

City-regionalism as a politics of collective provision: regional transportation infrastructure in Denver, USA

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Abstract

The rise of the city-region concept has focussed attention on the nature of territorial politics underpinning city-regionalism. This paper investigates the relationship between territorial politics, city-regionalism and the collective provision of mass transportation infrastructure in the United States (US). It deploys a case study of the Denver region, examining the state and governance structures driving forward FasTracks, a long-term project to expand the Denver Regional Transportation District's light and commuter rail system. FasTracks represents a program to retrofit the Denver city-region for integrated mass transit but its funding has fostered tensions around new regionalist governance arrangements. The paper uses the findings of the case study to reflect upon the balance of 'bottom up' versus 'top down' geopolitical forces shaping the landscape of city-regionalism in the US. It emphasizes the variety of ways in which struggles around infrastructure provision shape the emergence of new city-regionalist structures inside the competition state.

Key words: city-regionalism, infrastructure, territorial politics, Denver, USA

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Introduction

Several urban scholars have recently suggested that economic globalization is sustained by the rapid growth of city-regional agglomerations (Florida, 2008; Scott, 2001). A related claim – and one especially pertinent for the present discussion – is that the state is playing a far more circumscribed role in addressing the regulatory and infrastructural demands associated with city-regional growth; instead many states have resorted to new regionalist governance arrangements and a mixture of public and private local revenue sources to fund major new urban infrastructure investments (Brenner, 2002; 2004; Ward and Jonas, 2004). These new regionalist governance arrangements might, in turn, be symptomatic of the rise of the neo-liberal ‘competition state’ and its attendant modes of financing infrastructure and urban development (Cerny, 2007; Jessop, 2002); as such, they can be contrasted with the height of Fordism in the 1950s and 1960s, a period notable for national Keynesian approaches to the provision of metropolitan infrastructure and urban policy (Cochrane, 1999; Florida and Jonas, 1991). Further analysis of the relationship between city regionalism, state territorial structures and collective infrastructure provision promises to deliver new insights into the contemporary geopolitical landscape of capitalist development (Jonas, 2013).

At the moment, however, progress on these issues has been frustrated by an apparent impasse between, on the one hand, advocates of the relational approach to city-regionalism and, on the other, those for whom knowledge of territorial politics remains central to explaining the evolving landscape of urban and regional governance (Jonas, 2012). Relational theorists suggest that territorial approaches need to be augmented – if not replaced altogether – by new perspectives which recognise that many of the governance processes shaping urban and regional development do not map onto urban political space in a neat, one-to-one fashion (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; MacLeod and Jones, 2007). In a world of interconnected city-regions, moreover, urban development actors, such as mayors, planners and economic development officials, increasingly look elsewhere in order to learn about urban policy innovations before attempting to implement such policies within their own jurisdictions (McCann and Ward, 2011). Therefore questions must be raised about where the limits of urban political territory occur and the circumstances under which metropolitan and city-regional governance is assembled in different state territorial contexts (Cox, 2011).

One important consideration is the balance of geopolitical forces at work shaping geographies of city-regionalism from within the competition state. It could be the case that some states actively seek to orchestrate city-regionalism centrally ‘from above,’ deploying public infrastructural investments in order to stimulate a competition for inward investment between city-regions (Harrison, 2008). If this were the case then the analysis of city-regionalism could help to shed light on wider state competitiveness policies and geopolitical practices (Moisio, 2008; Jonas, 2013). Alternatively, it could be that the new forms of city-regionalism are shaped by business groups, civil society organizations and local governments working ‘from below’ through city-regional ‘growth coalitions’ in a fashion akin to Harrison’s (2008) concept of ‘regionally-orchestrated centralism’. Here knowledge of territorial political contingencies would come into play such as, for example, how in the United States (US) city-regionalism overcomes the problem of metropolitan jurisdictional fragmentation and enables business-led ‘growth coalitions’ to build alliances with local politicians and electorates around collective infrastructure provision (Cox and Jonas, 1993).

With these considerations in mind, the aim of this paper is to investigate the evolving geopolitical landscape of city-regionalism inside the US. One noticeable feature of this landscape is the rise of new regionalist collaborative arrangements; these span cities, suburbs, counties and, in some cases, even entire metropolitan areas and are engaged in activities ranging from urban development to regional planning and growth management (Hamilton, 2002; Orfield, 1997; Pastor et al., 2000). Whilst some of these new governance structures were originally set up to promote inward investment, others have since moved on to develop new territorial structures suitable for the delivery of regional mass transportation infrastructure, including light and commuter rail. The context for this shift on modes of collective provision in the US is a legacy of chronic under-provision of public mass transit in metropolitan areas, the decline of federal contribution to state and local transportation projects, and mounting fiscal stress at all levels of the US state.

The remainder of the paper is organized around a detailed case study of city-regionalism in Denver, Colorado. With a population of 3.7 million residents, the Denver-Boulder region currently occupies 29th place in Richard Florida’s global list of mega city-regions, which uses “light-based regional product¹” as a measure of regional economic output (Florida, 2008: Appendix A, pp. 312-13). Although Florida includes the entire Front Range urban corridor (Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Fort Collins, and Greeley) in his definition of this region, our present focus is on the Denver-Aurora and Boulder metropolitan areas which account for approximately 75% of the region’s population (Figure 1). Within this

region, the Denver-Aurora MSA is composed of 10 counties and has a population of 2.54 million. Of these 10 counties, only 6 (Denver, Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Douglas, and Jefferson) are represented in the Denver Urbanized Area, while parts of Boulder County (in the Boulder MSA) and Weld County (in the Greeley MSA) are also included in the contiguously built-up Denver urbanized area. Various business and local government organizations throughout this urbanized region have a track record of promoting economic development and infrastructure provision on a regional (multi-county) basis. Indeed, the Denver Metro Economic Development Organization describes the Denver region as possessing:

...the nation's first only truly regional economic development entity in which many area economic development groups have joined together to represent, and further, the interests of an entire region. Our partners include 70 cities, counties, and economic development organizations in the seven-county Metro Denver and two-county Northern Colorado region. (Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation: <http://www.metrodenver.org/about-metro-denver-edc/>, first accessed March 2011).

