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*Prog Hum Geogr* 1999 23: 503
DOI: 10.1191/03091329969659851026

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://phg.sagepub.com/content/23/4/503
Space, scale and state strategy: rethinking urban and regional governance

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Abstract: The last decade has seen a proliferation of theoretical approaches, which have sought to uncover the changing form and governance of cities and regions following the dissolution of the Fordist ‘sociospatial fix’. This article provides a critical review of some of the more influential of these debates that have sought to analyse: the central–local relations of government; the growing influence of ‘regimes’ and ‘growth coalitions’ in energizing urban economies; and the rise of the ‘learning’ or ‘institutionally thick’ region. The authors argue that, although providing valuable insights, these theories suffer from: 1) a failure to integrate analytically into their inquiries a relational account of the state, and thereby to neglect the state’s influence in actively shaping the urban and regional fabric; and 2) a similar failure to problematize the issue of scale, often taking for granted the spatial context of their own particular inquiry. Thus, terms like urban regimes, urban coalitions and learning regions are deployed as if they were ontological and epistemological givens. Drawing on neo-Gramscian state theory and recent work on the ‘politics of scale’, this article seeks to open up urban and regional research towards a multiscaled analysis, and to consider political economic activity as a series of situated, context-specific and politically constructed processes. These arguments are then briefly deployed to demonstrate the multifarious and multiscalar changes that characterize London’s governance in the late 1990s.

Key words: governance, London, scale, state strategy, urban politics.

State power can only be assessed relationally. The state as such has no power – it is merely an institutional ensemble; it has only a set of institutional capacities and liabilities which mediate that power; the power of the state is the power of the forces acting in and through the state (Jessop, 1990: 269–70).
Like state power, spatial scale is . . . something that is produced; a process that is always deeply heterogeneous, conflictual and contested. Scale becomes the arena and moment, both discursively and materially, where sociospatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated (Swyngedouw, 1997: 140).

I Introduction: the contemporary rescaling of political economy

Under Thatcherism, Britain was often justifiably characterized as a highly centralized unitary political system (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Gamble, 1994). However, since 1997, Britain has looked set to become a (late) entrant in the western European push to decentralize, as the New Labour government has sought to integrate constitutional reform with new structures for urban and regional governance. In addition to a Parliament for Scotland and elected Assemblies for Wales and Northern Ireland, a 1997 white paper outlined plans to create new Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in the English Regions ‘to integrate more fully the work of national, regional and local partners in economic development in the widest sense’ (DETR, 1997c). RDAs are, furthermore, seen as something of a precursor to the eventual embedding of elected regional government in England, ‘where there is a demand for it’ (DETR, 1997c). Perhaps the most novel proposals in this ongoing round of institutional restructuring concern London where, in addition to a London-level RDA, a 1998 referendum endorsed (albeit with a very low turnout) governmental proposals for an elected Mayor and Assembly. Although Britain’s key provincial cities are also bidding for an elected mayor, only London has, as yet, been provided with concrete proposals. All this political activity and debate has problematized anew the twin issues of governance and scale. When added to the continuing controversy over the future role of the European Union, what we appear to be witnessing is a complex reconstitution and rearticulation of various scales and forms of state activity (see Jessop, 1997a: 18–21; 1997b: 35–38; Swyngedouw, 1997).

Such changes in the urban and regional fabric are neither new nor unique to Britain: a factor reflected in the numerous scholarly endeavours to document the widespread transitions that have taken place over the past decade or so in the governance of North American and western European cities and regions (see Dunford and Kafkalas, 1992; Amin and Thrift, 1994b; Healey et al., 1995; Judge et al., 1995; Alden and Boland, 1996; Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Lauria, 1997b; Newman and Thornley, 1997). Of interest to us is the fact that such documentation has been accompanied by a proliferation of theoretical and conceptual approaches, which have sought to shed some explanatory light on to this growing volume of empirical research. This article seeks to provide a critical interpretation of some of the more influential of these debates, which have been variously concerned to analyse a series of (often inter-related) processes ranging from changes in central–local relations; the growing influence of public–private partnerships in urban and regional economies; the proliferation of interagency networking in local and regional governance; and the rise of the ‘entrepreneurial’ city, and the ‘learning’ or ‘institutionally thick’ region.

We argue that whilst providing some valuable insights, many of these approaches suffer from an underdeveloped notion of the state and, in particular, of the novel ways in which the state is now being reconfigured along local, regional, national and supra-national levels (cf. Goodwin et al., 1993; Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Brenner, 1997;
Jessop, 1997a; 1997b). This is partly because these approaches are hampered by a reluctance to engage explicitly with the critical issue of scale, and often ignore or take for granted the spatial context of their own particular inquiry (also Cox, 1998). Thus, terms like ‘urban regimes’, ‘urban coalitions’ and ‘learning regions’ are deployed as if they were ontological and epistemological ‘givens’. However, as recently argued by Erik Swyngedouw (1997: 141; also Sayer, 1991), given that ‘spatial scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested, and restructured . . . scale (at whatever level) is not and can never be the starting point for sociospatial theory. [Rather] the kernel of the problem is theorizing and understanding “process”’. Taking on board these claims, we argue that a refined emphasis on the concepts of ‘state strategy’ and ‘state project’ can help to consider political, economic and sociospatial activity as a series of situated, context-specific – but actively constructed – processes, and to open up the inquiry towards a multiscaled analysis. We briefly consider the case of London to demonstrate how these concepts can be used to help interpret the multifarious and multiscalar changes in contemporary urban and regional governance.

We are also sympathetic to Swyngedouw’s (1997: 142; also Peck and Tickell, 1995a) suggestion that the conceptual framework of the regulation approach (RA) can offer some useful insights into the ‘politics of scale and their metaphorical and material production and transformation’. Substantively, for instance, the sharpening tensions which emerged in the late 1960s within Fordism manifested themselves not only as material and imagined crises in global and national economies, but also ‘in a profound reworking of geographical scales’ in the regulation of production, money, consumption and welfare (Swyngedouw, 1997: 153–54). To help elucidate this after-Fordist rescaling of political and socioeconomic forces, we draw on the regulation-theoretic writings of Bob Jessop. In particular, we are persuaded by Jessop’s claim that in the globalizing ‘postnational’ era, new geographies of governance are emerging whereupon state capacities are being reorganized, territorially and functionally (see also Brenner’s, 1997, deployment of Lefebvre’s thesis on state spatiality and the (re-)production of ‘state space’). For Jessop (1997a: 18), this is leading to ‘a continuing movement of state power upwards, downwards and sideways’, and – in contrast to the national Fordist spatial fix – to the loss of a relatively privileged level in and through which other scales are managed (Peck and Jessop, 1998).

This ‘relativization of scale’ (cf. Collinge, 1996) and state power has profound implications for the ways in which cities and regions are governed. In particular, regional and local states are seen to have ‘gained’ an enhanced role in such governance, and have also begun to promote territorial and functional transnational linkages with other cities and regions, thus helping to bypass the nation-state. Jessop has labelled such movement the denationalization of the state. In some key respects, the Blairite reforms in the UK all fall into this category – albeit constituted out of varying agendas, structures and agencies (MacLeod, 1998; Jones and MacLeod, 1999). However, Jessop also emphasizes that this shift in the territorial scale, or ‘hollowing out’ of state activity, represents only one of three inter-related processes in the current restructuring of the state. Together these add up to major changes in the structural organization, strategic orientation and scaling of the political regime that helped to underpin Atlantic Fordism.

