of the South East of England, Massey and her colleagues develop this principle further in proposing that ‘an adequate understanding of the region and its futures can only come through a conception of places as open, discontinuous, relational and internally diverse’ (Allen et al. 1998, 143), and, therefore, that ‘[T]hinking “a region” in terms of social relations stretched out reveals, not an “area”, but a complex and unbounded lattice of articulations’ (Allen et al. 1998, 65; also Amin et al. 2003, 37). This mode of reasoning, in turn, offers a fundamental challenge to recently popularized perspectives on the political economy of scale whose language of ‘nested scales and territorial boundaries’ is deemed to omit ‘much of the topology of economic circulation and network folding’ characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Amin 2002, 395; cf. Brenner et al. 2003; Marston 2000).

The permeability and indeterminacy of regional boundaries and, relatedly, the extent to which regions – indeed all territories – are mutually constitutive and reflective of dynamic social, economic and political action leads us to concur with Allen et al.’s axiom of regions as open and relational rather than self-contained. Moreover, amid the globalization of space of flows, it would appear reasonable to surmise that economic and cultural geographies will increasingly be imagined and performed in and through an intricate geometry of transborder (though never placeless) networks (compare Agnew 2002; Amin 2002). A relational approach to space and place, then, would seem a most promising
theoretical avenue through which to encapsulate this contemporary mobile world and its transnational migration of commodities, people and ideas (Castells 1996).

Nonetheless, we contend that those who have looked to enhance this relational perspective bend the stick too far. First, while Allen et al. (1998) present a convincing case of the South East as a region of relational topologies vis-à-vis various maps of trans-regional and trans-national economic flows and interchange, this is surely only part of this region’s ‘story’, and of a very specific English region at that, given its long-established networks into the internationalizing economy through the City of London and its extraordinary concentration of political, economic and cultural power (cf. Amin et al. 2003). Second, we would contend that many everyday realpolitik acts of regionalization and/or regionalism – as in the case of a central or EU government classifying a region as a ‘problem’ or local activists campaigning for devolved government and cultural rights – often distinguish a pre-existing or aspirant spatial scale or territorially articulated space of dependence through which to conduct their actually existing politics of engagement (Cox 1998). In other words, when performing their practical politics, agents often imagine and identify a discrete, bounded space characterized by a shared understanding of the opportunities or problems which are motivating the very nature of political action. As we will see below, the tensions that punctuate the South West region are being waged exactly in these territorially demarcated and scalar defined terms.

Let us be clear in stating that, in normative terms, we are not necessarily advocating this territorially oriented grammar of politics or one that looks to articulate calls for regional citizenship through appeals to historic regional culture. Nor are we in any way seeking to reject the theoretical innovations that can be yielded from conceptualizing regions, particularly in economic terms, ‘as sites within networks of varying geographical composition [and therefore as] spaces of movement and circulation (of goods, technologies, knowledge, people, finance, information)’ (Amin et al. 2003, 25; also Smith 2004). Indeed, as we will see below, political and economic agents in the English regions and elsewhere would be well advised to consider the conceptual promise offered by network perspectives in envisioning the spatially stretched and the trans-scalar geography of contemporary corporate behaviour and economic development. Nonetheless, we consider that there may be certain circumstances in which, as an object of analysis, the region should be taken as a practical and ‘prescientific’ bounded territorial space that has been institutionalized through particular struggles and become ‘identified’ as such a discrete territory in the spheres of economics, politics and culture (Paasi 2001). All this also foregrounds the extent to which regions may become spaces for themselves, or more precisely how certain regional activists and alliances endeavour to mobilize a ‘regional interest’, often one that prioritizes sectional interests but in the name of ‘the region’ as a whole (Hudson 2002).

The discussion in the remainder of our paper demonstrates how in some regions, like the South West, a range of strategies are being enacted in a self-consciously territorial fashion to define certain interests as those of ‘the region’ or ‘stateless nation’; and they are being waged primarily against an integrative state. Of course, we accept that most regions are not like the South West, which is a messy politically constructed space containing different spheres of territorial influence. It is in this context that we follow the insightful lead offered by Anssi Paasi (2002 2003), who discusses the complexities of region-building by drawing on ideas of ‘regional consciousness’ to challenge the sometimes anthropomorphist use of the term ‘regional identity’ and its automatically positively laden consideration that regions can behave as actors. Paasi’s research makes the analytical distinction between the identity of a region – involving diverging symbols, discourses, signs (MacLeod and Jones 2001) and related classifications of space based on nature, culture (Peate 1930) and economy (DETR 1997), which are often used to distinguish a region from other regions – and the regional consciousness of individuals – the performed personal and collective spatial practices and experiences of actors, mainly inside but also outside the region, normally framed by institutionalized power geometries (Paasi 1996). This distinction permits us to explore identity formation by situating the endeavours of a range of often transregionally networked – sometimes locally clustered, sometimes nationally ‘scaled’, sometimes spatially stretched and globally circulating – cast of agents making territorial claims in relation to specific institutional and ideologically motivated projects. The key point is that for good or ill, whether being waged for politically progressive or regressive ends, these projects get mobilized in different places, in different ways and at different
times through the articulation of a deeply embedded territorially oriented consciousness. As we illustrate below, this perspective allows us to unravel the contested narratives of regional identity by foregrounding political agency and social power, and given the emphasis on contestation, it also encourages us to draw on a range of empirical materials to highlight different territorial claims within a region. We revisit relational spatiality in the last section.

The evolving English question: regionalization or regionalism?

