

**The genesis and tensions of the English Regional
Development Agencies: class relations and scale**

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Abstract

This paper argues that the origin of the recently-founded Regional Development Agencies in England should be theorised in terms of the class relations and tensions of economic regulation in Britain and the use of scale and re-scaling to manage those tensions. The paper considers the class logic of neoliberalism, which has been particularly strongly developed in Britain due to its longstanding liberal settlement, and the problems of socialisation of production which neoliberalism has produced. The class tensions and problems of socialisation which first created, and then led to the decline of, centrally-redistributive regional policy are discussed. Analogous processes at the EU level are examined. A key precursor of the RDAs, local economic initiatives, is examined, and the spatial-class relations underlying them discussed. These arguments are then the basis for understanding the partial rescaling of regulation in England downwards from the nation state and upwards from the local level, and also the shift from centrally- to locally-controlled regional policy. This analysis of origins of the RDAs then suggests a number of tensions in the project which will shape its future trajectory; due to these tensions the class relations of the new regional economic governance remain open.

1. Introduction

The setting up of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in England by the Labour government in 1999-2000 constitutes a major change in the institutional form of state economic regulation in Britain. There is considerable debate concerning the promise of, and policies for, the RDAs (Special issue of *Policy and Politics* 25 (1); Tomaney and Ward, 2000; Robson *et al*, 2000; Hall, 2000; Jones, 2001), but little theorising their origins and nature. This paper attempts to theorise the emergence and dynamics of the RDAs within a Marxist framework centred on class relations. Specifically, it is concerned with relations between capital and labour, relations of cooperation and competition within both capital and labour, and the refraction and constitution of these relations by the state. It is argued that tensions in class relations have led to a partial rescaling of economic governance down from the national level and up from the local level to the region. On this basis, I argue that the RDAs have a certain political-economic logic for capital, but that they nevertheless contain and re-express many profound spatial-class tensions of Britain. These tensions will be key elements in their future evolution.

The RDAs are boards appointed and funded by central government with responsibilities for the economy and employment, with territories corresponding to the longstanding official regions (of between 2.5 and 8 million inhabitants). England has never had regional government, though important parts of the central state have been administered at the regional level and local authorities have had forms of intra-regional coordination (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988, Ch.7). With regard to economic intervention, the previous form of regional policy in England, dating back to the 1930s, was *centrally* controlled regionally-differentiated

subsidies and spending. Locally-controlled sub-regional economic intervention has been carried out by local authorities at the borough or county level, albeit with rather weak powers. Thus substantial state economic regulation formally controlled from *within* the region and carried out at the regional scale has not existed before in England. The RDAs were adumbrated by the setting up of the sub-regional Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in the early 1990s (now the Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs)), and by decentralisation of certain central government functions to the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs) in the mid-1990s; but the RDAs involve greater regional autonomy than those initiatives. Just as importantly, they were foreshadowed by intra-regional networking by business, local authorities and economic agencies which developed strongly, if unevenly, during the 1990s (Evans and Harding, 1997; Coulson, 1997; Deas and Ward, 2000).

The powers of the RDAs are considerable: provision of grants to firms, land assembly, commercial property development (taken over from English Partnerships), rural economic development (taken over from the Rural Development Corporation), venture capital and innovation strategies. They lead on national government's local regeneration programmes and on EU structural fund programmes. They have a role in determining central government subsidy to regional inward investment. Moreover, the RDAs have responsibility for coordinating training, the state SME advice service, other economic development agencies and economic policies of local authorities, and for economic aspects of tourism and the arts. Their aggregate national budget, at only 2% of regional public spending (Jones, 2001), is small compared with those of, for example, regional states in federal countries. However, the present government has been explicit that it is seeking to transfer important aspects of economic regulation to the regional level. In policies for innovation, 'the knowledge

economy' and entrepreneurship, as well as the already established field of training, the regional level has been seen as vital (DTI, 1998; DTI/DfEE, 2001).

While the RDA boards are unelected and consist mainly of business people and local authority representatives, their legitimacy has been addressed, obliquely, by government encouragement of the setting up of Regional Chambers composed principally of representatives of the local authorities, and which 'shadow' the RDAs. It is possible, in turn, that these may develop into directly elected regional assemblies. The Labour Party manifesto for the June 2001 general election proposed that regional referenda may be held to set these up, and at the time of writing the government is intending to bringing forward appropriate legislation; one of the two layers of local government, the counties, would be abolished. Economic policy would certainly be central to such assemblies. Thus both in their current form and in their possible trajectory the RDAs are a major restructuring of the state in England, and have been presented as such by the government (Balls and Healey, 2000).

How can we theorise this change in state form? A substantial literature has argued that in the present epoch the nation state is being 'hollowed out' and its functions moved both upwards towards international state bodies or coordination and downwards towards the regional level (Jessop, 2000; Swyngedouw, 1992). There are two problems, however, with reading off the emergence of RDAs from this story. The first is that the empirical patterns of state scaling and rescaling are considerably more varied than the hollowing out thesis allows (Cox, 2002; Rodriguez Pose, 1998). The second problem is that, where the literature on state rescaling is not simply descriptive, it evokes a number of competing explanations: logics of technical-production efficiency, political-cultural projects, spatial reorganisations of capital, and

relations of social power have all been deployed. I critique the first two of these approaches in section 2 below. My own account starts from the now considerable literature which understands rescaling of social relations (including but not limited to the state) as powered by forms of social power, and conversely sees scale and changes in it as integral to that power (N.Smith, 1993; Leitner, 1997). Specifically, class power, closely bound up with capital flows, is seen as using scales and shifts of scales (Harvey, 1982, 1989; Gough, 1992; Jonas, 1994; Massey, 1996; Swyngedouw, 1997; Cox, 1998). In this paper my focus is not so much on changes in the scaling of capital as, directly, on the scales of class relations (Herod, 1997, Gough, 2000).