The other key ongoing processes of restructuring – the destatization of the political system and the internationalization of policy regimes – also carry major implications for urban and regional governance. Drawing some parallels with the rise of the ‘shadow
state’ (cf. Wolch, 1989), the former refers to the shift from government to governance (although as we show later, this is a far from unilinear trend). This is associated with a relative decline in the state’s direct management and sponsorship of social and economic projects, and an analogous engagement of quasi- and nonstate actors in a range of public–private partnerships and networks. This has taken place across a variety of state functions and at various scales, but the shift to urban governance has been particularly well documented, especially with reference to the rise of urban partnerships (Bassett, 1996; Harding, 1997). The internationalization of policy regimes alludes to: 1) the heightened strategic significance of the international and global contexts within which state actors now operate; 2) the more significant role of international policy communities and networks; and 3) ‘fast’ international policy transfer as in, for example, ‘workfare’ (Peck and Jessop, 1998). Much of this is most clearly discernible ‘insofar as the prime object of economic and social intervention by the national state has changed from the well-balanced domestic performance of the national economy to its overall international competitiveness’ (Jessop, 1997b: 37). At both regional and local levels this has helped to foster the rise of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ and the ‘learning region’ as economic spaces where supply-side initiatives favour the promotion of technology and innovation, labour market flexibility and a ‘productivist’ reordering of social policy.

It is against this background of the three inter-related processes of denationalization, destatization and internationalization that many of the recent debates in urban and regional governance are (albeit at times implicitly) placed. However, two key points need to be stressed at the outset. First, rather than representing some deep explanatory framework, the changes outlined above represent empirically observable trends (see below). Secondly, such trends are not necessary, but are only contingent upon particular contexts, structures and agencies. Thus, in particular conditions of existence, counter-tendencies and trends may be found (see Jessop, 1997a: 20–22) – some of which will be illustrated in part VI below. For instance, in what may amount to a generic process of ‘denationalization’, national states are not passive recipients of some global logic but are, through the actions of their constituent properties (governments, courts, bureaucracies), active agents in the structuration of globalization, ‘glocalization’, post-Fordism and ‘hollowing out’. And in many circumstances, such as the struggle over European monetary union, national states are seeking to retain or reassert some influence in global and supraspace – often translated through emotive discourses of ‘sovereignty’, but with material effect (Swyngedouw, 1997: 141) – particularly as no recognizable supranational or international state emerges to ‘claim’ territorial hegemony (Taylor, 1997). It is in these senses that ‘the material and the metaphorical are by definition mutually implicated’ (N. Smith, 1993: 98) and, similarly, that the contemporary scaling of political economy can be understood as a ‘perpetual transformative sociospatial power struggle’ (Swyngedouw, 1997: 141).

II Regimes and machines in the new urban governance

We will begin with an assessment of a body of work which has stressed the role of local economic development in urban political analysis. Since the mid-1980s, the burgeoning interest in globalization has been accompanied by an almost paradoxical concern with
the political economy of place (Logan and Molotch, 1987). The extent to which this economic focus contrasts with previous work on urban politics, which had placed a stress on collective consumption (Dunleavy, 1980; Saunders, 1981), has led some authors variously to identify the ‘building wave of a new urban theory’ (Marston, 1990), or the rise of a ‘new urban politics’ (Cox, 1993). Much of this new work centres on the post-Fordist-Keynesian realignment of politics and markets: in particular, its contemporary expression vis-à-vis the widespread emergence of alliances of key interest groups – invariably public–private partnerships – and the increasing responsibility believed to be conferred upon them for governing urban spaces (Jonas, 1991). Two of the most influential perspectives – both rooted firmly in the USA experience – are ‘urban regime’ analysis (Stone, 1989; Lauria, 1997) and urban ‘growth machines’ (Logan and Molotch, 1987) or ‘coalitions’ (Harding, 1994). Both are heralded as attempts to ‘uncover rather than merely assert the role of politics in urban theory’ (Jonas, 1992: 282), although this is questionable to say the least (see below). Whilst empirically such work examines the outcomes of all three of the tendencies referred to in the introduction, the emphatic ‘gaze’ (in both perspectives) on partnerships, networks and coalitions means that the stress is placed on destatization at the expense of denationalization or internationalization. Interestingly, the latter process is often ‘wheeled on’ as some kind of contextualization for the governance changes taking place, usually under the catch-all term of ‘globalization’ (e.g., Harding and Le Galès, 1997). However, there is rarely any attempt seriously to theorize or conceptualize either the causal mechanisms behind, or the constitutive forces of, these globalizing tendencies.

Recently described as a new intermediate level ‘theoretical force’ beyond the pluralist–élite theory dualism (Judge et al., 1995), regime analysis moves away from the question of ‘who rules’ to develop a ‘social production perspective’ more concerned to analyze the ‘capacity to act’ or ‘govern’ (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994). Thus, for one of its main proponents:

> What makes governance . . . effective is not the formal machinery of government, but rather the informal partnership between City Hall and the downtown business elite. This informal partnership and the way it operates constitute the city’s regime; it is the means through which major policy decisions are made (Stone, 1989: 3).

Such regime informality is in part illustrated by the absence of a conjoining structure of command (Stone, 1989: 5) – ‘successful electoral coalitions do not necessarily govern’ (Stone and Sanders, 1987, in Harding, 1994: 361). Rather, there is a tendency for regimes to ‘mesh’ via a system of civic co-operation based on mutual self-interest between governmental and nongovernmental actors (Ward, 1996). Regime theorists do however emphasize the structural power of business vis-à-vis the tendency for local public officials to be strongly predisposed to both support and enter into agreements with elements of business élites (Elkin, 1987; cf. Offe and Wiesenthal, 1985; Peck, 1995). Governing coalitions are thus occasioned through association and negotiation among those actors who have access to, and the power to deliver, the resources (financial, physical, human and political) of key public and private institutions. A central endeavour of regime theory, then, is to uncover the interdependent forms of collective organization, as well as the problems of co-operation and co-ordination, amongst the growing congregation of allied forces operating within cities in the USA (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994).
For Stoker and Mossberger (1994), once ‘cleansed’ of its North American ethnocentric assumptions, regime theory holds considerable promise for understanding the variety of responses to urban change. Nevertheless, despite being an attempt by urban geographers to locate theoretically the local economy in a wider political economic context, the emphasis on internal alliances within regime analysis often leads to: 1) an over-reliance upon behavioural microeconomic and/or pluralistic explanation (Lauria, 1997a); and 2) a neglect of forces which operate in and through spatial scales beyond the urban. In part, this relates to the methodological failure to abstract necessary from contingent forces in the structuration of regimes and/or to focus overtly at the ‘level of events’, thereby resulting in an undertheorization of causative forces and properties (Cox, 1993: 436). And whilst some have pointed to the possibility of marrying regime theory with more macro-level approaches such as regulation theory (Harding, 1994; Ward, 1996), others have, we believe rightly, cautioned against this on the grounds of methodological ambiguity (Goodwin and Painter, 1997; Painter, 1997).