England’s ‘territorial enigma’

In his brace of fascinating papers written over a decade ago, Peter Taylor (1991-1993) contended how England has come to be characterized by a ‘territorial enigma’. Stated baldly, the English lack a collective territorial emphasis and for Taylor people are written out of the script: a claim drawing resonance with G. K. Chesterton’s famous poem, *The secret people*, referring to the people of England ‘that never have spoken yet’. The net outcome is that, in contrast to the peoples of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, who ostensibly hold the cultural and institutional resources with which to mobilize against UK state hegemony, the English are unlikely to rebel against their own national identity, even if it does, in effect, exclude them (Taylor 1993).

This territorial enigma is disputed by those keen to record a high point of English regionalism during the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy (circa AD 700), when the independent kingdoms of Dumnonia (Cornwall and Devon), Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria dominated the political landscape (Banks 1971; Fawcett 1919). However, most mainstream accounts focus on England’s own brand of twentieth-century regionalization and, in particular, the construction of the Standard Region boundaries during World War Two. Since then the main business of the central state strategy has been to regulate uneven development. As Hogwood puts it,

> The key to understanding the role of regional structures in British public administration is that they are primarily concerned not with the management of territory but the delivery of functions. (1996, 1; emphasis added)

In general, the British polity has displayed little appreciation of how the institutions of economic development might engage with campaigns for democratic regionalism (Morgan 2002). Interestingly, though, the Kilbrandon Commission (1973) whispered evidence of a putative English regional consciousness, the most powerful expression emerging from those in Cornwall venturing to break away from the South West official region (Bennett 1985). But the proposal was rejected in favour of an intensive programme of local government reform, which was to leave English regionalism to the ‘fanciful excursions’ of grass-roots cultural organizations like the Wessex Regionalists (John and Whitehead 1997). The election of Thatcher’s Conservative Party – a government unsympathetic to regional economic decline and bereft of a regionalist sensibility beyond the wealthy South East – left English regionalism to be virtually silenced for the next decade (but see note 7). In 1994, though, a more conciliatory Conservative government responded to growing calls for political administration and the civil service to be brought ‘closer’ to the people by introducing Government Offices for the Regions (Whitehead 2003).

New Labour, new regionalization: RDAs as ‘programmed spatiality’?

The ‘anti-regionalist’ political legacy described above offers an important frame of reference with which to consider New Labour’s devolution programme. While acknowledging that ‘the region’ had been touted as an important space for political strategy during the Labour Party’s period in opposition – particularly through its 1982 *Alternative Regional Strategy* – the formation of England’s Regional Development Agencies can be traced more directly to the Regional Policy Commission document, *Renewing the regions* (1996). This was initiated by the future ‘governor of the regions’ (and subsequent Deputy Prime Minister), John Prescott, and looked to confront mounting concerns about the ‘democratic deficit’ that had escalated under the Conservative government, particularly through its appointment of ‘quangos’ or unelected centrally appointed agencies of governance (Morgan 2002). Although its proposals generated extensive discussion among stakeholders in the English regions (see Constitution Unit 1996), the Commission eventually settled on an economic form of regionalism, shying away from more thorny issues about political representation.

The Commission thereby paved the way for New Labour’s election manifesto, which proposed that every English region should have ‘one-stop’ Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Stated
bluntly, these were to be about ‘hard-headed economics rather than a sentimental identification with a particular part of the country’ (Richard Caborn, quoted in Richards 1998, 4). Indeed, RDAs were very much sold on the strength of an *economic dividend*, representing catalytic ‘agents for change’ designed to engender growth and competitiveness, and to meet specific objectives in economic development, social and physical regeneration, business support, investment and competitiveness, skills, employment and sustainable development (Jones and MacLeod 1999). Each now possesses a courageous Development Strategy fully embracing the ethos of place competitiveness inscribed in Michael Porter’s (2002) cluster analysis and the purported capacity for regional economies to prosper amid the forces of globalization and the informational revolution.

As with many forms of state-driven ‘programmed spatiality’ (Lefebvre 1976), RDAs have experienced a difficult childhood. Research has uncovered tensions over the ownership of key functions relating to skills and employment, such that a series of tangled hierarchies exist between the different levels of governance involved in economic and social development (Tomaney and Mawson 2002; Benneworth 2001). More generally, the RDA project would seem to be premised on two bold but flawed assumptions. The first concerns a naive faith in local cluster development as a recipe for economic success. To be sure, localized networks of firms may be behind the success of some sectors in some spaces, but there is budding evidence that distanciated networks may be equally vital factors for generating corporate success in a range of sectors: in other words, the tendential geographies of successful propulsive industries can only be identified *ex post facto*. Such evidence forces Amin et al. to contend that:

> ... the obsession with propinquity that has characterised political power in Britain seems far less necessary for business success, despite all the talk about clustering. The policy community is [therefore] wrong to think that localization enhances business efficiency and competitiveness, for there has come to exist another, distanciated, everyday geography of economic organization. This is a geography of stretched corporate networks and flows of varying spatial reach and intensity. (Amin *et al.* 2003, 24)

The second concerns the belief to which all RDAs can somehow magic a regional economic renaissance (DETR 1997; DTLR 2002): an assumption which conveniently disregards the unavoidably uneven character of capitalist development and the extent to which the competitiveness imperative powerfully instilled into the RDA project may well exacerbate the uneven geography of Britain’s space economy (Morgan 2002; Jones 2001). All of which places the much vaunted *economic dividend* in doubt. In addition, though, it would seem that RDAs have done little to dispel much of the cynicism relating to their purported democratic deficit. To be sure, efforts have been made to ‘shadow’ RDAs through voluntary Regional Chambers. But, devoid of many statutory powers, their success has been at best uneven (Sandford and McQuail 2001). Questions concerning participation, identity and culture have in effect been displaced to other institutions, which have been building ‘regional cultural consortiums’ to promote a renewed sense of England territorial identity.

