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Journal Item

How to cite:

Allen, John and Cochrane, Allan (2010). Assemblages of State Power: Topological Shifts in the Organization of Government and Politics. *Antipode*, 42(5) pp. 1071–1089.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00794.x>

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Assemblages of State Power: Topological Shifts in the Organization of Government and Politics

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Final draft July 2009

Introduction

Neil Brenner's book, *New State Spaces* (2004) is an interesting distillation of the changes that he and others believe amounts to an altered geography of state power. At the core of his analysis is the view that purely national territorial models are no longer, if indeed they ever were, able to make sense of a state whose powers have been dispersed, decentred and fragmented. The privatization of authority, the shift from government to governance, and the proliferation of regulatory bodies, has made it altogether more difficult to pin down the institutional geography of power and the decision-making processes that shape political outcomes. Along with Bob Jessop, Martin Jones (Jessop et al, 2008, Jones, 2001) and others, Brenner points to a wholly reorganized state apparatus; one evidently transformed by a reconfiguration of the scales that govern state power. If the national scale has been destabilized from above by the growth of supra-national institutions, it has also been undermined from below by the devolution and decentralization of decision making powers to sub-national institutions. In this evolving institutional landscape, the process of rescaling is thought to hold the key to a new geographical arrangement of powers. But for Brenner, importantly, this does not mean that national state institutions have lost their significance or grip. Rather, they are now said to operate in a multiscale institutional hierarchy where the geography of state leverage is far more malleable and indeterminate than hitherto.

So malleable in fact that, in this more ill defined landscape of political power now evident across the UK, even vertical or hierarchical notions of scale have been drawn into question. It takes a certain leap of conceptual faith to think about state power outside of any notion of hierarchy, but in many respects that is precisely where the

critique of geographical scale developed by Jones, Woodward and Marston (2007) has finally led us.

Critical of any ‘up-down’ vertical imagery of power often smuggled in by those who wish to defend a more complex version of geographical scale, Jones et al wish to shift our attention to a more immanent version of power where the interplay of forces within any particular site is the subject of attention. Crucially, on this view, the interleaving of power relationships does not take place ‘from above’, directed from ‘on high’ as it were, but through power working on subjects rather than over them. The idea that power may radiate out from a central point, like Whitehall or Washington, along a horizontal axis is also eschewed, but not without ambiguity. Since the interplay of forces *across* a multiplicity of sites remains their focus, a residual horizontal imagery appears to stand in contrast to hierarchical powers, scaled or otherwise.

On the face of it, such arguments do not seem unreasonable. The attempt by Brenner and others to stretch the language of scale to account for a new institutional complexity that views multi-scalar power relations as multiple, overlapping, tangled, interpenetrating, as well as relational, clearly aims to move beyond simple versions of state hierarchy, even if they themselves cannot embrace an alternative horizontal option. However, it seems to us that neither these attempts to rescue scalar vocabularies, nor the attempt of Jones et al to think through horizontally extensive spaces gets to grips with the new arrangement of state powers. Both accounts, we would argue, are starting from the wrong place if they wish to understand the changing geographies of state power. Both in their different ways help to provide more complex institutional geographies, but not a spatial architecture within which the new institutional arrangements may be grasped. .

In this paper, we pursue a different line of inquiry from either multi-scalar or multi-site power relations. We start from a topological account of state spatiality, one that draws attention to the spatial reconfiguration of the state's institutional hierarchies and the ways in which a more *transverse* set of political interactions holds that hierarchy in place, but not in ways conventionally understood through a topographical lens. In contrast to a vertical or horizontal imagery of the geography of state power, what states possess, we suggest, *is reach, not height*. Topological thinking suggests that the powers of the state are not so much 'above us' as more or less present through mediated and real-time connections, some direct, others more distanced. Indeed, what is arguably novel about the state's spatiality in the current moment is its ability to exercise its *hierarchical powers of reach* in ways that reflect a topological appreciation of space and place. Such an appreciation, in our view, is more in tune with the tangle of interactions and forces that Jones et al have sought to grasp and one with which a scalar imagination has striven to come to terms.

In what follows, we first try to show what an altered geography of state power looks like when it works through its institutional reach in an *intensive*, not an extensive, manner. In so far as topological accounts disrupt our sense of what is near and what is far, serving to loosen defined times and distances, they call into question the very idea that power may simply be distributed through either hierarchically or horizontally extensive spaces. Following that, we borrow from Saskia Sassen's work on spatio-temporal assemblages to piece together a vocabulary capable of portraying the redistribution of powers that has taken place between central government in Britain and one of its key (city) regions, the South East of England. With the emergence of a more tangled play of forces and governance structures, we go on to show how the new arrangement is best understood through a topological view based upon an *assemblage*

of political actors, some public, some private, where elements of the central and local state are ‘lodged’ within the region, not acting ‘above’, ‘below’ or ‘alongside’ it.

