Regions, Territories and Relationality: Exploring the Regional Dimensions of Political Practice.

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> *Part of the problem is the way the debate is posed, as if networks invariably stand in opposition to territories*
>
> (Agnew, 2002: 2)

Introduction

As this collection of papers shows, regions can be looked at from a variety of different perspectives, using a range of methodological approaches. Some analysts stress issues of culture and identity, while others explore regions from a political, economic and technological angle. This paper seeks to adopt both an empirical and a conceptual point of view. While focusing empirically on the region as a sub-national space of governance, I shall combine this with a conceptual approach which links the notion of territory to one based on relationships. The notion of the 'relational region' in the English context can be most effectively illustrated with reference to the promotion of sustainable development and the policy of combating climate change. Although a new area of intervention for many regions, sustainability and climate change are recognised as perhaps the biggest challenges facing contemporary public policy in Britain. As such, they lend themselves naturally to being understood in relational terms – both spatially through connections which extend beyond regional boundaries and from a temporal perspective in relation to future generations. Analysis of these areas of public policy leads the paper to conclude that researchers should seek to uncover both relational and territorial aspects of political practice – and indeed the connections between them. As Agnew

(2002:2) recognises, arguments which represent territories and networks as being in opposition to each other are an obstacle to those who seek to analyse the contemporary region from a public policy perspective. Rather, as we argue in this paper, territorial and relational aspects of regions are mutually constituted in specific ways according to the particular feature of the region that is under investigation.

The relational region

The notion of the relational region is itself part of wider reformulations of how we conceptualise space. As Massey (2004:3) puts it, 'thinking space relationally has become one of the theme-tunes of our times in geography'. The intellectual move to re-conceptualize space in relational terms, a move shared by authors such as Thrift (2004) and Amin (2004), derives, to paraphrase Massey (2005:9), from three basic propositions: **first**, that space is constituted through an infinite set of multilayered interactions, **second**, that we understand space to contain the potential for multiplicity as an expression of social plurality, and **third**, that we recognize space as being constantly under construction. In contrast then to a view of space and spatiality which emphasizes hierarchies, partitions and fixed territorialities, a relational approach is founded on the idea that 'what counts is connectivity' (Thrift, 2004: 59). This perspective, which sees regions as open and discontinuous, forged through a set of spatially stretched articulations and networks, therefore stands in opposition to the view that regions are bounded and discrete, lying within a nested hierarchy of scales. According to Amin (2004:35) 'cities and regions come with no automatic promise of territorial or systematic integrity, since they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity and relational connectivity'. This way of thinking about regions 'reveals not an "area", but a complex and unbounded lattice of articulations' (Allen et al, 1998: 65).

This of course immediately raises a set of methodological issues which lie beyond the scope of this paper, but which should be noted. A central issue for researchers who adopt a 'relational approach' is not where to draw (or rather erase) the regional boundary, but how to identify and trace the various connections and articulations which operate within and beyond it.

This raises potential problems somewhat akin to those thrown up by the epistemology of actor-network theory, where explanation is said only to arise once descriptions of the networks is exhausted, or saturated (Cloke et al, 2004)   To put it simply, how do we know when such states of exhaustion are reached; how do we know when to call a halt in our search for network relations? Different sets of connections and networks will be more or less important according to the subject under consideration. As Doreen Massey has acknowledged, the relational approach 'is, as with so many things, more easily cited in general than excavated in practice' (Massey, 2004:3).

Since 2004, several authors have taken important steps in applying a relational approach to the problem of investigating regional politics. Foremost amongst these are John Allen and Alan Cochrane, who in a series of papers (Allen 2004, 2009; Allen and Cochrane 2010; Cochrane 2010) develop what they label as a 'topological approach to the geography of state power' (2010, 1073). According to this view of the relationship between geography and politics 'shifts in regional architecture […] take their shape from the variety of relations that stretch across and beyond given regional boundaries, yet are simultaneously "lodged" within [them]' (Allen and Cochrane, 2010: 1079). In order to explore this further, they develop the idea of 'institutional powers of reach', through which central government is able to 'reach' into the politics of regions 'through a mix of distanciated and proximate actions':