*Enacting spaces of English regionalism*

If the government, post-1997, fell silent on the issue of territorial political representation for England, this seems only to have spurred into action grassroots regionalist movements to actively campaign for the abolition of the RDAs and particularly their boundaries. During the 1990s, the South West region saw the Wessex Regionalists re-mobilize and join with a newly formed Wessex Society to promote culture, folklore and regional identity in their region. In the Midlands, the Movement for Middle England, established during the late 1980s, matured into the transregional and relational (i.e. arguing along cultural, regional, economic and political dimensions) devolution campaign organization *Devolve!* (Jones 2004). These initiatives call into question Sandford’s claim that ‘there has been no grassroots awakening of interest in the governance of England’ (2002a, 789).

These grass-roots movements have been operating in the political shadow of the official regional Constitutional Conventions, which were designed to confront England’s democratic deficit. The pioneer of this territorial expression is the North East. Claiming to be ‘an apolitical organisation’ formed by a diverse group of people including leading church figures (NECC 1998), the NECC is unashamedly inspired by the Scottish Constitutional Convention that was so crucial in nurturing the civic espousal for a Scottish Parliament (MacLeod 1998). It has also provided much of the stimulus for a Campaign for the English Regions (CFER), which
has supported the emergence of further Constitutional Conventions (Morgan 2002). Four more have since been established, each with ‘regional visions’ impelled to renew democracy in the face of the economism associated with the RDAs: the North West, the West Midlands, the Campaign for Yorkshire, and the South West.

These represent novel initiatives to renew civil society and to do so via an avowedly territorial ambit. Moreover, evidence shows many people living in England to be gaining an appetite for regional devolution (BBC 2002). With politicians acquiring some sense of this (Labour Party 2001) – and following reviews of the Regional Development Agencies and Regional Chambers (ODPM 2002), alongside research into the links between economic prosperity and regional institutions (DETR 2000), and most importantly lobbying by CFER and activists in the North East – the Labour Party accepted the need to debate the issue of directly elected Regional Assemblies and issued a White Paper. For the Prime Minister, the White Paper, Your region, your choice provides the basis for a new era, offering people living in the English regions the chance to have a greater say over the issues that affect them as well as the power to devise tailored regional solutions to regional problems. (Blair, quoted in DTLR 2002, preface)

In terms of practical administrative devolution, the White Paper proposes to inculcate institutional coherence to existing regional arrangements and advocates the need to expand the remit of the Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) (Musson et al. 2003). On the surface, this might seem a straightforward exercise: the role of GOs being to integrate government regional activities and in general improve regional coordination, while the RDAs provide a buccaneering approach to regional wealth creation. However, all this glosses over a range of unresolved tensions about the political geography of state power and about what English regional autonomy and representation might eventually look like. Proposals for regional political representation are wholly dependent on the outcome of the November 2004 regional referendum in the North East – one territory that demonstrated overall support for regional government in Labour’s ‘soundings exercise’ (see ODPM 2003). And while the membership of assemblies is relatively small and their influence over government spending in the English regions restricted (Morgan 2002; Sandford 2002a), what is to stop the possibility of awkward territorial interests emerging in England’s civil society? And although these political developments appear restricted to the North, as we discuss below, this exercise has opened up considerable scope for rethinking the political geometry of regional politics across England.

Insurgent regionalisms? - Struggles to institutionalize territory in the South West of England

Regionalization: a South West Regional Development Agency

The South West of England is one of the largest and most complex of all the English regions. Formed through centrally orchestrated regionalization – a Greater South West (GSW) and later South West region being created by central government dictate during the 1930s following surveys on the population and economy by the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Labour (Linehan 2003) – its territorial shape has generated many socio-economic tensions. With a population of nearly five million, the region is geographically peripheral, which translates itself politically and economically. For unlike Scotland, certain Northern regions of Britain, and the South East under Thatcherism, the South West has never formed a powerbase for the hegemonic political party of Government and is currently represented through the Liberal Democrat Party, whose politicians regularly report the marginal, mistreated and hybrid nature of this region (George 2003). With GDP at 95 per cent of the UK average, it hosts a mixed economy of resource-based industries alongside port, seaside and tourist activities, and a military high-tech hub in the Bristol city-region (Bridges 2002). Indeed, its economic geography can be seen to split into three sub-regions: Cornwall and Devon to the West, containing mainly agricultural land, zones of economic deprivation and isolated high-tech projects; Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and the former county of Avon to the East, featuring urban infrastructures circulating through a nexus of high-tech and state-administered hotspots around Bristol-Bath, Gloucester-Cheltenham and Swindon, mixed with concentrated coldspots of poverty; and Dorset and Somerset in the centre, with a buoyant but seasonal tourism sector.

Prior to the introduction of RDAs and policies to promote an economically motivated regional
politics, the South West possessed a number of economic development agencies operating at different spatial scales, often creating fragmented partnerships at the ‘standard region’ level. The South West RDA (SWRDA) accordingly received broad support for its potential to ‘establish a level playing field between the South West and its competitors and to help make the region more competitive and more unified’ (DETR 1997, 64). To enact this mission, it has produced a regional economic strategy bristling with can-do bravado about competing as a ‘world region’ in economic terms (SWRDA 2000, section 1). As with many other RDAs, the strategy is insufficiently sensitive to local distinctiveness: in the words of one commentator fails to offer ‘a detailed analysis of the issues facing the regional economy’ (Bridges 2002, 96).

The SWRDA is shadowed by the South West Regional Chamber, comprising representatives with local authorities and social and economic partners. The Chamber endeavours to instil coherence to economic development and spatial planning in the South West. This has been a challenge. As we argued above, in some instances the regionalization of England has created many tangled hierarchies and networks of policy and, far from rationalizing the landscape of economic governance, new institutions have added to its complexity. Indeed, the Chamber - now the South West Regional Assembly - held a select committee into skills and learning', which revealed that ‘that the nature of the relationships between the key players within the region and the boundaries between them are at times, unclear’ (SWRA 2002, 15).

