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REGIONS UNBOUND: TOWARDS A NEW POLITICS OF PLACE

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Paper for Vega Collection

Introduction

The mainstream view of cities and regions is one that continues to conceptualise them as territorial entities: local economic systems, regimes of regulation, a place called home. As Doreen Massey muses in her opening essay, the local continues to be seen as the space of the intimate, the familiar, the near, the embodied, that is, as a space constitutively separate and different from a global space seen as the space of the afar, the abstract, the virtual, the encroaching, the hegemonic. The result is a world of nested or jostling territorial configurations, of territorial attack and defense, of scalar differences, of container spaces. The continuing grip of this imaginary is odd because it has been challenged by two significant developments in recent years.

The first challenge is the rise of compositional forces that are transforming cities and regions into sites immersed in global networks of organization and routinely implicated in distant connections and influences. These are changes we have come to associate with globalization, which includes the everyday transnational flow of ideas, information, knowledge, money, people, and cultural influences; the growth of translocal networks of organization and influence, such as transnational corporations, global financial institutions, international governance regimes, and transnational cultural networks; and the ripples of distant developments such as stock market swings, environmental disasters, global trade agreements, and policy decisions in powerful nations.

There is a large body of literature highlighting the variegated processes of spatial stretching and territorial perforation associated with globalization, which add up to the displacement of a world order of nested territorial formations composed of a discernible

inside and outside, by a world of heterogeneous spatial arrangements in terms of geographical shape, reach, influence and duration. In this emerging new order, spatial configurations and spatial boundaries are no longer necessarily or purposively territorial or scalar, since the social, economic, political, and cultural inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution (Amin, 2002).

The resulting excess of spatial composition is truly staggering. It includes radiations of telecommunications and transport networks around (and also under and above) the world, which in some places, fail to even link up proximate neighbours (Graham, 2002). It includes faith communities, dreamworlds and cultural domains that cut across lines of longitude and latitude and in such complex ways that any attempt to trace the connections from a given location would look like a mess of squiggles across a map (Nederveen Pieterse, 2003). It includes supply chains and corporate networks that tie producers, intermediaries and consumers in the most unexpected places in highly structured and close patterns of mutuality and dependence (Dicken, 2003; Hughes and Reimmer, 2004). It includes well-trodden but not always visible tracks of transnational escape, migration, tourism, business travel, asylum, and organized terror which dissect through, and lock, established communities into new circuits of belonging and attachment, resentment and fear (Castles and Miller, 1998; Coleman and Crang, 2002, Gray, 2003). It includes all the transhuman networks of sacred, viroid, digital, animal and plant life that summon meaning and attachment at microcosmic, bodily, aerial, epidemiological, planetary and cosmological scales, and which thoroughly infuse life at any given site (Whatmore, 2002). It includes spaces of emotional attachment whose geographies are almost as varied as life on earth, ranging from the workings of home, family and the playground, to the long cultural networks that feed the screen and the musical arrangements etched on CDs (as Nigel Thrift reveals in his essay here). It includes political registers that now far exceed the traditional sites of community, town hall, parliament, state and nation, spilling over into the machinery of virtual public spheres, international organizations, global social movements, diaspora politics, and planetary or cosmopolitan projects (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Connolly, 2002). The list could continue, but the point can be made. These

spatialities are decisive in the constitution of the local, but they continue to be written out of the hegemonic territorial imaginary of the world.

This omission is all the more puzzling because there has existed for a while now a relational reading of place that works with the ontology of flow, connectivity and multiple geographical expression, to imagine the geography of cities and regions through their plural spatial connections. This is the second reason why it is odd that the territorial/scalar imaginary of place has not budged. Perhaps it is not that strange, given the enduring grip of territorial representations of cities and regions. It will take a lot to displace the A-Z or concentric-circle image of London by a 'relational' map that incorporates the network of sites around the world that pump fresh food into a distribution centre called Covent Garden, that draws neighbourhood boundaries around settlements in post-colonial countries with which social and kinship ties remain strong, that makes us see sites such as Heathrow airport or Kings Cross station as radiations of trails shooting out across the land and far beyond to reveal London a site of transit and connectivity. I cite London only because it came to mind first, not because it is any more relationally constituted than any other place. Similar imaginaries could be conjured up for the least likely places, such as Bedouin camps in the Sahara brought to life through elaborate trading routes and religious practices that stretch across North Africa and far across the ocean to market stalls in New York (Stoller, 2002).