Within the literature on rescaling, further variety of explanation arises from different views of the state. Thus institutionalists, and many users of regulation theory, start with a taken-for-granted separation of economy and the state. External causality is then set up between them, which most commonly (though not always) is seen as proceeding from the economic to the political (for a critique see Cox, 2002). In the present paper the separation of economy and state is seen as chronically and unstably *constructed* out of contradictions in accumulation and class relations (Clarke, 1991; Bonefeld, Brown and Burnham, 1995). Their unity and separation is thus always problematic; in particular, state intervention into economy and society risks politicising the otherwise taken-for-granted powers of capital and fragmentation of labour (Habermas, 1976). Thus in examining rescaling, the state, too, is theorised fundamentally as class relations.

Section 2 considers two possible explanations of the creation of the RDAs, one technical-economic, the other narrowly political, and argues that they are too simple. Section 3 starts

the analysis of the class relations surrounding the RDAs by examining elements of the national political economy of Britain: its longstanding liberal traditions, its particular variety of neoliberalism, and the problems of socialisation of production these old and new liberalisms have given rise to. Section 4 looks at the history of traditional centrally-controlled regional policy and the reasons for its decline. Section 5 examines the growth of local economic initiatives since the 1970s, and argues that the class relations of these have provided something of a model for the RDAs. Section 6 briefly considers the regional policy of the EU. On the basis of these spatial-historical threads, section 7 summarises the origins of the RDAs, bringing together processes of different time scale and relations and shifts between different spatial scales. Finally, section 8 examines the resulting tensions intrinsic to the RDAs, which will construct the evolution of their class relations and hence their institutional form, strategies and interventions.

2. Two possible explanations

There are two, very different explanations for the emergence of the RDAs which it is useful to consider at this stage.

(i) A technical-economic logic?

A first explanation would see RDAs as the institutional expression of a technical-economic logic: that the global economy is increasingly organised, or needing to be organised, into regional-scale clusters and networks. This explanation is suggested by the 'new regionalist' economics, which both analyses and promotes industrial clusters and networked regions (for

example Storper, 1997; Scott, 1998; Cooke and Morgan, 1998). In these ideal-type models, the regional economy has strong internal linkages, relations and flows, and has strong and reflexive forms of internal governance and rule-making; these non-market relations generate trust between economic actors which allows productive relations to avoid damage by short-term advantage-seeking. These arrangements, implemented at this particular scale, are seen as being appropriate for high innovation competitive strategies in the context of contemporary technologies and forms of knowledge organisation (Healey, 1998). Regional economies so organised can not only stand up to the pressures of global flows but actually benefit from freer trade and financial flows and from distant productive linkages which can complement those within the region (Amin and Thrift, 1992).

The emergence of RDAs would then reflect a (rather tardy) realisation by the British state of this new geographical-economic 'imperative', and a wish to put in place systems of governance suitable for fostering it. [1] This would require a shift of at least some aspects of national intervention (industrial, innovation and labour market policy, economic infrastructures) to the regional level. The fact that RDAs are unelected and their boards dominated by business executives could then reflect their economic functionality, as distinct from any specifically-political or legitimating project (to which we turn shortly). This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the government has undertaken its own study to identify industrial clusters across Britain (DTI, 2001), and has been pressing RDAs into identifying such clusters and developing networks and policies to strengthen them (DTI/DfEE, 2001; F.Peck and McGuinness, 2001). Some have already signalled their enthusiasm: the published strategy of One North East (2000), for example, is centred on the strengthening or creation of regional sectoral clusters which, it is anticipated, will make the

north-east 'one of Europe's premier learning regions' by 2010 (p.10) (cf Robson *et al*, 2000). And in this enthusiasm they are substantially following the two longstanding development agencies for Scotland and Wales (for the latter case, see Lovering, 1999).

Possibilities for intra-regional economic linkages and networks have indeed been one element in the emergence of the RDAs. Moreover, discourses concerning such linkages, borrowing lavishly from the new regional geography, have been important in *legitimizing* their setting up. But we can doubt that this has been the sole, or even the main, element in this history. A number of points can be made at varied levels of theoretical abstraction. Firstly, it is a structural-functionalist error to imagine that the form of the state changes more-or-less automatically in response to technical-economic logic. To take a rather obvious but relevant example, England in the first half of the twentieth century had many important regional or sub-regional industry clusters, which in productive terms were under-governed (Dunford and Perrons, 1983), but this produced no significant moves towards corresponding state regulation. Secondly, and connectedly, the development of clusters and learning regions is strongly constrained by class relations and their tensions – industrial relations, intra-capitalist divisions, and the relation between the state and private interests – something neglected by the new regional geography (Gough, 1996; Eisenschitz and Gough, 1996); thus their development, and the state's role within it, cannot be read off from a purely technical-productive logic (Lovering, 1999; Perrons, 2000). Thirdly, and connectedly, the strong regional socialisation of production is only one of several possible models for organising firms, sectors and territorial economies (Harrison, 1992; Markusen, 1996). Fourthly, and consequently, there are many different spatial scales at which economic networking is currently occurring, and which are actually being addressed in economic governance (Evans and Harding, 1997). The

DTI's (2001) report on clusters itself shows that many important manufacturing industries in Britain show no particular spatial agglomeration (F. Peck and McGuinness, 2001). Many important firm-university ties are inter-regional (*ibid.*). Conversely, many industry concentrations in Britain have a scale much smaller than the British official regions. These arguments caution against reading off the RDAs from some hypothesised new paradigm of spatial-economic organisation. [2]

(ii) A political strategy of decentralisation?

