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Looking for the South East

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Looking for the South-East

Of all the British regions, the South East is the one whose conceptualisation is most awkward. It almost (but not quite) surrounds London, stretching from Southampton and Portsmouth in the South to Milton Keynes and Banbury in the North; and from Dover in the East to Reading and Oxford in the West. The government office and the headquarters of the regional development agency are in resolutely suburban Guildford, perhaps reflecting the absence of any defining urban centre (apart from London) around which a regional identity might cohere.

The 'official' government region is somehow far too big and too fragmented to have a popular identity, and yet at the same time too small to capture the flows and networks that might define it as an economic activity space. It incorporates some 13.5% of the population of the UK (with the highest population – at 8m - of any UK region), and it accounts for over 15% of UK GDP. It has an area of over 19 thousand sq km and a coastline of 1682 km. At least according to the South East Economic Development Agency (SEEDA), its economy 'is the 22nd largest in the world'. In the 1990s, the region's economy grew faster than any other UK region and it also exports more goods than any other UK region (SEEDA 2002a, p. 2). The average gross income of local residents is the highest in the UK. Over a quarter of regional GDP (2001 figures) is generated by financial and business services (significantly higher than the UK average). More surprisingly, perhaps, the share of engineering (at 7.2%) is also higher than the UK average and, although manufacturing as whole is less important than the UK average, in absolute terms manufacturing output (at £18.8 billion) in the region is second only to the North West (£20.4 bill.) and the West Midlands (£18.9 bill.) (SEEDA 2002a).

The South East incorporates six cities with populations over 200, 000 - Southampton, Portsmouth, Brighton, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading - and internally its sub-regions are diverse and sharply differentiated (see, e.g., SEEDA 2002a pp. 11-13). SEERA points to the 'polycentric and rural nature of much of the South East' (SEERA 2003, p. 60), and these divisions also find an expression in the institutional relations within the region. As John et al (2002, p. 738) note, 'The region is fragmented into counties and sub-regions, which jealously guard their autonomy and

fear centralization'. They point to the existence of a 'Maze of competing partnerships' (John et al 2002, p. 738).

According to a survey conducted by MORI for the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA 2004b), residents are more likely to identify two areas that are not in the 'South East' (Essex – by 29% of those responding - and London – 25%) as part of the region than three that are (Buckinghamshire – 22%, Isle of Wight – 19% - and Oxfordshire – 16%). Although a relatively high proportion of the population (67%) confirm that they are 'proud' to live in the region, a significant proportion (41%) also agrees that the South East is too diverse to be thought of as a single region (although there is at least one respect in which it is not particularly diverse – whereas 29% of people living in London are members of ethnic minority groups, that is only true of 8% of those living in the South East, a figure below the average for England as a whole).

Regional 'stakeholders' interviewed for the MORI survey are explicit about the problems of regional identity. 'It just doesn't really work as a region,' says one. 'There is absolutely no interest at all between Dover and Milton Keynes'. And another comments, 'We are not really a proper region. There are such enormous differences between the deprivation of Hastings and the huge prosperity of the Thames Valley, Berkshire and Oxfordshire…There is no community of interests. The only thing that links us is affordable housing'. As John et al (2002, p. 734) confirm, 'Elite networks rarely identify with the South East region, nor do they mobilize behind regional institutions'.

Through another lens, however, it could be argued that the problem is a rather different one. Perhaps the reason the region does not quite work, is that the administrative boundaries which define it are simply too restrictive. So, for example, from a popular perspective, the identity of the South East of England continues to be defined in large part by the presence of London as its (formally absent) core. Closeness to London is explicitly identified by residents in the MORI survey as one of the fundamental reasons for their satisfaction with life in the region. And, of course, it remains the place of employment for many of those who live in the South East – over half a million commuters travel in by rail every day. And much of the industry

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(whether production, financial services, knowledge based or logistics) in the South East is located there precisely because of its closeness to London. Some six per cent of London's GDP is generated by commuters from the South East, while eleven per cent of the residents of the South East who are in employment, travel to London to work (Robinson 2004, p. 14).