The underplaying of broader social and spatial forces means that there is a failure to deal with the state as anything other than as part of a regime, when often it is the state – scaled at various levels – which sets and controls the parameters for regime formation in the first place. This may be less an issue in the USA (although this in itself is only contingent upon time, place and context), but in the UK and mainland Europe we find the continued financial and legislative dominance of the nation-state. Indeed, one recent comparative study of European urban regimes has concluded that ‘little can happen subnationally without [the national state’s] cooperation, acquiescence or benign ignorance’ (Harding, 1997: 308). If taken seriously, this point has obvious implications for the understanding of regime formation and operation; most notably, in that much more attention has to be paid to how ‘urban’ regimes interact with, and are shaped by, social, economic and political forces operating in and through the national and regional state.

For the growth machine model, the central conflict in urban spaces concerns the use-value interests of residents and the exchange-value interests of place-bound local rentiers or ‘parochial capitalists’ (Harding, 1995). It thereby views the ‘commodification of place [to be] fundamental to urban life’ (Logan and Molotch, 1987: 1). For Logan and Molotch, the tensions surrounding this serve to energize the urban growth machine – a coalition of local interests led by property rentiers acting out of partisan motivations (Harding, 1994). Rentiers are the dominant players in contemporary urban development, and their proliferation is seen to explain how USA cities engage in competitive endeavour. The coalition itself is united through a commitment to economic growth – based on the alleged tangible benefits this will bring – and its benign discourse of ‘value-free development’ (Logan and Molotch, 1987). The latter provides political and ideological cement to the machine, whose hegemony is further achieved through the co-operation of ‘auxiliary players’, such as cultural institutions, media, universities and professional sports clubs and, crucially, local governments.

The work on growth machines – described as a partial return of elite theory (Harding, 1995) – examines urban change through the interactions of human agents. This strength however is overshadowed by problems with the overall analytical framework. First, its central hypothesis can be seen to overplay the dichotomy between the use-value of residents and the exchange-value of entrepreneurs, as well as generally overemphasizing the role of property in economic development (Cox and Mair, 1989). There is also a
neglect of the growing influence of multinational capitalists in shaping urban and regional networks. Most significantly though, the voluntarist emphasis on instrumental agency over contextual factors ‘truncates . . . analysis at the level of appearances’ thereby leaving it undertheorized (Lake, 1990: 180). Thus, as pointed out by Robert Lake (1990: 180, emphasis added), ‘a focus on the dreams, plans, and strategems of rentiers, politicians, and university administrators begs the question of why society gives rise to these particular kinds of actors’. Furthermore, the growth machine perspective has a particularly ‘limited conceptualization of the local state’ (Clarke, 1990: 191), and an underdetermined consideration of ‘place’ which ‘forestalls the possibility of examining and understanding the constitutive role of local places in the mediation of global forces’ (Lake, 1990: 183). Moreover, the framework virtually precludes analysis of the contemporary ‘relativization’ or shifting scales of governance – by definition the coalitions, and their policies, are urban, and cannot operate beyond this spatial scale. There is thus little effort analytically to integrate the strategies of urban growth coalitions within national political projects or accumulation strategies or shifts in global flows of accumulation.

Both these approaches have elicited interest amongst UK urban commentators. Whilst regime theory is held by some to be more promising (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994), it has yet to be widely operationalized (though see DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1993; Lawless, 1994; Harding, 1997). The more widespread application of the growth coalition approach to interpret UK urban ‘partnerships’ illustrates an early claim that it offered ‘a useful explanation of the changing relationship of business interests and local government’ (Lloyd and Newlands, 1988: 34). Lloyd and Newlands locate their account of the Aberdeen Beyond 2000 project, in northeast Scotland, within the growth coalition framework. They recommend some qualifications and adaptations of the model, most notably a better theory of local government and a rethink of the emphasis on the struggle over land and property value. But given that the latter constitutes the very explanatory foundations of the growth coalition thesis, and that Lloyd and Newlands themselves fail to advance any theory of the local state, it is little surprise that their account merely narrates some resonance with Logan and Molotch’s approach at the ‘level of appearances’ vis-à-vis the role of property developers, oil companies and the support of the local media. The failure to integrate into their analysis the wider political milieu and spatial scales can also be highlighted: there is no reference to the fact that the project itself was under the overall governance of the Scottish Development Agency – a Lowland Scotland-wide agent of the UK state. This again highlights the problem of restricting both the scale and the scope of analysis.

In general, regime and coalition approaches would certainly appear to resonate with the heightened influence of the business classes in the public-private governance of urban and regional economic development. However, their analytic schema is overly voluntarist. Moreover, they each display insufficient sensitivity to spatial scales above the local/urban to provide a causal explanation of the UK experience, where the ‘centrally orchestrated’ co-opting of business élites through national governmental patronage (Peck, 1995; Peck and Tickell, 1995b) – often for the ‘grabbing of grants’ (Jones and Ward, 1998) – has tended to take precedence over the overtly dynamic ‘activism of entrepreneurs’ (Logan and Molotch, 1987). In this sense, it has been argued that the economic, institutional and cultural divergences between the UK and USA need fuller recognition, and that one thus needs to tread cautiously in simply exporting
the above urban restructuring theories beyond USA shores. Certainly within Europe, the role of the state (and of the European Commission) as promoter and orchestrator of urban partnerships has to be explicitly considered (Amin and Tomaney, 1995).

It is in this context that Cox’s critique of the new urban politics is interesting. Cox argues that to understand the motivation behind the formation of particular regimes as well as their (re-)regulation, it is important to consider the relative mobilities and immobilities of the actors concerned. For Cox, this can best be understood through the concept of ‘local dependence’ (also Cox and Mair, 1991), in particular through an assessment of the scale at which the relevant agents are locally dependent (Cox, 1993: 438). Thus for a firm, the minimization of socially necessary labour time imposes constraints on location. Similarly for people, the reproduction of labour power in time remaining after work and sleep imposes tendencies towards proximity of work and home (as London commuters know only too well). This (local) territorial constraint can also be recognized in the spatial structure of the state in, for example, the spatial patterning of responsibility for services such as policing and libraries (Cox and Mair, 1991; Cox, 1998). Cox goes on to suggest that such an approach permits the new urban politics to be ‘critically linked to arguments about the territorial organization of the state’ (1993: 433).

This is certainly a promising line of inquiry. However, in his substantive discussions, Cox tends to couch the analysis solely in terms of the relative scales at which the respective interests of particular capitals and the local state are mobile/immobile, and thereby scale dependent (1993: 442–45). But beyond the agency inspired by the relative dependencies of actors, there is insufficient attention paid to the discourses, hegemonic ideologies and regulatory practices in and through which the scalar materialization of the state is constituted and how this, in turn, impacts back upon these relative dependencies. In other words, the multidimensional and multiscalar properties which, in part, shape the context within which relative local dependencies are situated, remain undertheorized. The concept of ‘local dependence’ is thereby overstretched in the search to unpack the complexities of urban governance. Thus, despite his claim to theorize the territoriality of the state, Cox’s account does little to explore the tensions which can arise within the state as a social relation, and as a disaggregated, dispersed and multiscaled site of political and economic contestation. Furthermore, the extent to which the local or regional state can develop accumulation strategies and/or politically mobilized projects which deviate from the national state project, and which thereby can become an object and/or agent of regulation for the central state, is never really explored (see below on the GLC) (see also Judd, 1998). This, in turn, means that greater methodological and conceptual attention must be paid to the spatial and scalar reorganizations and reorientations now underway within the emerging political system.