It appears, then, that city-regionalism is taken very seriously in Denver. However, as we shall argue in this paper, this powerful regional imaginary has occurred not without reference to territorial politics and, in particular, the balance of forces shaping 'top down' federally-orchestrated metropolitanism versus 'bottom up' city-regionalism.

*****Figure 1 about here*****

In Denver's case, moreover, city-regionalism has provided an opportunity to deliver the Denver Regional Transportation District's rail transit project known as FasTracks. The FasTracks program involves a 122-mile extension of light and commuter rail in six corridors throughout the wider Denver region to be completed over the next ten or so years. After decades of conflict around urban economic development, an impressive regional coalition was forged to provide financial support for this program. In drawing together diverse urban, suburban and metropolitan political constituencies, the coalition has reshaped the economic, cultural and political *modus operandi* of a sprawling city-region which, until recently, was utterly dependent on automobile transportation. Even as the Denver region continues to grow outwards, its internal political dynamics have been transformed to embrace a new mode of collective provision in the form of mass transportation and its attendant flows of people and funding. Yet this particular city-regional power assemblage confronts ongoing fiscal and political tensions; tensions which have necessitated further state interventions 'from above'. Therefore in describing the predominantly 'bottom-up' nature of city-regionalism in Denver, we also demonstrate how these local territorial contingencies feed into more recent 'top

down' federal interventions. In this respect, the paper offers a counterfoil to the recent turn away from territorial approaches to city-regional analysis.

City-regionalism as geopolitics: the US context

Recently urban scholarship has drawn attention to the rise of city-regions as strategic nodes in global systems of distribution having the potential to draw power away from the national state (Florida, 2008; Scott, 2001). At the same time, urban scholars no longer think about the city-region as a self-contained territory in the sense of it comprising a political arena for the activities of urban growth coalitions unmediated by wider economic and political influences (Brenner, 2002; 2004). This has, in turn, encouraged a new conceptual emphasis upon the territorial reconfiguration of the state in relation to city-regions (Jonas and Ward, 2002). Yet there is still a prevailing view that city-regions develop at the expense of the national state rather than in response to, for example, how the state and its local and regional branches deliver economic development and infrastructure (Ward and Jonas, 2004). Critical attention is therefore turning towards the role of city-regions in the wider geopolitics of capitalist development (Harrison, 2013; Jonas, 2013).

In a recent contribution, Harrison (2008) has drawn a useful distinction between 'centrally-orchestrated regionalism' – where the state reconfigures its territory in order to stimulate urban and regional development – and 'regionally-orchestrated centralism' – in which, for instance, urban and regional coalitions lobby the state for additional powers, resources and expenditures. What Harrison is hinting at is the need to examine the balance of geopolitical forces operating inside the competition state and shaping the landscape of city-regionalism. An important mediating factor is the territorial structure of the state itself: for instance, the ways in which state infrastructural and fiscal capacities are allocated across different territories (e.g., allocations across federal, state, regional and municipal levels of the US state) and the associated tensions and struggles shaping city-regionalism and infrastructure provision either 'from below' or 'from above'.

Studies suggest that in more centralized political-economic systems, such as the United Kingdom or Finland, the national state is quite instrumental in orchestrating city-regionalism 'from above' (Harrison, 2010; Moisiso, 2008). This central political orchestration of state territory could be a function of territorial bias in the allocation of state expenditures (e.g. attempting to bolster political party support in certain regions), new funding and grant regimes (e.g., new urban and regional arrangements for infrastructure and urban redevelopment) or efforts to make state territory more cost efficient (e.g., using city-

regionalism as a mechanism to stimulate territorial competition). In other state contexts, notably in the US, the direction of territorial politics has often been ‘from below’ reflecting the power of local interests in urban and regional development (Cox and Mair, 1988). In the US, the revenue required to fund major public investments in infrastructure is today mainly derived from state and local sources, such as sales taxes, or is financed by long-term bond issues which are contingent upon local voter approval. With the decline in federal funding for major transportation projects, states and localities have been forced to assume a leading role in the funding of highways and mass transit projects. Moreover, as banks and other lenders look to infrastructure for new investment outlets, local authorities have in turn resorted to complicated public-private financing arrangements which must be tailored to local circumstances (Jonas and McCarthy, 2009). In this context, the assembly of governance around larger city-regional structures can be seen as the latest attempt to overcome not only the territorial-fiscal discrepancies arising from the political fragmentation of metropolitan areas (Teaford, 1979) but also shortfalls in federal funding for transportation infrastructure.²

Throughout the US metropolitan growth has spilled over into contiguous counties which are poorly served by public transportation infrastructure. Sometimes regional special purpose districts have been set up or expanded in order to deliver new services; but such districts still have to negotiate with local jurisdictions for agreements around land annexations, taxation levels, planning, land use designations, housing types and service levels (Cox and Jonas, 1993). What is often at issue is not just the regional provision of infrastructure but also meeting other service demands that come with new development, such as demands for affordable (low-to-middle income) housing, water and sewerage, schools, and so forth. Therefore in building the case for regional transportation provision, a major concern is to find ways of managing local political interests in collective consumption; interests which might wish to retain a more decentralized territorial structure of urban service provision (*ibid.*). To ignore the role of territorial politics in brokering city-regionalism ‘from below’ would be to overlook an important part of the geopolitical landscape in the US.

