**Making up a region: the rise and fall of the 'South East of England' as a political territory**

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**Abstract**

Despite a growing academic scepticism about the significance of territory as a driver of politics, it remains a stubborn presence in the practice of politics. In the context of the wider UK devolution agenda, the first decade of this century saw the emergence of an English regionalist project, based around a series of regional institutions and governance networks. In other words, it appeared that a new framework for sub-national territorial politics was being constructed. With the help of a case study of the South East of England, this paper both explores both the fragility of the project in practice, but also notes the continuing importance of territory as a focus of politics, highlighting the importance of recognising that territory is not to be taken as something given, somehow pre-existing and waiting to be filled with politics, but rather as something that is actively formed and shaped through the political process

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The recognition that geography, and political geography in particular, need to be understood in relational terms has encouraged a degree of scepticism about approaches that identify territory as the basis of social and political organisation (see, e.g., Allen and Cochrane 2007, Amin 2004). One response has been to develop complex stories of multi-scalar, entangled and overlapping sets of power relationships where understandings of 'the geography of state leverage [are] far more malleable and indeterminate than hitherto' (Allen and Cochrane 2010, p. 1072). This approach is particularly reflected in the subtle and often painstaking work of Neil Brenner and others (Brenner 2004, Brenner et al 2008), and in a more descriptive way in analyses of multi-level governance (Bache and Flinders 2004, Healey 2004), drawn from debates around the European Union and its governance. More recently emphasis has been placed on the significance of the ways in which policies travel through space, being defined by their mobility as much as their often disputed origins, while necessarily being grounded and realised in particular places (McCann and Ward 2011)

Yet in some respects politics in practice still seems to retain a strong territorial focus, or at least territory seems still to provide a significant focus around which a range of political projects are organised. And territory has also made a strong theoretical comeback, as what Joe Painter has called 'the quintessential state space' (Painter 2010: 1090). Serious and often persuasive responses to some of the implications of following the logic of relational thinking through have sought to reclaim the notion of

territory in creative ways (see, e.g., Jonas 2011, Jones 2009. And Martin Jones has been particularly critical of the 'crude caricature' he suggests is being propagated by relational thinkers, 'whereby all non-relational thinking is conveniently displaced into notions of static space' (Jones 2009: 494). In rejecting any straightforward binary division between 'relational' and 'territorial' approaches, however, this paper seeks to frame the issue rather differently, in the hope of being able to move beyond both the crude caricature identified by Jones as well as the equally crude caricature of 'relational thinkers' which he presents in turn.

Rather than dismissing the importance of territory as a political site, here an attempt is made to locate it rather more precisely within a relational frame, setting out to understand territory not as given, but as made, not as necessary, but as contingent, in line with Anssi Paasi's injunction to see territory as a social process (Paasi 2003). Following Doreen Massey 2005, the paper sets out to understand regional space in terms of territory but does so through a lens that focuses on the ways in which places are defined and define themselves, are made and remade, imagined and re-imagined, in practice. It is probably not helpful to start by setting up false distinctions between the different approaches and dismissing one or the other as a result. More positively the aim here is build on the insights of Phil Allmendinger and Graham Haughton (2010) and reflect on the implications that the identification of soft spaces of governance and the existence of fuzzy boundaries may have for understanding the recent politics of English regionalism.

These issues are approached through a review of a particular territorial project that emerged from the wider politics of devolution in the UK after 1998. Devolution has

produced new territorial governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, while claims have also been made for the potential significance of the English regions and city-regions. The impact of devolution on the governance of the UK has been widely reviewed (see, e.g., among many others, Bradbury and Mitchell 2005, Goodwin et al 2005, Jeffery and Wincott 2006, Mitchell 2009) and there has also been substantial discussion of the position of England within the new arrangements, often with a nod towards the extent to which an English regional agenda has emerged or is emerging (see, e.g., Chen and Wright 2002, Hazell 2006, Jones and McLeod 2004, Mitchell 2002, Morgan 2002).