A very different explanation is to see the RDAs as powered by political strategies and tactical moves of the Labour government, that is, as politically constructed in a narrow sense. A relevant element here might be Labour's ostensible commitment to decentralise state powers and administration in order to strengthen democratic control, that is, a strong political project of decentralisation. This would be in contrast to the programme of the Conservative Party, which is overtly centralist and which has opposed the setting up of the RDAs. The setting up of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly by the Blair government could be seen as implementing this programme, and the RDAs as the next step. However, the failure of the government substantially to unshackle the local authorities, and the government's continuation of the policy of the previous Conservative government of setting up new measures to by-pass the local authorities and deal directly with local institutions, indicate that the Labour Party leadership lacks any *principled* commitment to decentralisation. A sufficient explanation of the government's sponsorship of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly was to head off strong and growing nationalism, especially in Scotland, and thus keep the union together.

In the case of the RDAs, there has certainly been pressure on the government for economic powers for the English regions, coming from local authorities and regional associations of capital in the economically-weaker regions (Coulson, 1997). This pressure has increased since the devolutions to Scotland and Wales, as those supporting regional economic powers have been able to argue that the English regions have become unfairly disadvantaged despite their needs being as great or greater. The setting up of the RDAs could then be seen as the government's response to this pressure; the fact that RDAs have been set up *throughout* England, including in the prosperous regions of the south, could then be interpreted as the simplest way of avoiding the problems which would result from choosing only certain regions to have such. It is plausible that this pressure from the regions is indeed one reason that the RDAs were created. But this begs several questions. The British state has, for centuries, been highly centralised, and in particular any formal representation for the English regions has been resisted; to change this pattern has required more powerful forces than merely some lobbying by disgruntled 'regional interests', particularly given that in England there has been no popular pressure for such regional devolution comparable to Scottish or Welsh nationalism. One also needs to explain why the new structures for regional economic intervention have taken the particular *form* that they have, namely agencies controlled from within the regions.

The RDAs, then, cannot be understood simply as functional to current technical-economic restructuring. Nor, as Tomaney and Ward (2000) and Rodriguez-Pose (1998) show, can regionalism in western Europe be seen as an ineluctable political and cultural trend. And I have argued that the RDAs cannot be explained by narrowly-political developments within

Britain. [3] Rather, analysis of the RDAs requires consideration of *class relations*. Since class relations internalise material-economic, political and cultural moments, this theoretical starting point can promise to integrate, and transform, the elements so far considered (cf Harvey, 1996, Ch.2). I shall consider these class relations over a number of different temporal scales from the modern period to the political conjuncture of Blairism. I shall discuss class relations at scales from the local to the European, paying particular attention to the *relations between* these different scales.

3. The force and the contradictions of liberalism and neoliberalism in Britain

Dating from the settlement of the late 17C, Britain has had a strongly *liberal* political economy. Private interests and private property have been the key elements of economy and society; the state's primary role has been to guarantee this primacy rather than to organise or direct such private interests. This specificity in relation to other advanced capitalist countries had various historical roots before the 17C, was reinforced by Britain's imperial dominance and the high spatial mobility of British capital that accompanied it, and was further reinforced by Britain's primacy in industrialisation (Gamble, 1981; Wood, 1991). Britain has consequently been characterised by weak coordination of individual capitals and a strong ideology and practice of sectoral and spatial mobility of capital compared with most of its major economic rivals (Germany, France and Japan in particular, but even the US). These traits have given some very significant strengths to British capital (Wood, 1991). They have given it considerable competitive advantage in finance, trade related activities, communications and the media. They have facilitated disinvestment from insufficiently profitable sectors and locations and access to new opportunities. British capital's mobility

has also provided a strong disciplinary pressure on wage earners, thus reproducing the characteristically proletarianised, privatised and market-led culture of the British working class.

This liberal political economy has, however, had its contradictions. Since the late nineteenth century, it has been evident that productive efficiency and commercialised innovation in important parts of the British economy, including most of manufacturing, has been weak due to the excessive independence of firms, weak common services and lack of effective state industrial policies. What we may call ‘interventionist’ currents, from Social Imperialism through 1930s Mondism and 1960s Wilsonianism to the 1970s Alternative Economic Strategy, have argued the need for greater cooperation and stronger state policy in a variety of fields, including research and practical innovation, technology transfer, training, property and finance. These currents have also tended to seek a change in the tenor of industrial relations away from the tradition of stand-offish, market-governed relations in which workers and firms pursue their short term interests in unrestrained fashion, towards a ‘German’ model of active cooperation between management and well-trained, ‘responsible’ and ‘involved’ workers.

These dilemmas of British political economy have been accentuated by the turn to neoliberalism since the 1970s. This turn has, of course, been a global one. Internationally, neoliberalism has been supported by dominant sections of capital as a way of dealing with economic-political rigidities and conflicts developed during the long boom, with the aim of overcoming the long wave of low profitability which started in the 1970s. Forms of non-market coordination and governance - or ‘socialisation of production’ as I shall refer to them

- grew during the boom in all advanced economies as means of enhancing productive efficiency. But they tended to lock capital into particular spaces and sectors, gave labour certain forms of leverage and influence, and eventually rendered economic and social decisionmaking highly politicised (Habermas, 1976). Neoliberalism seeks to unlock capital from these constraints, and to reimpose discipline on individual capitals, labour and residents. It does this by strengthening value relations, or rather, stripping away their mediations (Clarke, 1988).