That said the US state has not been a neutral player as regards setting out the fiscal, legal and administrative conditions for the evolving landscape of city-regionalism. Indeed, there was an earlier phase of ‘top-down’ metropolitanism, which can be contrasted to the more recent era of collaborative ‘bottom-up’ city-regionalism. In the 1950s and 1960s the Advisory Committee for Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) and the Committee for Economic Development (CED) promoted at the federal level strong forms of metropolitan government to resolve region-wide problems of housing affordability and generate economies

of scale in urban service delivery (ACIR, 1967; CED, 1970; Bish, 1971). As a condition for receiving federal funds for interstate highway and other transportation construction, the federal government mandated the creation of metropolitan planning organizations through which all metropolitan transportation planning would be coordinated. Federal interest in metropolitan political integration was further encouraged by civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, if for very different reasons. These groups made the constitutional case for opening up the suburbs and suburban school districts to low-income households and minorities (Danielson, 1976; Downs, 1973). At this stage, federally-driven territorial politics had a strong focus on fiscal redistribution. In response, some central cities pursued vigorous annexation programs, mergers and consolidations; whilst others worked with newly-created metropolitan governments and regional transportation districts (Savitch and Vogel, 2000).

In the 1980s, 'top-down' metropolitan territorial politics gave way to a new model of regionalism built, as it were, from the 'bottom up' (Mitchell-Weaver et al., 2000). One of the motives for the New Regionalism, as it has come to be known, is finding ways of leveraging new taxes and other sources of funding for economic development given the failure of earlier attempts at metropolitan potential integration, the decline in federal funding and support for metropolitan planning, the widening fiscal disparities between the declining urban core and the fast-growing edge cities, the absence of integrated regional planning, and a legacy of under-investment in public urban infrastructure (Jonas and Ward, 2002). Mindful of the potential for suburban voter backlash, a premium has often been placed on loose confederations of regional governance rather than formal integrated metropolitan government. In its various guises, the New Regionalism has been promulgated by practitioners working through regional business, civic and local government networks often with the backing of private corporations and public policy advocacy groups (Wallis, 1994; Jonas and Pincetl, 2006).

The provision of regional transportation infrastructure has been a driver of many such New Regionalist initiatives across the US; but not all of them have been successful in terms of building regional governance capacities 'from below' around mass transit. In Detroit, the Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES) was set up in 1997 to bring together businesses, religious leaders and civic activists involved in low-income and African-American communities around a campaign to establish a regional transportation authority and to increase regional public transit funds (Alliance for Regional Stewardship, 2003, p.17). Despite numerous regional transit voter initiatives since the 1970s, it took until early

December 2012 for the State of Michigan finally to pass legislation to create a regional transit authority for metropolitan Detroit, lending credence to claims that racism and exclusionary practices had hitherto prevented greater central city-suburban collaboration. In a similar case in Wisconsin, a two-county \$1.76 billion transportation package, which included provision for light rail, was put to the Milwaukee County and Waukesha County supervisory boards for consideration in 1997 but no action was taken by the respective boards on the grounds that it was felt that the service would provoke a voter backlash in the suburbs (Rowen, 2008). New Regionalist structures have, however, emerged in some outer metropolitan areas where there are severe shortfalls in mass transportation infrastructure. For example, in the I-495 suburban region of Greater Boston, the I-495/MetroWest Corridor Partnership was established in 2003 with the support of local business groups, planners and local governments to address the Boston region's mounting infrastructure deficit and a backlog in road improvement projects (Jonas et al., 2010).

In the Denver region, local business and civic organisations have been very mindful of local jurisdictional obstacles to regional governance. In the 1990s, the Alliance for Regional Stewardship (which is affiliated to the American Chambers of Commerce Executives) became an ardent proponent of the New Regionalism in Denver and one of its most active champions – until his untimely death in 2007 – was John Parr of Civic Results, a consultancy organization based in the City of Denver. Parr and the Alliance published a monograph series on regional stewardship, drawing attention to national models of 'community regionalism' such as the MOSES partnership. Table 1 represents the Alliance's approach to regional leadership. This approach places a premium on 'regional' networking and collaboration rather than a traditional 'local' or single-jurisdiction approach. Its focus is on building regional alliances 'from below' drawing upon existing local capacities but recognizing the challenges of bringing together collaborative regional partnerships where local inter-jurisdictional tensions have prevailed. As we now show, overcoming internecine tensions has been a serious impediment to regionalism in Denver. The model of city-regionalism that has evolved tries to balance historical tensions around economic development and new demands to fund infrastructure and services on a metropolitan basis.

*****Table 1 about here*****

Building city-regionalism in Denver: overcoming territorial politics

We now turn to the case of Denver to examine in more detail how city-regionalism has evolved in response to the changing landscape of territorial politics. Our aim is to use this

case study to flesh out some of the territorial contingencies shaping the geopolitics of city-regionalism inside the US (Jonas, 2013). At the end of World War Two, Denver was a major trans-continental rail hub with an extensive network of rail infrastructure. The City also operated a municipal rail transit (streetcar) system, but this was wound up in the early 1950s. The demand for mass transit was eclipsed by the private automobile and new demands for suburban freeway infrastructure. In 1955 Adams, Arapahoe, and Jefferson counties and the City and County of Denver formed the Inter-County Regional Planning Association (ICRPA) “to plan for the development of the metropolitan area ... and to meet the common problems that confront the four counties” (DRCOG, 2010). In 1958, the Association’s name was changed to the Inter-County Regional Planning Commission (ICRPC), and the first regional transportation plan was approved. In 1968, its name was changed again to the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) to “signify the responsibility of the core city to its neighbors” (DRCOG, 2005).