In this context it becomes necessary to clarify the ways in which England's regions have been made up as governmental territories, rather than taking them for granted as pre-existing entities, just waiting to be brought to political life. So, for example, Joe Painter takes on this task by focusing on the way in which GVA (Gross Value Added) has been translated from the apparent abstraction of accounting practices into a political expression which is mobilised to define regional economic success and an English regional hierarchy. He argues that 'the governmental technologies that produce the effect of territory are the product of spatially extensive networks of human and non-human actors' (Painter 2010, p. 1114) generating a tightly knit set of relationships so that 'the exercise of regional administrative power in the economic field results in the production of territorial understandings of economic practices and processes' (Painter 2010, p. 1103). From a rather different perspective, drawing on state theory, Mark Goodwin, Martin Jones and Rhys Jones nevertheless reach a similar conclusion, specifically drawing attention to the importance of the ways in which the various institutions of regionalism are 'peopled' (Goodwin et al 2004). And

John Lovering has memorably identified the emergence of a class of regional professionals competed for government attention, seeking to attract investment of one sort or another as members of a 'regional service class' (Lovering 2003). Rather than making up a network of globally competitive regions, from this perspective, the initiatives of official regionalism were much more effective in creating a policy world in which regions competed with each other for the hand outs of government, whether in the form of infrastructure, research laboratories or project funding, delivered through the sustainable communities plan or crumbs from the table of the London Olympics, or whatever the latest area based initiative of government might be (from city region to local enterprise partnership).

Academic responses to the regionalist project in its (modest) heyday tended to provide critically supportive commentary – often telling an insider story to a (slightly) wider public, as well as questioning the commitment of central government to the process. Books, such as Hardill et al 2006, Sandford 2005 and Tomaney and Mawson 2002, all sympathetically told the story of an emergent regional system. Meanwhile, among many other examples, papers focused on the tensions between the role of regional development agencies as drivers of economic competiveness and other roles relating to social cohesion and the environment (Pearce and Ayres 2009); on the extent to which they might work to challenge social deprivation (North et al 2007); on the extent to which regionally based government offices might fill a more extensive governance role (Pearce et al 2008); on the limits of the existing model as a means of delivering territorial equity (Pike and Tomaney 2009); and on the possibility of developing more inclusive approaches to regional governance (Humphrey and Shaw 2006).

In other words, the underlying assumption was that regionalism was more or less securely embedded within England's polity, and what mattered was to reflect on ways of mobilizing the institutions more effectively. Joe Painter felt confident enough to claim that 'the eight English regions do constitute territories (or territories in formation)…, that is, they are represented as delimited, contiguous and coherent political spaces' (Painter 2010, 1103); and Mark Goodwin, Martin Jones and Rhys Jones asserted that the UK model was becoming closer to that of (some) European countries as 'a highly unitary system of government [was] gradually shifting towards one which highlights regional and national differences' (Goodwin et al 2006, p. 980); while Graham Pearce and Sarah Ayres suggested that what was emerging was part of a wider reconfiguration 'of governance around territory' (Pearce and Ayres, 2006, p. 911).

Nor were they alone in drawing such conclusions (see, e.g., Cochrane 2006, who similarly identifies moves towards a more embedded political regionalism). It turns out, however, that Neil Brenner's warning (quoted by Goodwin et al) is more than just a necessary obeisance to avoid the accusation of structural determinism. As he puts it: 'State spatiality is never permanently fixed, but…represents an emergent, strategically selective and politically contested *process*' (Brenner 2004, p. 89;. his italics). In this case, the new institutional arrangements were rather fragile and they have disappeared with little obvious political response.

This paper sets out to explore this process by considering the experience of the South East of England over the last decade or so. Discussion of the politics of regionalism in

England has tended (with some notable exceptions, such as John et al 2005, Musson et al 2002, Peck and Tickell 1995, as well as Allen et al 1998) to take rather a different territorial starting point, since in academic as well as policy discussion the 'regions' are generally understood to be the regions outside London and the South East. And traditionally regional policy has been a policy targeted on those regions.

But shifting the focus to the South East of England is particularly instructive in this context because it makes it possible to trace the process by which it was 'regionalised' politically – re-imagined as a political territory in its own right. It provides the opportunity not only to explore the construction of a particular territorial politics, but also to reflect on its unmaking (or perhaps more accurately its remaking along different lines), in the wake of the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. The approach being adopted in the paper makes it possible to reflect on some of the limitations and fragility of the UK's devolution project as it was uneasily translated into English regionalism.

The next section of the paper sets out the wider context of the regionalist project, before turning to the particular positioning of the South East within it, and some of the tensions associated with that process.