Within geography, Doreen Massey and her colleagues at the Open University have been formative in developing a relational sense of place and space, supported by a rich vein of philosophical inquiry into why we must take space also to mean dwelling, affinity, immanence, relationality, multiplicity, and performativity (see also Thrift, 1999). They have imagined all kinds of ways in which our understanding of the spatiality of cities can be enriched. The bare essential of this theoretical endeavour are summarized in Massey's introductory essay. The resulting visualization of cities and regions makes interesting reading. Now they are recast as nodes that gather flow and juxtapose diversity, as places of overlapping - but not necessarily locally connected - relational networks, as perforated entities with connections that stretch far in time and space, and, resulting from all of this,

as spatial formations of continuously changing composition, character, and reach (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Seen in this way, cities and regions come with no automatic promise of territorial or systemic integrity, since they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity, and relational connectivity. The analytical challenge posed is to make something of the tracings of varying length and duration of material, virtual and immanent relationships that work through a place called London or a Bedouin camp, that mesh with a genealogy of past spatial relationships, to nudge London and the Bedouin camp in new directions of force and expression. So, if we are to see cities and regions as spatial formations, they must be summoned up as temporary placements of ever moving material and immanent geographies, as 'hauntings' of things that have moved on but left their mark (as Thrift, 1999, puts it), as situated moments in distanced networks, as contoured products of the networks that cross a given place. The sum is cities and regions without prescribed or proscribed boundaries.

What's in such a war of imaginaries? Why does it matter whether cities and regions are territorially or relationally interpreted? My argument in this paper is that the differences matter *politically* in quite profound ways, because I believe that very different sensibilities of the political spring out of the two readings of place. These differences relate not only to the scope and reach of local political activity, but also to what is taken to count as being political at the local level. Thus my aim in part is to open up an expanded understanding of what it is to be political in the context of what counts as local mobilisation, echoing Nigel Thrift's attempt in this collection to interpret affect as political. I want to pursue this dual aim through a discussion of the politics of regionalism. Regionalism is certainly live in Britain, fuelled by significant moves towards regional government and regional development agencies, and it is also part of a major reconfiguration of territorial politics elsewhere in Europe, driven by a reaction against the demons of state centrism, big nation, or modernist universalism.

The Politics of Territoriality: The New Regionalism

There are many different models of contemporary regionalism in Europe, from the governance-driven devolution experiments in Britain, Poland and Hungary, to the ethno-nationalist regionalisms such as those in Northern Italy and in some former state socialist countries, and the demands of autonomist movements and struggles of ‘indigenous’ peoples (Keating, 1998; Keating et al, 2003). It is risky to assume a unitary regionalism with a unitary politics. I wish to claim, however, that underlying the very different normative registers of regionalism - from febrile localism to secular republicanism and an internationalist regionalism - there is common ground, based on the assumption that territorial autonomy will: a) restore local control and democracy; b) increase economic returns; and c) strengthen sense of attachment. What I wish to argue is that all three expectations spring from a strongly territorial imaginary of place and place politics, one that is radically at odds with the implications that follow from a relational reading of place.

One good example is provided by the English experience, dominated as it has been by plans for regional assemblies and development agencies, claims of returning decision-making to local people, and a strong rhetoric of recovering and protecting old regional identities, as Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift and I have found in our recent work on the spatial grammar of British politics (Amin, Massey and Thrift, 2003). We have argued that these moves work with a highly restricted sense of local democracy, misunderstand the spatial needs of the contemporary economy (which are increasingly spatially distributed), and play on a conservationist regional identity that can be profoundly closed and exclusionary.

Other experiments are of course different. So, for example, Scottish nationalists have explicitly sought to reject a sense of place based on cultural parochialism, in support of a sense of Scottishness based on multiculturalism and cosmopolitan values, even though their governance and economic arguments for devolution have been similar. Regionalist mobilization in Upper Silesia in Poland has been an impassioned plea for cultural recognition against a history of state repression but also (as in other post-communist contexts – see Batt and Wolczuk, 2002) a means for articulating regional identity *and*

regional economy into a uniting Europe (Bialasiewicz, 2002). The Northern Italian case – perhaps one of the most vocal regionalist claims in today’s Europe – is not significantly different. Certainly, the Lega Nord’s recent rhetoric has become strongly exclusionary if not explicitly xenophobic. But here, too, narratives of cultural-territorial difference serve as a foil for economic power. Whatever its supporters may claim, “Padania” is constituted by its (networked and highly globalised) economic geographies – not any bounded and un-changing identity (see Agnew, 2000; Bialasiewicz, 2003). In turn, at least in terms of where the spatial dynamics of power lie, the Padanian case is quite different from the historic struggles in the Basque country for an independent nation and independent state from a centrist Spanish polity (Giner, 1998; Guibernau, 2000). But, I believe that the compulsion to think regions and regional politics in territorial terms remains constant across these differences. Most versions of the new regionalism share the conviction that region-building and regional protection is the answer for local economic prosperity, democracy, and cultural expression. In the rest of this section, I focus on what I consider to be two central aspects of the new politics of place.