III Policy networks

One approach which has sought to link the state to subnational urban and regional political analysis is that of policy networks. Its proponents have attempted to move beyond the limitations of pluralist and corporatist models of government/private interest intermediation through the application of the meso-level concept, policy network. Rhodes (1990) distinguishes five types of network, ranging from highly
integrated policy communities characterized by stable relationships, restrictive membership, vertical interdependence and relative insularity, to the more loosely integrated issue networks, which are distinguished by a large number of participants and their more limited degree of interdependence. A key strength of the policy network approach is its recognition that the government is ‘not an undifferentiated whole’ (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992: 196), and that individual departments pursue their own autonomy, albeit within overall governmental constraints.

At first sight this may seem to offer a fruitful line of inquiry for those concerned with the territorial and scalar dimensions of state activity. And in some instances the approach has been ‘spatialized’ to assist our comprehension of the complexities of the (predevolution) Scottish political arena (Midwinter et al., 1991), and of the Scotland–European Union governance of environmental politics (Bomberg, 1994). Within the UK political network, Midwinter et al. identify a distinct Scottish policy network focused on the Scottish Office, and which includes Scottish interest groups, MPs and local authorities. Although no single ‘Scottish policy community’ exists, they point towards functional – but territorially differentiated – policy communities such as those for education and economic development, and the extent to which they are constitutive and reflective of Scotland’s particular interest mediation. However, Midwinter et al. appear hampered in terms of exploring the complex array of institutions functionally located beyond the formal political network – i.e., the ‘integral state’ – as well as in the capacity to analyse the dynamic impact which national state projects like Thatcherism have had upon the particular shape of the Scottish policy network (cf. MacLeod, 1999). Bomberg is more emphatic about the spatiality of policy networks, arguing that Scotland possesses a ‘territorial community’ which differs from a policy community in its multifunctional remit, its informality and geographic peripherality (1994: 50). However, the very nature of these differences throw into doubt the extent to which the policy network framework befits the cases of Scotland and Wales (and perhaps in time, some English regions).

If this work represents an attempt to apply the policy network approach at a regional level, Bassett has also employed the concept in his analysis of new forms of urban governance. He argues that the growth of public–private partnerships in Bristol ‘can be seen in terms of an attempt to construct a new policy network in the general sphere of economic development’ (1996: 551). He also makes the larger claim that policy networks can be useful in understanding the diverse and competing interests which operate within the state. It is interesting that he comes to this conclusion after considering, and rejecting, both regime and coalition theories, which are seen as inappropriate in the British case. Indeed he makes the specific point that ‘if regime theory emphasizes the horizontal nature of local linkages, then policy network theory emphasises more the vertical linkages between locality and centre’ (1996: 552). However the conceptualization of the various forms that this linkage might take in a territorially differentiated state are never explored. Reference is made to regulation theory as a broader macro-level framework, which could encompass meso-level theories of coalitions, regimes and networks, but the methodological and conceptual implications of this are never explored.

Certainly, in describing the central-regional-local political machinery of the UK state form, the policy network concept has some use value. However, as the shortcomings in the cases above suggest, the framework provides little understanding of the collective
political representations and discursive struggles which underpin the substantive and scalar constitution of networks and communities (cf. Jenson, 1993). As Bassett himself admits, the concept cannot account for the emergence of new interests and the longer-term dynamics of network change (see also M. Smith, 1993). Moreover, its emphasis on synchronic order leaves little space to consider the articulations of structure and agency which may precipitate a particular shift in the configuration within a network, and its associated policy changes (Hay and Jessop, 1995). In other words, there is little conceptual space to consider the political struggles inherent in the production of networks (such as Scotland’s territorial bloc – cf. MacLeod, 1998), their scalar manifestation, and associated relations of empowerment and disempowerment, inclusion and exclusion. And, crucially, as with regime and growth coalition theory, the policy network approach does little to inform us of the broader socioeconomic context within which policy communities operate. Indeed, such limitations are acknowledged by key proponents of policy networks, whose more recent work argues that microtheories of individual/group behaviour and macro-level analysis need to be integrated with the meso-level policy networks – themselves best interpreted as ‘political structures which filter or mediate the change to post-Fordism’ (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992: 202; Marsh, 1995; Marsh and Stoker, 1995). Here we find parallels with Bassett’s attempt to use the concept to understand the changing form of urban governance.

However we suggest that this theoretical pluralism is heavily misguided on two key counts:

1) The emphasis on policy networks as mediators, simply reacting to macro-change, plays down the constitutive role which policy communities and networks, and other local and regional hegemonic blocs, have in the actual structural coupling of accumulation regimes, regulatory modes and societal paradigms such as Fordism and Keynesian welfarism, and their particular national and subnational inflections.

2) The assumption that macro-theories of the state and the political economy such as regulation theory can simply be fastened on to the policy networks approach fails to acknowledge the potential ontological, epistemological and methodological incompatibilities inherent within this venture (see Goodwin and Painter, 1997; Painter, 1997).

IV ‘Institutional thickness’ and urban and regional development

The ‘institutional thickness’ framework has been developed by Amin and Thrift (1994a; 1995) as part of the growing academic and policy-related concern to interpret the key factors which appear to be providing certain urban and regional spaces with a robust economic survival strategy in the ever harsher climate of globalization (Harrison, 1994; Cooke, 1995). The authors draw on the ideas of institutional economics and sociology (Grabher, 1993) to argue that the securing of economic success at urban and regional levels is not exclusively down to a narrow set of economic factors. Rather, the capacity to ‘pin down’ or territorially ‘embed’ global processes in place is becoming increasingly dependent upon a whole series of social, cultural and institutional forms and supports. Amin and Thrift define this as an institutional ‘integrity’ or ‘thickness’, and identify four key constitutive elements.
The first is a strong institutional presence – a plethora of actors such as firms, financial institutions, chambers of commerce, local authorities, development agencies, innovation centres, unions, business service organizations and voluntary bodies, some of which can be seen to provide collective representation and/or material services (cf. Cooke and Morgan, 1993). The second element assumes a high level of interaction amongst these institutions so as to facilitate reflexive networking, co-operation and informational exchange, all of which serves to occasion a degree of ‘mutual isomorphism’. These contacts and interchanges are often embodied as social norms, habits and conventions, and engender a particular ‘social atmosphere’ in place. The third condition centres on well defined structures of domination, coalition-building and collective representation in order to minimize sectionalism and rogue behaviour. Fourthly, there is the emergence of a cognitive mapping of place to the extent that agents perceive of a common agenda upon which the collectivization of institutions depends and develops. For Amin and Thrift (1995: 102–103), these four constituents enable a local integrity which both establishes legitimacy and nourishes relations of trust...[and]...which continues to stimulate entrepreneurship and consolidate the local embeddedness of industry...what is of most significance here is not the presence of a network of institutions per se, but rather the process of institutionalisation; that is, the institutionalising processes that both underpin and stimulate a diffused entrepreneurship – a recognised set of codes of conduct, supports, and practices which certain individuals can dip into with relative ease.