What is politically at stake in favouring topology over topography, spatial intension over spatial extension, is that such an approach is able to show how the state’s hierarchical powers have not so much been rescaled or redistributed as reassembled in terms of *spatial reach*. Equally, a topological understanding of the politics involved also reveals what lies behind the opening up of authority in the more complex institutional arrangements unfolding.

Institutional powers of reach

In arguing for a topological approach to the geography of state power, it is hard to dislodge the idea of a central state apparatus, whether unitary or otherwise, in possession of far-reaching powers. Far-reaching, in this context, may be understood in terms of horizontal or hierarchical reach, but in either case the ‘reach’ in question is one of power being extended outwards or downwards over space. In topographical terms, the greater the distance that powers are dispersed or decentralized, the more spatially *extensive* is the reach of the state’s authority. Reach, here, can be measured in miles and kilometres, but in practice the ‘reach of government’ more often than not refers to its pervasive quality; the ability of the state to permeate everyday life (Painter, 2006) or to make itself present in the regions ‘at-a-distance’ (Rose, 1999). Reach, in this latter sense, is *intensive*; it is inseparable from the social relationships which comprise it. And when you put spatial intension into the mix that is the tangled hierarchies of state decision making, where authority is shared between public and private agencies, it makes it difficult to entertain the idea that a simple top-down or centre-out account of central government is at work.

Equally, that is not to argue that the machinery of central government, made up as it is of more than one voice or set of agendas, has somehow flattened out. The point here is *not* that state hierarchies have transformed themselves into horizontal, networking arrangements, but rather that the hierarchies of decision making that matter are *institutional*, not scalar ones. Power and authority, on this view, are not so much seeping away from the corridors of Whitehall as being subject to renegotiation and displacement by the political actors drawn within reach. In that sense, the apparatus of state authority is not so much ‘up there’ or indeed ‘over there’, as part of a spatial power arrangement within which different elements of government, as well as private agencies, exercise *powers of reach* that enable them to be more or less present within and across the UK’s urban and regional political structures.

Central government offices are not only embedded within the regions, central decision makers reach into the politics of the regions (as well as urban and local politics) in often less embedded ways through a mix of distanced and proximate actions. The machinery of Whitehall may be thought of as far-reaching, then, in the sense that - through the circulation of priorities, direct negotiations and real-time engagements - agendas are mediated and translated for specific political ends. Authority may be detached from the ‘centre’, but it is re-embedded in regions and urban areas as part of a ‘national regional’ or ‘urban’ assemblage. Yet, in this topological landscape, what works for central government in terms of its hierarchical powers of reach also has the, perhaps, unintended consequence of opening up that authority to negotiation and displacement because all of the governing agencies are more or less present through distanced relationships, direct ties and real-time connections. The ability to draw political actors within close reach through the simultaneity and succession of institutional arrangements provides a context within which negotiations may be

brokered directly, rather than from afar or across a spatial divide that places the 'centre' of political power above everyone else. Little really happens at-a-distance, on this view, because the authority at the centre has already made its presence felt in its dealings with regional and local bodies, public, private and third sector, which, in turn, negotiate their own interests, and may reinterpret the lines of accountability as well as exploit the ambiguities inherent in, say, central government targets to suit their own ends. In practice, we believe that the mediated relationships of power multiply the possibilities for political engagement, drawing political actors closer through real-time technologies or reaching out to them through a succession of enrolling strategies.

Equally, regional and local bodies are in a position to translate growth over development possibilities by reaching out to sites of authority and expertise beyond those directly engaged in shaping their particular area. The use of consultancies or independent think tanks, for example, to legitimate a particular policy agenda or attempt to displace one in circulation by central government is a form of reach which cuts across any simple notion of spatial hierarchies of authority and control. The cross-cutting nature of governing relationships as different bodies, agencies and organizations mediate the decision-making process, often mobilizing resources independently of any central authority, reflects, as we will go on to show, a mix of time-spaces embedded in the regions. That said, the different temporal rhythm and institutional pace of much of the central state apparatus also enables it, for instance, to put some aspects of policy beyond reach, by extending events in space and time, and thus distancing them from certain elements of regional and urban policy agendas.