> '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. […] The apparatus of state authority is […] 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 the UK's urban and regional political structure' .
>
> (Allen and Cochrane 2010: 1074)

The approach adopted by Allen and Cochrane has other implications. The relational approach to the region is bound up with a much wider set of re-conceptualisations than those

involving simply the dynamic of political power. It also engages the interrelationships between identities, responsibilities, policies and politics. Indeed, the development of a relational approach was partly driven by the desire to counteract localist or nationalist claims to place based on notions of exclusionary belonging. It was argued that the relationality of space (and society) opens up a politics of connectivity which looks, as Massey puts it (2004: 17), 'beyond the gates to the strangers without'. In times of a 'war on terror' rained down on distant others, it is of the utmost importance that the relational approach encompass a 'fight against the idea that politics has to be territorially bounded' (Amin et al, 2003: 5). This appeal was made in a very rich *Catalyst* pamphlet whose aim was to promote the need for a more relationally focused politics in the UK in order to counter the dominance of London and the South-east. For Amin et al, it was necessary to counteract the sterility of territorial devolution which they claimed had done little to disturb the centres of power in Westminster and Whitehall. It was important to embrace the possibilities and potential offered by a politics of 'dispersal' and 'circulation' in which key institutions would travel beyond London so that the English regions could play an active role in a more 'mobile' politics. This line of argument has been taken further by Amin himself. In a very influential paper he stated explicitly that his aim was to articulate 'a relationally imagined regionalism that is freed from the constraints of territorial jurisdiction' (Amin, 2004: 42). For those working on the politics and governance of the region, this implied that 'spatial boundaries are no longer necessarily or purposively territorial or scalar' (ibid.: 33) and ultimately that 'there is no definable regional territory to rule over' (ibid.: 36).

While the aim of opposing an exclusionary politics based on place is an important one, as is the forging of links with those 'beyond the gates', it remains the case that a lot of practical politics continues to be conducted in, through and against a set of institutions whose jurisdiction is precisely territorially defined. Writing on California, Jonas and Pincetl have pointed out that those espousing a new regionalism of cooperation and collaboration ultimately have to 'confront the hard reality of fiscal relations and flows between State and local government, jurisdictional boundaries, and distributional issues of each place in the State' (2006: 498). In a similar vein, Morgan (2007: 1248) has pithily commented that democratic political space is inevitably bounded… 'because politicians are held to account through the

territorially defined ballot box, a prosaic but important reason why one should not be so dismissive of territorial politics'. However, Morgan also recognizes that such space is at the same time porous, because people 'have multiple identities [which spawn] communities of relational connectivity that transcend territorial boundaries' (ibid: 1248). Notwithstanding this critical dichotomy, the example of policy processes in the field of sustainable development and climate change serve to explore further how relationality and territoriality might be connected. The connection can be illustrated by considering the case of the short-lived English administrative regions, which were established by the Blair Government in 1999 and abolished only ten years later by the Coalition government of 2010 (cf Sandford, 2005).

Relationality, regions and the politics of sustainability

At first sight, sustainability and climate change can be viewed as issues which are ripe for a relational politics, both spatially and temporally. This is why they have been chosen as policy areas to investigate here. Climate change in particular is at once global and local; its processes envelop the globe but its impacts are felt differently in different places. It can only be addressed by future-orientated actions in the present, and its effects, at least initially from the viewpoint of those in the global north, will be felt by someone else, somewhere else. It will also require a connective politics to tackle it, one that is capable of forging a series of links between individual actions in one place and collective responses in another. It is a policy area that by its very nature serves to transcend the boundaries of any administrative region, and one which creates a commonality of interest with those in other regions, countries and continents.

In England, the regional level was seen as the key political and administrative space for delivering the Labour Government's Sustainable Development Strategy. This Strategy, entitled *Securing Our Future* (2005), showed elements of relational thinking when admitting that the UK needed a wider approach to sustainable development than that taken in the past, one which connected it to places beyond the UK:

> 'Past environmental policy focused mainly on pollution from domestic production activities. We now need a wider and more developed approach that focuses across the whole life

cycle of goods, services and materials, also includes economic and social impacts, and in particular encompasses impacts outside the UK '.