In Britain in particular, neoliberalism has taken a particularly virulent form. This is partly because Britain in the 1970s had a particularly low average rate of profit on domestic investments (Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison, 1991). Partly it is because Britain's longstanding liberal traditions mean that neoliberalism runs with the grain. It is also because the transition from the boom to stagnation, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was marked by militant popular struggles, particularly of the trade union movement but also around public services, gender, 'race' and urban issues. British neoliberalism has been directed strongly towards deflating these forms of conflict; the particular depth of the neoliberal offensive in Britain has been motivated in a large part by fear of their recurrence. This trajectory has been confirmed by the extent to which the Labour government elected in 1997 has continued with neoliberal policies, particularly in trade union law, restrictions on local authorities, and the fragmentation of and competition between units of the public sector. Indeed, in several key areas it has qualitatively extended the neoliberal strategy, for instance in greater autonomy for the Bank of England and in new forms of privatisation of public services.

Neoliberalism in Britain has been very successful in reducing the politicisation of the economy and opening up more options for British-owned capital. It has been the basis for relatively strong and sustained accumulation since the early 1990s recession, albeit with continued erosion of the manufacturing sector. But it has exacerbated the longstanding problems associated with the weak socialisation of production at different spatial scales (Green, 1989). Neoliberalism has encouraged short-termism in fixed investment and, particularly, research and development effort. In liberalising and internationalising finance it has exacerbated the tensions between the money and productive moments of capital.

Neoliberalism has further weakened training through both parsimony in state spending and dismantling of structures which encouraged or compelled firms to undertake training. A similar combination of state austerity and reliance on insufficiently-coordinated private initiative has led to severe underinvestment and poor quality in many physical infrastructures and communications, epitomised by the breakdown of the national rail network in 2000-1.

Neoliberalism has also tended to reinforce business's habits of purely disciplinary relations to their workforce; despite all the rhetoric of 'enterprise', Thatcherite culture encourages nothing so much as submissiveness, conformity and obedience (T.Smith, 1994). Finally, the freeing of capital has exacerbated spatially uneven development within Britain, resulting in congestion and inflation in the strong areas, and in the weak areas cumulative and accelerated unravelling of productive dependencies and undermining of the wage relation (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993, Ch.8). These multifaceted failings, which reinforce each other in myriad ways, have lowered innovation rates, productivity growth, and profitability.

The unintended consequences of neoliberalism provide renewed motivation and arguments for the interventionist project (Costello, Mitchie and Milne, 1989; Hutton, 1996) and indeed

for ad hoc, fragmented attempts to increase non-market coordination in particular aspects or spaces of the economy. But while the productive logic of such projects may appeal to sections of capital, they have to walk a political tightrope. British capital and capital producing in Britain have gained much from neoliberalism; new interventionism *carried out in the wrong way* could endanger both capital's economic and political freedom of manoeuvre and the disciplines imposed on labour and citizens.

As we shall see, the temporary resolution of this contradiction has come through strategies in which *scale* plays a key role. But to appreciate the significance of these, we have first to consider the nature, contradictions and decline of the longstanding form of regional economic intervention, centrally-directed regional policy.

4. The rise, contradictions and decline of traditional regional policy

The form of regional economic policy in Britain from the 1930s to the 1990s was central government programmes of subsidies to regions with weak accumulation, measured particularly by male unemployment rates. The principal form of subsidy has been to fixed investment in buildings and plant; subsidies for employment, and biasing of infrastructure spending towards the weaker regions, have also been used at various times. At times, restrictions were put on economic expansion in the strongest regions.

The aims of traditional regional policy have been ambiguous (Pickvance, 1982), which is to say that the class and other social pressures acting on it have been varied and complex.

Regional policy has been powered in part by the particular interests of capital, labour and

residents in the economically-weaker regions. These interests have been reflected in the formation and execution of regional policy: while it was directed and administered by central government, non-statutory coalitions of business, trade unions and local authorities in each of the weaker regions have undertaken continuous lobbying aimed at tweaking the rules and their interpretation 'to the benefit of the region'. The popular political ideology of regional policy has foregrounded these interests: the policy is seen as having *egalitarian* intentions.

But other aims have also been involved: regional policy has functioned as a covert, depoliticised way of improving the efficiency of capital operating within Britain as a whole (Dunford and Perrons, 1983; Massey, 1979). It has done so by alleviating congestion and inflationary pressures in the strong regions, and reducing wastage of fixed assets, infrastructures and labour power in the weak ones. The subsidies to fixed investment, in particular, also acted as a way of encouraging manufacturing firms to increase their capital intensity and economies of scale; in the 1960s, particularly, this was seen by 'interventionists' as a key way by which the state could modernise a sector whose investment rates were low by international standards. Given that explicit industrial policy has been weak in Britain, this role of regional policy meant that it was an important strategy for national industrial intervention.

The displaced and covert role of regional policy as industrial policy arose precisely because it could side-step the political barriers to intervention that we noted in section 3, namely liberal traditions and fear of any overt politicisation of the economy. Regional policy in its heyday was a *depoliticised* arena, in two senses. Firstly, it was ostensibly about spatial redistribution rather than industrial policy; the former aim commanded a wide consensus, while the latter

was problematic to the extent that it could not avoid the issue of the relation between the state and business. Secondly, regional policy involved lobbying, and to that extent politicisation; but the lobbying was done on a *cross-class* basis, within which capital and labour within each region sunk their differences in 'the interests of the region'. This regional chauvinism not only helped to foster cooperative class relations within the region, but also headed off any distinct working class politics (Hudson and Sadler, 1986). This depoliticised nature of regional policy meant that it could be a decentred form of industrial intervention without threatening the class disciplines of the British liberal settlement. In this respect regional policy is similar to other distinctive areas of policy in Britain such as strong state land use control (after 1947), the New Towns, extensive state ownership of housing, or the state health system (NHS): these have promoted increased productivity and profitability, but in *indirect* ways which bypass the political difficulties of industrial policy and which command a wide consensus.