In this topological take on the politics of central/regional relations and the altered geography of state power that it illuminates, what comes to the fore turns out to be less of a movement of power downwards and rather more of an interplay between

parts of central, regional and local authority ‘lodged’ at different sites within the region. Some of this interplay takes place indirectly by authorities *reaching into* the politics of regions and localities in an attempt to steer and constrain agendas; some of it operates in a more direct fashion by *drawing within close reach* those that are able to broker and influence decisions; whilst other forms of mediated interaction *reach out* beyond the region or locality to shape events within. In each case, the powers of reach exercised are not a simple form of spatial extension where an authority’s powers pervade every square metre of a given territory. Rather, proximity and reach play across one another in a variety of intensive ways to bridge the gap erected by the physical barriers of distance. Crucially, though, as argued, none of the powers of reach subvert the institutional hierarchy that is the state, yet neither do they operate along the lines of a top-down or centre-out geography.

State hierarchies

In her attempt to develop an alternative geography of environmental governance, Harriet Bulkeley (2005) drew attention to the fact that notions of hierarchy have tended to be under theorized in debates between scalar and horizontally networked approaches. On the one hand, she notes that there is little enthusiasm today, even among defenders of scalar arrangements, for the ‘Russian Doll’ model of power where discrete scales are hierarchically ordered and contained one within the other from the global down to the local. Brenner (2001, 2004), for one, wishes to preserve a multiscalar politics that evolves in a more tangled fashion, mosaic-style in its configuration. On the other hand, she notes that in response to the frequent conflation of power hierarchies and vertical scales in the geography literature other, more network-inspired, approaches (see Amin, 2002 for example) have rejected the notion of hierarchically ordered scales in favour of exploring the more horizontal sets of

relations between actors across different sites. For our part, we want to hold onto the fact of powerful state hierarchies without having to work within a scalar geography *or* within a horizontal geography, networked or otherwise.

As we see it, there is nothing in a topological account of state power which has to pit vertical spatial configurations against horizontal ones. The contrast to a topological appreciation of space and place is a topographical one, not a smooth or a scalar one, and the different geographies of reach involved in the exercise of the state's powers do not fit into a predetermined spatiality, whether vertical or horizontal. We have drawn attention to the cross-cutting nature of political arrangements, where distant powers intersect with more proximate modes, and, to us, this suggests a more *transverse* set of government interactions (see Allen, 2008). By that we mean, for instance, that any regional governance arrangements would involve central government agencies attempting to manoeuvre themselves into positions which both engage with *and* cut across regional as well as local lines of decision-making. The result from one vantage point may resemble a rather messy, lattice-like pattern of political negotiations and diverse capabilities, but from another angle simply appear as a series of intersects between polyarchic institutions: one set of political lines of decision-making crossing another set of lines operating in topological fashion.

On this view, the reworked geography of state power that comes into view is closer to the kind envisaged by Saskia Sassen (2006), where different bits and pieces of institutional authority are drawn within reach of one another. State hierarchies, together with private agencies, partnerships and supranational institutions, may in that sense be seen as part of a geographical assemblage of distributed authority in which power is continually negotiated and renegotiated. Moreover, for Sassen, as we outline in the next section, it is precisely the mix of time-spaces embedded in the material

practices of the different actors and agencies in places such as London and the South East that goes a long way towards shaping both its distinctive politics and its diverse institutional apparatus.

For Sassen, the novel geographies that she has in mind are a product of the disassembly and reassembly of - what invariably falls under scalar terminology - bits of national, regional, local and global institutional apparatus. The contingent quality of a spatial assemblage, its partial character and intersecting components, are drawn from her understanding of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988), and relatedly Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005) (see also Ong, 2007). The sense in which there is a 'flat' ontological dimension to this understanding, however, does not form part of her usage when talking about the emergence of new spatio-temporal assemblages and is potentially misleading in a geographical, as opposed to a philosophical, context. It is misleading because the 'flatness' referred to by Jones et al is all too easily conflated with spatially horizontal linkages and connections, when the intent of their term is to avoid predetermined or axiomatic interpretations in advance of any inquiry; that is, top-down or centre-out interpretations which encompass or are imposed *upon* the subject matter at hand (see Jones III et al, 2007).

State hierarchies are what they say they are: hierarchical forms of prescribed authority, but, to repeat ourselves, they work through geographies of reach, not height. The sense in which central government is geographically 'higher up' is, as Timothy Mitchell (1991) has argued, a reification, an effect of the state's claim to spatial authority over a given territory. If we wish to avoid this reification, the solution is not to shift to a horizontal as opposed to a vertical axis of political practice, but to trace the different lines of authority, negotiation and engagement, and how they criss-cross one another in terms of their distinctive rhythms and spatial practice. In the

next section, we attempt to do this by considering the emergent assemblage that is the South East of England, drawing upon Sassen's sense of the new geography of state power to find a suitable vocabulary to express the political and institutional changes underway.