(*Securing Our Future*, 2005: 43).

This is also evident in the Chapter entitled '*One Planet Economy*' which refers to the fact that current patterns of production and consumption in the global North could not be replicated across the globe without requiring three planet's worth of resources. For all those involved in regional governance, the notion of a 'one planet world' immediately articulates a set of common interests, and in this context it makes no sense to talk of a bounded and closed territorial space. The notion of a 'one planet' world does indeed conjure up the spirit of connectivity and there is a clear acknowledgement that sustainable development policy should look beyond the boundary walls to Doreen Massey's 'strangers without'.

In the context of policy statements such as the above, a key role for the administrative regions in England was to prepare *Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks* which were supposed to help deliver the aims of *Securing Our Future*. These frameworks were then meant to inform, amongst other things, 'Regional Spatial Strategies', 'Regional Economic Strategies' and 'Integrated Regional Strategies', all overseen by 'Regional Sustainable Development Roundtables'. As the British Government saw it in 2005, 'sustainable development is now integral to many regional strategies, policies and programmes. It is becoming central to the aims of many regional bodies [...]. It is through this regional partnership approach that we are best able to achieve our aspirations on sustainable development' (*Securing the Regions' Futures*, 2006: 8). In the words of Allan Cochrane, the pursuit of the sustainable development agenda 'was accompanied by a (desperate) search for a series of overlapping institutional forms' (2010: 376). Within two months of taking power in May 2010, the incoming Coalition Government had begun to dismantle this institutional framework. The new Government announced the abolition of *Regional Development Agencies*, got rid of the *Regional Strategies*, ended funding for the *Regional Leaders' Boards* (the successors to the *Regional Assemblies*) and announced the closure of the *Government Offices for the Regions*. It remains to be seen what impact these decisions have had on the relationship between 'territoriality' and 'relationality'. For the time being we should note the extent to which regional level policy in England under New Labour

was framed through the lens of sustainable development under the banner of a 'one planet world' and was therefore 'connected' to a concern with other peoples and places. This of course embraced much more than a narrowly defined sustainable development policy. Policy areas such as transport, planning, regeneration and economic development would also have a very direct impact on sustainability.

The practical implications of Labour policy for the Regions in England multiplied the articulations and connections that coalesce around the issues of sustainability and climate change. Decisions, for instance, on the economy and economic growth, invariably involve - and impact on - a range of wider flows and networks operating around labour markets, production and consumption chains, finance and marketing opportunities. There was an explicit recognition in the *Integrated Regional Strategy for the South-West* (tellingly entitled *Just Connect*: 2004) that the region was connected to the rest of the globe through a series of networks and flows:

> 'It is important to recognise the many potential factors that could influence the region in the future from all levels; international, national and local. Some of these factors we can be reasonably certain about…Other factors we can be less certain about, such as the on-going strength of the global economy and the South West's role within it…'

(*Just Connect*, 2004: 6).

These global economic connections have long been recognized. The Labour government justified the creation of the English administrative regions in 1999 as an appeal to their ability to 'punch their weight' in a global market place; it always made an explicit connection between regional devolution and economic performance in a global economy. As a review of the *Regional Development Agencies* put it,

> 'We believe that in an increasingly inter-dependent world in which the UK economy faces more intense competition, the best way to meet the challenge to increase economic performance in all our regions is to empower them to harness their full economic potential. This is being achieved by devolving greater freedom, flexibility and funding to each region …. to exploit their indigenous sources of growth.'

(*ODPM*, 2005: 9)

Taken together, sustainability, climate change and environmental policy were introducing a new set of articulations and networks within this 'increasingly inter-dependent world'.