At the heart of this milieu is the animation of institutional innovation, reciprocity and – least common of all – ‘the consolidation of a sense of inclusiveness, that is, a widely held common project which serves to mobilize the region with speed and efficiency’ (Amin and Thrift, 1995: 104). This latter component resonates with Lipietz’s (1994) idea of a ‘regional armature’ as the institutional expression of a subnational space acting for itself; and also with Cox and Mair’s (1991) theorization of a locality operating as an agent courtesy of an alliance formed out of the interest mediation of locally ‘dependent’ actors. The emphasis on institutional forms, and on reciprocal and associational habits also strikes some chords with the mode of regulation concept – albeit at a more concrete level of abstraction.

Amin and Thrift’s elegant and sophisticated account of local institutional capacity as an integral condition in embedding the forces of globalization certainly isolates a richly powerful set of taxonomies with which to interpret urban and regional governance (cf. Hudson, 1994; MacLeod, 1997; Raco, 1998). Our own concern with this approach is threefold. First, there is a danger that – with the stress on interagency synergy – the term will be used as a form of shorthand with which to illustrate the shift from government to governance. Thus, there is a danger that, for example, the emergence of urban governance becomes explained simply by identifying the very existence of an ‘institutional thickness’ within the cityscape. Secondly, in a normative manner, it can easily be assumed that the aim or endgame of a successful partnership is to achieve such thickness. In both these cases, the analysis stops when it reaches the institutional thickness – yet, as we shall see, this is not sufficient. Thirdly, the term seems rather neatly to exemplify aspects of all three of our key processes of state restructuring – yet these are never separated, specified or detailed. For instance, the plethora of agencies involved points to destatization; the local, regional and global levels at which they operate indicates denationalization; and the emphasis on...
entrepreneurship acknowledges the international context and Schumpeterian dynamism.

However, Amin and Thrift themselves are fully cognizant of the modest explanatory capacity of the framework, particularly in their acknowledgement that there is ‘clearly some way to go before the ultimate power of the new institutional paradigm can be assessed as an explanation of geographically uneven development’ (1994a: 19). One of the major reasons for this is that like the other three frameworks considered above, the institutional thickness paradigm lacks a sufficient grasp of both the role of the state and the importance of scale. In particular it looks at the interplay between global economic forces and local and regional ‘thickness’. Cities and regions are considered to find themselves as ‘key nodes within global economic circuits’ – but not as constituted (and constitutive) elements of a national state project. We never glimpse the ways in which national-level policy can ‘overdetermine’ the operation of those trying to construct an appropriate institutional thickness at a local or regional scale. For instance, the indigenous efforts to construct an institutional ‘integrity’ within the Lowland Scotland region in the mid-1990s – centring around an interactive social infrastructure and the carrot of technological upgrade – have been hampered by a national regulatory regime premised upon low-cost flexi-wage social relations and the stick of job insecurity (MacLeod, 1997). Neither does the institutional thickness approach alert us to the way that some efforts to construct ‘alternative’ local institutional milieux can impact quite dramatically upon the actions and resolve of a national state project (see below on the GLC).

More generally, there is a concern that the one-dimensional focus on the interplay between ‘institutions’ can draw attention away from the fact that these are particular institutions, operating in particular ways in particular places. The relations between them reflect broader conditions of power and control; quite simply, some institutions are more equal than others when it comes to building and deploying policy agendas. Thus, researchers (and indeed practitioners) need to be fully aware of the forms of political and social exclusion that can arise in the construction of local (but often élite-driven) ‘common agendas’ (Raco, 1998). In concrete-complex terms, some institutions possess a ‘whip-hand’ or are more important than others in helping to construct and cement the thickness (or even dismantle it). This often means that consensus is harnessed along the lines of least political resistance and, moreover, that the substantive form of partnerships evolves as a politically ‘thin’ and mechanically driven strategy of supply-side provision. And as we will see, it is here that the role of the national state can often prove critical. Although the concept of institutional thickness enables us to move beyond the mere cataloguing of a particular locality’s institutions and agencies to consider their interaction and synergy, the problem remains of adequately dealing with the territorial and conceptual space occupied by the nation-state and its internal scalar materialization.

V The state as political strategy: rethinking the constitution of urban and regional governance

Despite their varied conceptual roots, the four approaches discussed above share one fundamental problem. They all locate changes in urban and regional governance
exclusively within the context of one or other of the key processes of state restructuring that we identified in the introduction – destatization, denationalization and internationalization. Why should this be a problem when we have been calling throughout for a closer engagement with the actions of the national state? The reason is that in each case, these processes are presented – albeit at times implicitly – as an explanation. Thus, the very growth of intervention at the urban or regional scale is seen to be explained by the denationalization of statehood or the hollowing-out of the state. The increased involvement of the private sector in mechanisms of urban and regional governance is supposedly explained by reference to a destatization of the political system, or the shift from government to governance. And the move towards entrepreneurism and competitive innovation is explained by reference to the internationalization of policy regimes, or the heightened strategic significance of the global economic context.

However, to proceed in these terms is a misreading of the regulationist literature (the usual source of such contextualization), and especially of Jessop’s development of it. In the latter’s own words, these empirical trends towards hollowing out, governance and internationalization are ‘essentially descriptive, synthetic, and generalized’ (1995b: 1619) such that nothing can adequately be explained by them alone. Indeed it is these trends themselves that actually require explanation. Moreover, although such trends may be generalized they are not generalizable – the specific ways in which they are expressed will vary within and between nations, regions and their respective contexts. To understand the structures, mechanisms and events that actually constitute these processes in specific places, and then to understand, in turn, the ways in which they impact unevenly upon the structures and processes of urban and regional governance, requires a more conjunctural account: one which stresses the complex articulation of social, economic and political forces through space and across time (Painter and Goodwin, 1995; Goodwin and Painter, 1997).

With regard to the state, one such account can be found in the recent development of neo-Gramscian state theory (Jessop, 1995b; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; also Collinge, 1996; Jones, 1997; MacLeod, 1999; MacLeod and Jones, 1999). Revisiting some of his own earlier work (1990), Jessop argues that while a regulation-theoretical approach can help us to interpret the generic shift from a Keynesian welfare national state (KWNS) to a Schumpeterian workfare post-national regime (SWPR) by way of the three processes identified above, neo-Gramscian state theory may help to disclose the political forces and regulatory practices and discourses which activate the very constitution of specific SWPRs. In part, this is because it situates processes of accumulation in relation to specific hegemonic political or state projects. The emphasis is on exploring how political, intellectual and moral leadership is ‘mediated through a complex ensemble of institutions, organizations and forces operating within, orientated toward or located at a distance from the juridico-political state apparatus’ (Jessop, 1997c: 52). Neo-Gramscian analysis is thus an ‘integral’ (inclusive or broad) understanding of the state, providing some useful angles with which to interpret the politically constructed ‘informal’ networks of association and/or governance – situated at various spatial scales – which help to mould the contemporary state. In this way, the introduction and operation of the new institutions and processes of urban and regional governance can be positioned within a wider set of social and political forces, and can be understood as part of the continuing attempts to forge and sustain a ‘successful’ political project and
scalar fix (although it needs emphasizing that the fundamental contradictions of capitalism can never be fully contained – Lipietz, 1994).