In 1969, DRCOG supported state legislation that created the Regional Transportation District (RTD) and entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Colorado Department of Highways (CDOH) and RTD to jointly plan the region’s transportation facilities (ibid.). RTD was specifically charged with responsibility “to develop, maintain, and operate a mass transportation system” in Denver and all or parts of five surrounding counties (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Douglas, and Jefferson) (Denver Metropolitan Study Panel, 1976). RTD’s governing board of directors was formed with ten members from the City and County of Denver appointed by the Mayor; two members each from Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, and Jefferson Counties and one member from Douglas County appointed by their county commissioners; and two at-large members appointed by the Board (ibid.). As we shall argue, the RTD’s regional jurisdiction corresponds more or less to the territorial scale at which city-regionalism operates in Denver.³

Initial ‘top down’ efforts to bring about metropolitan collaboration were by-and-large not successful. Many suburban jurisdictions remained wary, both of Denver and regional agencies like RTD and DRCOG, and jealously guarded local municipal powers. For example, an effort by the Colorado State Legislature in 1961 to create a metropolitan capital improvement district ended when the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that the district violated the Colorado Constitution’s home rule provisions (Denver Metropolitan Study Panel, 1976). Subsequently, plans in 1965, 1967 and 1968 to create an urban super-county to consolidate services such as water and sewerage were rejected by the State legislature (Leonard and Noel, 1990). The suburbs surrounding Denver, including Aurora, Englewood, and Westminster, set

about developing their own water systems so as not to be dependent on the Denver Water Department. After a period of frequent droughts and rapid suburbanization in the 1950s, the Denver Water Department established a “Blue Line” around the metropolitan area, beyond which it refused to supply water. Denver was not alone in respect of a growing central city which used its control of water and other strategic infrastructure to forestall suburbanization and protect the municipal tax base (Jonas, 1991). In the event, as the suburbs developed their own service capacities and competed with Denver for new development, restricted access to the Denver water system might not have inhibited the growth of the wider region; but it did intensify the problem of metropolitan political fragmentation.

Throughout the 1970s concerns over rapid metropolitan growth drove further efforts at regional collaboration, though intra-metropolitan discord was a more prevalent theme. At times territorial-political discourses in Denver were resonant with wider geopolitical references. For example, when faced with the possibility that the City and County of Denver would annex a major office development to the southeast of the City in a neighboring county, the mayor of the local community of Greenwood Village, Harold Patton, proclaimed that “we will fight Denver in all ways possible like Poland did when Hitler decided he needed more land. . . . We will fight until they are as bloody as a bull’s hock” (*Denver Post* 1975, quoted in Leonard and Noel 1990, p. 293). Such virulent geopolitical opposition to Denver was further fuelled by a new environmental politics, which focused attention on the negative externalities of major urban economic development projects for which the City of Denver had been competing. Notably, in 1972 Denver was selected by the International Olympic Committee to host the 1976 Winter Olympic Games with strong support from the Governor of Colorado, the Mayor of Denver, and pro-growth business interests in the City (Leonard and Noel, 1990). Opposition groups, led by Colorado State representative Richard Lamm, questioned the environmental and financial impacts of the Olympics. Environmental awareness was particularly acute at that time shortly after the promulgation of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Clean Air Act of 1970, and other environmental legislation. In a State-wide referendum in 1972, Colorado voters rejected by a 3-2 margin hosting the Winter Olympic Games, the first and only time in history that an already-selected city rejected the Olympics. Support for the referendum united diverse urban and suburban electoral constituencies (Lamm, pers. com., 2011). It spurred efforts on the part of business and political élites in Denver to foster greater city-regional collaboration.

Towards ‘bottom up’ city-regional collaboration in the 1980s

Arguably, the era of city-regionalism in Denver can be traced back to this period. A crucial consideration was how to broker ‘from below’ the territorial politics of metropolitan development. Once again the changing wider fiscal context was critical. The 1980s were marked by intense intra-regional competition for jobs, investment and tax revenues and also growing tensions around regional infrastructure as Denver assumed the characteristics of a sprawling Sunbelt city albeit vulnerable to periodic recessions (Judd, 1983). Counties and municipalities across the region competed against each other to lure retail and other business opportunities to their jurisdictions, prompting the Denver-based business and political leadership to embrace New Regionalist thinking and imaginaries. For instance, Richard Fleming, President of the Greater Denver Chamber of Commerce, said in 1990:

The world sees Denver as you see it from an airplane—without artificial boundaries. We should treat it that way and deal together on common problems of air pollution, economic development, transportation, and water. We need to market Denver as a five-county metropolis and let prospects see all the alternatives. That’s a lot better than having each county try to build itself up by running down the others (cited in Leonard and Noel, 1990, p. 473).

Initially, collaboration around economic development occurred on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction basis. For example, in 1984 Aurora and Denver agreed to a revenue-sharing compromise over the Galleria Shopping Center, which would be built in Aurora but close to the Denver city limits. Then in 1988 Aurora and other municipalities in Adams County supported a ballot measure to allow Denver to annex land for the purpose of building Denver International Airport. The expected economic benefits for those jurisdictions closest to the new airport were a powerful inducement for this nascent city-regional collaboration.

In the transportation planning arena, however, efforts at city-regional collaboration proved much more difficult. In 1987, unhappy with RTD’s lack of progress in developing a rapid transit system, the Colorado State Legislature authorized a private sector-led group, the Transit Construction Authority (TCA), to lead efforts to plan and build a light rail line in the southeast corridor between downtown Denver and the Denver Technological Center (a major employment cluster). The TCA effort collapsed in 1990 after DRCOG selected RTD’s southwest corridor instead of TCA’s southeast corridor as the preferred alternative to be submitted for federal funding consideration. Concerns were raised about DRCOG’s ability to forge a regional approach to transportation and other issues. Former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm said in 1989, “For all the money we’ve put into DRCOG, the returns are

marginal. When you try to list the dynamic things DRCOG has done, nobody can think of anything” (cited in O’Keefe, 1989, quoted in Leonard and Noel, 1990, p. 475).