Assembling the South East

Coming to terms with this shift in the spatial architecture of regionalism and its associated redistribution of powers is itself part of what Brenner and others attempted to grasp, but in a language which, in our view, tends to obscure more than it reveals. The more convoluted the scale imagery becomes with its recalibrations and relativisations, the less it seems to be able to capture what is, in effect, a fundamental reorganization of the geography of state power. For that, as mentioned, we have found it useful to turn to the work of Saskia Sassen. In her recent attempt to capture what is distinctively new about power and globality, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (2006), she draws attention to the interaction of the often quite different time frames and spatial orders of the actors who actively produce the realm of global domestic politics. Sassen's concern is how to represent the 'national' setting as the site within which the forces of globalization are played out, rather than the 'region', 'urban' or 'local', but there are useful parallels in the vocabulary upon which she draws to make sense of the new cross-cutting political and economic arrangements. In particular, she makes use of the idea that the 'national' is something that gets assembled and reassembled over time by different actors who jostle, co-exist and interrupt one another to gain advantage. The different forces at work, however, are neither 'national', 'global', or 'regional' for that matter, but are assembled in place, so to speak, out of a mix of spatial and temporal orders. These

emergent *spatio-temporal assemblages*, as she refers to them, perform a key role in effectively unbundling what were formerly seen as exclusive territories such as the nation state, but in ways that produce partial formations of private and public authority operating according to their own distinctive rhythms and spatial practices.

The novel global formations that she has in mind, that take shape in places like London and the South East, are configurations of territory, authority and rights that combine older elements of the legal and bureaucratic system of governance, for instance, with new economic capabilities and norms drawn from elsewhere. Part private, part public, with bits and pieces of institutional authority, legal rights and territorial infrastructure, the emergent assemblage, which is neither national nor global, represents an unstable power formation in the making. It is unstable not only because different economic, political and legal elements may co-exist in novel arrangements, but also because such elements may operate according to different temporal rhythms and institutional pace which come together in both enabling and contested ways. In short, a mix of time-spaces embedded in the practices of the different actors involved - from state agencies and jurisdictional authorities to global firms and supranational institutions - may work to disassemble and reassemble 'national regional' or 'global regional' political spaces.

It is widely recognised that the South East of England fits uneasily into any scalar hierarchy, if only because of its sheer size (or scale), since 'London and the South East are inextricably interlinked in terms of workforces, incomes, services, markets, supply chains and migration patterns' (SEEDA, 2006, p. 4). By implication, this often means that it is understood as some sort of an anomaly (not really a 'region' but a 'super region' or the 'region' whose dominance somehow confirms the other regions of the UK as proper – disadvantaged or 'distressed' – regions) (see, e.g. Cochrane,

2006). However, a different case has also been made. 'Taken as a whole,' we are told in the Regional Economic Strategy, 'the Greater South East (comprising London, the East of England and the South East) is an advanced industrial super-region that is meeting today the challenges that other regions will face tomorrow' (SEEDA, 2006, p. 4). The justification for the suggestion that somehow the South East is an experimental laboratory within which the future can be mapped may not be entirely convincing, but what matters is that a political story is being constructed that is capable of justifying the region's continuing national significance. We believe that by exploring the ways in which the South East has been made up as a city region, a process of political construction is revealed which makes it possible to explore some of the ways in which geographies of power are assembled and new political possibilities generated.

Notwithstanding Sassen's tendency to be over-schematic in her analysis, what one can borrow from it is a language with which to capture the shifts in regional architecture that, in places like the South East, take their shape from the variety of relations that stretch across and beyond given regional boundaries, yet are simultaneously 'lodged' within it. The loose unbound geography of authority and heightened temporal order thought by Sassen to be enjoyed by global financial centres such as London have their analogous political forms in the central government agencies and partnerships whose reach and authority in the city region are geared to agendas with a different temporal rhythm and pace from many of the day-to-day institutional pressures experienced by local politicians and bureaucracies.

Geographies of reach

A key part of Sassen's novel geography of authority in global cities like London and the 'national' framework into which they are inserted is the co-existence of diverse actors operating within different spatial and temporal frames. Oddly though, there is little sense in her analysis that actors distant in space and time are part of the equation. In order to understand the different power-plays that shape the politics of the South East, however, it is necessary to grasp the various ways in which government departments, government-sponsored agencies and private partnerships stretch and reach into the region.