Stretching beyond a narrow economic remit, the South West’s new institutions of regionalization have been acutely aware of the problems of regional embeddedness, leading some organizations anxiously groping to define a territorial identity. Perhaps most extraordinary here has been the Government Office of the South West’s cultural strategy (designed via the Regional Cultural Consortium but effectively produced by consultants in Bristol), which focuses on Gerrard Dunster, a character active in the South West carnival movement. Quite understandably, the statement ‘Roll over Rio and Mardi Gras, one of the world’s most spectacular carnivals takes to the streets in ... Somerset’ (Culture South West 2001, 30) has led to some embarrassment. It also surely serves to underline the difficulties associated with any endeavours to define and represent – or in non-representational terms, present and perform (Thrift 1996) – a coherent regional consciousness for any region, let alone one as contested as this, by networks concerned primarily with manufacturing and marketing the identity of a region (Paasi 2002).

**Insurgent regionalism I: Cornish nationalism**

The South West possesses several alternative political geographies, perhaps most notably those associated with the strategies of Mebyon Kernow (The Party for Cornwall) and those celebrating Wessex. In a powerful antipathy to the British state, some Cornish view Cornwall as a separate Celtic nation akin to Scotland and Wales (Fleet 1983). Certainly this ‘Celtic region’ has many characteristics distinguishing it from other counties in the South West and England more generally. Cornwall has its own history: the Prayer Book rebellion of the 1550s and the march from St. Kevern to London in 1497 are two commonly cited examples of stands taken against English dominance over Cornish identity (Whetter 1971). It has its own flag, the Saint Piran. Cornwall can also claim its own language: a case has been put forward to the Council of Europe to obtain national minority status (Deacon 1999). In economic terms, though, poverty is acute: Cornwall has a GDP of 65–70 per cent of the British average and is the poorest county in England (Sandford 2002b). Allied to the fact that it has no city (containing 12 medium-sized towns) and relatively poor communications, these factors explain EU Objective One status and a desire to build up a knowledge-based economy through higher education (Cornish Constitutional Convention 2003).

Active insurgence against New Labour’s post-1997 regionalization has been led by Mebyon Kernow, formed during the 1950s to defend the interest of Cornwall in the wake of economic restructuring (Deacon et al. 2003). Mebyon Kernow is a grass-roots regional movement modelled on Breton–Welsh–Celtic lines and combines claims for cultural rights with strategies for economic devolution. These activists have regularly contested general and local elections and secured representation at district council level, but their history of achievements is somewhat marred by internal power struggles and reactionary separatist associations. Throughout the 1990s though, Mebyon Kernow gained credibility by developing closer alliances with the regionally hegemonic Liberal Democrats. Its attitude towards the RDA model of regionalization is encapsulated by Deacon’s contention that:
By refusing to debate regionalism the UK government is threatening Cornwall’s institutional integrity. It has placed Cornwall in an artificial regional construct – the South West which is very large and culturally incoherent. (1999, 3)

Mebyon Kernow is long committed to an elected Assembly for Cornwall based on five arguments, each of which resonates with the ministerial statements contained in the Your region, your choice White Paper (Mebyon Kernow 1999, 2):

1 ‘Cornwall is a land apart with its own distinctive identity, culture, language, history, constitutional status and economy’.
2 ‘Cornwall has been failed by the Westminster government’s inability to treat Cornwall as a region in its own right’.
3 ‘Cornwall has been failed by the “Devonwall”, “south-west”/“westcountry” project which has done damage to Cornwall and its economy, taking jobs, influence and wealth out of Cornwall’.
4 ‘The people of Cornwall have lost faith with the political system. There is a growing sense of disillusionment, despair and powerlessness. This is a direct result of vesting power in unaccountable quangos and far off government’.
5 ‘Our future can only be safeguarded if we take control of our own affairs. This will only happen when a Cornish Assembly is established’.

This insurgent venture to disturb established political geographies received a key impetus in 2000 with the enactment of a Cornish Constitutional Convention – a cross-party organization supported by Cornwall’s four Liberal Democrat MPs, members of political parties, community and cultural activists – and its campaign for a Cornish Assembly (Deacon et al. 2003). By the end of 2001, over 50,000 people had signed the petition for a Cornish Assembly and this was delivered to 10 Downing Street. This was ‘their region’ and ‘their choice’ to generate a regional renaissance. Building on this work, landmark documents Devolution for one and all (Cornish Constitutional Convention 2002) and The case for Cornwall (Cornish Constitutional Convention 2003) offer a multi-dimensional blueprint for a devolved Assembly by drawing on the experiences of Wales and the Isles of Scilly and Cornwall’s claims to be a case for exercising a ‘variable geometry’ approach to English devolution because of its unique connections between territory, identity, politics and economics (Cornish Constitutional Convention 2003, 10).11

Insurgent regionalism II: the case for Wessex

Wessex demonstrates the plurality of culture regions in England’s South West. Covering at least six counties – Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Berkshire – Wessex dates back to the seventh century and is most notable as the backdrop for the Thomas Hardy novels (Darby 1948). The relatively recent confirmation of the Royal titles, the Earl and Countess of Wessex, may also have done something to reaffirm the region’s place in English folklore. The original motivation for the Wessex Regionalists followed the 1973 Kilbrandon Report. Founded by Alexander Thynn (Lord Weymouth, the present Marquess of Bath, and known locally as the ‘loins of Longleat’), who stood for parliament in the February 1974 general election, the party was formally constituted in the early 1980s and the ‘Statute of Wessex’ defines a 12-point programme of action for devolving power (Wessex Regionalists 1996). The Wessex Regionalists are affiliated to the Regionalist Seminar (note 7) and their ultimate aim is to achieve a significant level of political autonomy for Wessex within a federal structure (Bennett 1985). They also regularly put forward candidates at general and local elections and attract ongoing publicity in the South West media. Interestingly, though, it is in the sphere of modern commerce that a Wessex consciousness has been most routinely deployed: as a prefix for trade and industry, the Wessex regional narrative (the name and the golden Wyvern symbol) has been doubled over the past 20 years (Wessex Regionalists, Wessex Society and the Wessex Constitutional Convention 2002). The Wessex insurgency, however, lacks the membership and credibility of the Cornish activists. The more recent Wessex Society is currently gaining support by adopting a non-political approach (see above) and tapping a slightly different audience.