Concerns such as these led Governor Roy Romer and the State Legislature in 1990 to create the Metropolitan Transportation Development Commission “to develop a comprehensive, regional solution to transportation problems plaguing the metropolitan area” (Metropolitan Transportation Development Commission, 1990). The Commission produced a report that called for a new regional transportation plan, including both highways and rail transit that, according to public surveys, should be managed by a new regional authority. No new authority was created, but changes in the existing transportation agencies had begun to occur. In 1991, the Colorado Department of Highways (CDOH) was re-organized by the Legislature, and changed its name to the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) to reflect the increasingly intermodal character of transportation planning (Goetz, 2007) and to align the activities of DRCOG with those of the State’s departments of transportation and regional transit agencies (Goetz et al., 2002).

Nonetheless, these hesitant moves towards city-regionalism were tinged with ongoing scepticism about the ability of agencies such as DRCOG and RTD to forge a regional consensus around planning and infrastructure. An ongoing concern was to find ways of brokering territorial politics ‘from below’. In response to this issue, the Denver Chamber of Commerce set up the Metro Mayors Caucus (MMC) in 1993 to act as a voluntary, consensus-based organization of 32 metropolitan area mayors. The mayors felt there was a need for a more collaborative regional forum to exchange ideas and viewpoints outside of the more confrontational public arenas. One of our interviewees contrasted the ‘solution-based’ role of MMC in brokering territorial politics with the more ‘political’ approach required at the State-level:

...there is unanimity in the fact that we need more money to build and repair roads in Colorado. But there is no support in how to raise these funds. So that’s a problem. Because of the scope and the fact that we have the Caucus allows us to really dive in and do a lot more in-depth discussion and problem-solving. The Mayors Caucus is ... non-partisan... it’s more solution oriented than political-based. When you’ve got the Statehouse, a lot of the issues are more politically-based. It’s a huge difference and with its own problems (Interview with suburban Denver mayor, March 2009).

Along with its growing role in building regional consensus, membership of MMC has also grown to 39 mayors and it now holds its regular meetings at the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce offices. The Caucus works closely with both DRCOG and State-level organisations like the Colorado Municipal League, and agreements made within the context of MMC have extended to these other organizations.

A good example of the effectiveness of this new approach to city-regional collaboration is the consensus that was forged in 1997 in support of DRCOG's Metro Vision 2020 plan, which represented a strong statement in support of smart growth policies for the region. In the 1970s, the Denver region had a notorious 'brown-cloud' air pollution problem due to increased particulates and temperature inversion smog especially during the winter months. Compounding the air quality problem, traffic congestion was increasing much faster than population growth and there were ongoing battles over the funding and approval for additional suburban beltways. Even though Governor Lamm had initially stopped the I-470 beltway from being constructed, pieces of this outerbelt freeway eventually were built. DRCOG realized that a coherent vision of the region's future was necessary and sought MMC as a broker of internecine conflicts. The resulting Metro Vision 2020 Plan focused on growth and development, the natural environment, and transportation (DRCOG, 1997). Most significantly, DRCOG agreed that a regional rail transit system should be built as the backbone of an intermodal transportation system to help focus development in designated urban corridors, limit traffic congestion, and improve air quality.

Regional transportation infrastructure: the FasTracks test of city-regionalism

By the early 1990s, Denver had become an automobile-dominated city-region; one which had expanded its urban footprint from 105 square miles in 1950 to 459 square miles in 1990 (Rusk, 2003). During that same time period, population in the urbanized area increased from 498,743 to 1,517,917, with much of the increase occurring in suburban areas. In 1950, only 16.6% of the urbanized population lived in suburban areas, while by 1990, nearly 70% lived in suburban areas. Population density dropped from 4,741 people per square mile in 1950 to 3,309 in 1990. This pattern of spread-out, low-density suburban development was not at all well-suited for mass transit, and initial efforts to revive the old system proved unsuccessful. However, Denver at least had the advantage of an extensive rail right-of-way infrastructure already in place⁴. Moreover, in the MMC it also had a new political mechanism for shaping public and business attitudes to funding regional mass transit.

In 1980, the Denver RTD put together a regional transit plan that focused on building a light rail line in the Southeast Corridor along the line of Interstate 25 from the Denver CBD southwards as part of a 73-mile system. Instead of submitting an application for federal funding, the RTD Board decided to place a referendum on the November 1980 ballot to increase the regional sales tax by 0.75% for 14 years in order to build not just the Southeast Corridor but also five other regional corridors. Despite early polls that suggested the measure

would be approved, voters ultimately denied the referendum 54% to 46%. At the same time, voters also approved an initiative that required elections for RTD board members, rather than board appointments by politicians (RTD, 1995). Once again voter concern over local taxes had driven the territorial politics of city-regionalism in Denver.

Despite these early setbacks, there was renewed interest in developing a regional rail transit system but infighting between rival agencies and authorities clouded the picture. Some members of the emerging regional political and business groups were sceptical of the ability of RTD to develop an effective regional transportation system. Frequent concerns were raised about the elected board members of RTD, with claims that “RTD managed to attract a string of candidates known for personal problems and political gaffes,” including several convicted felons and outright opponents of public transit (Hodges, 1994, p.1). The RTD Board developed a negative reputation that cast a shadow over everything that the agency tried to do. In 1990, the Colorado General Assembly promulgated Senate Bill 208 (SB 208) which required approval by the relevant metropolitan planning organization of the financing and technology for all proposed fixed rail projects in Colorado (RTD, 2010). Traffic congestion and air quality continued to worsen, and demands for regional transportation solutions grew louder. While the decision to build Denver International Airport was ratified in the late 1980s, some observers suggested that a regional rail transit system was actually a more pressing transportation need (Leonard and Noel, 1990).