A Politics of Territorial Management

The first feature of the new politics of place can be described as a cadre managerialism fashioned for local returns, often defended as a democratic improvement due to the desire to break away from central government control. Much contemporary regionalism is concerned with localizing decision making in core institutions such as regional government, regional assemblies and regional development agencies. Such an institutional frame is believed to help build a locally integrated economic system gathered around the dynamics of clusters, local supply chains, and local knowledge transfer. In this politics of localism, now actively endorsed by the EU and many national governments, a strong link is predicated between the economic and the political, based on the establishment of a locally governed institutional structure to support a locally-oriented economic system (OECD, 2001; DETR, 1997; DTLR, 2001). The European Union has also been very active in promoting regionalisation and regional governance in the candidate states – see Batt and Wolczuk, 2002).

At one level, it is hard to fault the politics of managerial localism. Has it not long been argued in critical geography that the regional problem is the product of the concentration and centralisation of capital and control? Does it not follow therefore that devolution and local orientation – the establishment of a different order of organization and power to that of the central state, transnational corporations, and other remote centres of power – is a necessary first step in reducing regional inequality? Is local capacity building not a way of helping less favoured regions to shed a culture of dependency on central state solutions (Amin, 1999)? Maybe, but only if the option of region-building and growth-from-below can demonstrate that the assumptions of the new economic localism are valid, and if it is accompanied by a reduction or radical re-ordering of the primary orders of power that continue to drive regional fortunes, as it were, from a distance.

Contemporary experiments in devolution, with their endless concern with clusters, assemblies, development agencies, and the like, fall short of these two conditions. First, there is growing evidence to show – despite the claims of economic localization theorists - that in the majority of contemporary corporate and industrial contexts, supply chains, linkage arrangements, and knowledge networks, are not locationally restricted, but highly dispersed spatially (Amin, Thrift and Massey, 2003). Firms now routinely draw on highly distributed supply chains, they pride success on their ability to break out of local markets, their knowledge base – both tacit and formal – is increasingly distanced and techno-mediated (Amin and Cohendet, 2004), and their infrastructural links – from logistics to training – are trans-regional. These observations cast serious doubt on the potential effectiveness of cluster initiatives and their promised local returns. Second, the new localism cannot pretend to be able to control the forces – material, virtual and immanent – that are implicated in new spaces of trans-territorial organization. These are forces that, in the form of share prices and interest rates, shifts in standards and rules, corporate and banking investment decisions, financial transfers, flows of information, people and knowledge, and decisions in far away places, routinely get around, distort or annul brave efforts to organize for local benefit. Finally, as Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift and I have argued in our recent polemic on UK centrism (op. cit.), only too often

devolution and local institution building – despite the rhetoric of wresting control away from the central state - comes without any serious attack on the power of defining others, ranging from central government, powerful states and international organizations, to legal codes, metrics and technological standards formulated elsewhere.

My argument is not against building regional voice and representation. Instead, it is against the assumption that there is a defined geographical territory out there over which local actors can have effective control and can manage as a social and political space. In a relationally constituted modern world in which it has become normal to conduct business – economic, cultural, political – through everyday trans-territorial organization and flow (Urry, 2002), local advocacy, it seems to me, increasingly must be about exercising nodal power and aligning networks at large in your own interest, rather than about exercising territorial power (unless you have access to the core sources such as control over the means of coercion and enrolment as do some in some powerful regions and states). I will return to the idea of ‘nodal’ regional strategies later. This is not to play down the significance of the powers that come with devolution in areas such as public services, welfare, education, environmental regulation, housing – where local control can have a decisive influence on the local quality of life. Instead, it is to caution that these powers do not, as so often assumed, add up to an ability to govern a ‘manageable’ geographical space. There is no definable regional territory to rule over.

This brings me to a second problem, which relates to the meaning of local democracy in the new regionalism. In the hands of pro-devolution institutions - governmental and non-governmental - the project amounts to a politics of good management and the inculcation of a local managerialist culture. This may come with plenty of talk about bringing in new voices and civic institutions into decision making and plenty of references to open government and public consultation: to doing government in a more inclusive way. There is nothing wrong with this. But, it is a restricted democracy that is envisioned, falling well short of a politics of extensive empowerment capable of distributing power and responsibility well beyond the control of an elite entrusted with such work. On occasions when the interpretation of democracy is more broadly defined to include

returning power to ‘local people’ (e.g. by grass-roots regionalist campaigns), many of the proposals for reform – possibly in the hope of being taken seriously – appear as mini versions of representative democracy, in the form of proposals for elected regional assemblies, accountable regional elites, and incorporation of the interests of different groups within the assemblies. Again, there is nothing wrong with this, but what is on offer is an imitative model of democracy, rather than an opportunity for a different and more expanded politics of place, as I will try to illustrate in the last part of the paper.

