



Exploring new systems of regionalism: An English case study



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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study of the North West England has identified two new approaches to regionalism. *'Hybrid regionalism'* puts forward an alternative between old regionalism (in terms of a holistic tier of regional government above local authorities) and new regionalism (or complete reliance on voluntary collaboration for self-interest). This study has verified the hypothesis that hybrid regionalism, which involves the central establishment and steering of regional collaboration with a sustainable development objective, is effective in encouraging non-governmental involvement, relational innovation among 'less likely' partners, and the formulation of policies that are cross-sectoral and focused on their regional remit (spatial policy fitness) as opposed to parochial and/or central interests. Another approach to regionalism identified in this study is *'departmental new regionalism'* in which national growth targets, rather than the self-interest of localities, institutionalize and control collaboration. This approach to regionalism could lead to non-governmental involvement but more limited relational innovation, especially between local governments, and a resultant strategy which would be oriented towards the region's contribution to the wider economy.

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1. Introduction

Political science and spatial planning have had a common interest in different forms of territorial management at the regional (sub-national) level (see Basolo, 2003; Feiock, 2009; Frisken & Norris, 2001; Hamilton, 2013; Hamilton, Miller, & Paytas, 2004; Kübler & Heinelt, 2005; Kübler & Schwab, 2007; Norris, 2001a, 2001b; Savitch & Vogel, 2000). Drawing on the work of Kübler and Heinelt (2005), Hamilton (2013), for example, identifies four typologies with a continuum from most centralized to most decentralized (Fig. 1). Such typologies are basically inspired by two schools of thought on regionalism. As Norris (2001a) points out, it is difficult to present a definition of regionalism regardless of its school of thought. However, an over-simplified definition might suggest that regionalism implies a commitment to the 'governability' (see Hager, 2012) of the sub-national level. A brief review of the two schools of regionalism thoughts next to a school of thought on localism will help illuminate this definition.

The *institutional reform* tradition, or *old regionalism*, is rooted in the comprehensive regionalism of the 1960s and 1970s covering and integrating a wide range of issues (for example, from economic growth to clearer air, inclusionary housing and externalities of development competition in a region) in a similar approach to what is now discussed as strategic spatial planning for sustainable development (Basolo, 2003; Frisken & Norris, 2001; Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2011; Ziafati Bafarasat & Baker, 2015). It thus disapproves of the existence of a large number of independent local authorities in a region. With this perspective, and

a Weberian trust in the rationality and planning capacity of large public bureaucracies, these scholars advocate the existence of a holistic regional government, to be achieved either through the consolidation of local governments or by the establishment of an additional tier of government (directly elected, composed of members of municipal councils, or some combination) (Hamilton, 2013; Kübler & Heinelt, 2005).

However, fundamental political difficulties work against the creation and success of such new regional governments, including strong opposition from local and state governments unwilling to give up some of their power, and the hostility of peripheral areas unable to see how their interests are tied to the wellbeing of central cities (Wheeler, 2002). While the desired policy output of the school of institutional reform has gained momentum via new waves of making regional spatial plans from the 1990s (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2014), such difficulties with the establishment of a holistic tier of regional government partly explain why this school of thought is also known as old regionalism.

Developing from the 1960s onwards, the school of *public choice* highlights these difficulties next to those of measuring accumulative efficiency. It draws on the service benefits of competition between local authorities, therefore suggesting that local autonomy should not be hampered by institutional consolidation or by the creation of higher level authorities (Kübler & Schwab, 2007; Lefèvre, 1998). However, the public tenet of unbiased competition between autonomous local authorities appears a theoretical position that lacks empirical ground (Kübler & Heinelt, 2005). In the 1990s, in line with the debate on the shift from government to governance (see Table 1), the transition from old to *new regionalism* started (Kübler & Schwab, 2007). As a third-way alternative to a regional government and competing

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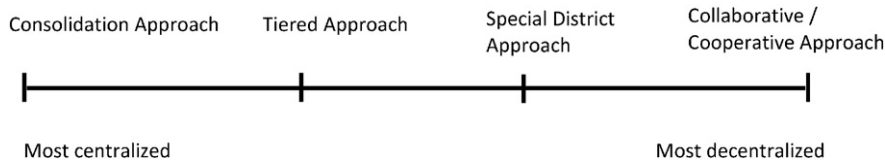


Fig. 1. Regionalism systems from most centralized to most decentralized (original diagram: Hamilton, 2013, p. 6).

autonomous localities, this school of thought thus promotes horizontal policy networks between localities, governmental agencies, and private and Third sector organizations to plan for and meet region-wide interests, especially the attraction of external private capital (Visser, 2004). The vehicle through which this voluntary collaboration is facilitated is often a civic association or a council of governments (Hamilton, 2013).