At the same time, the growth of the South East seems to bring more and more of England into its ambit, reflected, for example, in the plans for 'sustainable communities' which have lead to the identification of 'sub-regions' that cut across the official regional boundaries as strategies have been developed for Milton Keynes and the South Midlands and for the Thames Gateway (ODPM 2003). The former sits astride the South East, the East Midlands and the East of England, the latter incorporates parts of the South East, London and the East of England.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on three different ways in which the region is being and has been defined. The next section considers the construction of an 'official' government region, increasingly defined by the actions and plans of a range of regional agencies. That is followed by a section which explores arguments for the emergence of a 'Greater' South East (bringing together the government regions of the South East London and the East of England). The third of these sections reflects on approaches which seek to define the region in 'relational' terms. Finally, a concluding section briefly considers the implications of each of these approaches for public policy.

Official representations: making up a region

Development agencies were set up throughout England in 1999 and fostering the competitiveness of regions was presented as a means of providing them with a secure (competitive) economic base, capable of underpinning the financial well-being of their residents (moving beyond welfarism – see, e.g., Morgan 1997). Collectively the competitiveness of individual regions was seen as a way of enhancing the overall competitiveness of the country, but the regional agenda was also presented as a means of achieving political and economic redistribution. It was intended to 'promote sustainable economic development' (Department of the Environment Transport and

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the Regions 1997), with a 'greater focus on wealth creation and jobs' (John Prescott, quoted in Jones and MacLeod 1999, p. 301). In the coded language of new Labour politics, a focus on the 'regions' offered a means of acknowledging the existence of economic inequality, as well as promising a programme of renewal through a form of economic self-help, rather than redistribution.

The arrival of the new regionalism, however, had a particular significance for the South East of England. Unlike the 1930s and the period after 1945 when 'regional policy' was explicitly oriented towards shifting 'growth' from the more prosperous to the less prosperous regions of the country, this time the South East, too, is a region, apparently driven by similar needs to the others. Regional policy is no longer a policy for a set of 'regions', defined as those places with economic and social problems which lie outside the golden heartlands of London and the Home Counties. *Every* region is being enjoined to improve its economic competitiveness. The South East of England Development Agency makes no bones about its purpose, with a strap-line that promises that it is 'Working for England's World Class Region' and the explicit claim that it is 'driving force of the UK's economy' or the 'powerhouse of the UK economy' (see also SEEDA 1999, 2002a, 2002b).

While joint planning arrangements (given the Soviet style acronym of SERPLAN) predated the creation of the regional development agency and its associated regional assembly they had little authority in shaping any emergent South East regional identity or, indeed, its economic direction, even if they did cover a wider area and included London in their remit (see, e.g., Lock 1989). Alongside the significantly expanded Government Office of the South East, the development agency has taken on the role of giving the region more of a shared identity and, perhaps more important, attempting to shape its economic direction. Not surprisingly, the new agencies start from the borders they have been given and seek through planning and promotional practice to give them a meaning that goes beyond the bureaucratic. Following the logic of the new regionalism, the region is effectively to be defined by its competitive position, formally its competitive position with respect to regions elsewhere in Europe, but implicitly, at least, within the UK, too.

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SEEDA explicitly defines the South East of England in terms of its economic success – as the UK's growth region, the region whose prosperity drives that of the rest of the country. The drive to regional competitiveness is, therefore, identified as a national as well as a regional imperative, since although the South East is understood to have grown faster than other regions of the UK and – indeed – than London over the last decade, it is also stressed that the South-East's competitors are outside the UK, and particularly in Europe (see, e.g., SEEDA 2002a). If the South East does not succeed in claiming its rightful place among Europe's elite regions, it is implied, then the UK (and the UK's other regions) will also suffer.