A Politics of Territorial Identity

Often, popular support for regional devolution has been sought by appealing to a local cultural heritage that needs to be recovered or protected from a threatening cultural ‘outside’. An insider culture is imagined, and significantly, as a *territorially* defined public sphere or public culture that can sustain a regionalist political project. Many threads are woven in narrating a coherent regional community, from stories of colonization and a common external enemy, to stories of heroism and resistance, as well as the scripting of a regional folk culture. A strong regional culture along these lines is assumed to help cement a strong public sphere composed of common interests, local orientation and active deliberation over a local way of life (see Paasi, 1996).

I acknowledge the risk of cultural caricature and over-stated insiderism in this summary, but the point that remains valid is that devolution politics is grounded in an imaginary of the region as a space of intimacy, shared history or shared identity, and community of interest or fate. These have become the motivating cultural reasons for a politics of local regard and local defense to be delivered through devolution. Regional identification, the presence of a local public sphere, and regional autonomy are assumed to go hand in hand and mutually reinforce each other. Of course, how the relationship between these three phenomena is played out varies from case to case. For example, the regionalism of the ‘Celtic nations’ or the Basque country draws upon a strong sense of regional identification and cultural unity (Le Coadic, 2002), while in the case of the economically strong regions that are seeking to break away from the rest of the nation, such as

‘Padania’ (and increasingly London, around the falsity that it subsidises the rest of the nation), the appeal to local cultural homogeneity is weak. In turn, regions such as Catalonia, Tuscany or South West Sweden play upon the merits of a distinctive public sphere rather than a regional homeland.

A politics of territorial identification comes with a baggage of problematic assumptions. First, it cannot be taken as given that strong regional identification along the lines outlined above captures cultural practices in most regions of Europe, and that it gathers a local public into a politics of regionalism. We know from a deluge of writing in cultural studies that a key consequence of contemporary globalism is the rise of composite and hybrid cultures, and hyphenated and diasporic identities. This globalism, through the everyday powers of consumer, lifestyle and media habits defines the cultural practices of most ethnic, class, gender and generational groupings, even those who consciously rant against modernity and globalization, from religious, cultural and regional conservationists to ethno-nationalists and folklorists (some of these contradictions are poignantly captured in Linda McDowell’s account here of the cultural practices of disaffected young men in British urban estates).

The salient point is that cultural globalism has become the *everyday* filter through which regional attachment or sense of place is developed and expressed (see also Paasi, 2002). The result is not a weakened sense of place necessarily, but a heterotopic sense of place that is no longer reducible to regional moorings or to a territorially confined public sphere, but is one made up of influences that fold together the culturally plural and the geographically proximate and distant. Increasingly, cultural attachment to a given city or region is defined through plural spaces of attachment, and for this, it provides no easy promise for a politics hooked around the myth of a regionalized identity. This is not to diminish the validity of a politics of place or to deny place attachment. Far from it. It is, instead, to question a politics of place based on the idea of a territorial commons or a cohesive territorial culture. Clearly there are exceptions such as Bosnia and Serbia or other similar ethno-nationalist regionalist claims driven by a pathology of colonial or ethno-nationalist abuse, but the norm elsewhere is a politics of place based on other

forms of place attachment such as a fondness for where you live or for a particular regional way of life, or other forms of struggles such as those over local quality of life or decisions made by local authorities.

This brings me to a second objection. It is all too easy to think that cities and regions offer territorially defined public spheres. The popular imagination abounds with easy labeling of apathetic publics here, buzzes of urban creativity and intermingling there, active public deliberation and debate somewhere else, state dependency or familism in other places. Academic writing on social capital has given further legitimacy to caricatures of place based on assumptions about prevailing local public cultures/spheres, to label, for example, some regions as civic regions (lots of social capital, lots of deliberation, lots of state transparency) and others as bureaucratic (state-driven, low levels of public participation, weak associationalism) or individualist (lots of market, proliferation of entrepreneurial cultures, weak state).

These caricatures come with a grain of truth about the nature of local public spheres, but the political conclusions drawn are far fetched. The link between the local public sphere and the local political culture can only ever be indirect. For a start, it is an error to imagine the local public sphere in purely localist terms. The public sphere, that is the discursive arena in which any individual here or there can participate with aid of many 'traveling' technologies such as books, newspapers, billboards, the media, the internet, is trans-territorial by very definition. It is a mobile, circulating, and ubiquitous space (Warner,), one that can generate associations and discursive engagements at a variety of spatial scales and a variety of spatial forms (from transnational ethical networks and global news audiences to school playgrounds and chat rooms). Any particular geographical site can only ever be a nodal connection in a hydra-like network space that never coheres into a local public sphere. Cities and regions are nodes in many public spheres, sustaining many geographies of attachment and political practice (see also Perulli, 1998). They do not automatically come with a strong local public sphere. An obvious implication is that there is no pre-given place for a politics of regionalism. Any

such outcome can only be the result of a deliberate campaign to fashion a community of local sentiment (over other political projects).