These different components of sustainable development are represented visually by Figure 1. . Here we see a 'Regional Sustainable Development Framework' literally framing and providing the context for a whole host of other Regional Strategies covering, amongst other policy areas, economic development, transport, housing, the environment, innovation, tourism, energy and culture:
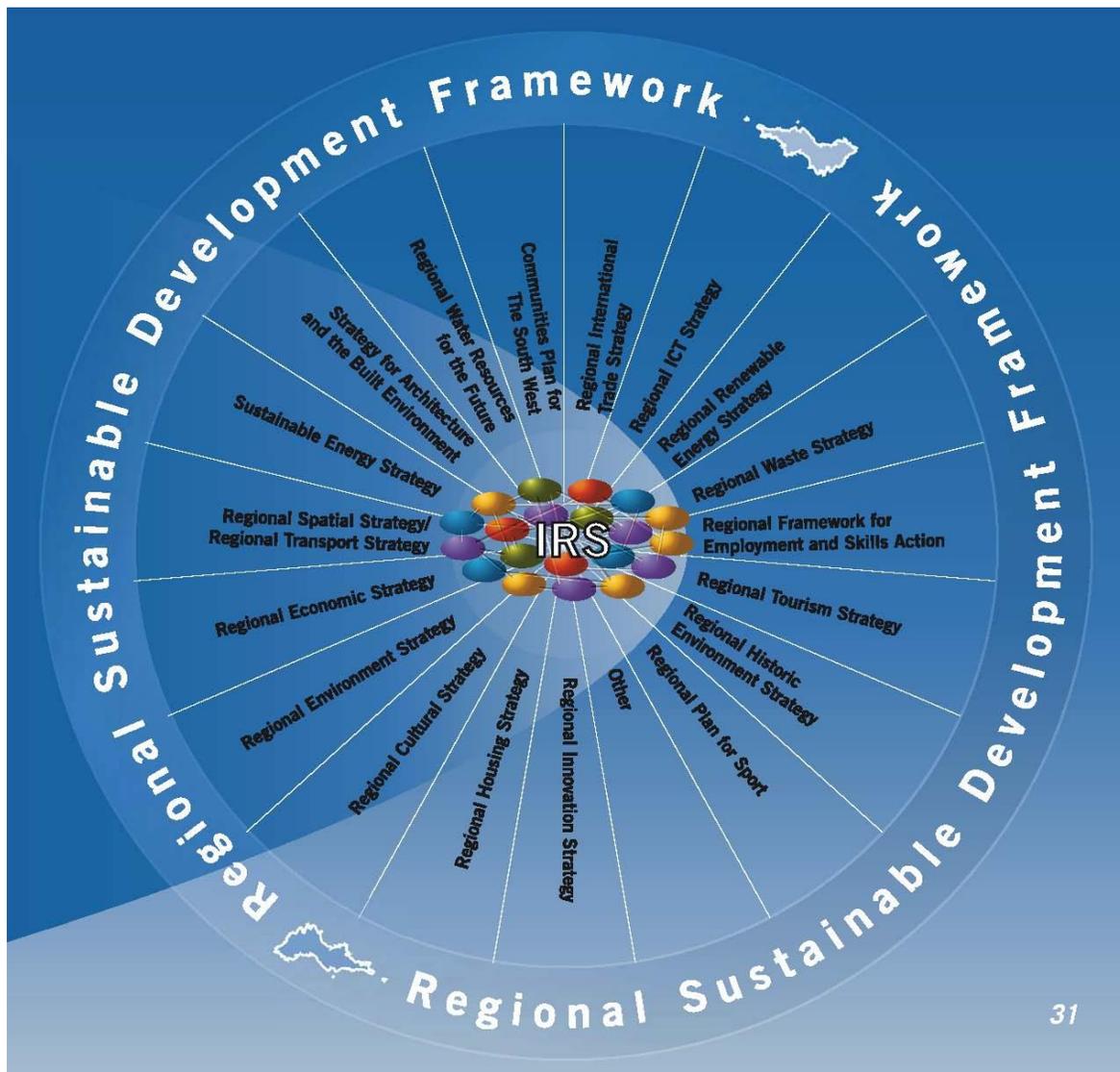
Figure 1

The Integrated Regional Strategy for the South-West of England within its Sustainable Development Framework

What is remarkable is the sheer volume of the strategies that fell within the overarching sustainability agenda, suggesting the need for connectivity and networks within the region as well as without, and showing that any exploration of relationality should give equal weight to intra- as well as inter-regional perspectives. The bulk of these strategies have now been abandoned or revoked, but while they were in place they raised all kinds of issues about the efficacy of policy coherence and 'joined-up' governance within the region (Goodwin et al, 2005; MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Morgan, 2007).