The Regional Economic Strategy forefronts an image of the region as 'a dynamic, diverse and knowledge-based economy that excels in innovation and turning ideas into wealth creating enterprise'. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that by 2012 the region is acknowledged to be one of the fifteen 'top performing regional economies' in the world (SEEDA 2002b, p. 8). The South East is said to be the UK's 'global gateway' and 'an international region', providing a way into both the UK and Europe for multinational companies, attracting almost as much foreign direct investment as London (SEEDA 2002, p. 13). From this perspective, it is simply taken for granted that it is a more or less coherent 'region' capable of being understood as a unified whole.

But the current policy game has another vitally important aspect, which encourages a focuses on the differences within the region and particularly the differences in income levels and prosperity within it. Just as others point to the differences in wealth between regions, so in the South East emphasis is placed on differences within it. Since the current politics of regionalism require regional actors to emphasise the problems they face in order to attract resource, there has recently been a remarkable turnaround in official representations. Where it was once left to agencies such as SEEDS (South East Economic Development Strategy, a local authority sponsored initiative of the 1980s) (SEEDS 1987. See also Breugel, 1992) to point to divisions within the South East, now the new regional agencies sponsor research to identify them so that they have something with which to bargain in the search for state funding.

The broad divisions identified in the various texts of the regional agencies are clear enough. A growth belt – or 'area of economic success' - is identified in the West of the region, stretching from Winchester to Milton Keynes and Newbury to Gatwick, while a coastal belt to the East, incorporating areas bordering the Channel and the Thames Estuary, is identified as facing problems of decline (both in tourism and other traditional industries).Finally, an area is identified that has a concentration of declining industries, particularly those associated with defence or port activities (see, e.g. SEEDA 2002b, pp. 12-14).

There is an explicit focus on 'tackling disadvantage' within the region. So, for example, although unemployment is low, the point is made that the numbers unemployed in the South East are high in absolute terms; while educational achievement is high in Buckinghamshire, it is low in Portsmouth; while the employment rate for the region as a whole is higher than the national average, it is lower in the Isle of Wight, Brighton and Hove and Southampton (SEEDA 2002b, p. 10). The South East Region Social Inclusion Statement published in 2002, lists areas suffering deprivation. In particular it highlights the extent to which there are pockets of deprivation in the region's coastal towns, such as Hastings and Thanet. Of the 119 wards identified as being among the 20% most deprived in the country, 94 are in coastal towns (GOSE 2002, p. 40). 46 of the 50 most deprived wards in the region are in Hampshire, Sussex and Kent, 'mainly along the 'coastal strip'' (SEERA 2003, p. 27).

The impact of the closure of the East Kent coal fields is also noted as an issue in the social inclusion statement, since this is said to have left 'social scars', as well as dereliction, while individual wards in some of the region's urban areas contain significantly deprived populations – particular attention is drawn by GOSE (2002, p. 40) to a ward in Portsmouth in which child poverty is a particular problem, and in one ward in Brighton poor skills levels are identified as an issue of major concern, while a ward in Slough has the worst problems of poor housing and overcrowding in the region. Even in a region that seeks so strongly to identify itself as a centre for knowledge-based industry, the variation in educational and skills levels between different parts of it can be start. Nearly 60% of working age adults who live in

Wokingham have qualifications at NVQ level 3 or above, while in Medway the figure is below 35% (SEERA 2003, p. 27).

Rural decline is also an issue that concerns the various agencies, both because of the fall in available agricultural employment and because of the reduction in housing available for local residents and their children. Not surprisingly, perhaps, attention is drawn to the fact that the experience of social exclusion may be worse for people trapped in more prosperous areas (like those in the South East), because access to appropriate services may be restricted by lack of overall demand (GOSE 2002, pp. 40-41). And, although in proportional terms deprivation in the South East is clearly far lower than in other regions of the UK, SEEDA also stresses that the 'sheer size of the South East means that the actual number of excluded people in the region is comparable to and can exceed those in regions that are better known for their high levels of deprivation' (SEEDA 2002b, p. 42), while the Draft Regional Plan also notes that the disparities between the incomes of individuals within the region are the widest of any English region (SEERA 2004, p. 2).