A Relational Politics of Place

I want to argue that a relational reading of cities and regions offers a very different reading of place politics, one that is neither a-spatial (i.e. where the local is reduced to a mere stage) nor territorial (i.e. where the geographical local is all), but topological (i.e. where the local brings together different scales of practice/social action – see Agnew, 1994). I want to explore a politics of place that is consistent with a spatial ontology of cities and regions seen as sites of heterogeneity juxtaposed within close spatial proximity, and as sites of multiple geographies of affiliation, linkage and flow. I wish to claim that associated with each is a specific spatial register of politics, adding up to a very different and expanded sense of the political that we find in the new regionalism (even if certain the local institutional arrangements – from assemblies to other represented interests – may reappear). We could, experimentally, summarize the political challenges of these two spatial registers of place respectively as the *politics of propinquity* and the *politics of connectivity* (or transitivity). I use the caveat ‘experimental’ because political geography, geopolitics and international relations lack an established terminology able to synthesize politics in non-territorial terms, but, at the same time, also able to retain a strong sense of the spatiality of social relations (without reducing this spatiality to a dewy-eyed localism as Massey warns in her article, or to some other form of boundary politics). What follows, thus, is a tentative framing of site politics in relational terms. It is the sketch of an alternative imaginary that is crying out for other dimensions of site politics to be fashioned.

A Politics of Propinquity

One major aspect of globalization that any politics of place has to come to grips with is the intense everyday negotiation of diversity in most cities and regions, associated with the exposure to cultural, social, experiential and aspirational difference among those who

share a given regional space. The politics of a local society made up of bit arrangements and plural cultures that never quite cohere or fit together, can no longer be cast as a politics of intimacy or shared regional cultures.

What, then are the alternatives? One temptation – indeed a fashion nowadays in readings of Benjamin, Lefebvre and Augé that interpret the local as the arena of the prosaic and the habitual - is to imagine the politics of propinquity as the politics of the everyday. Accordingly, such a politics might attend to the challenges thrown up by negotiations of everyday difference in habituated spaces such as work, welfare, housing, schooling, public space, public services, and so on. The focus would fall on, for example, how diversity is represented, how interests are contested, how different needs are met and reconciled. Indeed, there is no shortage of this style of local politics even if rarely grasped as a politics of propinquity. Debates in planning, local government studies, and social policy are inundated with practical suggestions about how everyday public goods should be distributed, about how different voices and interests can be heard, about how local differences can be reconciled. This reading of the everyday is the bread and butter of local politics everywhere, but it is an unnecessarily restrictive interpretation. Increasingly daily life is constituted through attachments and influences that are distanced, as revealed by the workings of diaspora communities, corporate networks, consumption patterns, travel networks, microworlds of communication, and the many public spheres that stretch across space. These translocal aspects of the habitual cannot be written out of a politics of propinquity, but tend to be undervalued in accounts of the everyday taken as the geographically proximate.

I wish to read the politics of propinquity relationally, in order to rule in everything that vies for attention in a given location. As such, it is a politics that cannot be confined to the everyday local or the intimate, such that spaces of the international or national can be treated as spaces for another kind of politics (e.g. the politics of regulations, standards, ‘big’ issues, state affairs). But, with everything ruled in as the ‘political’ at urban and regional level, a legitimate question is whether there remains anything specific about place politics. It is tempting to answer that place politics is no different from any other

kind of spatial politics, such as negotiations of issues arising at the national or international stage, or the machinations of more fluid political configurations such as global protest movements. It comes, however, with the risk of rubbing out potentially meaningful political effects associated with differences in spatial configuration. Space *can* talk back.

I wish to experiment with the proposition that if there is something distinctive about the politics of place as a *spatial* phenomenon (which is not the same as wanting to claim that the difference lies in what counts as the political at the local level), it is that different microworlds find themselves on the same turf, and that the pull on turf in different directions and different interests needs to be actively managed and negotiated, because there is no other turf. In other words, it is a politics shaped by the issues thrown up by living with diversity and sharing a common territorial space. Of course, both of these aspects also figure in other spatial arenas. For example, in contemporary debate on belonging and citizenship in a multicultural society, the nation has been taken as the prime locus of concern regarding diversity and a shared territorial commons. The national is intensely contested as a sacred space and as a site of belonging, as we know from the scars of state and nationalist attacks on immigrants and asylum seekers. What is perhaps distinctive about the local turf, however, is that it is perceived as a micro-world that is experienced and contested as a lived space; as heterogeneity habitually negotiated through struggles over roads and noise, public spaces, siting decisions, neighbourhoods and neighbours, housing developments, street life, and so on.