Next to a narrow vision around addressing the self-interest of localities through collaboration (Mittelman, 1996), a basic critique of new regionalism appears to relate to non-transparent decision making and indirect democratic accountability in self-made representative forums (see Brenner, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2003). However, it is argued that new regionalism facilitates ‘non-governmental involvement’ in strategic governance (Kübler & Schwab, 2007). The absence of a regional government provides a loose institutional context in which legitimacy is fragmented (Andersen & Pierre, 2010). This can facilitate the involvement of socio-environmental and business stakeholders, whose interests are scattered across administrative boundaries, in supra-local governance as there would be no ground for ‘non-corrupt’ exclusion and majority rule, and the question of ‘who is not involved?’ maintains the ‘political’ in decision making (see Balducci, Kunzmann, & Sartorio, 2004; Hillier, 2003; Susskind, 2006; Warren, 2004). The loose coupling of arenas and levels of governance and its consequent power fragmentation and negotiation breadth are argued to encourage consensus building with some less likely partners and in less usual orders in the pursuit of collaboratively identified common interests (Benz & Eberlein, 1999; Booher & Innes, 2002; Haughton, Allmendinger, Counsell, & Vigar, 2010). This ‘relational innovation’ is thus more likely to occur under new regionalism where policy making exercise is basically undertaken via the ‘scale jumping’ (see Van Dyck, 2011) of higher and lower government levels and the representation of voluntary and business actors.

Relational innovation does not always lead to sustainable strategies. Since new regionalism is focused on boosting self-interest via voluntary collaboration, rather than addressing the values of comprehensive planning under formal obligations (Swanstrom, 2001), its potential in producing sustainable strategies depends on a relative balance between the influence of different stakeholders (see Ziafati Bafarasat & Baker, 2015). However, lacking a government tier suggests that the role of intermediate levels under new regionalism can decline to that of serving the sectoral and parochial interests of higher and lower levels with a government tier and coherent politico-institutional resources. This would undermine the ‘spatial policy fitness’ of regional strategies, defined as the formulation of policies that serve regional, as opposed to central and/or parochial, interests and have a cross-sectoral agenda (see Cashin, 1999; Harrison, 2013; Jones, 2001; Reynolds, 2003).

Table 1
Some basic differences between government and governance (based on: Savitch & Vogel, 2000, pp. 161–162).

Government	Governance
Vertical and firmly institutionalized	Horizontal and flexible
Formal and directed from above	Informal and self-regulating
Regional government connects to localities through demarcated procedures	Inter-local agreements are looser and less confined by boundaries
Emphasizes the centralizing features of regionalism	Stresses the decentralizing virtues of local cooperation

2. Research focus and case study

A resultant hypothesis from the aforementioned debate is that a hybrid of old and new regionalism, which offers an alternative between a holistic tier of regional government above local authorities and a complete reliance on voluntary collaboration for the self-interest of localities, might be capable of addressing inclusivity and relational innovation as well as spatial policy fitness. With a system of regional collaboration which was defined, institutionalized and steered by central government for a sustainable development objective, English regionalism in the period 1997–2008 provided an opportunity to examine this hypothesis and, in addition, the 2008–2010 period helped explore the formation of another system of regionalism. The experience of ‘hybrid regionalism’ (1997–2008) involved: a) a government aspect with a region-building agenda, involving central policy statements and the roles of Government Offices (GOs) for the English regions and the Planning Inspectorate, to some extent Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), and to a lesser extent Regional Assemblies (RAs); and b) a governance aspect within the government aspect at two levels: loosely defined collaboration in regional planning between GOs, RDAs and RAs, and partly within the Regional Assembly through representative membership and decision making. So while inclusion and innovation are more likely to be observed in these governance arenas, spatial policy fitness is expected to be mainly dependent on the role of government (see Fig. 2), including the role of the Government Offices. Government Offices were established in 1994 but in subsequent years, especially after Labour governments came to power from 1997, their roles were extended to cover various responsibilities relating to regional planning, transport, urban regeneration and so forth, drawn from what finally amounted to twelve government departments (Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Musson, Tickell, & John, 2005; Government Offices for the English Regions (GOs), 2010).

The highly fractious nature of the North West region in relation to economic and political geographies (see Thompson & Dimitriou, 2007; Williams & Baker, 2007; Wilson & Baker, 2006) was the main factor behind its selection as the case study of hybrid regionalism. These differences have contributed to the evolution of hybrid regionalism since they, on one hand, have reduced the possibility of voluntary cooperation at the regional level and, on the other hand, have created a difficult context for the establishment of a regional tier of government (Ziafati

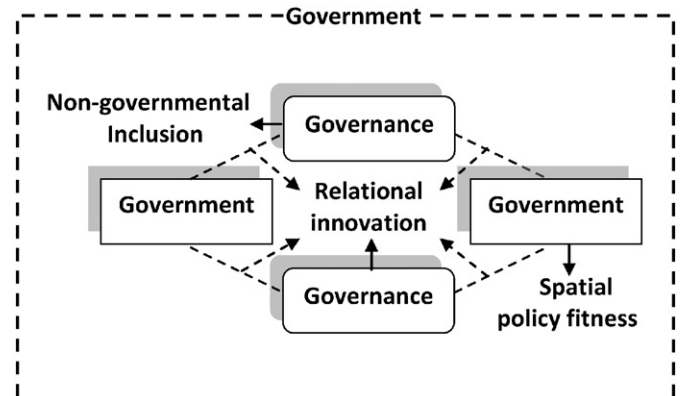


Fig. 2. Hypothetical outcomes of hybrid regionalism.

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