The case of the government sponsored sustainable communities plan (ODPM, 2003) is particularly instructive in this context. At the core of this plan, as we have argued elsewhere (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, Cochrane, 2006, Cochrane and Etherington, 2007), was an understanding which defined sustainability as *economic* sustainability. In principle it was suggested that ways needed to be found to ensure that economic growth would be sustained, for example, through the provision of necessary infrastructure and housing for key workers, while also ensuring that areas could be protected from environmental depredation, transport networks maintained, flooding avoided and, above all, the quality of life for residents sustained. The means of achieving this have, interestingly, led to the identification of yet more 'sub-regions', but in this case they cut across the official regional boundaries. Arrangements in the major growth areas stretch across those boundaries and link together government departments, government sponsored agencies and new 'partnership' institutions. Strategies have been developed for sub-regions in Ashford, the Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes and the South Midlands, and the London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough corridor (ODPM, 2003; ODPM, 2004).

A major role of these growth areas was identified as being to provide housing for 'key' workers - broadly defined, those required to provide the necessary social infrastructure, including nurses, teachers, and other public sector employees - as part of that process (Raco, 2007). Indeed, much of the debate around development and planning in the South East has actually been focused on house building – and the various growth points have all been defined in terms of housing targets. The targets proposed in the draft plan for the South East prepared by the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA, 2006) have been substantially amended in the revisions proposed by the Secretary of State which suggests that this is less distant government than part of a continual negotiation and renegotiation of political agendas, especially given the downturn in the housing market and the shift in attitude among private developers.

Targets, in this sense, are part of the way central government departments *reach out* through the circulation of priorities, funding arrangements and solutions, yet they are encountered as a form of negotiable authority where the manipulation of agendas and the translation of possibilities enter into the play of forces. As each new regional drama unfolds, the expertise, skills and interests of a range of professionals, some operating at arms-length reach, have the potential to modify or translate central goals, or broker alternative regional futures. This is not to suggest that the political pressures of the centre can be merely negotiated away, but that such pressures often require collaboration to be achieved, seemingly with an increasing diversity of political actors and agencies.

In this context, the role of external consultants is, of particular significance. They play a major part in constructing and shaping regional policy documents, legitimising the ways in which regional programmes are developed. It is, however, important to

recognise that they do not play a determining role, in the sense that they import templates and attempt to impose them, but are rather engaged in delivering what the 'regional' agencies want of them. That is, they tend to confirm existing policy directions and sometimes give shape to them. These are rarely global consultancies, even if they draw on such rhetoric, but specialise in providing support to organizations embedded in the region who may draw others *within close reach* to counter the political authority of central government actors. So, for example, in the Regional Economic Strategy prepared by the South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA, 2006) the scenario planning exercise drew on work undertaken by the consulting arm of St. Andrews University's Business School. One of the four scenarios, perhaps unsurprisingly, confirmed SEEDA's commitment to endorsing the South East as a world class region, while each of the other three promised economic decline for the region,. Equally unsurprisingly, in the scenario on the basis of which SEEDA has chosen to develop its strategy, it is the agency's own role in supporting the development of an effective infrastructure and an effective response to the global competitive challenge that is identified as being necessary to save the region (SEEDA, 2006, pp. 8-10).

In this context, the consultant agencies, and other policy groups and independent think tanks external to the region play a role as part of an extended circuit of institutional actors brought into the regional assemblage to gain leverage. The inclusion of a wider range of 'regional' actors opens up the prospect of a more, fluid, institutional setting which has the potential to cut-across hierarchies of government decision-making, with the possibility to skew agendas and steer targets in directions that may not have been fully anticipated by central government actors.

Moreover, there is a range of quasi-public and private bodies that are effectively 'lodged' in the space of the South East in some combination or other, each of which is seeking to build relations transversely by *reaching into* the political assemblage. The frustration of central government agencies as they attempt to pull levers in ways that achieve the changes they want at local and regional levels is apparent, as they introduce one organizational initiative after another. The government's review of sub-national economic development and regeneration (H.M. Treasury et al, 2007) heralds the end of regional assemblies and promises a lead role for Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in the preparation of regional strategies that bring together economic, social and environmental issues, and requires them to meet government targets on regional economic growth, as well as co-ordinate and plan programmes of housing growth. Responsibility for managing the RDAs passes to the Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, but at the same time local authorities are also expected both to agree the regional strategy and scrutinise the RDA's performance (taking on the regional assembly role), and the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) also has to sign off the regional strategy. Meanwhile the Homes and Communities Agency (sometimes referred to as Communities England) has been set up to bring together English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation, the Academy for Sustainable Communities and parts of the DCLG to take on responsibility for the development of social housing, and for working with local authorities and the private sector to encourage the development of affordable housing and foster regeneration (DCLG, 2007).