The search for a spatial pattern to issues of deprivation and social exclusion is ultimately unconvincing, since the most deprived wards are scattered like a rather disconnected necklace along the coast round from the Thames Gateway, through Thanet and Hastings, to Brighton and Hove and on to the Isle of Wight and Southampton, with a few others dotted around in a series of urban areas - in Reading, Slough, High Wycombe, Milton Keynes and Oxford. The explanations for the problems facing people who live in these wards owe little to any shared set of 'regional' issues. On the contrary, listing the areas concerned helps once more to indicate the relative incoherence of the region being so actively constructed in the planning documents and economic strategies. They are discussed together not because they have much in common, but because they happen to have been clustered together in a newly invented region.

If one vision for the South East focuses on competitiveness and growth, stressing what is seen to be the region's key role in underpinning the UK's economic prosperity, a second is defensive, recognising the inevitability of growth, but seeking to protect residents from its environmental and other impacts. In a sense this captures

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key tensions within the region – it retains some of the features of the old 'home counties' (see, e.g., Hamnett 198?), reinforced by the rise of an extended suburbia at the same time as being the location for expanding service industries, particularly in financial and business services. The growth of employment in these industries both underpins the prosperity of local residents and threatens their 'quality of life'. It is in this context that the language of 'sustainability' is so effectively mobilised, both to find ways of sustaining economic growth and to protect the new middle classes from its more unpleasant aspects.

'Sustainability' is, of course, a term that can take on many meanings in the context of economic development. Sometimes, the emphasis is on finding ways of ensuring that economic growth will be sustained (e.g. through the provision of necessary infrastructure, housing for key workers etc.), while on other occasions the emphasis may be placed on ways of protecting areas from environmental depredation, ensuring that transport networks remain effective or that flooding is avoided. The tension between these approaches is particularly apparent in the language of the new regional agencies. SEEDA is more concerned with the former, while SEERA is more likely to emphasise the latter, particularly as a means of defending the relatively privileged position of existing residents of the South East. An 'Integrated Regional Framework' has been developed with a range of regional partners and an explicit emphasis is placed finding ways 'to reduce the negative effects of economic growth' (SEERA 2004a).

In the draft South East Plan approved for consultation by SEERA in 2004, the tension is explicitly acknowledged: 'On the one hand economic growth and concomitant development has been a necessary condition for prosperity and social and environmental action. On the other, some consider that the price of that growth in terms of resource consumption and other impacts is too high and unsustainable in the long-term' (SEERA 2004c, p. 4). Despite the care of its authors to present the tension explicitly, when the draft plan was presented to the Assembly in November 2004, the range of proposals for housing growth in the region was rejected and a lower range was agreed for wider consultation. In other words, for however brief a moment, the protective instincts of the interests represented in the Assembly overcame the sponsors of growth.

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These issues are also at the core of the work of a Commission on Sustainable Development (supported by the counties of the region, as well as PriceWaterhouseCoopers) which is being undertaken through the Institute of Public Policy Research. The first working paper produced by the Commission suggests that increased growth should not be a priority for the region, not least because its author questions the region's role as a driver of growth within the UK Robinson 2004, pp. 7-8). Instead he points to the need to find ways of coping with some of the problems of the region's 'success' (particularly by challenging disparities within the region and tackling issues relating to traffic congestion, the shortage of affordable housing, the consumption of natural resources and maintaining the quality of the environment) (Robinson 2004). The second working paper (Foley 2004) explicitly sets out to explore what are seen as 'the problems of success' and emphasises that public policy within a region should be directed towards improving or maintaining the quality of life for its residents.