The official RDA boundaries effectively divide the Wessex territory in two: one part falling in the SWRDA with the remainder in the South East RDA. Despite this, the Wessex Regionalists broadly welcome the RDA initiative as offering ‘a prelude to regional government along devolutionary lines’ (Banks 1997, 2), although they do urge New Labour to take the question of identity more seriously:

Because the success of the regional policies will depend on public acceptance, and because acceptance of recognisable areas is so important . . . we make no apology for seeking recognition for Wessex as a region
Regional spaces, spaces of regionalism

before other areas are institutionalised, and pre-empt the prospect of Our Region being offered the choice of becoming a single entity in a devolved England. (Banks 1997, 3, emphasis added)

Regionalization meets regionalism: convening the South West of England

Given this tension between regional spaces and spaces of regionalism, a South West Constitutional Convention (SWCC) has proved more difficult to institutionalize than has been the case in regions like the North East and North West of England. Indeed, the insurgent regionalisms described above raise fundamental questions about which organizations can claim to legitimately represent civil society in the South West and at which particular spatial scales? Conscious of these anomalies, the Campaign for English Regions – keen to support a South West-wide movement – funded a development officer (based in Bristol) to create an organization capable of bringing ‘people, civil society and politicians together’ (CFER 2000). This eventually took shape in a South West Constitutional Convention (SWCC), Chaired by the Bishop of Exeter and involving Labour Party activists from the South West Regional Assembly. The SWCC is territorially aligned to the South West RDA and Assembly: a regional geography that was set to create tension within civil society, not least in Cornwall.

These territorial imbroglios boiled over at the official launch of the SWCC on 19 May 2001. Profoundly dissatisfied with RDA boundaries amid claims that ‘the regions of the future are still to be drawn’, some grass-roots regional activists boycotted the SWCC event, choosing instead to form a separate Wessex Constitutional Convention. Having already launched their own Constitutional Convention in 2000 (see above), the Cornish attended the SWCC event with a view to further promoting their campaign for an Assembly for Cornwall. Adding to the spectacle, the UK Independence Party and the Campaign for an Independent Britain blockaded one of the entrances armed with placards claiming ‘Region for Sale, Please See the Bishop’ and related propaganda which sought to link English regionalism with a European federal super-state.

The launch day commenced with a PowerPoint presentation by the SWRDA. This was delivered to the venue by a motorcycle courier and then read out by one of the organizers – given that no RDA officers were in attendance: a factor that provoked considerable frustration among delegates. Follow-

ing this, the Bishop of Exeter introduced the ‘founding statement’ of the SWCC, during which further tension erupted because the South West ‘official government region’ was to define the Convention’s territorial contours. This was voiced most clearly by one of the Cornish stakeholders.

It seems to me that before we go down the road of deciding what we want to do, we ought to ask ourselves what it is we mean by the term region. That is where we are coming from in Cornwall. Because we have a very strong sense of ourselves, our geography, our culture, of our constitutional position in Britain, of our economy, and of the way we can achieve success and become a major contributor of the well-being of Britain as a whole. (Bert Bircoe, Chair of the Cornish Constitutional Convention, University of Exeter, 19 May 2001)

This prompted many in the audience to question the ‘democratic mandate’ of the SWCC and, facing a public disturbance, the Bishop invited a show of hands for a debate on the future of the South West. This was passed, and recognition acknowledged of the hybrid territorial, symbolic and institutional shape of the South West, as the Bishop proposed to replace the wording ‘official government region’ with ‘regional governments within the South West’. The event closed and its organizers agreed that CFER should fund a project to investigate the viability of a smaller Cornish region within a bigger South West territory.

Their region, no choice? The South West after the White Paper

Any remaining goodwill between those representing the official South West region and those seeking recognition for Cornwall soon disappeared following the launch of the 2002 White Paper, Your region, your choice. This unyieldingly advocates English regionalism to be based around ‘existing regional boundaries’ and cites international evidence indicating how a strong historical identity is not a prerequisite for securing economic and political stability (DTLR 2002). As we outlined above, these relationships remain inconclusive. However, Cornish activists view this governmental legislation and its accompanying model of state territoriality, designed to secure economic competitiveness, to ride roughshod over the aspirations of Cornish people.

The Government should have learnt by now that its ‘control freak’ tendencies are always destined to failure. Evidence of an obsession with boundaries created to satisfy the administrative need of unelected Government
quangos and departments does not make a sound basis for galvanizing public opinion. (Andrew George, MP for St Ives, Cornish Guardian 16 May 2002)

The White Paper talks about choice, public support and local solutions. But for Cornwall these are empty words. If this is about democracy – which it is – the Government has an obligation to allow everyone in Cornwall to fully consider the argument for and against a Cornish Assembly, and then vote in a properly constituted referendum. Denying the people of Cornwall the chance to vote for their own assembly will make a mockery of Labour’s devolution programme. (Dick Cole, Leader of Mebyon Kernow, Cornish Guardian 16 May 2002)

Spurred by similar sentiments, the Cornish Constitutional Convention’s response to the White Paper argued the case for an Assembly and that devolution to Cornwall ‘is not about structures and administrative arrangements, but about people achieving an acceptable level of economic prosperity and fulfilling their potential’ (Cornish Constitutional Convention 2003, 3). Wessex activists offer an analogous, though understandably less mature, interpretation:

As the Government is increasingly moving towards the setting-up of elected regional assemblies in England, the question of areas and boundaries can’t be put off any longer. We want to see real ‘history-friendly’ regions like Wessex that people can identify with. We’re opposed to the arbitrary, unimaginative areas – like the ‘South West’ and the ‘South East’ – that are used for regional administration at present. Using those for elected assemblies would just turn people against the whole idea. They’d soon become as unloved as the made-up counties of Avon and Humberside . . . Wessex is an identity of today. (David Robins, convener Wessex Regionalists, press notice May 2002)

Following the White Paper, the SWCC distanced itself from the Cornish, realigned its interest to New Labour in the hope of demonstrating a unified case for the ‘official’ South West region, and held closed meetings to silence those challenging Labour’s regionalization. Nonetheless, the SWCC was dealt a serious blow when the Constitution Unit – funded to explore the case for territorial collaboration between the Cornish and the SWCC – published a report advocating separate institutional arrangements for Cornwall (Sandford 2002b). As constitutional tensions mounted throughout the South West, the Bishop of Exeter resigned as Chair of the SWCC. And by the end of 2002, the Convention had reduced in size, led primarily by Labour Party activists endeavouring to draw an ‘official’ territorial line. Hostilities were sharpened with the Labour Party’s 2002 ‘soundings exercise’ (see above), which presented the RDA territories as the basis for testing interest in elected regional assemblies. For those in the South West, regional civil society was being offered a top-down model of RDA-partitioned regionalization. Figure 1 details the ‘soundings exercise’ response issued by the Cornish Constitutional Convention at its meetings in 2003 – to be sent by the Cornish people to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Although the South West is not one of the political spaces being put forward for testing directly elected regional assemblies – partially because its inhabitants chose not to identify with an artificially created region14 – insurgent regionalism continues to be a live concern and could signal some profound implications for the future political geography of Southern Britain. Cornish and Wessex activists, for instance, have recently joined forces with other regional movements and representatives from local government and political parties in England in a ‘Continuing Commission on the South’ to discuss:

1 regional representation and funding;
2 resource allocation, planning, infrastructure and networking across regions;
3 citizen involvement, local government and very local democracy; and
4 identities and boundaries (see Devolve! 2003). Chaired by Alan Whitehead MP, a committed regionalist and the former Minister for the Regions, this has attracted interest from those concerned to reconfigure the southern regional map.15

On ‘relational regions’ and the territorialization of political life

This paper offers an account of what is becoming known as ‘the English Question’: the current and future territorial representation of England following the devolution of the UK’s constitutional arrangements (Chen and Wright 2000; Regional Studies 2002). Overall, the introduction of Regional Development Agencies seems to have heartened those in England who possess a regional sensibility. And in the main, RDAs have been met with warm approval by those economic and political campaigners most disapproving of the hugely centralizing Thatcherite state project that prevailed
PRO-FORMA FOR RESPONSES TO THE SOUNDINGS EXERCISE ON THE
LEVEL OF INTEREST IN EACH REGION IN HOLDING A REFERENDUM
ABOUT ESTABLISHING AN ELECTED REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

1. Your name, or that of the organisation on whose behalf you are responding (if you are
responding on behalf of a representative group, please list the people/organisations you
represent):

2. Please indicate the region that your comments relate to (Please tick one box. Please
complete a separate pro forma if you wish to respond in relation to more than one region):

- Cornwall
- Yorkshire & The Humber
- East Midlands

3. What is your connection to the region for which you are responding (e.g. resident in
region, work in region, business in region)?

4. Postal address:

5. E-mail address:

6. Do you want a referendum in your region? Yes ✓ No □ - in Cornwall

7. What is your view on the level of interest in holding a referendum about establishing an
elected regional assembly in the region for which you are responding? Please tick the box
you believe best represents the overall level of interest:

- Very Strong ✓ - in Cornwall
- Strong
- Neither strong nor weak
- Weak
- Very weak

Figure 1 Our region, our choice: a Cornish response
Source: Cornish constitutional convention literature
8. Please give reasoning, evidence and information to support your answer to question 7.

The Government should be in no doubt about the strength of feeling on this issue in Cornwall. More than 50,000 people (over 10% of the electorate) have signed individual declarations for a Cornish Assembly, with supporters coming from all sectors of the community. Signatories include over 120 district/county councillors and four of Cornwall’s five MPs.

A referendum on the issue of a Cornish Assembly is also backed by the majority of principal authorities in Cornwall and in recent months, the majority of the responses to the regional government White Paper came from Cornwall.

9. Please use this space to inform us of any information or evidence you have (if any) regarding the differences in the levels of interest in holding a referendum between regions.

Over the last three years, there has been more support for devolution to Cornwall than to the Government’s (eight standard planning) regions put together (see above). In Cornwall, there has been a grass-roots campaign for a new democratic settlement.

Regional government is an issue of democracy. Surely, it would be undemocratic to deny the people of Cornwall the opportunity to say YES or NO to a Cornish Assembly in a referendum.

THE PEOPLE OF CORNWALL MUST BE ALLOWED TO DECIDE FOR CORNWALL.

Responses are requested by 3 March 2003.

Please send to: referenduminterest@odpm.gov.uk

If not sending via e-mail, please send your completed response to:

Regional Policy Unit (regions soundings exercise)
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Zone 1/A6
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister may wish to make responses to this soundings exercise available to Parliament and for public inspection in the Office’s library. We will assume that you do not object to this unless you specify otherwise. Responses that are submitted on a confidential basis will, nevertheless, be included in any numerical analysis of responses.