In 1997, the RTD proposed a long-term comprehensive rapid transit plan called “Guide the Ride” that sought to expand rapid transit service by 100 miles using a combination of light rail, commuter rail, and bus/carpool lanes in the major corridors. The proposed \$6 billion plan would be funded by a 0.4% hike in the regional sales tax in a referendum that was presented to voters in November 1997, with strong backing from regional business and economic development organizations. While the RTD received support for the Guide the Ride plan from many political and business leaders in the region, the RTD Board itself was sharply divided on the issue (Prendergast, 1997). The voting public was once again left with the impression that the RTD Board was split and dysfunctional, and that RTD could not be trusted with \$6 billion of public money to build a rapid transit system. Despite early polls showing public support, the Guide the Ride referendum was defeated 58% (no) to 42% (yes).

After the defeat of Guide the Ride in 1997, RTD continued to work on rail transit development in an incremental fashion. The Southwest Corridor light rail line was completed in the summer of 2000, on-time and within its \$177 million budget. Projected to

carry 22,000 daily passengers by 2015, it had already carried 27,400 passengers daily by 2008. A light rail line along the Southeast Corridor was approved in 1999 as part of the Transportation Expansion (T-REX) highway widening project along I-25. Upon completion in 2006, the \$1.67 billion public-private T-REX project was 3% under budget, and was finished 22 months ahead of the projected completion date. While initial passenger estimates called for 33,800 riders per day in 2008, actual daily ridership in 2008 was 38,500. Once sceptical of RTD's ability to build and operate a rail transit system, political and business leaders, as well as the general public, began to believe in the viability of rail transit in Denver.

In November 2004, voters in the Denver-Aurora metropolitan area approved a 0.4% increase in the regional sales tax to support the FasTracks rail transit program that proposed to add 122 miles of light and commuter rail transit to the existing 35-mile light rail system (Figure 2). FasTracks would expand rail transit into six new corridors (including a line to Denver International Airport), extend three existing lines, build a bus rapid transit line to Boulder, and refurbish Denver Union Station into a multimodal transportation hub for intercity and regional rail and bus service (Figure 3). At an initial cost of \$4.7 billion in 2004 (now estimated to cost \$7.4 billion), the FasTracks project is one of the largest urban rail transit construction programs in the US.

*****Figures 2 and 3 about here*****

One of the major challenges faced by RTD while implementing this massive program was to increase the regional sales tax by 0.4%. At the very beginning, state transportation officials and Republican Colorado Governor Bill Owens were not in favor of this tax hike because of its high cost and the potential negative effects on highway funding. However, Owens reluctantly agreed to allow RTD to put forward the tax hike proposal on the ballot under the condition that FasTracks and related highway improvements along the corridors would be a part of the State's comprehensive transportation plan. The Colorado Senate also supported RTD's effort regarding a sales-tax hike by passing Senate Bill (SB) 167 and rejecting SB 1. SB 167 gave RTD the power to go to voters with a proposal of a sales-tax increase whenever it wanted, whereas SB 1 allowed RTD to put forward such a proposal just once. If RTD had wanted to propose another sales-tax hike, it would have had to seek the permission of the Legislature. Even though SB 167 was passed in April 2002, the referendum was not put on the ballot until Nov. 2004. Bill Owens did not want the RTD referendum to be on the ballot at the same time he was running for re-election (Leib, 2002).

From the beginning RTD – with the strong support of regional business groups and MMC – started spending hefty sums of money to get approval from the voters. In May, the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce contributed \$250,000 to the pro-FasTracks campaign (Leib, 2004a). A huge amount of support was also provided for the FasTracks project by other organizations as well as resident voters in the Denver-Aurora and Boulder metropolitan areas. Volunteers collected 60,000 petition signatures so that the tax-hike proposal could be placed on the Nov. 2004 ballot, even though only 35,000 signatures were required (Nicholson, 2004). The vote finally took place on Nov 2, 2004 and the tax-hike for FasTracks funding – Referendum 4A – was approved by 57.2% of the voters (Leib, 2004b). This was a tangible victory for city-regionalism in Denver.

However, delays in the construction of FasTracks led to an increase in the price tag of the project. Construction material costs rose between 2003 and 2006, much faster than RTD had predicted. Furthermore, sales tax revenues were not as large as originally projected, especially after the national recession and global economic crisis began in the 2007-2008 period. By 2012, the *RTD Annual Report to DRCOG on FasTracks* estimated that \$7.4 billion would be required to complete the entire FasTracks project, which was \$2.7 billion more than the initial RTD cost estimate in 2004 (RTD, 2010). In 2006, RTD suggested that the best way of mitigating the problem would be by finishing construction of the lines as fast as possible before construction costs rose even higher.

But in 2008 the crisis of collective provision became so deep that RTD brought up the idea of shortening some of the new rail lines except the West line and Denver International Airport line because they were receiving \$1.3 billion in Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds (Leib 2008). RTD this time also tried to resolve the problem by increasing the construction time of some of the corridors to 2034. But the idea was vehemently opposed by the suburban mayors working through the MMC. The possibility of another tax-hike was also proposed. Even though it was initially supported by the mayors, the RTD Board rejected placing another sales tax increase measure on the November 2010, 2011, or 2012 ballots, because of continuing concerns about the economic and political climate.