It is in this context that the language of social exclusion and deprivation, of internal divisions within the region, and the search for ways of tackling these problems also has the paradoxical policy benefit of offering an apparently painless way of resolving the tensions – growth may be delivered through the regeneration of deprived areas (such as the Thames Gateway, but also the other areas on the 'coastal strip' and parts of Kent) as well as development on the edge of the region (in Milton Keynes – to which there is a long tradition of shifting development to defend the leafy suburbs of South Buckinghamshire) (see, e.g., Charlesworth and Cochrane 1994). The quality of life of the prosperous 'core' can be protected, while growth is diverted to those parts of the region that need it.

Similarly, the mantra of 'affordable housing' is one that is shared by all the agencies involved in the region and is an issue that is identified as a clear concern by residents in the MORI survey referred to above. However, the understanding of what is meant by 'affordable housing' is not necessarily shared in quite so straightforward a fashion. For residents, of course, it is a complaint about the costs they incur by living in the South East, although (in some areas, at least) tempered by a desire to ensure that development does not threaten their lifestyles. For SEEDA, GOSE and the Office of

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the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 'affordable housing' is a coded expression of the need to provide the necessary infrastructure to underpin continued growth. If growth in the 1980s and 1990s was held back by labour market constraints and overheating (see, e.g., Peck and Tickell 1995) then the task must be to find ways of reducing the likelihood of a similar occurrence. Providing housing for those who are needed to sustain the boom, even where (like teachers and other public sector workers, but also the growing army of service workers in retail, distribution, hotels and catering) they are not highly paid 'knowledge workers' is identified as a priority (see, e.g., ODPM 2003).

Although the focus of the regional agencies is on the narrowly defined South East as a more or less coherent entity, there is also a recognition that its connections to and linkages with neighbouring regions are significant. The existence of boundaries is taken for granted, but the potential importance of 'cross-boundary links' is acknowledged (SEEDA 2002b, p. 13). There is even an acknowledgement that there may be a shared interest between Kent (particularly its coastal towns) and regional authorities in Northern France. The South East is identified as an 'integrated region', that is a region 'integrated' into wider regional context, and, in this context at least, the interrelationship with London is recognised as paramount. Other explicitly identified linkages include the Central South Coast (which stretches along from Portsmouth and Southampton into the South West region) and the Oxford to Cambridge Arc (which rather hopefully promises the creation of a major cluster of knowledge based industries that stretches across the north of the region from Oxford to Cambridge in the East of England) (see O2C Arc 2003). The most significant linkages, however, are probably those associated with the Thames Gateway and Milton Keynes and the South Midlands, since they (along with Ashford, on a smaller scale) have been identified as areas for significant growth in the government's plans for the development of 'sustainable communities' (ODPM 2003, GOSE et al 2004, ODPM 2004). The extent of these proposals and their likely impact (as populations double in size and major investment takes place in infrastructure and housing) makes it difficult to sustain a narrow focus on the official South East, since many of the most important development decisions affecting that region will be taking place either outside it or on its extreme edges, even if one of the reasons for focusing development there may be to protect the heartlands from the impact of growth – maintaining a

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relatively 'green and pleasant land' for those in the suburbs and 'rural' exurbs of the region.

Bigger is better: the 'Grater' South East

If the curiously truncated and incoherent official region is ultimately unconvincing as a representation that reflects either popular understandings or economic linkages, is there any other basis on which the 'South East' may be understood and identified? Until 2001, when the most recent Regional Planning Guidance was issued (GOSE et al 2001), for planning purposes the South East continued to be defined as including London and the counties of Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, so that the South East was made up of London and the Rest of the South East. The Rest of the South East was effectively the doughnut around London, which meant (in principle at least) that a rather different regional vision was in play. Some of the same features remain identifiable (Milton Keynes and Ashford are identified for growth and the Thames Gateway is identified as a priority for regeneration) but the region is seen as a whole and at least some of today's border regions – those with London and the East of England – are in the centre rather than on the edge of the region.