This stress on politics and political strategy is also useful in avoiding the dangers of economism. It is sometimes tempting to appeal to the effect of economic changes – usually characterized as a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism – in order to explain the three general trends in the national state. However, there could well be political reasons prompting such institutional redesign (Peck, 1995; MacLeod, 1999). And even if economic forces do have a direct role we need to understand how these ‘are first translated into political projects for state action and [how] their solution is mediated through the specific, structurally inscribed, strategically selective nature of the state’ (Jessop, 1995a: 30). In these terms, a crisis in the KWNS and its yielding to a hollowed-out SWPR regime is not simply to be understood as the mechanical entrance of certain structural limits. Rather, such a transformation is narrated, manifested and resolved within the ideas, spaces and times of particular state projects, representational regimes and societal paradigms (cf. Jenson, 1993).

In order to analyse the formation and deployment of these projects, Jessop draws on Poulantzas and Foucault to argue that the state should be viewed as a social relation which can be analysed ‘as the site, the generator and the product of strategies’ (1990: 260). By ‘state strategy’ we are referring to a pattern of intervention in the economy and society which ‘(a) favors the course of [a particular] accumulation strategy and the flow of material benefits to the requisite social base; and (b) constructs forms of representation that systematically favor the access of the key sectors and social groups to sites of political and economic power’ (Jessop et al., 1988: 159; and cf. the policy networks approach above).

In initially viewing the state as the site of strategy, it can be analysed as a territorially and functionally dispersed system, whose internal structure and mode of operation are more permeable and suitable to some types of political agents than to others. For Claus Offe, this often entails a tendency for the state to favour certain interests groups (usually capital) – a process referred to as ‘structural selectivity’ (Offe, 1974). However, rather than being the result of some essentialist logic whereby the state functions as if it were an ‘ideal collective capitalist’ (Altvater, 1971, in Jessop, 1990: 86), the structural selectivity of any state needs to be analysed as contingent upon the actions and strategic endeavours of a whole plethora of agents peculiar to specific places and times. The complex articulation of these processes of strategic selectivity means that

particular forms of state privilege some strategies over others, privilege the access by some forces over others, some interests over others, some time horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others. A given type of state, a given state form, a given form of regime, will be more accessible to some forces than others according to the strategies they adopt to gain state power. And it will be more suited to the pursuit of some types of economic or political strategy than others because of the modes of intervention and resources which characterize that system (Jessop, 1990: 10).

Moreover, the relational character of strategic selectivity implies that the differential ability of social forces to pursue their interests through different strategies ‘is not inscribed in the state system as such but in the relation between state structures and the strategies which different forces adopt’ (Jessop, 1990: 260). For Jessop, it is here that the effort to construct a particular ‘hegemonic project’ (in part through the mobilization of a social base of support) can prove decisive in resolving (albeit temporally and
unevenly) the conflicts between particular interests (Jessop, 1997c: 62). A hegemonic project

\[\ldots\] mobilizes support behind a concrete program of action that asserts a contingent general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction) and thereby privileges particular economic-corporate interests compatible with this program while derogating the pursuit of other interests that are inconsistent with the project (Jessop, 1997c: 62).

As our own brief glimpse into London’s inconstant mode of governance will demonstrate, all this, in turn, implies that, through the endeavour to articulate a particular hegemonic project, there will be an incessant search by dominant social and political forces to construct the state form and associated scalar ‘fix’ – the institutional site suitably organized along functional and territorial lines – which can best further their particular strategies (cf. Harvey, 1989a; Brenner, 1997). We argue that these processes are a key factor in much of the recent restructuring of urban and regional governance.

Secondly, as the institutional site through which particular strategies are elaborated, the state is thus also the ‘generator’ of strategy. It can never, however, be the absolute guarantor. As an institutional condensation of struggles, contradictions and tensions, the state is perpetually faced with considerable problems in terms of its operation as a unified political and spatialized force. These can be internal – consider the British government’s recent interdepartmental tensions over welfare to work or regional aid – or external, such as the recent resistance from some EU states to permit Britain equal decision-making status following its hesitancy to join the ‘first wave’ of European monetary union. Some of these tensions and struggles are played out in and through (and, in turn, can impact quite markedly upon) the spatial structure of the state (Cox, 1993). A parallel can be drawn here with accumulation strategies in the way that the cohesive unity of the state is as underdetermined at the level of the state form as accumulation is at the level of the value form. Thus, just as accumulation strategies are needed to bring a coherence and direction to the circuit of capital, state strategies and state projects are required to bring some guidance and coherence to the manifold activities of the state. Here, Jessop stresses the role of state managers (politicians and officials [and of course in the late 1990s, ‘spin doctors’]) as being critical in beginning to understand how some relative unity is imposed on the ‘various (in)activities of the state and how these activities acquire a relative autonomy from the conflicting pressures emanating from civil society’ (Jessop, 1990: 261).

Thirdly, the ‘structure and modus operandi of the state system can be understood in terms of their production in and through past political strategies and struggles’ (Jessop, 1990: 261). Thus, the present state form is partly the product of past strategies or, more accurately, the product of the interaction between past patterns of strategic selectivity and the strategies currently adopted for their transformation. In urban and regional governance, as much as any other form of state activity, we do not start with a clean sheet, but have to restructure and transform within the bounds of previous interventions. In other words (and adapting Neil Smith, 1993: 101), the formal and scalar manifestation of the state is both constituted out of (as well as containing) political activity and at the same time provides an already partitioned geography within which such activity takes place. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that Jessop’s conceptual approach deploys mid-level abstractions or concepts that are non scale specific. In other
words, there is nothing to imply of necessity that a state project or strategy, or an accumulation strategy, can only be articulated at the national scale (Jessop, 1997c: 62). Similarly it is important not to equate the abstract or the process of abstraction exclusively with the ‘bigger’ national and/or global scales and to conceive of the concrete as being reducible to the ‘local’ (see Sayer, 1991). To this extent, ‘local’ and ‘metropolitan’ states are quite capable of fashioning complex economic and political endeavours, which, in themselves, can be suitably analysed at a relatively high level of abstraction respectively as (local/regional) accumulation strategies and state strategies/projects. The substantive form that these assume, and the extent to which they will complement, challenge, inform and/or help to constitute the prevailing national state project and dynamics of global accumulation, will be the result of a ‘complex synthesis of multiple determination’ (Marx, 1857, in Jessop, 1995a), which can only be revealed through informed concrete/complex research. It is in this sense that empirical research can be both theoretically informed and theoretically informative (Sayer, 1991; Painter and Goodwin, 1995). Much of this resonates with some sophisticated research undertaken during the 1980s within critical human geography (Massey and Meegan, 1985), which emphasized that the epistemological distinction between abstract and concrete research should not be conceived as absolute, but as a continuum (Asheim and Haraldsen, 1991). Perhaps the key point to stress here is that the concepts discussed in this section are not scale determined, and are only scale specific within the context of the particular research problem and its chosen object of inquiry.

