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Towards a new New Regional Geography

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag versucht einen Überblick über den gegenwärtigen Stand der angloamerikanischen Regionalen Geographie zu geben. Zunächst werden die Diskussionen, die gegenwärtig im Hinblick auf die Restrukturierung des Begriffs geführt werden, zusammenfassend dargestellt. Denn wie auch immer der theoretische Zugriff aussieht, kommt dem Begriff der „Region“ vor allem in den Debatten um die Globalisierung eine Schlüsselrolle zu. Der zweite Teil des Beitrags beschäftigt sich mit neuen Formen von Regionalpolitik, die im Zusammenhang mit den Debatten um Globalisierung und „Region“ entstanden sind. Dabei wird besonderer Wert auf Ansätze gelegt, die beides zu verbinden suchen. Ausgehend von der gegenwärtigen historischen Diskurskonjunktur werden im dritten Teil neue wissenschaftsbasierte Netzwerke diskutiert, ehe dann abschließend Ansätze vorgestellt werden, die sich auf eine nicht darstellende (nonrepresentational) „Theorie“ von Praktiken bezieht, die erlaubt, „Regionen“ auf eine neue Art zu sehen.

Introduction

It is a great honour to be invited here to Leipzig to talk on the subject of regional geography. Over the last few years we at Bristol have been privileged to have a succession of German-speaking students taking our *MSc in Society and Space* course and these students have convinced me (if I ever needed convincing) of the need for closer contact between German-speaking and British geography. There are obvious parallels. Both German-speaking and British geography are being shaken up by new practical and theoretical agendas. Both German-speaking and British geography have been enlivened by an influx of exciting younger scholars. And both German-speaking and British geography seem to be concerned with the notion of regional geography, precisely at the point where the notion of the region has become, in certain senses, quite nebulous.

In this presentation, I want to talk in general about the region and regional geography before turning more specifically to work that I am

doing. Because this is the first paper, I will talk quite generally about regions, in certain ways trying to provide an agenda.

I will therefore address three main developments in the geography of regions. First of all, I will consider the impact of globalisation on regions. Then I will discuss new forms of regional policy. Finally I will consider the current conjuncture and the region, trying to identify what is new. The paper also provides some brief conclusions of a theoretical nature concerning the new, new regional geography.

1. Globalisation

Currently, there seem to be three main reactions to the discourse of globalisation:

1. *It's a fraud.* (eg. HIRST/THOMPSON, 1995). What we see is a period of internationalisation much like periods in the past. The notion of globalisation is based upon ignoring certain empirical trends and exaggerating others to the advantage of the global capitalist business class.
2. *It's for real.* We are living in a world of flows and intensities based upon an informational revolution which heralds the latest stage of historical development. The reaction can be found across the political spectrum. O'TUATHAIL and LUKE's (1994, p. 383) description from the left is typical; "Flows act as decentering, despatialising and dematerialising forces, compounding their own new social formations, or maybe 'inflowmations' or rezoned performatively developing alongside and against the geopolitical codes of spatial sovereignty. The local and the global commingle in new blurring modes of production speeding across and outside of national boundaries". Kenichi OHMAE's (1990) work, from the right, makes very similar points, though it draws rather different conclusions.
3. *It's true and not true.* We live in a world of greater 'connexity'. As MULGAN (1997, p. 21) puts it. "Today the world is more like a cacophonous city, connected in a million ways. Continents are criss-crossed with roads, and railways, airports and distribution centres. Telephones, computers, faxes, television sets, mobile devices, even electronic tags on consumer goods, on clothing can all be connected together, so that the world somehow seems like the market place of a medieval city, a buzz of messages, letters, newspapers, complaints and requests, small advertisements and bombastic slogans."

In other words, there is increasing economic, social, cultural and political interdependence. But, as Mulgan also makes clear, there are also new forms

of independence. Thus globalisation cannot be described as one process, but only as a set of more or less effective processes of connection.

But, however different are the accounts of globalisation, what is extraordinary is that the region is central to each of them.