In one sense all of these initiatives are presented as if they were spatially neutral; that is, affecting every region and locality equally. But, of course, each of them will clearly have quite specific regional and local effects. Indeed, although they cover

England as a whole, in practice, some of the main issues being confronted are of particular relevance to the South East. So, for example, the main housing pressures are in the South East (both the official and the wider region) and giving the RDAs, rather than the local authorities or SEERA, responsibility is intended to ensure that economic and housing growth can be more closely linked. The expectation is that it will be possible to escape from the painstaking (and often painful) negotiation over housing targets reflected in the process of moving from draft plan to examination in public to consultation following DCLG proposals for amendment to the plan. One of the central roles of the Homes and Communities Agency was to deliver housing in the growth areas identified in the sustainable communities plan, but it was also given responsibility for taking forward plans for growth in other identified growth points.

The important point here is less what these various proposals actually set out, since many of them are themselves likely to change within a few years (particularly in today's changed economic climate in which growth is more of a dream than a reasonable expectation), just as the previous structures and programmes have changed with little explicit acknowledgment. Rather, at each twist and turn, new sets of actors and coalitions have come into play as part of the re-assembling of the South East. Instead of being fixated on the territorial or networked capabilities of all those involved, however, we have drawn attention to their more or less direct presence through mediated and distanced forms of reach. The ongoing attempts to forge a regional settlement, to broker the hierarchical decision-making process, is more provisional in part because of the cross-cutting mix of institutional agencies, public and private partnerships and interest groupings that currently make up the political assemblage that is the South East.

Making up the politics of a city region

London and the South East continue to have a peculiar position in Britain's imagined urban and regional hierarchy. In the past we have located the driver for the South East's identification as a region in terms of neo-liberal growth (Allen et al, 1998) and some aspects of the politics associated with the developing city region can only be explained as part of a neo-liberal project. But this politics is also deeply inflected with a topological understanding. Doreen Massey's discussion of the way in which London's definition as world city also operates as a central political statement which frames the development of national (UK) economic policy is a powerful exploration of the process at work (Massey, 2007). While in regional policy documents, the South East continues to be positioned as having a particular national role, as the driver of British economic success, it is also presented as facing growing global competitive pressure, particularly from the emerging city regions of Pacific Asia, as well as being positioned as a core 'European' region in the EU context (see Cochrane, 2006, Hall and Pain, 2006).

So, for example, the invention of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc, with an impressive sweep across the North or the Greater South East as it is mapped in planning documents, brings this set of global understandings directly into the language of and local regional politics. It is identified as part of a process of developing 'breakthrough' solutions in areas of global excellence' (SEEDA, 2006, p. 4). It is said to contribute: 'significantly to the UK economy, accounting for over 5% of national GVA (£50.3 billion in 2004)' (SEEDA, 2006 p. 24) but, above all, it is claimed that:

‘There is scope for further enhancement of the Arc as one of the world’s leading centres of the knowledge economy, given its assets including world class universities, high-tech spin-outs, innovation networks and highly skilled workforce. Much of the Arc is within the Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale Growth Areas designated under the Sustainable Communities Plan. This provides a unique opportunity to combine its innovation assets and development potential, thereby strengthening its position and spreading the benefits of success more widely across the Arc and beyond’ (SEEDA, 2006, pp. 24-5).

The extent to which the Arc has any material reality may be questionable, but this is a regional politics which is able to draw on a geographical imaginary that intersects with political agendas that, ‘lift out’ and ‘re-embed’ parts of ‘the national’ and ‘the global’ to justify its own position. This is a (neo-liberal) political project that is not ashamed to reach out to draw in and mobilise political threats and opportunities from outside (so that it is the ‘other’ global regions that are competitively near at hand that come to define the South East), while the topographically near (England’s other regions) are constructed as quite distant, even when as Doreen Massey reminds us they are actually closely connected through webs of economic relations (Massey, 2007).

At the same time as this global imagery is mobilised, however, the regional political assemblage also reaches out to other national political imaginaries. The ‘South East’ (or at any rate a truncated version of it) has come to be officially, formally, defined as a region in the same terms as other UK regions. And this regionalisation of the South East – its re-imagination as a region – has opened up spaces for new policy actors and

has encouraged them to look for different ways of defining the spaces within which they operate.