In this context, perhaps those who espouse the notion of a Greater South East have a greater claim to be identifying a more coherent approach to understanding the region. In their discussion of the South East as a 'core region' Breheny and Congdon (1989) start from an understanding of the region as incorporating the currently 'official' South East, London and the Rest of the South East (and sometimes going further to include other parts of the 'Western crescent' identified by Hall et al, 1987). They suggest that this South East is 'an example of a 'core' region, occupying a dominant position, economically, politically and culturally, within a capitalist economy which exhibits distinct and enduring uneven development' (Breheny and Congdon 1989, p. 1).

Gordon (2003 and 2004), too, argues strongly that the focus should be on the 'greater' South East, incorporating the East of England as well as the government regions of London and the South East. In a sense (paradoxically perhaps) his argument is one that constructs this super region as a city region, one whose central

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focus is London. It is the spread of activities building on the strengths of the London economy, coupled with a transport network that focuses on London, that define the region. However, Gordon emphasises that developments since the 1970s have helped to redefine the region, as the spread of business services functions and high tech industry has helped to build a wider range of centres with their own linkages into national and international networks. As he puts it: 'In this regionalised version of London, outer areas now substantially contribute to its agglomeration economies, as well as continuing to benefit from those rooted in central London' (Gordon 2004, p. 41). Pain (2004) explores the extent to which the South East (broader than borders – defined by connections in advanced producer services) is polycentric – i.e. links between centre rather than through London. Evidence strongly suggests that links through London are still the most important but also highlights linkages that cross cut the region between Cambridge and Reading, Reading and Southampton and MK and Southampton (see also SEERA 2004, pp. 43-4, which presents evidence from the same research project to support the argument for the emergence of a series of functional urban regions across the Greater South East, as well as highlighting the growth of cross-commuting between towns in the wider region).

In other words, Gordon is identifying the emergence of a region whose coherence is not simply a function of its core. He draws on the work of Simmie et al (2002) to highlight the interdependence of the different parts of the region – both noting the dispersal of innovative firms across the region (i.e. not simply clustered in London) and emphasising that it is regional connections (including air services and labour markets) that sustain the region's growth. Simmie confirms that the Greater South East 'contains the highest concentration of innovative firms in the UK' (Simmie 2003, p. 614).

Gordon argues that such are the interconnections within this region that it is only through regional success that internal divisions and inequalities can be minimised: 'For spatial equity within the GSE, as well as for its overall employment rate', he says, 'it is the competitive performance of the region as a whole which matters' (Gordon 2004, p. 42). From this perspective, the current structures of regional governance and planning are not only inappropriate but may actually have negative consequences for the development of the region and, because of its centrality to the

UK economy and its wider role as centre for innovation, for well-being of the country as a whole.

Gordon shares the emphasis of SEEDA (albeit for the wider region) on the need for the South East to be supported in achieving economic success, and for this reason he maintains that 'it deserves serious attention to its needs and management on a continuing basis and structures which maximise the chance of this occurring' (Gordon 2004, p. 64). He acknowledges a potential split between the 'region' with which people may identify as residents and the Greater South East for which he argues there needs to be coherent planning and political leadership. Gordon's own suggestion is for a political leader connected into national government, heading up 'a single, strengthened super-regional Government Office' which would work with a more fine-grained and disaggregated set of regional assemblies and agencies. In other words, his way of dealing with the tensions between the expectations of residents and the needs of the national economy is to explicitly separate the role of representation (the various regional and sub-regional agencies) from that of planning and fostering economic development (a super government office).

Beyond the boundaries

Another way of moving beyond the existing boundaries is to consider regions as what Allen et al (1998) refer to as spatialised social relations, that is as places which are actively constructed by the economic and social networks and linkages within them and which connect them to other places. In most political debates on regions, in practice emphasis is often placed on their constructions as economic activity spaces, but – as Amin and Thrift (1994) stress in their discussion of the significance of 'institutional thickness' – this may include the cultural and institutional relationships that underpin economic processes. Unlike the fixed entities generated by the texts and the rhetoric of the official regionalism, this approach suggests rather more fluid possibilities and implies the possibility of overlapping regions of different sizes. These are regions that may vary across time and are made and remade by human interaction (within which – of course – the cartographers, government officials and regional politicians play their own part). These regions do not have clear and permanent boundaries, and are defined by their positions within networks, which

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stretch out much wider nationally and internationally through a series of interconnections.