Thus, in the 'its a fraud' reaction the region which was often formerly a bulwark against capitalism, becomes instead the region with a new role, as the bulwark of a kinder, more caring capitalism. Based on a mixture of concepts like the Europe of the regions, the construction of high trust economies through various civic institutions, preferential financing for industry, and quite often, an appeal to the German economic model, this reaction sees the region as a crucial element in restoring the depredations of western neoliberalism, and as the starting point for a new order (eg. HUTTON, 1995).

In the 'it's for real' reaction what is often forecast is the rise of regional or city states (see PORTER, 1990, OHMAE, 1990, TAYLOR, 1997) based on territories able to win out in the globalising economy by fostering what PORTER (1990) has famously called competitive advantage, usually based on specific strategic assets.

Finally, in the 'it's true and not true' reaction, the region is a means of obtaining some degree of local control over global forces through a process of careful institution building, based usually on achieving what I and Ash Amin have called 'institutional thickness' and on attendant notions of 'associational' democracy (AMIN/THRIFT, 1992, 1995). Whereas this literature began by being associated with Italian industrial districts, it has now become much more concerned with regions that are of a diffuse character, and with the examples of a 'recombinant' capitalism (STARK, 1996) that are possible on the capitalist proving ground of Eastern Europe.

Of course, in all this, the impact of telecommunications has clearly been important as both an index and a driver of globalisation (GRAHAM/MARVIN, 1996). But the importance of telecommunications can be interpreted in two ways. One is as a new informational mode of production (see CASTELLS, 1996) in which information technology is at the heart of a new socio-technical paradigm. In this interpretation, telecommunications is the touchstone of contemporary societies. But in another interpretation, this view is seen as shot through with technological determinism. An alternative view is therefore put forward in which telecommunications are a part of a set of different networks of practice, each of which has a different stance towards their use. Using actor-network theory, such a view stresses the wide variety of intermediaries needed to mobilise these networks and the sheer work required to build and maintain them.

2. Regional Policy

Along with the rise of a discourse on globalisation has gone a remarkable outpouring of policy work which, significantly, has often focused on the regional level. Much of this outpouring is based on three related principles. First, there is the need to 'relocalise' regional economies and policies, not in any fortress – like way but in a way which allows regions some greater degree of autonomy. Second, there is the need to see the region as in process, constantly changing through time. Then, third, there is the attempt to see the region as a site of many intersecting processes operating at many different scales, rather than as a coherent and self-contained whole. This often means that regions are seen as networks, although BARRY (1996) has made it clear that such a description has its own political rhetoric in Europe.

There are four main examples of these principles in action. The first is new forms of democratic politics, based on institution-building in which the process of institution-building is as important as the ends, especially on the ideas of associative democracy made popular in the United States by Cohen and Rogers and in Europe by writers like HIRST (1994) and MULGAN (1997). The emphasis is firmly on the process of getting to the result, rather than the result itself. As Ash Amin and I have put it (AMIN/THRIFT, 1995, p. 55), the aim is to "give a community (local or otherwise) sufficient potential for strategic action (by a process of institutional 'filling in' rather than 'hollowing out') through a process of negotiation, in which the process of negotiation is itself a vital part of the institution-building process. Thus the social consciousness of a community is changed, and not just its institutional framework, and, in this process, the community is endowed with agency."

The second example are new forms of response to the world economy, based especially on the template provided by regions which are rich in what STORPER (1992) has called 'untraded interdependencies'; the kind of informal know-how and expertise which is distributed through the industries of a region which gives it a competitive edge. Originally the outcome of the literature on industrial districts, this regional discourse has now turned into more general discourse on the determinants of the 'learning region', using ideas from institutional economics, economic sociology, management theory, and, increasingly, cultural theory. The idea is to produce regions which are in a state of permanent innovation, at 'the edge of chaos' but never falling into it. Much greater emphasis is therefore given to culture, both as a means of trying to detect what is different about different kinds of organisational culture, and as a means of trying to centre the conversations in houses, clubs, restaurants, bars and the like which were considered peripheral to the success of regional economies but which

increasingly, at least as far as the transmission of knowledge and learning capacity go, may be central.