**The invention of English regionalism**

The history of English regionalism as an active governmental project is a relatively brief one. There were some regionally based institutions before 1997 and some vestigial structures have survived the cull undertaken after 2010, but it was the

election of new Labour that brought with it the set of regional structures, which have now been demolished. They took what was an existing network of regionally based offices of central government, and introduced alongside it an institutional architecture of regional development agencies and regional assemblies. In a neo-liberalised version of corporatism, even if in practice they were often deeply entangled with state bureaucracies, the new institutions sought to incorporate major regional interests, nominally under a form of business leadership. By the end of the 1990s, a more or less universal template was being applied across England.

England's regions were being re-imagined as territories to be governed – in (more or less distant) echoes of the shifts taking place in the other nations of the UK and in Northern Ireland. This was always an uncertain process and attempts to create electorally accountable regional institutions soon ran into the sand (even the relatively toothless regional assemblies were scheduled for abolition before Labour's electoral defeat in 2010). So while the process has sometimes being interpreted in ways that suggest it was consistent with approaches to regions and regional governance elsewhere in the European Union (in France, Germany or Spain), it was always a more modest enterprise and the extent of regional autonomy was always severely restricted (to the extent that the government's regional offices effectively remained agencies of the centre in managing and controlling local government) (see, e.g., Pearce et al 2008, Whitehead 2003).

Nevertheless, one consequence was that every English 'region' – including those identified as 'best-performing' – was given a new institutional status. A heavily populated institutional landscape was constructed through England's regions, circling

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around the government's own regional offices (where the departments of national government were brought together) and the newly created regional development agencies (see, e.g., Pike and Tomaney 2009, Sandford 2005).

The underlying promise of this particular agenda was never a particularly democratic one. On the contrary, the expectation was that it would somehow foster competition between the regions in ways that would encourage a process of equalisation. 'The Government and its partners in the English regions,' it was stated, 'are committed to working together to improve the economic performance of each region and, in the long term, to reducing the persistent gap in growth rates between the three best-performing regions – London, the South East and East – and the other six' (ODPM 2006, p. 2) (See also HM Government 2007). In other words, in a classic expression of market driven policy-making, instead of seeking to redistribute resources or to foster equalisation through regulation and planning, the expectation was that state managed competition between the regions would both deliver a stronger national economy and, ultimately, reduce the differences between them as each sought to out do the other – in a form of what Allmendinger, Haughton and others (Allmendinger and Hughton 2010 and Haughton et al 2010) define as soft space governance (see, e.g., Morgan 2006 for a critique of the new arrangements).

**Constructing a 'region'**

The application of a universal template in the context of new Labour's (modest) commitment to an English regionalism had a particular significance for the South East of England because it created new institutions in and for (if not of) that region, too.

As, unlike the era of the Keynesian welfare state in the middle of the twentieth century, when 'regional policy' was explicitly oriented towards shifting 'growth' from the more prosperous to the less prosperous regions of the country (see, e.g., Ministry of Labour, 1934; Commissioner for the Special Areas, 1935), this time the South East, too, was a region, apparently driven by similar needs to the others. Regional policy was no longer interpreted as a policy for a set of 'regions', defined as those places with economic and social problems and which lie outside the golden heartlands of London and the Home Counties. *Every* region was enjoined to improve its economic competitiveness.

The South East of England always fitted uneasily into these arrangements for a number of reasons. One simply related to its definition, its territorial identity. The definition of England's other regions was relatively straightforward – or at any rate they had some sort of history on which to draw, as what had for many years been called 'planning regions'. But in the case of the South East, even identifying the potential regional territory was highly problematic. As Steve Musson, Adam Tickell and Peter John note, it was necessary to incorporate the South East into the wider regional project, if it was to avoid being reduced to a strategy that was targeted on the areas in need of economic (and social) restructuring – in an echo of traditional approaches to regional policy, defined through the identification of 'problem' regions. But the process of incorporation itself was always uncertain, generating its own contradictory governmental and policy challenges (Musson et al 2002).