Allen et al (1998) argue that in the 1980s and 1990s the 'South East' was defined and understood itself as a 'growth' region and specifically a region of neo-liberal growth. Its national dominance was expressed through this definition which reflected a particular confluence of political, cultural and economic dynamics. Although it was presented as a model of deregulated growth, in practice, it relied on high degree of state intervention both to achieve the particular forms of 'deregulation' that were driven through and tended to advantage the South East, as well as significant investment in large scale public infrastructure, for example, associated with road construction, form by-passes to the M25. The growth of the South East was predicated on decline elsewhere in the UK, in the wake of large scale (state sponsored) industrial restructuring. In other words, it was not possible to view the region as self-contained and simply building its own competitiveness. Its positioning within a wider national (and European) system helped to shape its growth.

Viewing the South East as a 'growth' region confirms the limitations of more static definitions, and it also highlights some of the difficulties of utilising generally available data in pursuing dynamic processes of change. There is no single correct definition of the growth region. It stretches far beyond the 'standard' region for some forms of economic and cultural relationships (e.g. to Cambridge, through the threads connecting high technology industry, and pulled to Wiltshire by the tentacles of the luxury – 'country' – housing market, as well as the M4 corridor) (see also Gordon et al 2003). Meanwhile, within the 'standard' region there are substantial spatio-social discontinuities – holes and hot spots (the holes represented by the high water mark of Fordism in places like the Medway Towns, Portsmouth and Southampton and the hot spots represented by Gatwick airport, developments around Heathrow and the new town of Milton Keynes). From this perspective, it could be argued that the region is spatially discontinuous, in the sense that some places currently defined as being in the South East are not (e.g. much of Kent and the coastal South) while other places located far away from the current borders of the region should be seen as part of it, precisely because they are so tightly connected through economic and cultural networks.

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Attempting to force the South East (however its boundaries are defined) into a regional template, that is one that starts from an implicit understanding of regions as more or less coherent economic spaces, based around the clustering of particular activities, may itself be unhelpful. Some have argued that the formal and informal networks that define the 'power' of London and the South East are national (and potentially international), rather than regional. Peck and Tickell (1992) see this as a weakness as well as a strength in the boom years of the 1980s they argue that the 'region enjoyed strong economic growth as a result of its privileged place in *national* regulation strategies and *international* accumulation strategies, but subsequently was shown to lack appropriate *regional* regulatory mechanisms for the sustenance of growth' (Peck and Tickell, 1992, p. 359). For Amin et al (2003) this is a fundamental issue which sets the 'South East' in a longer cultural history. They relate its national role back to a 'courtly' structure (focused on the crown and state) through which the apparently necessary centrality of London and the South East is reproduced in terms of the institutional relations of class and politics with their associated powers of exclusion and inclusion (Amin et al. 2003, pp. 9-12). 'London is the presumptive location of the national', they argue. 'It is in this sphere that the political meets the economic meets the national imaginary' (Amin et al 2003, p. 13). Amin and Thrift (1994, p. 17) acknowledge that the South East does not exhibit the rich set of finely grained cultural and economic networks that might be characterised as 'institutional thickness' (often seen as a prerequisite for economic growth), but it is where the national elites learn to be elites.