Regions unbound - and bound

Through an emergent sustainable development policy, then, we can discern a vision of an increasingly relational region, a vision which stresses connectivity and networks across the various components of sustainable development – some economic, some social, some environmental – both within and outside the region. So far this seems to fit with a relational view of the region. However, the paradox comes precisely because these regional institutions were – until their abolition - territorially bounded. This is neatly illustrated in Figure 2 which reproduces the front cover of *Just Connect* to provide another representation of the regional sustainability network. In many ways, Figure 2 is a more interesting representation than Figure 1. What it reveals is the issue of *Climate* placed at the centre of an interlocking web of concerns covering, amongst other things, the region's economy, population, health, infrastructure, tourism, and resources, all designed to look like an integrated molecular structure. This again provides a representation of an interlocking system of policy areas across the region – but does so against a backdrop of an outline map of the South-west, suggesting a bounded territorial space.
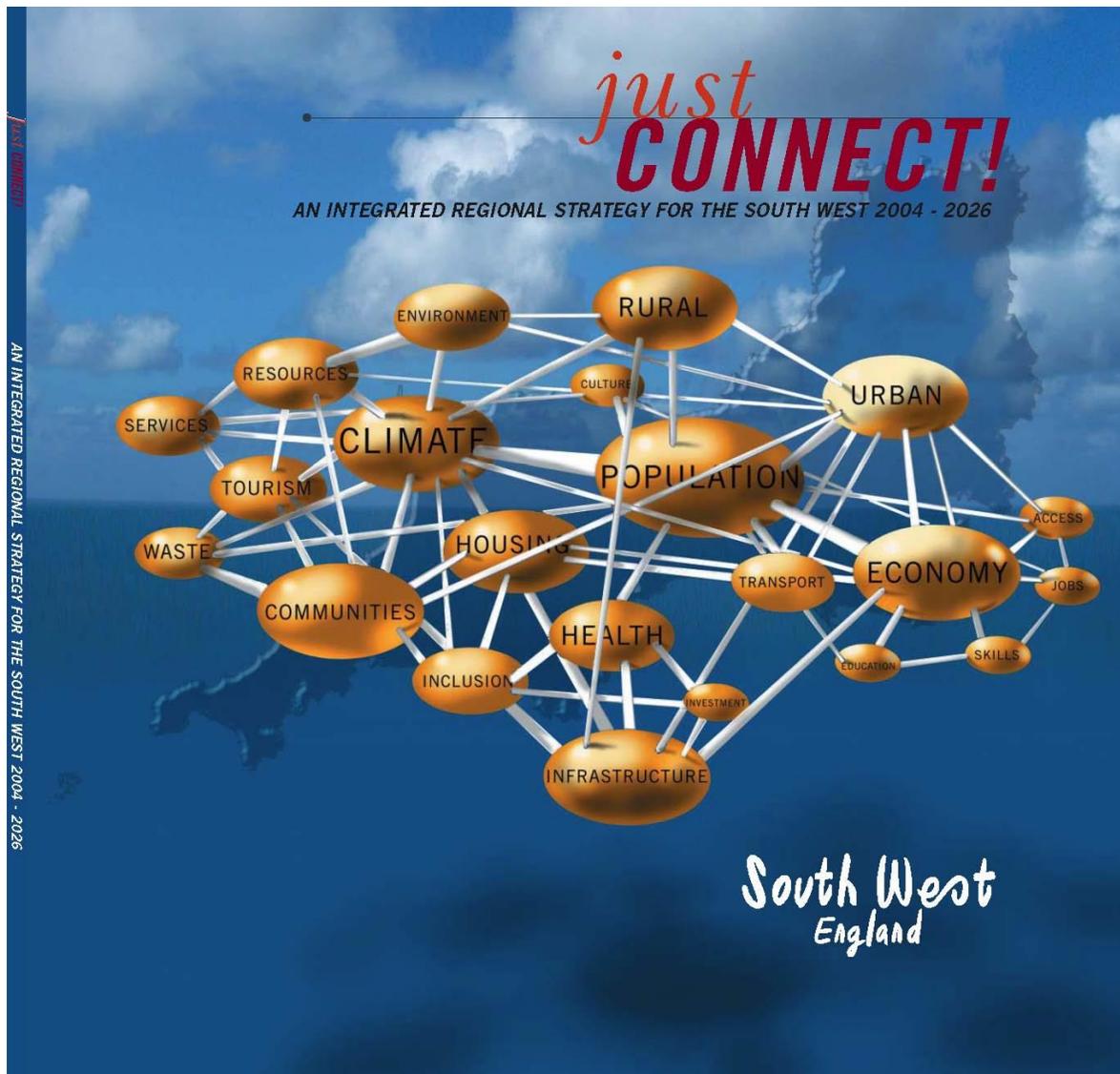
Figure 2
Just Connect – the relational regional against a territorial backdrop