However, traditional regional policy ran into increasing problems from the 1970s. One problem was the *crudeness* of regional policy *qua* industrial policy. The form of regional subsidies has meant that they have been 'broad brush', lacking in detail, and weakly related to the specificities of industries, regions and labour markets. One symptom of this crudeness was the notoriously large amount of 'dead-weight' in the policy. This crudeness, in fact, is the price paid for the inexplicitness and strong legitimacy of the policy. A second problem was that restrictions on growth in the strongest regions, and the 'unfairness' of regional subsidies, were opposed by firms in these regions, and the state was disinclined to oppose strong accumulation there (Pickvance, 1982). A third problem was that workers' struggles against redundancy from the late 1960s into the 1970s made increasing demands on regional

assistance; workers came to regard regional policy, together with strengthened explicit industrial policy, as forms of industrial planning for their own particular class interests, to be used *against* the market (Coventry *et al* Trades Councils, 1980). This broke the class consensus around regional policy. It thus became, for neoliberalism, part of the over-politicised baggage of the Keynesian epoch. [4]

Traditional regional policy did not disappear, but it underwent major change. Under the 1979-97 Conservative governments its budget and scope were progressively reduced. It was also changed from grants as-of-right to selective grants determined by central government on an ad hoc, project-by-project basis. This was seen as reducing dead-weight, and as making the policy more responsive to local specificities. But these reforms did not overcome the politicisation of regional policy; indeed, to an extent they exacerbated it. Despite selective grants being secret (justified in typically British fashion on grounds of commercial confidentiality), they still emanated from central government, seen as ‘subsidiser of the last resort’, and thus a legitimate target for demands for large scale funds from firms, workers and regional representative bodies. Moreover, the very selectiveness of the grants *encouraged* specific lobbying and demands. Thus in 1999-2001 the government has been subjected to strong campaigns to make substantial grants to save major industrial sites threatened with large contraction or closure, campaigns which have sought legitimacy precisely on the grounds of regional equity. In some cases, for example the reprieve of the Ellington colliery and a £40m grant to Nissan, both in north east England, these campaigns have been successful. Neoliberalism criticises selective grants as ‘lacking transparency’; what this says (in reifying language) is that they may be too politicised.

Since the 1970s, then, traditional regional policy has been too crude in its mechanisms and too politicised to be an effective vehicle for the socialisation of production at the national and regional scales. Yet, as we saw in section 3, the need to address socialisation in Britain is longstanding and has been increased by the neglects of neoliberalism. Into this gap entered a new scale of economic policy, the local.

5. The rise of local economic initiatives

Since the 1970s there has been a rapid growth throughout Britain of economic initiatives and organisations at the ‘local’ level – from the sub-region down to the neighbourhood level.

These have to some extent provided a resolution of the tensions around the socialisation of production in Britain so far discussed. While local economic initiatives have been diverse in their political complexion, the majority have trodden a path of pragmatic interventionism (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993). They have addressed a very large range of economic and social issues – innovation, sectorally-specific services, funding, premises, business and ‘enterprise’ support, environment, training for skills and to counter disadvantage, community business, and neighbourhood renewal; in this sense they are richer than traditional regional policy. They also differ from regional policy in their forms of control. They have been led largely by local authorities, locally-based boards, business-state partnerships and voluntary organisations. They have received funding from central government and the EU but, with the exception of the Conservative government’s urban regeneration programmes in the 1980s, they have had a substantial (if varied) degree of local control.

These local economic initiatives have addressed themselves to the longstanding critique of the specific failures of economic socialisation in Britain which we have already noted – the low rate of commercially-effective innovation, the distance of finance from industry, the conservativeness of property capital, inadequate training arrangements, distant relations between the two sides of industry (Gough and Eisenschitz, 1996a). Local initiatives have responded also to the exacerbation by neoliberalism of these longstanding failures. Yet this substantial local interventionism has, by and large, not resulted in politicisation. Mainstream local economic initiatives have been able to maintain a ‘common sense’ air, and command support from across the political spectrum and from diverse economic and social groups. They address, or ostensibly address, evident shortages, mismatches or unmet demands, and do so in an undogmatic, case-by-case fashion. There is a low local rate of new firm formation? Who then can object to setting up an enterprise centre giving advice and technical support to new entrepreneurs? Local clothing employers complain of shortages of skilled machinists? A training scheme targeted at ethnic minority women is an ‘obvious’ and consensual response. The initiatives seem uncontroversial because of their promise to improve productivity and productive linkages on the one hand, and to ameliorate problems of employment and ‘social exclusion’ on the other.

This consensus around local economic initiatives is remarkable, given that the very idea of economic intervention has been so effectively branded as counter-productive and wasteful by neoliberalism. If interventionism has become so discredited and marginalised at the level of national government, how has it blossomed and been seen as ‘common sense’ at the local level? The answer lies in the *class relations* which the local scale allows. The evident vulnerability of local economies to global flows of capital and commodities can be the basis

for constructing new local cultures of class cooperation. All sections of capital, labour and residents need to set aside their differences in order to improve ‘the competitiveness of the local economy’ (Cox, 1998). The locality becomes an enterprise, internally united in order to face the buffeting of international pressures. No sectoral interest should make ‘excessive’ demands on local economic institutions, since these would have *local* opportunity costs and thus visibly damage the solidarity of the locality. The cooperation fostered by the new *scale* of economic intervention, the locality, has thus been crucial to its political acceptability, and to enabling this intervention to grow in a world ideologically dominated by neoliberalism (Gough and Eisenschitz, 1996b).