With FasTracks facing a significant funding shortfall, in May of 2011 the FTA awarded \$1 billion to the RTD for the completion of the so-called Eagle P-3 (public-private partnership) project, which includes the East Corridor to Denver International Airport, the Gold Line commuter train to Arvada/Wheat Ridge and a segment of the Northwest train line to south Westminster. In awarding the money to Denver, the head of the FTA, Peter Rogoff, commented that “When it comes to private-sector involvement in transportation, Denver is

the model” (cited in Lieb, 2011). Nonetheless, the FasTracks program has proven to be a stern test of that model and, in particular, the level of city-regional collaboration achieved to implement it in the first place. In this case, the US federal state has eventually had to play a significant role in mediating city-regionalism ‘from above’.

Some wider theoretical reflections

The case study allows us to reflect upon certain aspects of how city-regionalism in Denver has evolved in response to territorial politics inside the US state. Metropolitan political fragmentation has often been seen as a challenge to collective action around the provision of urban infrastructure and services (Ostrom et al., 1961). The specific challenge most often highlighted is one of local fiscal capacity, although views differ on how to address this in terms of reorganizing the territorial structure of the state in metropolitan areas (Cox and Jonas, 1993). One possibility is the sharing and externalization of costs through regionalized fiscal collaborative arrangements. But often this involves drawing in local and higher levels of local government – counties and states – into new territorial structures (Miller, 1981). Thus regionalization is not neutral with respect to wider interests, structures and processes operating inside the competition state. The question, then, is whether this process is driven ‘from below’ or happens in response to pressures ‘from above’; therefore the form of territorial politics does matter.

In the Denver case, an important factor has been changing public attitudes to mass transit as reflected in the US federal state’s willingness to support regional provision, albeit this has clearly been nurtured by powerful economic and political interests ‘from below’. Indeed, the political constituency for regionalism and mass transit in Denver is arguably far stronger today than it has been at any other point in the city-region’s history, a fact confirmed by several of our interviewees:

Interviewer: Looking back at the history of this metro area there seems to have been quite a lot of antagonism historically between the suburbs [and the city], I don’t know if [suburb X] is in that category or not ... But now you seem to have a climate of cooperation.

Interviewee: We do.

Interviewer: Is that a fair characterization? Was FasTracks one of the major foci for that?

Interviewee: I think there has always been the DRCOG, the Denver Regional Council of Governments, [and] there was a little bit of a culture of regional cooperation. I think the Metro Mayors’ Caucus again helped to crystallise that a little bit and again the way the Caucus is structured is very important. There has to be a consensus and everyone has one vote. You can be [the Mayor of Denver] from the largest city or the Mayor of [small suburb Y]. You are still in the same boat and it really creates the sense of

regionalism in that I think it is fairly uncommon around the country. I think that the FasTracks effort in 2004 probably solidified that sense of [regionalism]. (Interview with suburban Denver elected official, March 2009).

Other contingencies help to explain the evolving geopolitical landscape of city-regional collaboration in Denver. Firstly, practitioners in Denver have not been indifferent to the wider urban policy landscape, which has made it possible to embed New Regionalist structures locally. Of these structures, perhaps the key institutional mechanism in Denver has been MMC. Several of our respondents singled out the role of MMC in joining together the component territorial parts of city-regionalism:

The Metro Mayors' Caucus was created to do things politically that city councils would be divided on individually or if DRCOG didn't want the controversy associated with them. And it's consensus based. If there's not 100% vote then they don't do it. I mean little Foxfield -- a [jurisdiction with a] couple of horse properties and strips of asphalt -- has [in effect] the same votes as John Edgar Hoover [former FBI Director] has, and DRCOG is weighted disproportionately you know; the City of Denver has a disproportionate vote. So everything has to be done by consensus (Interview with Denver Regional Economic Development Organization, April, 2009).

It is important to note that organizations such as MMC do not replace existing state territorial structures but instead operate alongside them:

... [I]f you think about the Regional Council of Governments, it's a formal regional institution, but it played a role, a lesser role than that of the Metro Mayors [Caucus], which was really an *ad hoc* place that sort of again, jumped outside of the regional structure, because the regional structure wasn't [working]. The way that the COG is set up it is kind of a creature of the Federal government's requirements that certain monies flow through a regional body (Interview with Denver Community Developer, March 2009).

A second contingent factor driving city-regionalism in Denver is the use of new regional territorial structures to leverage taxes for major infrastructural projects such as FasTracks. This has meant, in effect, stretching the territorial limits of the city so as to embrace wider-scale constituencies and processes:

Usually people have ended up at the regional level by necessity, either as a practical reality of 29 waste water treatment plants or one or two centralized ones, that kind of drives you in a direction, and there's a practical reality of some of those other things. But by and large, it's still a sort of fragmented world, which is why the alliance of the business community and Metro Mayors'. Those people are deciding that they are going to make the region effective despite the way the boundaries are drawn. (Interview with Denver Community Developer, March 2009).

Along with this, thirdly, there is a recognition that the regional political culture of Denver itself has changed as voters, otherwise hostile to new local taxes, have been taught to see the value of publicly-funded regional mass transportation:

We in the west [i.e. western United States], in particular, believe in direct democracy not representative democracy, which means that more and more decisions are going directly to the voters than being dealt with by legislative bodies, for example, the legislature or the city council. So again it takes sort of a different mindset if you will, of getting people, transportation planners to think about, you know, “how do you package this [for the voters]?” (Interview with Regional Civic Organization, September, 2007).