The third example is new forms of associative economic organisations which tend to be localised, but also other have a strongly international dimension. These forms of organisation (Table 1) may seem new but are often based on old forms (for example, the principles behind LETS were first tried in the 1820s, in Britain). What is new is that they are often conscious attempts to give some measure of control back to local economies by producing local monies, fairer trade relations, and more ethical investment.

Table 1: New Forms of Economic Organisation	
<i>Trade</i>	<i>Housing</i>
Community Enterprise	Community Self-Build
Fair Trade	Green Homes
Telecottages	
Community Shops and Pubs	<i>Land</i>
Ethical Shops	Community Land Trusts
	Development Trusts
<i>Money</i>	Community Orchards/Woodlands
Community Trusts and Foundations	Managed Workspace
LETS	City Farms
Time Dollars	Community Gardens/Allotments
Credit Unions	
Community Loan Funds	<i>Transport</i>
Socially Responsible Investment	Car sharing
	Community Transport
<i>Food</i>	Rail Line and Station Re-opening
Box Schemes	
Subscription Farming	<i>Lifestyles</i>
Food Co-ops	Eco Feedback
WI Markets	Global Action Plan
	Permaculture
<i>Energy</i>	Eco-Villages
Community Recycling Schemes	
Community Composting Schemes	
Community Renewable Energy Schemes	
Domestic Energy Service Companies	

The fourth and final example is what CASTI (1996) has called the 'would-be worlds' created by advances in computing, advances that make it possible to visualise the consequences of the decisions made in regions. This is no longer an attempt at forecasting, but rather an attempt to produce an 'ecology of the future' by attempting to outline possible alternatives.

But, in all this frenzy of activity, three important points need to be made. First, it is still not clear how we deal with successful regions (like the south-east of England) which seem to have only limited economic 'atmosphere' but are still successful. Are they planar regions at all? Or are they just a multinodal set of successful agglomerations – linked certainly, but only in quite limited ways. Thus Bill Gates has produced a world map of concentrated populations of computer programmers which, in many ways, are more connected with each other than the regions they are located in. As LATOUR (1997, p. 3) puts it "the first advantage of thinking in networks is that we get rid of 'the tyranny of distance' or proximity; elements which are close when disconnected may be infinitely remote if their connections are analysed; conversely and elements which would appear as infinitely distant are brought back into the picture. I can be one metre away from someone in the next telephone booth and be never the less more connected to my mother 6000 miles away; an Alaskan reindeer might be ten metres from another one and they might nevertheless be cut off by a pipeline (...) that makes their mating forever impossible; my son may sit at school with a young Arab his age but in spite of this close proximity in first grade they may drift apart in worlds that at later grades are incommensurable; a gas pipe may lie in the ground close to cable television glass fibre and nearby a sewage pipe, and each of them will nevertheless continuously ignore the parallel words lying around them."

Second, in truth there is still only the most limited understanding of how to stop or ameliorate capitalist uneven development. The turn to cultural explanation, for example, seems only to produce another take on the problem, by indicating that core and periphery exist in a whole series of registers (THRIFT/OLDS, 1996). As one computer expert put it, "you are either one of the people in the middle spinning the wheel, or one of these on the outside being spun", and this observation pertains to conversations as much as it does to money.

Third, there is only the most limited understanding of what makes a successful region. For example, GRABHER (1996) has argued for an economic form of the law of requisite variety by hypothesising that really successful regions will have a variety of organisational forms, on the grounds that it is better to generate many of these forms (some of which will fail) in order to make sure that success is 'in the bank' over a number of turns of the economic cycle.

3. The Current Conjuncture and the Region

So what is really new about the current economic conjuncture? I would argue that the novelty of the present lies in a number of developments

which have chiefly taken place since the 1960s. Three of these seem particularly significant.