The politics of propinquity, then, can be read as a politics of negotiating the immanent effects of geographical juxtaposition between physical spaces, overlapping communities, contrasting cultural practices. As such, the politics of propinquity is neither automatically benign or malign, it has no pre-given remit, institutional composition and conduct, and it comes with no territorial restriction of its spatial architecture and alignments. Instead, all it be sure of is to take spatial juxtaposition seriously as a field of agonistic engagement. This means seeing the local political arena as a field of claims and counter-claims, agreements and coalitions that are always temporary and fragile, always

the product of negotiation and changing inter-sectional dynamics, always spreading out to wherever a claim on turf or on proximate strangers is made or to where novelty is generated by juxtaposition. One implication of this interpretation is that the politics of propinquity must be as much about what is struggled over (turf, difference and the forcings of spatial juxtaposition), as it must be about the conduct of local politics, in allowing agonistic engagement (contra the politics of governmentality) and about who or what counts as political, through its recognition of the acts of expression and organization across local society (contra the powers of designated institutions).

We now have a politics of place that looks very different from the politics of regional management or regional destiny that have become the hallmark of territorial regionalism. It makes for a vision and a set of political priorities established out of the open but fair power-play between agonistic actors and their competing and often conflicting claims. It accepts that a regional agenda has to be fashioned out of the disparate interests and the different worlds of connectivity that overlap in a given places, through active public discussion of different visions of what kind of local turf is desired and in whose interest (from the vested classes and majority communities to minorities, outsiders, and distant strangers). 'Region-building' becomes altogether different in a politics of place that works with and through the fragments (Paasi, 1996). It becomes an act of the free play of an active and plural regional body politic and a plural public sphere; an act of making the invisible part of the register of political life (e.g. by decentralizing decision-making to civic organizations and communities, by envisioning planning as an aggregated and discursively negotiated choice of visions and strategies, by bringing into play sentiments, ethics, emotions, aesthetics, ambiguity and uncertainty into the field of what counts as political). It becomes an act of developing a sense of place and place attachment that works with difference and distance, assuming no indigeneity or privileged set of claimants. Finally, it becomes an act of acceptance that the shared commons that we choose to call a regional way of life is only ever relationally and discursively constituted.

Those impatient for normative clarity will object that this alternative reading of regionalism is irresponsibly imprecise in that it lacks a vision of the good life. The critics

no doubt will include the regional policy community keen on targets as well as activists on the Left and the Right driven by a vision of what is to be done and for whom. In defence, I will make three points. First, the alternative reading has nothing to do with making up policy as you go along or not having clear normative objectives. My argument is simply that these should be the product of active debate, after different visions and preferences have been brought to the table and given legitimacy. My argument is against a presumed hierarchy of worth or order. It is not a rejection of normative purpose, but of its formulation in advance of agonistic engagement.

Second, and consequently, the alternative normativity is the product of a desire to take (regional) democracy seriously. I find it hard to see how contemporary versions of territorial regionalism are an act of democratization, which should achieve more than establishing new centres of power at the regional scale, that is, more than devolved government. As an act of democratization, it should also extend the franchise, bring in new voices, deal with power asymmetries, decentre authority and responsibility, and pluralize the decision making process. A democratic regionalism, consequently, has to accept the novelties, antagonisms, unpredictable outcomes, and excess generated by allowing heterogeneity and difference to be voiced.

Third, the alternative regionalism brings new priorities into the frame of what needs attending. This includes above all the issues thrown up by the juxtaposition of difference, ranging from those related to indigeneity, ethnicity and sense of place, to those related to the rights of claim of different economic interests in a region. I find it surprising that current regionalist mantras have nothing much to ask in the cultural realm about changing senses of place and place attachment in a multiethnic and multicultural society, or in the economic realm, about whether the interests and practices of actors gathered in the local economy – from maintenance and repair and distribution and logistics to the informal sector, public services, small firms and the corporate sector – can be gathered into clusters of local interdependence. A sense of the local as a fractal culture or fractal economy would yield a very different local politics, one which would begin with the assumption that there is no local cultural or economic coherence.