The present Governor of Colorado, John Hickenlooper, who was Mayor of Denver at the time of the FasTracks sales-tax vote, claimed that a crucial factor was the decision to give the suburban mayors most of the credit for the success of the FasTracks initiative even though in many other cases they had been bitterly opposed to regional initiatives led by Denver.⁵

A final variable in the evolving landscape of city-regionalism in Denver is the importance attributed to overcoming potential suburban opposition. What has been a particular concern is managing local interests in the collective provision of services and environmental amenities. This has meant in this case the business-led ‘growth coalition’ building functional ‘bottom up’ alliances with environmental groups, local governments, and various civic organizations on common regional issues:

This all makes sense from business standpoint, and you have to go around looking for allies and all of a sudden you find, “gees, the environmental guys, they have got a lot of people who can walk every precinct for you” and they have got an environmental agenda which is kind of your agenda because if you are too polluted, companies don’t move here. Certain types of companies can’t move here because of the air quality. So it just all kind of fell into place and again, we have gone through a metamorphosis as an organization realising that you take your partners where you can find them and you don’t necessarily draw on those on ideological or other places where you have fought (Interview with Denver Regional Economic Development Organization, April, 2009).

How long these new city-regionalist structures can be sustained is hard to say but it does depend on the governance of territorial politics.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have chosen to examine city-regionalism as an example of territorial politics around the collective provision of transportation infrastructure. Our empirical focus has been the FasTracks light and commuter rail project in Denver and the emergence of a powerful city-regional coalition involved in driving this program forward. The case study encourages us to reflect on some recent developments in the literature on the rise of city-regionalism in the geopolitical landscape of capitalist development. It confirms the constitutive role of territorial politics in shaping how city-regionalism in the US is assembled in particular circumstances. As such, the study offers a counterfoil to relational thinking on these issues.

With respect to ‘top down’ territorial politics inside the US, we have drawn attention to the role of the federal state in shaping the landscape of city-regionalism through various fiscal incentives for regional planning and transportation infrastructure. In the Denver case, it would be difficult to argue that the US state has played a strong unilateral hand in shaping city-regional governance ‘from above’. However, the US state and its territorial structure have provided the enabling fiscal and administrative conditions for the evolving landscape of city-regionalism. Regional transportation and planning agencies set up in Denver under federal jurisdiction in the 1950s and 1960s eventually proved weak and lacking in the fiscal capacities to address severe shortfalls in the collective provision of mass transportation infrastructure. Yet the federal state has of late chosen to support the FasTracks program financially, citing regional collaboration as an important condition for its intervention. In the Denver case, then, the dominant direction in organizing city-regionalism has been – and continues to be – ‘from below’, albeit always mediated by wider state territorial structures and funding regimes.

The case study also supports the argument that local territorial contingencies are important in shaping the ‘bottom up’ form of city-regionalism inside the US state (Jonas, 2013). The reason most often cited for the lack of metropolitan provision is the chronic dependence on local sources of revenue amid dwindling levels of federal funding. The recourse to alternative regionalized structures of funding (in this case, the regional sales tax) helps to leverage economies of scale and spread the tax burden across a wider electorate. In Denver, however, this has necessitated ways of drawing in business, local governments and the electorate into new city-regional collaborations. In this context, the Metro Mayors Caucus has enabled territorial politics to be brokered prior to putting forward regional transit initiatives to a public vote. The political culture of regionalism and a growing consensus around a smart growth agenda is more developed in this respect in Denver than in those metropolitan areas where racial tensions, class divisions, and sprawling development continue to frustrate regional transit provision (Goetz, 2013; Rusk, 2003).

Our study raises questions about the drift away from incorporating knowledge of territorial politics in explaining how city-regionalism arises. What matters here is not just what goes on inside city-regions: for example, how governance is assembled in order to overcome the internal territorial politics of city regions (e.g. the politics of cities versus suburbs). It is also about how city-regionalist processes interface with wider struggles around territorial structures of the competition state: struggles, for example, to draw down infrastructural funding to fast growing city-regions; the allocation of fiscal and administrative

capacities across different territorial structures of the state; the competition between city-regions to attract inward investment; and suchlike. All of this in turn suggests that the competition state itself has an internal territorial politics of distribution and that city-regions are positioned differently in relation to this. Therefore we see intellectual value in investigating city-regionalism as a contingent territorial politics, the outcome of which is socially determined not least by the state working, as it were, both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ in order to organize, for example, a regionalized space of collective provision functional for urban economic development.

Notes

¹ Light-based regional product is an estimate of regional economic activity based on night-time light intensity derived from satellite imagery.

² The dearth of federal funding today can be contrasted with the robust levels of federal transportation funding during the 1950s/60s Keynesian era in which a 90% federal/10% state and local match funded the construction of the Interstate Highway System.

³ Today RTD is governed by a 15-member Board of Directors whose members are elected in geographic districts throughout an 8-county region, including all of Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, and Jefferson counties, as well as parts of Adams, Arapahoe, Douglas, and Weld counties. The Board is responsible for “setting District policy, adopting the agency’s annual budget, and establishing short and long-range transit goals and plans in concert with local, state, and federal agencies” (RTD, 2009, p.12).

⁴ Denver’s rail right-of-way infrastructure is owned by the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad. So while some of the existing rail rights-of-way have been utilized to build or plan new rail transit lines, the use of the rights-of-way are subject to financial negotiation with the freight rail corporations. One of the reasons for the cost increases of the FasTracks program has been sharply increased costs of acquiring access to these rights-of-way from the freight railroads.

⁵ The California planner, Bill Fulton, has dubbed Hickenlooper’s leadership style as “brewpub regionalism” (Hickenlooper opened a brewpub in Denver’s lower downtown district before eventually running for Mayor) (see <http://www.cp-dr.com/node/1702>, accessed August 1, 2011). Now a regular invited speaker on the national conference circuit of urban professionals, Hickenlooper himself has described the Denver approach to city-regionalism and regional transportation provision as “collaboration for competition” (see: <http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/07/ford-foundation-the-just-city/>, accessed March 20, 2012).

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