Whatever the challenges London and the South East (the Greater South East) does, nevertheless, have a very strong case to be understood as a (global) city region,

precisely because of the way in which a set of spatially concentrated economic activities and social networks is connected through it and beyond it. Peter Hall, Kathy Pain and Nick Green (2006) describe it as a global 'polycentric metropolis' or 'polycentric mega-region' – a polycentric urban system (comparable to others across Europe). And Ian Gordon forcibly and persuasively argues that the focus should be on what he calls the 'greater' South East (Gordon 2003, 2004, Gordon et al 2004). This 'super-region' (or what Peter John, Adam Tickell and others also refer to as a 'mega region') (John et al 2005) is one whose central focus is London. As Ian Gordon, Tony Travers and Christine Whitehead argue, 'the effective London economy extends well beyond the borders of Greater London, encompassing most of South Eastern England and perhaps some areas beyond, in what is for many purposes a single labour market' (Gordon et al 2004, p. 30. See also Travers 2004, pp. 138-9). From this perspective (see also Allen et al 1998) London's reach can be seen to spread out more or less organically, gradually and inexorably incorporating and reshaping more and more of the country (in some visions already beginning to draw in cities as far away Birmingham – see Hall et al 2009).

In a sense, however, recognising the significance of this emergent region precisely highlights a contradiction at the heart of the wider project. As Tony Travers notes, 'it is clear that there never has been, nor ever will be a political body corresponding to this economic reality. A sub-national entity containing 40 per cent plus of the population and perhaps 50% of the national GDP would be far too great a threat to national government, and create far too unbalanced a system of sub-national government' (Travers 2004, p. 139). Instead, the formal administrative structures which created the new territories of government cut across this region in the making,

so that the Greater South East was divided into three. Greater London was officially recognised as both city and region – and the only example of metropolitan (regional) government to be reborn after the cull of the mid 1980s, when England's metropolitan counties were abolished by the Thatcher government (Pimlott and Rao 2002, Travers 2004). London was surrounded by two strangely truncated government regions surviving as a misshapen doughnut around it, in the form of the East of England (stretching into East Anglia to Cambridge and Peterborough) and the narrowly defined space that was given the formal label of the South East of England (curling around round London from Kent through Hampshire up to Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire with Milton Keynes at its north eastern tip).

In this model London operates both as a model of urban government (with a mayor) and, at least in some versions, of 'regional government', a product of devolution. But this is a very peculiar 'region', what Tony Travers (2009, p. 780) refers to as an 'oddity', in the context of the wider regional project since it  incorporates only some of the city's suburbs and yet is defined by its position within a much wider set of networks (within the UK and beyond – see Massey 2007). Although Greater London's boundaries are already drawn widely enough to incorporate a metropolitan area in ways that no other English urban government does, and it is both more heavily populated than the other regions (and, indeed nations) of the UK, it nevertheless omehow remains severely truncated, not even incorporating its own travel to work area or city region.

Despite the formal structures, in practice policy for London requires an understanding that stretches beyond Greater London's administrative boundaries (see, e.g., Bowie

2010). So, for example, when, in the context of regeneration, Michael Keith (2009) focuses attention on a slice of post-industrial (mainly inner city) Greater London, which has been the target of many regeneration initiatives, he sets his agenda firmly within the wider urban context of the London 'super-region'. The whole notion of the Thames Gateway, which has been the focus of major investment and the promise of dramatic housing growth, is premised on the need to understand the ways in which London stretches out into Essex, Kent and beyond (ODPM 2004). For the surrounding administrative regions, the requirement to draw on a wider spatial imaginary recognising the importance of linkages in, through and around London are still more apparent, and some of the implications of this are discussed more fully below.

The next section reflects on the way in which the South East was positioned within a national spatial strategy constructed around this understanding of the wider region. This was an unspoken regional policy, with the South East being allocated status as a 'growth region' within a wider national strategy for growth. Allmendinger, Haughton and others (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010 and Haughton et al 2010) note the extent to which spatial planning was borrowed from Europe as part of new Labour's political toolbox. However, here it was mobilised not within the framework of a dispersed urban system or one based around polycentric development (as espoused within the European Spatial Development Perspective), but quite explicitly in ways that confirmed and reinforced the South East's dominant role.