One aspect of the new South East regionalism – the regionalism of the official government office South East, rather than the ‘Greater South East’ - is about somehow locating it within a bigger city region, and (despite claims to polycentricity) recognising its subordination to London as economic driver, since London is seen to act ‘as an escalator region, attracting capital and people and then dispersing it across the wider South East – meaning that at the regional and local level people are drawn in to the wider South East to live, and increasingly to work’ (GOSE 2008. See also SEEDA 2006, p. 26).

There is nothing particularly contradictory about this construction of the South East as both subordinate to London, yet simultaneously a global city region, but it does highlight the existence of a complex politics of negotiation. The two moves, as a governing region and as a sub-region, represent effective ways of mediating different political and policy audiences. The geographies may code differently in each setting, but players involved in the constructions recognize their role in a double game of sorts, even if the duality is not openly acknowledged. Such *polyvalent* performances, as Charles Tilley refers to them (Tilley, 2002), reflect the practical challenges faced by regional institutions, and their parent organizations beyond the region. In such contexts, what matters is that in this politically serious game of regionalism, ostensibly the same region can be seen to mesh with different economic and political agendas. The same but different constructions of the region, whether orientated to a central state or global city agenda may be read differently depending upon which construction of the region is facing ‘outwards’.

A variation on this is the more recent attempt to map patterns of division and disadvantage within the region: so, for example, in a range of policy documents an emphasis has been placed on divisions within the region, highlighting pockets of unemployment in particular spaces and seeking to identify a territorial pattern of disadvantage (see, e.g., SEEDA 2002; GOSE 2002 and SEERA 2003, p. 27). The Draft Regional Plan prepared by SEERA and submitted to the government in 2006, also notes that the disparities between the incomes of individuals within the region are the widest of any English region (SEERA 2006, p. 6). The construction of the Coastal South East as a peripheral sub region is an example of the ways in which the political game of regionalism itself generates policy objects with which it is then possible to work.

It is undoubtedly the case that many, although not all of the most deprived wards in the regions can be tracked along the coast like a rather disconnected necklace from Thames Gateway Kent, through Thanet and Hastings, to Brighton and Hove and on to the Isle of Wight and Southampton. It is less clear, however, that there is anything else that holds these areas together, except the fact that some of them are inconveniently positioned for commuting to London, while their traditional economic bases no longer have the same salience as in the days of high Fordism (whether as tourist destinations or as ports or in light manufacturing). That, of course, makes them rather more like some places outside the South East than it does within it (see the discussion in Allen et al 1998 of the holes in the South East as growth region, pp. 70-73) . As a result, what is most apparent is that the region is problematized in different ways in response to a moving set of agendas that draw their dynamics from beyond the region.

The point here is that regional players draw on a series of geographical imaginaries, often simultaneously, to meet the demands of different sets of dynamics working themselves out within a variety of governing agencies in the UK, Europe and beyond. This is a regional politics, but it is a regional politics which can also be read as a national politics, just as there is a national regional politics. And it can also be understood as an international or global politics in which the key players against which the regional actors define themselves are located on the far side of the globe, perhaps even in China or India. But, at the same time, the polyvalent nature of the politics involved means that it is also a local politics focused on localised issues of deprivation and disadvantage which seeks to position them as regional issues.

In the discussion so far we have focused on the official politics of the region, the ways in which attempts have been made to construct the city region as a neo-liberal space, or – at any rate – a space within which it is possible to survive and prosper in the context of global neo-liberalism. We have stressed the extent to which this process has involved a reaching out to find ways of defining a more local politics – bringing near sets of relationships that reinforce particular sets of localised and national understandings and power relations. We have explored some of the ways in which regional and local political assemblages are constructed, as central government agencies reach into them, while also being required to negotiate within them. In other words, we have considered the ways in which a topological politics has been mobilised by those seeking to pursue a neo-liberal agenda or to find some means of surviving in a world dominated by such an agenda.

Topological politics

But this is to understate the possibilities for a more radical topological politics, as groups and social movements draw in apparently distant others to be active political

participants and partners. At local government level, Harriet Bulkeley's work has shown how shared agendas on climate change can allow for the building of transnational networks, making it possible to develop alternative policy frameworks and local initiatives (Bulkeley 2005, Bulkeley and Betsill 2003). The transition town movement has gone further in seeking to build an increasingly global movement based on linking local communities and locally based initiatives aimed at responding to the challenges of 'peak oil' (Transition Towns 2009). Eugene McCann has highlighted the importance of urban policy mobilities in a range of contexts (including drugs strategies) in ways that show how borrowing and reworking, reaching out to the apparently distant, can play a vital role in dominant assumptions of central or other levels of government (McCann 2008, McCann and Ward forthcoming).