A Politics of Connectivity

The plural public sphere that is involved in the making of a region is a spatially diffuse and geographically mobile sphere. It calls forth a politics of place that works through this constitutive condition, not one that fakes, as does the new regionalism, a minor national politics of assumed territorial insides and outsides and an imagined regional identity. As I have already argued, it is difficult to imagine areas of social life that are not folded into spatially stretched circuits of organization/flow involving money, trade, work, faith, belief, consumption, information, knowledge, and power. Equally, it is difficult to hold on to an idea of the public sphere as a territorial given. Whatever we choose to describe as the institutions and practices of regionalism comes with connections, meanings, and influences that are never quite of that place.

It follows that a politics of place, whether we like it or not, has to work with the varied geographies of relational connectivity and transitivity that make up public life and the local political realm in general in a city or region. Analytically, the new regionalism acknowledges this constitutive exteriority. Most contemporary variants recognize the local transformations brought about by immigration, travel and exodus, global cultural connectivity, external economic integration and the rise of trans-local business chains, mediated or virtual worlds, and other elements of the globalised modern. It is generally accepted by regionalists that local life is shot through with these influences.

Normatively, however, this exteriority is either rejected or played down. So, for example, autonomist and cultural regionalists tend to shut it out through strong narratives of local embedding and local pedigree, which allows them to fabricate a pure imagined local community. Meanwhile, pragmatic regionalists and devolutionists have tended to see such exteriority as ontologically separate from a regional 'inside' that can still be mobilized and organized to drive local fortunes through such interventions as clusters and joined-up government.

A politics of place rooted in the idea that ‘we make space through interactions at all levels’ (Massey, this volume, p 1) has to be different. It has to be fashioned through the varied spatialities of connectivity and transitivity that cross a given region, such that the inside and the outside are no longer locationally defined. What is deemed as ‘local space’ and what is deemed to be a local priority cannot be determined territorially, but in other ways. A start would be to define regional priorities programmatically, contested through relationally constituted communities of attachment and resistance. The result is a regional ‘inside’ constructed through public debate over a particular political programmes or visions of the good life. Indeed, this should happen in ways open to both local and distant actors to sign up to a given programme, thereby, at the very least, freeing proximate strangers who inhabit different worlds from the tyranny of belonging to a ‘local community’ with shared interests.

There are significant changes in the conduct of regional politics that follow from this emphasis on a politics of programme conducted through spaces of relational connectivity, as Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift and I have begun to argue in our work on cosmopolitan regionalism (Amin, Massey and Thrift, 2003). Two examples – one related to the regional economic priorities and the other related to regional cultural priorities – might help to illustrate the difference. First, in a relational politics of place, decisions concerning what is good or bad for the local economy would no be decoupled from scalar or territorial assumptions, which in the new regionalism routinely hold that ‘local’ autonomy is empowering, while ‘external’ control is disabling, that local agglomeration increases local returns while global commodity chains seeps profits away, that home-grown institutions are locally-oriented while distant institutions are predatory or indifferent. Instead, judgement over economic worth would be based on public scrutiny of alternative models of economic prosperity and well-being (e.g. neo-liberal versus social democratic) and competing visions of the economic good life, which are approved or not by residents on the basis of how well a vision fits with their interests that may well be locked into spatial connectivities beyond the region.

The task, then, of local debate on economic priorities – within the development corporations, in regional assemblies, in the public arena – would become that of discussing what kind of regional economy is desired, with those who promise various returns expected to make transparent the distributional benefits associated with competing models of regional prosperity, instead of relying on the make believe that that economic localism in its own right promises regional competitiveness and rewards for all.

Whatever fictions there may be about regarding the inevitability of neo-liberal economics or the inevitability of ‘container’ policies, even the most cursory glance at experience in different parts of the world reveals the work of plural models of economic prosperity and organization. There are different models, each with its own spatial connectivities, each with particular local implications, each demanding a different set of policy solutions and policy actors in order to maximize local returns.

The models and their consequences need to be publicized. For example, there is a stark choice between a growth model that draws on TNC power, migrant labour, local elites, wage restraint, and minimum regulation, and a growth model that builds on social needs, fair trade, redistribution, social investment, international cooperation, mutual funds, and ties with other regions trying to pursue a similar economic agenda. The first model, which is not that far from the circumstances faced by many less prosperous regions, is a growth-before-equity model that is driven by rewarding sectional interests, that draws on a local-global relational connectivity geared towards cost minimization and profit maximization, and that requires policy interventions of a very particular kind (e.g. upgrading of the local supply base, attraction of more skilled labour, qualitative incentives to TNCs) in order to better local returns (if alternative models are unfeasible). The second model, a growth-for-equity model, works on the principles of mutuality and social obligation, requires work to be done to legitimate an economy of graduated growth and reduced income differentials and a culture of social solidarity that could tie in citizens both locally and a world away. This contrast is clearly a caricature, but my point is to highlight how different the discussion on regional economic priorities can become once the analysis of ‘local returns’ is situated within a frame of working in connections of

power and mutuality around particular visions of economic well-being (with no a priori privilege given to what happens to be ‘indigenous’).