 **A national strategy for the South East**

The South East had a special status within national policy and in a sense was part of a national plan, even an unstated national spatial strategy – in which the 'national' slipped uneasily between the UK and England, albeit with an increasing slippage towards an English framing for policy debate. There was a complex relationship between regional institutional frameworks and national political and economic agendas (see, e.g., Cochrane 2010). The sustainable communities plan (ODPM 2003, 2005a) effectively endorsed the South East's special status, as well as helping to generate a set of regional and local institutions tasked with providing the infrastructural basis for continued economic growth. In this context, the South East was understood as a 'region' but - building on an understanding of it as England's (and the UK's) growth region (Allen et al 1998) - quite explicitly as one whose performance was of national significance, based around the key assumption that national prosperity would be generated by market driven economic growth in a form of state sponsored neo-liberalism, or 'Keynesianism with the gloves off' (Cochrane and Etherington 2007).

This found its clearest expression in quite distinctive policies concerned with housing and community development. *Sustainable* communities were defined as those 'places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all' (ODPM 2005b, p. 56). In the Midlands and North of England emphasis was placed on the renewal of housing markets in inner areas (Housing Market Renewal Areas – the so called Pathfinder programme) (see, e.g., Cole and Nevin 2004). There the assumption was

that the housing market needed to be revived and regeneration would be delivered through the process of rising house prices and the creation of such a market. In the South East, by contrast, there was deemed to be a strong housing market but it was one whose operation carried with it the risk of 'overheating', forcing labour costs higher, endangering the prospect of 'sustainable' growth. In that context, what was needed was the building of (new) sustainable communities on the edge of the region.

'Taken as a whole,' we were told in the South East's 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). In this context London was 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). The sustainable communities plan (ODPM 2003. See also ODPM 2005a) explicitly build on these understandings, locating London and the South East within a national (increasingly English) politics of growth, with proposals for a housing growth in a series of places on the edge of the city region. The South East of England Development Agency made no bones about its purpose, with a strap-line that promised that it was 'Working for England's World Class Region' and the explicit claim that it was the 'driving force of the UK's economy' or the 'powerhouse of the UK economy' (see also SEEDA 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2006).

Almost all of the growth areas identified in the sustainable communities plan stretched across the administrative boundaries of the South East in all its various

forms – Milton Keynes and the South Midlands drew together parts of the South East, the East Midlands and the East of England; the Thames Gateway stretched out from London into the South East and the East of England; while the London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough corridor incorporates parts of London as well as the East of England (the sole exception among the growth areas is Ashford, whose growth was nevertheless defined through its linkages beyond the region and across the English Channel). In each of these sub-regions new cross-cutting administrative and management structures were put together, and a series of more localised 'delivery vehicles' created (whose form ranged from 'partnerships' to development corporations and development companies). The search for the appropriate territorial arrangement continued.

Joe Painter's identification of a range of technologies and techniques that served to define and shape the regionalisation process is helpful in this context (Painter 2010, pp. 1105-6). A similarly extensive list could be derived for the South East, with its own specific variants. So, for example, as well as the regional economic strategy and the regional spatial strategy, a social inclusion statement was prepared and published in 2002 (to be taken forward by a regional social inclusion partnership, whose revised statement never got beyond draft status), active attempts were made to deliver a regional dimension to the 2012 London Olympics, all in the context of wider national policy (GOSE 2002, SEEDA 2009). And active work was undertaken to identify divisions and functional areas at sub-regional level, effectively reconstituting the region as the (bounded) space within which tensions between sub-regions played themselves out (see, e.g., Bianconi et al 2006).

As indicated above, the special status of the Greater South East within the sustainable communities plan helped to determine the territorial parameters of housing growth, and to generate sub-regional and cross regional institutions and plans. The housing targets framed the scope and limits of regional initiative, at the same time as generating an active regional politics, reflected in the tensions and debates associated with the competing numbers incorporated into planning strategies. These were largely constructed as technical debates (in the sense that projections were made about future housing demand and the task was defined as finding ways of meeting it) and were, in any case, overtaken by the realities of a collapsing market for new build housing after 2008. But the process by which the South East Assembly's regional planners first proposed targets known to be substantially below those expected by central government, before they were revised upwards following an Examination in Public, only to be revised still further upwards by civil servants (collectively identified as the Secretary of State) (SEERA 2004c, 2006; GOSE 2008) was an expression of the ways in which regionalism was uneasily being made up through the detailed practices of governance.