Nor have these political possibilities been ignored in London and the South East. Doreen Massey and others (Massey 2004, Amin 2004) develop an approach which calls for a local politics that is also a global politics, reflecting the linkages of power and inequality that already exist and seeking to challenge and question them. She identifies the agreement negotiated while Ken Livingstone was mayor of London which brought Venezuelan oil to London, while transport planning expertise was made available to Caracas as a good example of this process (Massey 2007).

It is also possible to find more modest examples of local politics that go beyond the locality, regional politics that seek to redefine the region in a different context. One relates to the various attempts over several years to construct a wider Euro-region, linking local and regional authorities across the Channel. In some respects, of course, these attempts build on (supposed) territorial contiguity, but they are probably more significant because of the way in which they allow local governments to engage more directly in EU level politics, by reaching out both to the institutions of the EU and to

other local and regional agencies. The creation of the Transmanche Euro-region in the late 1980s was largely an initiative of the local and regional agencies (at first Kent County Council in England and the Nord Pas de Calais region in France, later joined by the two main Belgian regions). It allowed an admittedly rather minimal local foreign policy to develop (with the main emphasis being on tourism and on finding ways to access EU funding under the Interreg scheme, in which the partners were quite successful through the 1990s). Kent promoted itself as the 'European County' and, for a time, there was a small jointly funded secretariat in Brussels (Barber 1997, Cochrane 1994, Cannon 2005).

More recently, the wider Arc Manche 'region' (created in 1996) has drawn in a rather different set of authorities from Northern France and the South of England (Bretagne, Basse Normandie, Haute Normandie, Nord Pas de Calais and Picardie in France, and Kent, West Sussex, Hampshire, Devon, Brighton and Hove and Southampton in England), representatives of which come together in an 'assembly' once a year. The Arc Manche has the explicit purpose of influencing EU policy, particularly on maritime issues, and has been recognised at European programme level. It too has received EU funding to foster cross border collaboration, and it has even been seen (Euro-sceptic politicians) as the precursor to a new regional structure, which will undermine the UK state and have its capital in Calais (Miller 2008). The point here, however, is not to exaggerate the significance of these bodies, but rather to show not only that it is increasingly impossible to disentangle the politics of local, the regional, the urban, the national and the European but also that this opens up new political possibilities for those previously apparently trapped at 'local' level. The articulation of political demands has less to do with 'jumping scale' or formalizing extensive network connections, but rather more to do with the ability to reach directly into a

more 'centralized' politics where proximity and reach play across one another in particular ways.

Conclusion

Much of this paper has been concerned to find a suitable vocabulary through which the changing *geography* of state power can be expressed and the nature of political demands articulated. The attempt to stretch the language of scale to account for the new institutional complexity has, to our minds, revealed the limits of such a vocabulary. When scales are multiple, overlapping, tangled, interpenetrating, as well as relational, we begin to wonder whether the geographical term has not been stretched beyond its ability to account for the new arrangement of state powers. In many respects, it could be argued that the shifts in regional, national and global architecture have by-passed the notion of scale as a useful framing device for understanding the altered geography of state power. The significance of wider geographies to how state power is exercised, the manner in which the political actors of other institutional actors are folded into the here and now, are part of a spatial reconfiguration of power that, arguably, the vocabulary of scale strains to convey. Neither, however, does the topography of extensive networks capture the spatial shifts involved.

In our view, both scalar and networked topographies have found their limit and now push up against a topological world in which the ability of institutions to be far-reaching in their powers opens up for interrogation precisely what forms of reach are in operation today. The powers of reach that we considered in the context of exploring the shifting political agendas of the South East; that is, the ability of authorities to

reach into the politics of the region, to draw others within close reach or to reach beyond the region to influence events within, do not exhaust the topological shifts involved, but they do grasp something of the changing geography at work. In doing so, they also offer a vocabulary for capturing some of the workings of state power in the current moment.

But if topological geographies call into question the notion that state power may be redistributed through a hierarchization of spaces or that it can be scaled upwards and downwards or extended horizontally, then such a geography also has consequences for how political interests are mobilized and demands raised. If the apparatus of state authority is not so much ‘up there’ as more or less present in distanced or mediated terms, then claims made upon it may likewise ‘lift out’ and ‘re-embed’ demands in an attempt to influence government agendas. The many and varied political pressures, for example, that those who ‘govern’ the South East are subject to do not then simply emanate from ‘above’ or ‘below’; they may just as easily be folded in by lobby and interest groups with sufficient reach to engage the assembled forces. How political claims are pitched in relation to the central state then becomes less one of territorial or networked capabilities and more one of the topological twists and turns engaged in by different groups and constituencies. .

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