Thank you for responding.
Regional spaces, spaces of regionalism

throughout the 1980s. However, several years into
the institutional renewal of England’s regions, and
as the anomalies bedevilling the RDA initiative
become more perceptible, some lessons can be
touched out. Several of these were addressed earlier,
but we also wish to further underline two major
shortcomings highlighted by Morgan (2002). First,
the new regional narrative elides the disturbing fact
that, contrary to governmental claims, there is a
huge asymmetry between power and responsibil-
ity; the latter being way ahead of the former.
Second, by treating all regions in a broadly uniform
manner, it does little to address the protracted
economic problems of the assisted area regions in
England, particularly the shortage of jobs (Adams
et al. 2003). All of which challenges naïve assump-
tions that regions can revitalize their own eco-
nomic spaces without a supportive macroeconomic
environment.

Our own discussion of the South West also
reveals the extent to which this state-planned
regionalization project has amplified a range of
political and constitutional tensions in England’s
political and civil society, whilst throwing into
doubt the claim that

[With the exception of the North East of England, the
English regions, until recently, have not been character-
ized by the presence of broadly based and vigorous
regional campaigns. (Tomaney 2001, 122)

While admittedly not shaking the very foundations
of the UK state, various insurgent regionalisms in
the South West have gone some way to destabilize
those organizations programmed to sponsor ‘official’
visions of the state’s regionalization project. Indeed,
this case serves usefully to illustrate the incessant
processes of destabilization and re-stabilization
in and through which regions and territories are
institutionalized, demarcated, contested and re-
structured at varying scales and at particular histor-
ilical moments. The territorialization of political life
is never fully accomplished once and for all, but
remains a precarious and deeply contentious
outcome of historically specific state and non-state
projects. Spatial, territorial and scalar relations
are consequently neither automatic nor naturally
‘bounded’ features of statehood, but are rather
deeply processual and practical outcomes of stra-
egic initiatives undertaken by a wide range of
social forces (Brenner et al. 2003).

In the context of the South West and England,
the Cornish are particularly keen to denaturalize
the contemporary territorialization of political life,
promoting their brand of nationalist regionalism
as a processual and practical route through which
to confront the perceived contradictions of statist
technocratic regionalization. In undertaking this,
they also seem at pains to underline a non-parochial
territorial politics:

The campaign to establish a Cornish Regional Assembly
is not a subversive separatist plot. It is not a covert
bid for independence or UDI. The campaign is about
developing Cornwall as a region, with an assembly
leading, monitoring, promoting … doing strategic
things which will generate success in the wider world
for places like this. (Bert Biscoe, Chair of the Cornish
Constitutional Convention, quoted in Cornish Guardian
6 February 2003)

Of course, as researchers it behoves us to subject
such claims to critical analysis and, as stipulated in
the second section, we are certainly not intending
to unequivocally align ourselves with these ter-
itorially motivated politics. Such concerns surface
in an important pamphlet by Ash Amin, Doreen
Massey and Nigel Thrift, which heralds a radical
approach to regional development and political
representation in England. In this the authors
proclaim that, while they

have no argument against the celebration of regional
traditions, [they] … believe it is dangerous to ground
arguments for regional citizenship in appeals to
regional cultural identity. (Amin et al. 2003, 37)

Such arguments dovetail somewhat with Massey’s
earlier (1994) work on the distinction between a
‘progressive’ and a ‘regressive’ sense of place.

However, Amin et al. are also keen to stretch the
thinking on the ‘regional debate’ by contending
that the very ‘spatial grammar’ which informs the
routinized practice of the devolution debate and of
British politics needs to be fundamentally challenged.
Their argument is that UK devolution has done
little to disturb the entrenched nature of London-
centrism that has characterized the business of
politics and economics for over the last 100 years (cf.
Taylor 1991), and which has ‘become so ingrained
in the British psyche that it never occurs to anyone
to think that there is a political battle to be had’
(Amin et al. 2003, 7). Quite simply, in following the
well-trodden path of a territorially rooted political
imperative, New Labour’s regionalization of
England has left this spatial grammar of politics
untouched and the London elite intact as a ‘classic
centre of control’.
In order to challenge the entrenched hegemony of London, Amin et al. propose replacing the territorial politics of devolution with a ‘politics of dispersal’. This would envisage different parts of England, and perhaps the UK in general, playing equal roles in conducting politics, perhaps involving ‘national’ institutions, like Parliament, travelling from the London city-region ‘out’ to the various ‘provinces’ (though, presumably, in the process, this very concept would be junked!). For Amin et al., this could help foster a patchwork of different political mobilities, revalorizing the local by bringing it into a new geometry with the national. They add that

such acts of dispersal would represent a radically new way of imagining the spatiality of the nation; no longer the norm of a centred nation with tributary obligations, but the promise of a multi-nodal nation. (2003, 34)

This is certainly a bold and challenging politics:

Proposing a radically different approach that places strong obligations on the centre to disperse itself, so that regions can themselves be effective national players in an economy and polity without such a strong, and colonial, geographical centre, and where regions can look to external connectivity too for economic regeneration. We propose a more relational grammar of politics. (Amin et al. 2003, 27, emphasis added)

We have considerable sympathy with these proposals; not least in they seriously disturb the asymmetrical nature of power and responsibility so bedevilling the contemporary arrangements for devolution (Morgan 2002). In making their case, though, Amin et al. pick up the baton of the ‘relational region’ to further challenge conventional conceptualizations of regions, regionalization and regionalism in what they consider to be

an era of increasingly geographically extended spatial flows and an intellectual context where space is frequently being imagined as a product of networks and relations, in contrast to an older topography in which territoriality was dominant. (Amin et al. 2003, 6)

And likewise, in place of fixed regional identities and parochial senses of belonging, Amin et al. promote a ‘cosmopolitan regionalism’ that ‘draws upon an open sense of place a politics of local and translocal engagement’ (2003, 37). Again, we concur that there are sound reasons as to why such a relational approach to space and identity can open up innovative ways of conceptualizing contemporary economic and political spatialities and, relatedly, offer new ways of thinking about how England’s regional ‘problem’ can be more effectively tackled.