This bounded outline is there because, like all formal administrative regions, the South West exhibited an 'an avowedly territorial narrative and scalar ontology' (Jones and MacLeod, 2004: 448). The partnerships which were built within the region around sustainable development were part of governance structures which were territorially bounded. In other words, the English regions were at once bound and unbound – their governance structures were jurisdictionally defined, and we find territorially bounded institutions seeking to govern unbounded flows and networks. The territorial jurisdiction of the South West region literally

goes no further than that represented on the cover of *Just Connect*. To draw on Allen and Cochrane's notion of the institutional powers of reach, central government was able to 'reach' into the South-west region by setting down particular duties in terms of promoting sustainability, but the region was not able to reach beyond its own boundaries to influence activities and practices taking place elsewhere.

Such a representation confirms the point made by Jessop, that all state institutions have what he calls a 'definite spatio-temporal extension'. As he puts it, they

'emerge in specific places and at specific times, operate on one or more particular scales and with specific temporal horizons of action, have their own specific ways of articulating and interweaving their various spatial and temporal horizons of action, develop their own specific capacities to stretch social relations and/to compress events in space and time.'

Jessop (2007: 45-46)

Jessop's statement resonates with Morgan's notion of a region which is at once porous *and* bounded (Morgan, 2007: 1248; cf MacLeod and Jones: 2007), even though, in this case, the appointed *Regional Development Agency* was not subject to a territorially defined electorate. The boundedness of the territory derives from the area over which its policies hold sway and can legitimately be delivered. Thus, in terms of tackling climate change and promoting sustainable development the *Regional Sustainable Development Framework*, and accompanying *Climate Change Action Plan for the South West* both set out policies such as promoting renewable energy, encouraging recyling, reducing CO2 emissions from businesses, cutting energy use in the home and so on. Of necessity, however, these focused on the South West region. The South West might have wished to contribute to a 'one planet world' but it could only do so within its own region:

'The aims and objectives expressed in this *Integrated Regional Strategy* […] seek to steer a path that both addresses the challenges the region currently faces and take the South West towards achieving its long term vision in the context of the issues likely to affect the region in the longer term. Critically, the aims and objectives identify those areas where integrated working will deliver the best outcomes for the region' .

'Our vision for this Action Plan [is] putting the South West at the forefront of the English Regions in tackling dangerous climate change, in adapting to inevitable impacts, and in maximising the economic opportunities that strong leadership on climate change will bring'.

(*A Climate Change Action Plan for the South West*, 2008: Foreword).

The language is very much 'in' the region, 'of' the region and even 'for' the region, and what we witnessed was the region being constructed and indeed performed as a space of governance which is territorially bounded. Indeed the assemblage of overlapping institutional forms – regional offices, agencies, assemblies, boards, roundtables - and strategies which were designed to deliver a sustainability agenda were helping to construct a political space of the 'South-West'. In so doing, they were building a particular political project within a particular institutional territory, via a set of political practices which had very little purchase beyond the regional boundary.