Overall, if developed substantively, the ‘strategic-relational approach’ discussed above could provide some critical implications for the ways in which we understand the restructuring of urban and regional governance. It emphasizes that any substantive unity which the state possesses only derives from (but can never be guaranteed through) specific political projects. This in turn means that there are different potential state systems, and that ‘state-building is not a once-and-for-all process but is constantly reiterated within specific but variable institutional [and spatial] limits’ (Jessop, 1990: 268). Within the UK, this is precisely what we are witnessing as the millennium draws to a close. And these Blairite reforms, involving devolution, regional assemblies, development agencies and elected mayors, are only the latest in a long series of iterative attempts at ‘state-building’ – designed like the others to impart a strategic direction, and a form of ‘programmed’ spatiality (cf. Lefebvre, 1976: 88) to the different branches of state activity, and on behalf of strategically significant actors. We will now illustrate these processes by brief reference to the changing governance of London – which, because of its status as Europe’s leading ‘global city’, is currently being actively constituted as a key terrain in the project of forging a successful state strategy (see Taylor, 1997).

VI On state projects and ‘glurbanization’1: reconfiguring London’s governance

Limitations of space preclude a detailed analysis of the evolution of London’s governance (see Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Newman and Thornley, 1997). Rather, the aim of this section is briefly to illustrate some of the ways in which Jessop’s neo-Gramscian approach may be deployed to analyse the complex mechanisms and processes shaping an emergent form of urban governance. We argue that by drawing
on the concepts of state project and state strategy, it becomes possible to explore how successive governments have sought to forge a ‘structural determination’ to hegemonic projects (Jessop et al., 1988). It also allows us to investigate where – through particular strategic selectivities – they have favoured particular social forces in fabricating a social base of support, and in the (re-)constitution of political representation, associated scalar fixes and policy paradigms. In other words, this approach enables one to consider the extent to which the strategic selectivity of the state can be deliberately promoted by those in possession of political and intellectual leadership, and that this can, in part, be realized by reconfiguring the internal institutional structure and representational regime of the state. Furthermore, as stressed by Jessop (1988: 157), this dialectic between structure and strategy entails ‘a complex process of mutual historical conditioning and reciprocal recursive transformation’.

The ongoing endeavour to establish effective London-wide governance provides a useful illustration of such complexity as, in many respects, it represents a ‘product’ of the interaction between past patterns of state selectivity and contemporary strategies for transformation. Perhaps the most notable moment of such preceding state selectivity, at least in recent times, concerns the 1986 abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC). At this time, the Thatcherite government was seeking to instigate a state project to reconfigure the representational regime and regulatory fabric of Britain, combining themes of organic Toryism – family, deference to authority – with a revived neoliberalism and anti-statism (Hall, 1988: 48). But the GLC, headed by the increasingly popular Ken Livingstone, was seeking to construct accumulation and local state strategies which diverged markedly from Thatcherism’s national state project, particularly vis-à-vis economic restructuring, the redistributive flow of material benefits to a broad social base and attitudes towards sexuality and authority (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988). It is in this context that the GLC abolition can be viewed as part of a larger project to dismantle ‘roguish’ elements of the state so as to impose a substantive unity on to the overall state system.

Following abolition, the Conservative Party wasted little time in ensuring that its particular type of metropolitan state form inhered a structural and strategic selectivity permitting greater accessibility to some social forces than others. In short, and with the symbolic flagship of the London Docklands Development Corporation acting as the key ‘site’ and ‘demonstrator’ of the emergent state strategy, the role of elected local government was increasingly supplanted by the influence of central government and the private sector (Jenkins, 1996). In 1992, a new Cabinet committee was established to review London policy alongside a Cabinet Minister for London followed, in 1994, by a new Government Office for London (GOL). Alongside these bodies, tightly controlled from the very centre of government, a series of private sector and partnership activities were established. Most notable in this regard is London First (supported and financed by over 250 companies) and The London Pride Partnership. The ‘vision’ for London which arises from these groups is one based centrally around London’s international competitiveness and its world-city role (see Goodwin, 1996; Newman and Thornley, 1997).

It is this set of institutional forms that New Labour inherited when swept to power in May 1997 – and pledged to restore democratic citywide government to London. A consultation paper entitled New leadership for London proposed to establish a new elected mayor, which together with an elected assembly will make up the new Greater
London Authority (GLA). The mayor is envisaged, not as a ceremonial figure but as ‘someone more akin to a dynamic chief executive. A mover and shaker who would forge partnerships with others and get things done’ (DETR, 1997a). The assembly would be ‘a new model of local government – small, strategic and focused’ (DETR, 1997a). In this centrally orchestrated process of strategic selectivity, the government is at pains to distance itself from the past in ‘not seeking to create a new GLC’. And this theme is given a personal twist in the way that, despite opinion polls registering him as the ‘favourite’ of Londoners, the Labour leadership is almost certain to ‘block’ the former GLC leader Livingstone in his efforts to be mayor (Hetherington, 1998). More structurally, in contrast to the expansive set of interest groups the GLC sought to incorporate into its local state project, the emerging Blairite project is seeking quite explicitly to incorporate a social base centred on business classes above all else:

London is a world class business location, the first choice of European business. London’s competitiveness is however being damaged by its need for improved infrastructure, the existence of areas of extreme deprivation and a lack of strategic planning . . . The new strategic authority will work to improve London’s competitiveness, creating a climate in which business can thrive and a city where people live and work (DETR, 1997b: para. 1.06).

In terms of the neo-Gramscian approach, increasing London’s competitive advantage within the international playing field is being translated into a key political project for state action. Even areas of extreme deprivation will only be tackled because of the threat they pose to the city’s competitiveness (DETR, 1997b: para. 1.06). This represents, quite unequivocally, the central state strategically selecting to subordinate social policy concerns in favour of a supply-side Schumpeterian commitment to foster a more entrepreneurial urban governance (Jessop, 1997b; also Harvey, 1989b). The overall discursive thrust of this move towards ‘glurbanization’ – attempts by cities to insert themselves favourably into the global division of labour (Peck and Jessop, 1998) – appears to be founded upon economic (and geoeconomic) imperatives rather than those of a social and/or domestic political nature. This connects somewhat with the recent argument of Peter Taylor, that London’s location within the UK polity and economy may indeed be a disadvantage in its endeavour to assert ‘world city’ status. For Taylor (1997: 769), it is increasingly the case that ‘the interests of the London city region do not coincide with the interests of the rest of England’.

We have already noted that for Jessop, analysing the state as a social relation through which particular strategies can be pursued leads us to appreciate that a particular state system will be more suited to the pursuit of some types of economic or political strategy than others because of the modes of intervention and resources which characterize that system (Jessop, 1990). What we seem to be witnessing with the current reform of government in London is an attempt by New Labour to establish a particular hegemonic state form (both national and within the London region), with particular resources (both material and nonmaterial), privileging some coalition possibilities (e.g. London First) over others (local authorities and community groups) and particular modes of intervention (such as procurement of inward investment) suited for a specific accumulation strategy (the assertion of ‘world city’ status). Moreover, the substantive concern of the Blairite state project not to reproduce the GLC may be down to the fact that to do so may just begin to: 1) refocus on socioeconomic redistribution, and thereby blur the strategic vision of global competitive status; and 2) redirect London’s (metro-
politan and national) governance more acutely towards the Keynesian political concern to engender balanced growth.

At a conceptual level, there may be valid grounds for labelling the above developments as an endeavour to create a London-wide ‘growth machine’ or ‘regime’, or as an effort to provide some local ‘institutional thickness’ befitting the imperatives of globalization or ‘glurbanization’. However, it must be stressed that, as with previous incarnations of London-wide governance, a great deal of the impetus and strategic selectivity in the forging of key systems of representation, and indeed the very ‘capacity to act’ in terms of shaping this urban process, resides within the regulatory technologies and scalar narratives and geometries of the central state.