6. EU regional policy

A final contributory element which needs brief mention here is EU policy. Since the 1970s, the EU structural funds and ‘initiatives’ have been intended to compensate for the deepening of regional uneven development resulting from the EU’s neoliberal strategies. The latter include the Single European Market, the prohibition of ‘market-distorting’ state industrial subsidies, and the monetary and fiscal policies directed towards the creation of the single currency. In contrast, the structural funds have constituted a certain social democratic element in EU policy, addressing industrial restructuring, labour market adjustment and social reproduction simultaneously. Irrespective of their material effectiveness, they have served to limit opposition to neoliberal policies of the EU and national governments.

The EU’s administration of the structural funds has increasingly been organised around partnerships of state, business, unions and community organisations of sub-regional and

regional scale. The stimulation of such networks, as distinct from a simple channelling of funds to weak areas, has been seen not only as a way of ensuring that funds are well-spent but also as desirable in itself. The strengthening of localised forms of cooperation between sections of capital and between the latter and workers and residents is seen as a strong accumulation strategy for the weaker regions. There are thus similarities between the relation of the structural funds to EU neoliberal policies *and* the relation of local regeneration initiatives in Britain to national neoliberal policies: the structural funds attempt to fill gaps in socialisation created by neoliberalism, doing so in modes which promote accumulation and inter-regional competition (Keating, 1998), thus *melding* social democratic and neoliberal themes. The EU structural funds have then functioned to foster a certain regionalism in (inter alia) the economically-weaker English regions. This regionalism has ambiguous political complexion: there is an element of simple pork-barrelling, reflected in the opening of offices in Brussels by some of the English regions; but it also involves forms of inter- and intra-class cooperation within the region and ‘for the region’.

It is not simply, then, that the EU has regional funds which RDAs can tap into. It is that this regional policy is a condensation of contradictory class pressures (neoliberal fragmentation and individualism versus socialisation of production and reproduction) articulated by spatial scale. The EU has thus fostered economic regionalism in England in a particular class mode, to which we can now turn.

7. The logic of the RDAs

The RDAs have emerged from the confluence of this complex set of scaled and inter-scalar class relations and state practices: of Britain, of traditional British regional policy, of local economic governance, and of EU regional policy. The strong tensions which these express and internalise account for the *major* reform which the RDAs represent. In scalar terms, the RDAs are the result of a four partial shifts in scale, all powered by difficulties in existing forms of regulation: (i) from central government policy to regionally-controlled policy; (ii) from centrally-directed inter-regional policy to regionally-directed policy; (iii) from local to regional economic policy; and (iv) from regions tapping into EU structural funds to internal networking around those programmes. Let us examine these threads.

The success of local economic initiatives in Britain in organising socialisation while avoiding overt conflict has provided a model for what can be achieved at a sub-national scale.

However, the local scale suffers from certain weaknesses relative to a regional scale of governance. Important economic processes which local initiatives have attempted to address have scales which can be larger than the local. A large part of labour markets (particularly for men and those on higher incomes) function at sub-regional or regional scales, though for many the market is more local (particularly for women and lower income workers); this is why the TECs and LSCs were set up at a sub-regional level. Industrial concentrations also are often of larger scale than the local. Moreover, regional economic institutions can command resources more adequate to major productive or infrastructural investments. They can also somewhat mitigate ‘excessive’ competition between local economic agencies within the same region, which have been a notable and often-criticised feature of local economic initiatives. It is interesting in this context that, in the 1980s, Labour-controlled councils in the major conurbations set up Local Enterprise Boards which operated at a city-regional scale;

while these were sharply limited by central government hostility, lack of powers and paucity of funding, they adumbrated the RDAs. More recently some adjacent local authorities have cooperated to attempt to overcome the limitations of local scale (Johns and Whitehead, 1997).

Regional economic institutions, then, promised to overcome some of these scalar limitations of *local* economic policies, while reproducing the latter's consensual class relations. The regional level is sharply disciplined by international economic flows; and it *may* be possible to create a regional solidarity which can keep internal conflicts muted - a key question to which we return in the next section. At the same time, for the national state the RDAs offer a way of improving economic socialisation without instituting or reviving nationwide industrial intervention, with its dangers of renewed politicisation (section 3). RDAs are thus the result of partial shifts in regulation from both the local and the national levels.

The RDAs also promise to resolve some of the difficulties of traditional, nationally-administered regional policy (section 4). The pressure on the latter policy arising from its being seen as a gravy train may be mitigated by putting 'regions themselves' in charge of policy formation, thus using the solidarity of the region to make demands 'reasonable'. The change in institutional form reduces (though does not extinguish) the nature of regional policy as inter-regional rivalry, and emphasises the mobilising and organising of resources *internal* to the region (Caborn, 2000). Connectedly, regionally-controlled policy can address more aspects of the economy and society than traditional regional policy touched, providing a richer and a more explicit engagement with socialisation. As we have seen in section 6, the EU structural funds have encouraged a similar development of intra-regional coordination as

distinct from simple inter-regional redistribution; and indeed, the EU approach has been something of a model for the RDAs (Roberts and Lloyd, 2000).