Thus the South West's *Climate Change Action Plan* speaks of a set of 'South West specific issues' (p.13) which need to be tackled in order for progress to be made on carbon mitigation. It talks of 'particular problems' and 'challenges' for the region in terms of its ability to reduce carbon emissions (p.16). As far as carbon reduction is concerned, the document recognizes that the region contains a particular mix of advantages: good climate, high solar radiation, wind and woodland resources, but also disadvantages: high levels of fuel poverty, inefficient housing and low support for SMEs. The policies set out in the plan were designed accordingly to tackle this regionally specific mix, and they were delivered within the regional boundary. This is not to claim that these features were not linked or connected to activities and processes beyond the South West's boundaries. It is simply that they combined in a particular way to produce particular sets of effects which were tackled through particular types of regionally-specific policies.

The policies designed to promote sustainable development were part of a range of competencies devolved to the English regions in 1999. However, Amin (2004: 36) urged caution in the way in which these moves were interpreted:

'My argument is […] against the assumption that there is a defined geographical territory out there over which local actors can have effective control and can manage as a social and political space. […] These [devolved] powers do not […] add up to an ability to govern a 'manageable' geographical space. There is no definable regional territory to rule over'.

While we may well agree with Amin's assertion that it is difficult to conceive of a defined geographical territory over which regional actors can have effective control and which they can manage as a discrete social and political space, this is not the same as maintaining that these actors have no regional jurisdiction. They do, and this is very clearly set out by the regional institutions described above, and in the strategies on sustainable development and climate change that they sought to pursue. In other words, we can agree with Amin's first sentence without having to accept the strict accuracy of the second. What we have is an example of the region as a clear delimitation of political practice, even around a policy area as open, connected and global as sustainability and climate change.

Connecting networks and territories through political practice

The above arguments are not seeking to make the case that administrative regions should be seen as containers with clear insides and outsides. Joe Painter (2008: 348) has recently argued that 'state institutions can be understood as the product of networked flows and relational processes', and gives the example of how an apparently 'territorial' institution such as a regional government office 'can be interpreted as the product of rhizomatic flows', both in and out, covering, for example in the fields of taxes, policy documents, knowledge-sharing, food, water, statistics, staff secondment, public consultants and much more. Many aspects of state behaviour and practice do involve links and connections beyond their territorial jurisdictions. As Painter also observes: 'formal territorial boundaries, too, can quite reasonably be interpreted as the effects of networked social and material practices' (ibid). Elsewhere , Painter has written of how territory is not an independent variable but is itself dependent on the 'rhizomatic connections that constitute all putatively territorial organizations, institutions and actors' (2007:28, cit. MacLeod and Jones, 2007: 1186).

However, as we have seen in the example of sustainability policies, there are also key dimensions of political practice which are territorially located. A brief review of the dismantling of New Labour's regional institutional architecture helps to confirm this. First, it reveals the fragility of state territoriality. As Painter puts it 'territory is not the timeless and solid geographical foundation of state power it sometimes seems, but a porous, provisional, labour-intensive and ultimately perishable…product' (2010, 1116). New Labour strategically introduced regional institutions and deployed a regional scale of politics as part of its wider devolution agenda for the UK (Goodwin et al 2012). Once established, the territories of the English regions then emerged, as we have seen, as a political space within which particular projects could be pursued. Not least among these were the sustainability agendas discussed above, and, as Cochrane has argued, the new regional scale institutions were necessary in order to draw New Labour's sustainability agenda together (2010 376). Their abolition has significantly shifted the sites, scales and territories of political practice. Instead of formal state institutions and strategies, regional sustainability fora are now viewed as 'sustainability champions', with no power or authority to do anything other than demonstrate the efficacy of particular sustainability projects and hope that others will take them up. The abolition of a regional territory of governance means that the ability to deliver a sustainable development agenda in England now sits uneasily between central government departments and local authorities, with the remnants of the regional institutions hovering uncertainly in between.