Similarly, in the area of cultural priorities - to come to the second example – attention in a frame of a politics of connectivity would fall on the actual, material dynamics of cultural formation, since no ontology of origin or indigeneity would be assumed. Here too, however, it does not follow that a politics of connectivity freed from the baggage of regional nostalgia will yield a regionalism that automatically recognizes cultural difference and hybridity. Instead, as with the economy, the imperative is to arrange for active debate over different models of cultural connectivity, over the kind of cultural connections that people in a region wishes to defend, over the value of relational interactions beyond the region.

Again, for the sake of illustration, we can compare two very different versions of cultural connectivity circulating in current debates on multiculturalism. One is a ‘consumer’ cosmopolitanism, typified by the EU programme on European Cities of Culture, which celebrates cities and regions as cultural gateways, and plays on the virtues of world music, minority ethnic food and festival, regeneration based on multicultures and multiethnic public spaces, and the exoticism of the stranger. A raft of contemporary urban and regional regeneration strategies play on this aspect of belonging in the world in order to re-boot the local economy through new consumption, as well as to demonstrate an openness to multiculturalism and multiethnicity. Another version of cultural connectivity is a cosmopolitan ethos of solidarity and rights that has been growing in different parts of the world as a form of local response to global poverty, ethnic intolerance and Empire. It is based on combating racism, protecting the rights of displaced people and asylum seekers and fostering inter-cultural dialogue and commitment to distant strangers. It frequently involves local groups developing voice and impact through worldwide solidarity networks and social movements in order to shape and influence cultural politics both ‘at home’ and in other regions. While cultural connectivity in both examples rejects an idea of the region as a place of reminiscence and cultural preservation, neither share the same sense of place in the world.

As in the example of the economy, the point is that the politics of connectivity is not about the balance between localism and globalism. It is a matter of making explicit and of choosing between different senses of place and place attachment on the basis of agonistic engagement between different coalitions of cultural and geographical attachment. Thus conceived, a region should be able to be claimed can also be claimed by distant others, and in turn, able to link up with developments elsewhere on the basis of genuine normative complementarity.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to articulate a relationally imagined regionalism that is freed from the constraints of territorial jurisdiction. I have tried to show that if place matters in this perspective it is through the challenges – cultural, economic and political - thrown up by the spatial juxtaposition of difference and by the effects of connectivity in a multitude of relational spaces. I have tried to illustrate that these spatial effects really do count, in terms of what is conjured up for political attention, what is deemed significant or possible, and what, who and where are mobilized by the political process.

One question I wish to return to is whether in this alternative reading of regionalism anything remains distinctive about place politics. A vein of argument in this paper has been that what goes on in a city or region is about questions of political choice and democracy that could be found anywhere, which makes the politics of cities and regions no different from the politics of, say, the household, the nation, or the internet. There is nothing gained from fetishizing cities and regions as particular kinds of community that lend themselves to territorially-defined or spatially constrained political arrangements and choices. This simply diminishes the political at urban and regional level or restricts it to particular tasks. The typical current assumption is that while national governments should conduct the affairs of the land, regions should concentrate on local matters alone, or that while the nation should decide on matters of asylum, immigration, and racism, regions should concentrate on ‘smaller’ or local cultural questions).

But, it is not adequate to stop here, as this is to erode the significance of spatial difference. I have claimed that cities and regions possess a distinctive spatiality as agglomerations of heterogeneity locked into a multitude of relational networks of varying geographical reach. As such, they express, perhaps more than other socio-spatial formations (nations, households, organizations, virtual and imagined communities), the most intense manifestations of propinquity and multiple spatial connectivity. They are distinctive ‘nodal’ formations, and as such, they illuminate a particular kind of spatial politics. They could be seen as the forcing ground for challenges that are thrown up when difference is so visibly gathered in one place and when a globality of myriad flows and connections is temporarily halted in one place. The placement of different economic actors, different cultures, different citizens and non-citizens, different dreams, and different needs vies for attention in itself through the effects of spatial proximity (anger, dissonance, distance, visibility, encounter, evasion, mobility, non-correspondence). In turn, the global flows and connectivities constantly throw up new dilemmas of placement, possibly also new political challenges, from those related to everyday negotiations of cultural diversity or conflicts between a changing local populace over the everyday turf, to reimaginings of the local through diaspora and transnational (be)longings or strategies of local economic renewal based on the remittance economy. If thought of relationally, cities and regions could become generators of a kind of democratic energy because they would continually act to remind citizens what the stakes are in living with difference and everyday global connectivity.

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