We are not implying here that the central state can ‘fix it’, particularly given that the exact institutional shape of London’s governance will be determined through the post-1998 legislative process: one which will presumably seek to align a variety of social forces such as central government ministers, local boroughs, individual voters and London First, all with their own particular scale dependencies (Cox, 1993) and narrative understandings of scale. In other words, whilst the state can be seen as a key ‘generator’ of strategy, it can never be ‘guarantor’. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence we have at the moment vis-à-vis emergent state structures and selectivities would imply that the power geometry built into the proposals for London’s governance will heavily favour the emergence of a hegemonic bloc intent on promoting a strategy based on London’s international/global economic competitiveness. Both the shape of this emergent urban state form and its functions would seem to suit this particular strategy. This drift towards an SWPR regime – with the national level appearing to assume the role of ‘steering’ mechanism – can also be seen to represent a form of crisis-displacement in and through the rearticulation of scale, as the local boroughs are left to cope, on ever declining budgets, with the day-to-day social issues of housing, education and service provision. With the new proposals making no reference to these at all, we can only presume that they will be dealt with by the trickle-down effect of economic regeneration. Whether this will amount to a qualitative improvement in London’s governance is questionable. Indeed one is tempted here to invoke Lefebvre’s (1976: 87) argument that all this represents some ‘polite actions for the benefit of [London’s] leading citizens’ whilst offloading social responsibility on to local ‘organisms’. To this extent, the problems in enacting a coherent state strategy furnished with a democratic legitimacy within London seem likely to continue, and there is a danger that the institutional form of London’s new governance may continue to problematize its successful functioning for the majority of its citizens.

VII Concluding comments – theory, scale and state spatiality

This article has sought to provide a contribution to contemporary debates on urban and regional governance. By focusing on recent changes in London, we have attempted to highlight the extent to which the national state has been a critical variable in providing a context for, and indeed actively shaping, the city’s institutional fabric. More abstractly, this study has demonstrated the need to examine the relationship between local accumulation strategies and prevailing national hegemonic state projects and strategies (Jessop, 1997c). In many recent analyses, there has been a tendency to assume that the
trends towards destatization, denationalization and internationalization (or however people have chosen to define them) have, between them, eroded the political power of the nation-state. Some commentators have, in other words, confused a hollowing-out of the state form with a hollowing-out of state power (e.g., Mayer, 1994). But as Jessop (1997a: 19) points out, an ‘increase in governance need not entail a loss in the power of government as if power was a zero-sum resource rather than a social relation’. Indeed, as we have seen, the shift to governance in London under the Thatcher administrations can be interpreted as a means of retaining and reinforcing central government power, by removing key decisions and key institutions from democratic control, and relocating these within the power of social forces that can be ‘trusted’. It is these complexities in the contemporary political economic arena that have led Jessop recently to caution against an uncritical acknowledgement of these unilinear trends, and to posit some countertrends (Jessop, 1997b; Peck and Jessop, 1998).

Moreover, contingent upon certain conditions, it may be that the expansion of non-governmental agencies will actually enhance the role of the state, as the one agency charged with overall responsibility for securing socioeconomic and political cohesion. As Jessop (1997a: 21–22) further outlines, ‘governments (on various scales) are becoming more involved in organizing the self-organization of partnerships, networks and governance regimes’. They provide the ground rules, ensure the compatibility of different mechanisms, deploying information and intelligence, resolve disputes, balance power differentials and assume political responsibility in the case of governance failure. All this leads Jessop to conclude that governance still operates in the shadow of government and, as such, an understanding of the actions and interests of the latter is necessary towards an understanding of the former. Regimes, partnerships, networks, coalitions and institutional thicknesses have to be constructed, managed and maintained – and at present a critical part in this is played by the national state. Within the UK in the late 1990s, what we are witnessing is the attempt by a fresh government to impose its own state strategies in and through the establishment and reconstitution of urban and regional organizations. All this bears some resonance with Peck and Tickell’s argument that, despite the increasing importance of political struggle and institutional restructuring at regional and supranational scales, such ‘processes continue to be significantly articulated at the level of the nation state, even if they are not exclusively rooted there’ (Peck and Tickell, 1995a: 24, emphasis in original).

The current restructuring also shows that we must be wary of assuming a linear drift from government to governance. The literature often assumes this, and usually places it within the general economic context of a parallel shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Again citing the example of the late 1990s UK, we see a new administration reintroducing government – in the form of assemblies in London, Northern Ireland and Wales, and a parliament in Scotland – and governance in the form of RDAs in English regions (including London). All this is indicative of a series of changes in the articulation of government and governance (Jessop, 1997a: 23) with, moreover, the state acting as a key site, generator and, through its own reconfiguration, a product of these dynamics. In a sense the state’s form and functioning is in a condition of perpetual motion/transformation, and changes in urban and regional governance must be linked to this. Similarly, a whole series of UK-wide processes – pensions, welfare to work, education reform, etc. – can be understood as being part and parcel of this reconstitution of the structural form and substantive functioning of the state.
It is with these factors in mind that the strategic-relational framework as developed by Jessop, and with its emphasis on state power as a social relation, would seem to be particularly apposite for exploring these complexities. It stresses how such power is ‘reproduced in and through the interplay between the state’s institutional form and the changing nature of political forces’ (Jessop, 1997a: 23–24). As the example of London’s changing governance illustrates, there is indeed a constant interplay between institutional forms and political forces. The latter will seek to use and shape the former to their advantage, but as the London case study also shows, this can never be guaranteed.

Finally, all these arguments could lay us open to the charge of ‘reifying’ or ‘fetishizing’ the activities of the central state apparatus in analysing the constitution of urban and regional governance (cf. Brenner, 1997: 280). However, in contrast to some of the theories discussed earlier, the theoretical framework adopted here is neither scale specific or scale dependent. As a relatively abstract account of relational state power, it can be applied towards an understanding of any level of state activity, from the local to the supranational, and to the ways in which these territorially bounded actions interact and support each other. The content of such actions will only be uncovered through concrete research, but one of the very strengths of the approach is that it lays a stress on the conjuncturally determined nature of politically driven state activity. There will always be a plurality of possible strategies and of scalar fixes, even within one nation-state, and the outcome is always open to contestation and struggle. This stress on the process and the ‘constitutive properties’ of political selectivity and representation can alert us to a series of sociospatial structures, mechanisms and events that can alter the importance and role of certain geographical scales, reassert the importance of others, and sometimes create entirely new significant scales (cf. Swyngedouw, 1997). It is our contention that future studies in urban and regional governance should seek analytically to integrate into their research inquiries a deeper concern with both the spatiality of the state and with the associated scalings of political economic representation.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the ESRC for assistance in the form of the Local Governance Research Programme (Grant Awards L311253011 and L311253032). They are also grateful to Ron Johnston, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones and three anonymous referees for some very constructive comments on an earlier manuscript. Any remaining errors of fact and interpretation are solely the authors’ responsibility.

Note

1. The authors are grateful to Bob Jessop and Jamie Peck for suggesting this term.

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