With the abolition of the regional institutions which, as we have argued, underpinned a spatial yet porous notion of regional territory, the ability to frame and pursue specific objects of governance, such as sustainability, has been radically altered.   The demarcation of a particular political space – the South West, for instance – as a locus for the development of specific forms of economic, social and environmental policy is literally denied. What this in turn means is that the agents who have access to power are different, the projects they pursue are different, and the connections and relations they deploy to those outside the region will also be different. In his discussion of the 'whereabouts of power', Allen (2004: 24) draws attention to the fact that there are 'territorially embedded assets and resources – of money, information, people, ideas, symbols, technologies and such – which may be mobilized to great effect, misused, abused or

simply wasted'. As the territories of governance change, so too does the ability to deploy these assets, and a change in the territory of governance alters the assets and resources of those in and out of power. These assets and resources will include the ability to connect to other political projects and political forces elsewhere. As territories change, new sets of actors come into play, bringing with them new political strategies and political projects – and new sets of connections.

Allen has made the point that the choice of different spatial frames for analyzing the institutional workings of power 'is not an arbitrary affair; it depends upon the questions asked about power, and its changing institutional relationships' (2009: 197-8). In the same way, the salience of territory to any analysis of institutional change and policy delivery will also depend on the questions being asked. As we have noted, Jessop (2007) has argued that all state strategies have definite spatio-temporal extensions. Even when they are concerned with undeniably relational issues such as climate change and sustainable development, this extension may reach no further than their jurisdictional boundary. It may on the other hand move well beyond the region to influence the actions of others, either directly or indirectly. The key is to analyse the way that territorial and networked relations are combined in any particular case through the pursuit of particular sets of political practices operating at particular scales.

Brenner has argued 'geographical scales and networks of spatial connectivity' can be seen as 'mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive aspects of social spatiality' (Brenner, 2001: 610). It is this mutual constitution that seems to me to be crucial, rather than arguing for the primacy of either a relational or a territorial view. By focussing on the scalar dimensions of political practices, rather than on networks or territories per se, we will find that some of these dimensions are extra-territorial while others are not (cf Jessop et al, 2008; Mansfield, 2005; MacKinnon, 2010, MacLeod and Jones, 2007). This has recently been illustrated by the work of Bulkeley's (2005) on climate change, where she argues for an exploration of how 'networks, scales and territories are not alternatives but are intimately connected' (2005: 896). She explores such connectivity through a study of the *Cities for Climate Change Programme* whose

wide-ranging network spans the globe, with linked campaigns in Australia, Africa, Europe, North and South America and Asia. This shows how policies can be relational, networked and connected to other places and peoples well beyond any given jurisdictional territory. However, Bulkeley also makes the point that this should not automatically be interpreted as implying either de-territoriality or non-territoriality. Rather, she concludes that:

> 'The nature of the network – its norms, practices, knowledge and effect – is conditioned by the politics of particular places […]. Its impacts and implications are shaped by political authority constructed, contested and acted through particular territories of governance, which in turn shape network practices and expectations (ibid).

In this instance, network practices and territorial and scalar politics are intimately connected through the operation of different sets of political practices, taking place at different scales and having jurisdiction over different territories. What matters, and what should be explored, is the form this co-constitution takes rather than asserting the primacy of either the territory or the network. Regions then are at once closed and bounded and open and permeable. The challenge is to explore the connections and relations between these twin aspects of spatiality by uncovering the scalar and territorial dimensions of particular political practices (cf Prytherch, 2010 on the political project of the Catalan region as both a networked space of flows and a bounded territory, and Painter, 2010 on the ways in which network and territory are articulated together in the 'production' of the North-East regional economy). In acknowledging that certain state practices do have a territorial jurisdiction, reach and influence, we do not have to fall into what Agnew (1999) has called the 'territorial trap' of taking state space for granted as the natural demarcation of political power. It is the combination of these territorial spaces with other more networked dimensions of social activity that sets an intriguing research agenda for those interested in the contemporary region. It also reminds us that regions are always imminently globally connected, at the same time as being rooted in their own sets of political and material practices.

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