Nonetheless, as emphasized throughout our paper, we consider it to be both politically and theoretically rash to ignore the fact that much of the political challenge to devolution prevailing across England and elsewhere is being practised and performed through an avowedly territorial narrative and scalar ontology: albeit these practices and performances are also often enacted through topologically heterogeneous trans-regional and cross-border networks of ‘fluidity’ and circulation (à la Mol and Law 1994), as illustrated by the move (see above) by Cornish and Wessex activists to foster networks with parallel regional movements. But, importantly, mobility and fluidity should not be seen a standing in opposition to territories. For as Agnew contends, regions

are linked together and across geographical scales by networks of political and economic influence that have been, and still are bounded by but decreasingly limited to the territories of national states. (2002, 2, emphasis added)

The South West offers a stark demonstration of how a range of systematizing networks has realized both a political economy of scale and a cultural construction of scale. In this regard, our case study is particularly useful in demonstrating how a ‘politics of scale’ – contested around and through the South West ‘official’ government region – produces a particular ‘scaling of politics’, which has been associated with civil society movements endeavouring to forge a range of territorially motivated networks to break out of the constraints imposed by a state-centred model of territoriality. And these movements are only too aware that the current devolution settlement simply reproduces at another scale (this time at a regional level rather than London) the hierarchical spatial relationship that has so bedevilled British politics for so long (Amin et al. 2003). We, therefore, call for a retaining of territorially oriented readings of political economy and when appropriate their conjoining with non-territorial and/or relational socio-economic and political strategies (Allen et al. 1998; Amin 2002): a view that would seem to lend support to Hudson’s contention that:

... the degree to which regions are regarded as closed, continuous and bounded or as open, discontinuous and permeable is perhaps best regarded as a matter to be resolved ex post facto and empirically rather than a priori and theoretically. (Hudson 2002, 3)
Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Perhaps this is itself an oxymoron given Britain’s persistent lack of a written Constitution (Partridge 1999).
3 We acknowledge this very distinction that Loughlin (2000) and Painter (2002) both draw between ‘regionalization’ and ‘regionalism’.
4 In this paper, we are more concerned to discuss sub-national forms of regionalization and regionalism. It is nonetheless worth noting how in international relations theory, the region is habitually deployed to describe a multi-national politically contested landscape like the Middle East, while in international political economy (IPE) another ‘new regionalism’ has begun questioning the ‘realist’ analysis of states as isolated entities, whilst simultaneously calling to account the purported logic of a single global market (Thompson 2000).
5 Historically, American ‘regionalism’ tended to assume the form of a conservative, anti-urban movement, associated with the revival of Southern culture after 1918 (Harvie 1994).
6 Liptez (2003) defines this as a ‘regional armature’.
7 This is after what had really amounted to several years of inactivity. For back in the early 1980s, a number of regional movements converged to produce the ‘Declaration of Oxford’. A ‘Regionalist Seminar’ was created as a forum for the Campaign for the North (broadly aligned to Northumbria), the Wessex Regionalists (following Wessex), Movement for Middle England (celebrating parts of Mercia), Mebyon Kernow and Cowenthas Flamank (identifying with Cornwall), the Orkney Movement, and the Shetland Movement (see MacLeod and Jones 2001). Between 1982 and 1992, the Seminar produced a twice-yearly publication The Regionalist, while member organizations also published their own material.
8 Our concept of ‘insurgent regionalism’ is inspired by James Holston’s (1995) work on ‘insurgent’ forms of citizenship as they unfold across globalizing cities and which ‘embody alternative futures [being] . . . sites of insurgence because they introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories’ (Holston 1995, 39).
9 This section is based on empirical research undertaken by Martin Jones between 1998 and 2004 and funded by two University of Wales Aberystwyth small grants – The New Regionalism: Building the Regional Development Agencies’ and ‘English Regional Questions: Devolution, Territory, Civil Society, Identity’. This has involved documentary research, participant observation at key meetings and semi-structured interviews with actors involved in regional economic development and grass-roots regionalism in four English regions: the North West, the South West, the West Midlands and the East Midlands.
10 Over 70 per cent of place names are in the Cornish language and recent years have been witness to protests over English language symbols (O’Leary 2000).
11 It is, therefore, somewhat misleading to argue that the Cornish model of devolution can be reduced to a concern with ‘fashioning a history of “pre-colonial” autonomy and distinctive civic or folk traditions in order to justify devolution’ – a claim that Amin et al. (2003, 37) make when discussing the South West in a general sense without making sub-regional distinctions.
12 Members of the UK Independence Party, for instance, could be heard making connections between Hitler’s political strategies and European federalism.
13 Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that ‘The Government has not completely ruled out in the longer term the possibility of adopting boundaries for regional assemblies that do not follow the existing boundaries [and] in exceptional circumstances in the longer term regional boundaries could be altered’ (DTLR 2002, 49).
14 This is not the only story to be told. The sounding exercise only recognized the comments of individuals within regions; regional movements submitting petitions containing multiple signatures and opinions counted as a ‘single response’, alongside members of the general public, local businesses and local government interest groups etc. (DTLR 2002, 22).
15 Participant observations at meetings during 2003 suggest a desire on the part of New Labour to redraw the boundaries of the South West and South East, possibly leading to territorial recognition for Cornwall (as a separate region) and to rethink the interface between these two regions around the counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Hampshire. This is particularly pertinent given the proposed review of local government boundaries in London, with one proposal being territorial expansion into the South East of England (see London Assembly 2003).
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