Almost until the announcement that the government offices and regional development agencies were to be abolished, they continued to operate in ways that reproduced forms of regional political identity. Reports were produced, meetings held, forums organised, local authorities received their instructions and third sector organisations continued to lobby. The region was defined through the regionally based institutions and the activities that clustered around them.

**Conceptualising the region along different lines**

The dominant governmental framing of the South East in its various institutional forms (Greater London, the East of England, the South East of England) was, then, predicated on an understanding of it as a growth region, and the challenge was to find ways of ensuring that growth could be maintained. But there was always a danger that the apparently taken for granted institutional certainties associated with the structures of regional governance would mask other ways of conceptualising the South East politically. Making up a region is not an uncontested or straightforward process, and popular understandings of territory are more complex than those generated by the charting of economic networks or the description of political structures and institutions.

All along there was at least one other vision of the region seeking to make itself heard. It found an expression in the valedictory comments of the Chair of the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA) (also Leader of Oxfordshire County Council at the time) as the regional assembly was abolished, when he commented that: 'Because planning affects property rights and the character of places it must be subject to local political responsibility. Change should enhance the democratic accountability of planning decisions not further erode it. We urgently need to turn the tide back towards democracy' (SEERA 2008, p. 4). SEERA (which brought together representatives of local authorities in the region as well as representatives of other regional bodies) had previously raised concerns about the possible 'negative' consequences of growth, as well as proposing housing targets far lower than those likely to be acceptable to central government or its regional agents (see, e.g., SEERA 2004a, SEERA 2004c, SEERA 2006).

While recognising that economic and housing growth might be necessary for the achievement of regional prosperity, a concern was nevertheless expressed that 'some consider that the price of that growth in terms of resource consumption and other impacts is too high and unsustainable in the long-term' (SEERA 2004c, p. 4). Similar conclusions were drawn from work undertaken by the IPPR on behalf of the Commission on Sustainable Development in the South East, itself sponsored by the region's (Conservative controlled) county councils, which called for a strategy capable of pursuing 'smarter growth' (Commission on Sustainable Development 2005).

The message may have been presented in the formal language of public policy, as evidence was provided of the dangers of flooding, or the inappropriateness of excessive development in the region – in opposition to the unachievable targets for housing growth being handed down from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or the Department for Communities and Local Government, and described by Sir Keith Mitchell as 'pie in the sky' (SEERA 2008, p. 4. See GOSE 2008 for the final statement of these targets). But the nature of the message can be summarised relatively simply – the residents of the South East may acknowledge the need for economic growth to sustain their own well-being, but they also seek to defend the amenity (and possibly even the house prices) to which they have become accustomed. Ian Gordon highlighted some of these tensions even as he was calling for a more explicit nationally driven policy for the Greater South East, noting a potential split between the 'region' with which people identified as residents and the Greater South East for which he argued there needed to be coherent planning and political leadership

(Gordon 2003, 2004. See also the results of the MORI survey of popular attitudes to the region undertaken for the regional assembly, SEERA 2004b).

The alternative vision is perhaps best described as one that identifies the South East as a suburban region – defined through the commuting patterns and lifestyles of its residents rather than the bureaucratic, if sometimes high flown, language associated with the drive for growth (see also Cochrane 2011). They were no more interested in defining themselves as a growth machine for England or the UK than the other regions were in seeing their own claims to growth being sidelined by the rhetoric which positioned the South East as national saviour.

The proposals of the UK's Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government on housing and planning – which promise the end of top-down planning and target setting, while offering the prospect of 'localism' – may not amount to the handover of power from the centre to local agencies and community organisations as is suggested by their proponents, but they certainly transform the position of the South East and its official conceptualisation. It was in that region that targets for housing growth had most significance – there that supply and demand for 'affordable' housing were most disconnected. The growth strategy for the region was above all a strategy for housing growth, delivering housing to (broadly defined) key workers to sustain the labour supply needed to maintain the wider growth agenda (see, e.g., Allen and Cochrane 2010, Raco 2007). The withdrawal of such targets and the return of the initiative to local authorities (albeit with financial carrots for those that choose to allow housing development) represents an explicit rethinking of the region as a suburban region, in other words one framed by the politics of the suburbs, defined through the district and

county councils of the region as they are linked into the wider economy of the London city-region.