Amin et al (2003) question the extent to which the North/South divide should be seen simply as a consequence of the working out of market forces. On the contrary they suggest that the centralisation of power in London and the South East means that a 'significant element of 'national policy making effectively functions as an unacknowledged regional policy for the South Eastern part of England' (Amin and Thrift 2003, p. 17). So, for example, they suggest that national economic policy is overly influenced by the state of the regional economy in London and South East, with steps being taken to restrain the economy when the region is 'overheating', even when the Rest of the Country still has significant capacity for growth. They also suggest that tax policy which reduces income tax for high earners, in practice shifts

resource to London and the South East because of the concentration of high earners in the region.

Effectively Amin and Thrift (2003) turn the claims often made for the South East as a 'growth region' that drives the British economy on their head. Instead they suggest that it tends to work as a drain on the rest of the country. If the South East is a 'core' region, then, according to this analysis, it is one whose relationship with the rest of the British economy is rather peculiar, since in the 1980s 'in effect the political economy of the south east as 'growth region' operated in ways which restricted the possibility of growth in other regions of the UK' (Allen et al 1998, p. 119). Amin et al (2003) highlight the drain of graduates to the region from elsewhere in the UK, which reinforces the centralisation of the knowledge economy in London and the South East, at the expense of other parts of the country. Hepworth and Spencer (2003) highlight the extent to which London and the South East dominate British knowledge economy and highlight the existence of an 'uneven or centralised geography of the knowledge economy', pointing to the existence of ''brain drains' that undermine capacity building, graduate underemployment and local bottlenecks for people with intermediate qualifications'. There is, they argue, ' a relatively distributed pattern of growth in qualifications and the graduate labour pool contrasting with a highly concentrated pattern of knowledge-intensive job creation that favours London and its hinterland, and the South East more widely' (Hepworth and Spencer 2003, Executive Summary). Among graduates who move to study in a region in which they did not study or originate from, the Greater South East is the most favoured first destination (Uzzell 2004, p. 20).

What sort of South East?

The three versions of the South East that have been discussed in this chapter each has a strong claim to representing the 'real' South East and each has significant implications for public policy.

The first is in a sense the embodiment of current public policy, in the context of a newly regionalised England. The regional agencies play an active part in defining the region, identifying relations (including divisions) within it and giving some meaning

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to the borders around it (not least as they identify cross-border linkages). But they also embody some of the tensions within the policy, in particular, those between the drive for 'growth' and the desire of residents to defend their quality of life (particularly those residents in relatively privileged enclaves) (given institutional expression to some extent in the different roles of SEEDA and SEERA, and ultimately policed by GOSE). And they reflect the difficulties of managing a 'region' whose borders are so porous and which does not include many of the areas whose development effectively shapes what is possible within it. The drivers of change are not 'regional drivers'.

The second finds a route through by identifying a Greater South East, which seeks to capture the broader economic linkages and to create an entity within which plans can be given some meaning. The institutional tensions reflected in the first model are overcome by suggesting that economic and regional planning (that is planning for growth in the interests not only of the region but also of the country as whole) would be conducted under the aegis of a super government office, who would work with and negotiate with a wide variety of regional and local agencies capable of reflecting the wishes of those they represented. The extent to which such a powerful agency could ever be created is – of course – an open question, and it is perhaps worth pointing out that the population of this super-region would be almost half that of England. Its construction in this way would have fundamental (and potentially threatening) consequences for the rest of England (as well as the devolved countries of the UK).

The third (certainly as articulated by Amin et al 2003) takes an approach that implicitly questions the value of regional structures of the sort that currently exist, but also questions the extent to which (whatever its borders) the South East can be seen as a positive driver of the UK economy. On the contrary, it is argued, the central role that is currently accorded to the South East in the UK economy and society masks the extent to which it effectively undermines growth elsewhere in the country, by sucking in talent, public and private investment. Instead of a programme of redistribution from the South East to the rest of the country, however, they argue for a different starting point, in which public policy is 'decentered' and the activities which it is currently simply assumed will be undertaken in London and the South East are instead located elsewhere. Like the first, when it emphasises the significance of inequalities within

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the region, so does the third, arguing that issues of distribution can best be handled intra regionally, with little national intervention.

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