A further advantage of the new form of regional policy is that it dilutes (though, again, does not remove) the notion that the function of regional policy is simply to benefit weak regions, that is, an agenda of inter-regional redistribution. If regional policy is to be a depoliticised vehicle *for socialisation*, as traditional regional policy attempted to be, then it should be available in *all* regions, including the more prosperous. Partly because of the lack of (unitary, democratic) regional state structures in England, socialisation of production and reproduction at the regional level has been poor. In fact, this lack has perhaps been more obvious in the fast-growth regions of the south of England than in the north. The former have been plagued by problems of transport, public services and housing, with major negative impacts on accumulation, and the existing ad hoc regional planning structures have proved completely incapable of addressing these (J.Peck and Tickell, 1995; GLA, 2002). The RDAs, set up in every region, can promise to address socialisation in both the weak and the strong regions. However, the funding of the RDAs is presently skewed towards the poorer regions. The RDA system preserves a modicum of traditional inter-regional redistribution, while for the first time constituting state structures to address the socialisation of production *within* each region.

8. Questioning the future trajectory of the RDAs

The genesis of the RDAs within scalar class relations suggests a number of tensions which are inscribed in this project, and which will play important parts in its evolution. In this final section of the paper I discuss three types of tension: the articulation of scales of economic

governance; conflicts between institutional actors; and finally the crucial question of regional identity, solidarity and democracy.

(i) The articulation of scales

The RDAs involve difficult problems of articulation of scales, from the local through sub-regional and regional to the inter-regional and national and up to the EU level. Firstly, despite moves towards cooperation, there is in many cases sharp competition between local authorities within regions to attract, variously, high level business services, cultural landmark projects, high tech projects, and routine manufacturing production. The RDAs will be called upon to adjudicate in these competitions. They may take the path of least political resistance, by offering something to each locality: for example, the northern RDAs have been able to discover ‘clusters’ in most of their localities (F.Peck and McGuinness, 1991). But such balance is contradicted by accumulation pressures and funding restrictions. Moreover, the problem of inter-local distribution is exacerbated by the fact that all regions, even the strongest (Allen, Massey and Cochrane, 1997), contain areas of poor accumulation and disinvestment, and most, even the weaker, contain some areas of high growth. The RDAs will politicise this issue, and will be under contradictory pressures to counter internal uneven development while promoting the profitability of the region as a whole (F.Peck and McGuinness, 1991).

Secondly, at the inter-regional scale, deepened intra-regional intervention across the country can *exacerbate* uneven development between the regions, since it tends to be most effective in regional economies where accumulation is already strong (Fach and Grande, 1991;

Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993; Rodriguez-Pose, 1998). Moreover, despite their ostensible focus on internal linkages, the RDAs can potentially politicise central government's *inter-regional* redistributions, particularly as the RDAs are wholly dependent on national funding. This could include not only the government's distribution of 'regional' funds, but also the inter-regional distribution of its 'non-spatial' industrial, infrastructural and research spending; the row in early 2000 concerning the government's relocation of a synchrotron research laboratory from the north west to the south east is a case in point (Charles and Benneworth, 2001). Thirdly, the RDAs, through their funding sources, are embroiled in the differences between an EU strategy with substantial social democratic elements (section 6) and the more strongly neoliberal strategy of the British nation state.

The task of articulating these scales is not simply a matter of balancing competing claims between internally-unified and formally equal territorial bodies, as pictured by 'realist' political geography. The different territorial economies at the same scale, and the territorial economies of different scale, have different *types* of socialisation. And they also often have different political-economic strategies, as the example of the British state-EU tensions suggests. Lying behind these are *different class relations* within territories of the same scale and within territories at different scales. The task of the RDAs is therefore not merely skilful pork-barrelling, but to articulate different territorially-embedded patterns of class relations and politics. It is not merely a quantitative problem of allocating resources between areas and between scalar priorities, but a qualitative one of mediating different class projects. This threat of politicisation (cf Evans and Harding, 1997: 26) accounts for the government's *limitations* of the RDAs' powers, namely their modest budgets, the large degree of control

over them of four different central government departments, and their lack of authority over a number of other key agencies within the regions (Hall, 2000; Jones, 2001).

(ii) The articulation of institutional agencies

Although I have focused on class-political projects rather than institutional organisation, the latter do have a certain autonomy and dynamic *qua* institutions, whether they be associations of civil society, quangos, or formal state bodies. More importantly, institutions sometimes give expression to the varied class politics just discussed, and come into conflict for that reason. The institutional actors of economic governance *within* the English regions are now very numerous: the local authorities and confederations of them, the LSCs, urban agencies, public-private partnership bodies, voluntary and community economic associations, as well as various representative bodies of business and labour. The RDAs will therefore be involved in continuous conflicts between these bodies. They will have to deal with the ambiguities of private-public ‘partnership’ which have often emerged at the local level (Atkinson, 1999). Tensions are likely between elected local authorities and the RDAs (Deas and Ward, 2000). These may sometimes express differences in class perspective: in the north east, for example, the regional confederation of local authorities sharply attacked the first draft of the RDA’s strategy for downplaying issues of employment quantity and quality in favour of business profitability. Conflicts are also likely between the RDAs and the LSCs; the latter have been hobbled with a neoliberal agenda which prioritises low level skills and basic employability, while the former are likely to be more concerned with meeting business’s demands for substantial skills. Political differences within the regions will thus partly be expressed in institutional conflicts; the latter will then be more than simple bureaucratic rivalries.

(iii) Regional identification and solidarity, and the problem of democracy

Can these problems of scale and institutional conflict be contained and depoliticised by new politics of regional solidarity? I have argued that the promise of the RDAs for capital, and their compatibility with neoliberalism at the national and EU levels, rests on their ability to mobilise regional identification and cooperation, analogous to that which has been created around local economic initiatives. The importance of this element can be seen in the discourses of the RDAs themselves. The RDA for north east England has named itself One North East, with the echoing acronym ONE. Its first strategy document (ONE, 2000) is replete with calls for all social groups to unite for the greater good of the region.