**Conclusion**

Despite a tradition of regional boosterism stretching back to the 1930s and beyond the territories and boundaries of England's regions remain uncertain. In practice towards the end of the twentieth century, they were largely defined as a by-product of administrative decisions about appropriate levels for sub-national planning and the management of government activities, generally being identified in terms of the points of the compass rather than any collectively claimed territorial title (see, e.g., Hardill et al 2006). This does not mean that they were unable to develop a political identity, but it does highlight the extent to which, rather than being self-generated, that identity was generated by wider governance initiatives (and the creation of a plethora of formal and informal partnerships, agencies and organisations across the public, private and third sectors ready to label themselves in regional terms). At no stage was there any direct transfer of power to regional institutions: funding was determined at national level and many of the responsibilities of the key agencies were delegated from that level (for example in terms of achieving housing targets, delivering competiveness, negotiating local area agreements) and reviewed accordingly.

This may also help to explain the ease with which the regional political architecture could be dismantled following the election of the Cameron government in May 2010. The shift towards a language of 'city-regions' in the last years of the Labour government and the drive towards multi-area agreements, as well as the more recent

sponsorship of (sub-regional) local enterprise partnerships confirms the significance of locality/territorial based politics but also reflects the extent to which the particular territorial configuration remains up for negotiation.

A straightforward top-down process of rule from above is no longer an option, if it ever was. What has emerged is a much more complex process of negotiation, in which different actors are engaged at a range of territorial scales, defining particular territorial arrangements in that process. So, in particular places and through specific assemblages, supposedly national, regional and local players, public, private and third sector actors come together (and sometimes break apart) in ways that define those places as political territory (see, e.g. Allen and Cochrane 2010). As the case of setting increasingly high housing targets for the South East demonstrates, starting from some abstract notion of what is needed and attempting to impose it, simply leaves the whole exercise discredited. And it is this which means that even as one (regional) vision is – for the moment at least – sidelined, another geographical or territorial imagination is called on to frame the 'new politics' and we are promised a move to 'localism'. It is, perhaps worth recalling some of the other territories that have been called on over the last few years – including neighbourhood, city-region, total place, sustainable community, even city - if only to remind us that territory matters, even if we cannot always be sure which territory matters when. In other words, what matters is that territory is not taken as something given, somehow pre-existing and waiting to be filled with politics, but rather as something that is actively formed and shaped through the political process.

It is apparent that the making, unmaking and remaking of the South East as a region owes little to the process of devolution as practised in Scotland or Wales (and has still less in common with the attempted political settlement being sought in Northern Ireland). In one sense, of course, that is obvious – while the South East may once have had a claim to defining (or at least framing) the 'nation', as imperial or metropolitan heartland, it has never itself been conceptualised as having any sort of claim to nationhood (and the same can be said of England's other regions) (see, e.g., Amin et al 2003). New Labour's vision of the South East was predicated on continuing economic growth (and a buoyant housing market), which can no longer be guaranteed (or even expected). In that context it is hardly surprising that the dominant regionalist agenda and its associated implicit national (English) spatial strategy have lost their power, but it is more difficult to identify what is going to replace them. The drive seems to be towards a more localist approach alongside a limited regional growth fund, and all within an increasingly constrained framework, particularly in financial terms (for the 'regions' now once more identified as 'problems'), as well as a growing commitment to privatised and third sector forms of delivery. It is, however, hard to escape the conclusion that the South East will retain its centrality as the English national model – even if it is now a resolutely suburban model once more, a lifestyle to aspire to, rather than the region that drives national change.

There is no inexorable logic of state or scalar restructuring waiting to be uncovered, even if from time to time particular tendencies can be identified. On the contrary it is always necessary to explore with care what is actually happening, to identify the interests in play, and the ways in which economic and political processes come together and (sometimes) break apart as governmental territories are put together and

– equally often – taken apart. What is apparent is that the existence and nature – the borders - of territorial politics cannot simply be taken for granted. But that does not mean that these issues are irrelevant or can be dismissed as somehow old-fashioned. On the contrary territory continues to be a focus around which politics is actively conducted and pursued, and a great deal of activity continues to be oriented towards the re-imagination and sometimes invention of particular territories within which and around which political initiatives and political programmes may be developed and implemented. What matters is the way in which politics and territory interact, how each effectively shapes and defines the other in complex and entangled ways.

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