The first is the importance of knowledge as an economic asset (NONAKA/TAKEUCHI, 1995), and similarly the way that property rights have become mixed up with knowledge, making certain kinds of knowledges much more likely to be commodified than before, from software through to all kinds of media. Linked to this process is a second novelty. Increasingly we live in a world in which nearly all knowledge is mediated. A vital part of the process of commodification, and the rise of a new 'cultural' economy is therefore the products of the media, which constitute another level of transaction in the economy and not just another set of industries (THRIFT, 1997). Finally, the third novelty is the increasing attempts to engineer the subjectivity of managers and workers by business. Increasingly, as Foucault's 'pastoral' mode of control moves into business through the agency of what ROSE (1996) calls the 'psy' disciplines, business has turned to attempts to inculcate *self*-discipline in managers and workers through institutions like new forms of training, new ideologies of self-formation, and the like. Since this engineering of subjectivity is itself mediated, involving new means of envisioning, for example, it is linked to the first two developments in strong ways.

These newer developments have produced actor-networks which did not exist previously which allow new business ideas to circulate around the world and become embedded in subjects much more rapidly than before. In other words, an economy of concepts, with its own institutions and geographies, has been added to what we have previously regarded as the economy. For example, I have recently been involved with the study of how ideas from complexity theory have been imported into business, through a strategy centred on the Santa Fe Institute. My intent is to show that these ideas have their own regional geography.

4. Conclusions

A 'new, new regional geography' has now become something approaching an orthodoxy in parts of Anglo-American Geography. As Table 2 shows, it is based on a specific theoretical methodological and political stance which is founded in what LAW (1994, p. 195) has helpfully called a *relational materialism*, which is based on a search for "decentred, distributed, but rigorous ways of knowing and being", and therefore stresses interconnectedness, hybridity and possibility.

To many commentators first coming across this body of work, it often seems tentative, partial, and pluralist. In other words, what is regarded as

'theory' seems overly modest. But I think not. My sense is that this form of theory is one which is best able both to tell stories of how the processes of the world works *and* to situate itself within that set of processes.

Table 2: "New New Regional Geographies"

1. Substantive Content	– Ethnicity/nationality – Gender/Sexuality – Subjectivity/identity
2. Method	– Mainly qualitative (eg. ethnography, focus groups, life histories) – Reflexive
3. Theoretical Discourse	– Highly theoretical – Tends to draw on a number of theoretical traditions, but especially relational materialism
4. Politics	– Takes political stances – Most attention to marginalised groups
5. Space	– Relational materialism, stressing interconnectedness, hybridity, and practices

In turn, this new relational materialist approach provides a fascinating set of research areas which all tend to cluster around three main research questions. The first of these questions is how the structures of power that dominate our everyday lives are built-up from a range of different materials and, as importantly, are then the subject of continuous effort to keep in place: in other words, how do these structures *work*. The second question concerns how subjectivity is built up – performatively and productively – as a part of these structures. Thus much attention is currently being given to issues like sexuality and ethnicity. Finally, there is the question of space. In what ways does space intervene and constitute? Until recently much of the effort in geography has been expended upon the issue of the iconic and textual representation of space. Thus countless papers have been written concerning landscape, scripts, and such like, (as instanced by the postcolonial turn), all following essentially discursive and contemplative models of human action. But, now, much more attention is being paid to practices and to more tactile issues like affect, passion, desire and dreaming which bulk as large in the way in which structures of power are produced. Accordingly, the interest in qualitative methods from the social sciences

which has been rampant in geography over the last decade has been supplemented by methods from the humanities which are much more concerned with what might be called the poetics of everyday life.

A long way from regional geography? Perhaps. But more likely, it is through this 'non-representational' turn (THRIFT, 1996) that many of the most pressing issues about the culture of regions will be able to be seen anew and will, in turn, be able to stimulate new policy initiatives of the kind I outlined above. There is an old Chinese curse "may you live in exciting times". In the case of geography now, I think the curse is actually a blessing.

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