There is, however, clearly a problem here: the statutory English regions have no necessary economic, social or cultural commonality; and they have never had (democratic, explicit) state regional structures which could have *constructed* a sense of commonality.

Consequently, there is a weaker sense of regional identity than in most western European countries (John and Whitehead, 1997). This trait has a long history: the strongly centralised form of feudalism in England; and, particularly, the open and mobile character of British capital (section 3) which has been unfavourable for the formation of regionally-embedded capital. [5] It is true that the poorer regions developed a certain degree of regional identity through the non-statutory regional economic associations which were formed to lobby within the framework of traditional regional policy. Around this lobbying was generated a certain ideology of regional identity, as discourses of disadvantage were deployed to win more central government funding (Hudson, 1989). The peripheral regions thus do have a certain

regional self-identity, which is one of being disadvantaged relative to - or even 'exploited by' - the south east. This ideology is arguably strongest in the north east and Yorkshire, present but less powerful in the north west, west midlands and south west, and weak elsewhere; it is clearly absent in London and the rest of the south east.

The starting point for regional identification is thus weak and highly uneven. However, the construction of regional solidarity has been made easier by the defeats of trade union and community struggles by the neoliberal offensives of capital and the state. Support for distinct interests and organisations of the working class (in a Marxist sense) has been weakened, making it easier to construct cross-class alliances based on 'territorial interests'. But to the extent that the RDAs begin to undertake substantial economic and social interventions with serious money, divergent interests between the classes and also within them are likely to re-emerge. Moreover, since the re-election of the Labour government in 2001, the unions have begun to recover from the defeats of the 1980s and have moved to the left. Pressure may come not from unions but from community groups. These could be in both poor communities, dissatisfied with progress on job creation for example, and in rich communities demanding improved infrastructures or resisting undesired 'overdevelopment'. As we saw above, these conflicts are likely to be both articulated and spurred on by scalar and institutional conflict.

The regional chambers have been set up with these problems in mind, to weld these interests together through the formulation of consensual strategies. Regional enthusiasts see these as adumbrating elected regional government. But whether the latter would lend itself to more or less conflict is uncertain. Elected regional government could give greater legitimacy to the idea of the region as a unified and relatively homogeneous entity, and could be a forum for

constructing it as such (though this is necessarily a very long and difficult process: Le Gales and John, 1997). But on the other hand, a shift in control of economic policy from an unelected quango (the RDA) to an elected assembly would tend to further politicise policy formation. This politicisation would be likely not only in politics *within* the region but, especially in the case of the weaker regions, with respect to the distribution of funding to the regional assemblies *externally* from central government. In the disadvantaged regions, the assemblies could become vehicles for social democratic demands as has occurred with the Scottish Parliament and, to some extent, the Welsh Assembly. These contradictions have been reflected in the coolness of the Confederation of British Industry towards elected regional government (Deas and Wood, 2000: 281), and in the ambivalence of the Labour leadership. The prime minister, whose class instincts are decidedly authoritarian, opposed it until recently, while the deputy prime minister Prescott, who has vestigial ties to the old Labour apparatus and via them to the grass roots, pushed the regional chambers and has been favourable towards regional government (Hetherington, 2000).

To conclude. The new regional economic governance embodies an inter-class compromise in which sorely-neglected socialisations of production and reproduction are addressed through moderate intervention. The Blair government has evidently judged that regional economic governance will not be too conflictual due to the discipline imposed by the ‘global competition’ of regions and by neoliberalism. But this class compromise is vulnerable. It is uncertain to what extent inter-and intra-class conflicts can be contained by regional identification, solidarity and chauvinism. And regional chauvinism, while it can unify the region internally, can exacerbate disruptive conflict *between* regions, as has sometimes been the case with economic localism. It can also lead to excessive demands on the national state.

Regional inter-class solidarity, then, can be a two-edged sword. The many tensions involved, including scalar ones, and the possibilities for social actors to mobilise around the new form of governance, mean that the government is taking a gamble.

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Notes

1. Some authors who do not share the ‘new regionalist’ viewpoint nevertheless also see regional governance as having a technical-economic logic. Tomaney (2000: 387), for example, argues that ‘[t]he experience elsewhere [than England] demonstrates that the region, not the nation-state or the locality, is the appropriate scale at which to develop social and economic strategies...’.
2. Using other arguments, a similar conclusion is reached through analysing regions across the EU by Evans and Harding (1997) and Tomaney and Ward (2000), and more abstractly by Jones (2001).

3. Deas and Ward (2000) see the origins of RDAs in an attempt to better coordinate the myriad economic and regeneration agencies in each region. They see them as vulnerable to conflicts between the RDA and local authorities and agencies, each protecting its patch. This explanation, following realist political theory, pictures the dynamics of state rescaling as arising from within state structures themselves, thus attributing a high degree of autonomy to the state *vis a vis* civil society (in particular, class relations).

4. Thus Ed Balls, a New Labour policy advisor, claims baldly and wholly inaccurately that traditional regional policy 'did not work' (2000:12).

5. The north-east region is a telling exception to these processes. Under feudalism the great nobles of the region had an exceptionally high degree of autonomy because of the proximity to Scotland. The industrial bourgeoisie and professional class formed in the nineteenth century had a strong view of themselves as progressive (Benwell CDP, 1978). And the north east has suffered from especially severe deindustrialisation since the 1920s. These may have contributed to the relatively high degree of regional consciousness. See further Tomaney and Ward (2000).

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