In what sense 'spaces of neoliberalism'? The new localism, the new politics of scale, and town twinning

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ABSTRACT

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This paper draws on a study of town twinning in Britain since 1945 to engage with narratives of 'the new localism' and 'the new politics of scale'. It argues that town twinning is often used in technical assistance programmes such as the UK Government's Know How Fund and various schemes of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. 'Fast policy' is a concept that can be usefully applied to these programmes and the broader field of interurban networking, urban policy mobility, and policy transfer. Town twinning plays an active yet overlooked role in fast policy. The paper also argues that town twinning is part of a longer history of bottom-up localism that includes the political arguments of John Stuart Mill, at least two moments of twentieth-century municipal internationalism, the municipal foreign policy movement of the 1980s, and the community development movement of the last three decades. This longer history suggests sources of localism other than statecraft, and problematises the conceptualisation of power and periodisation of history found in regulation theories of devolution.

Introduction

This paper emerged from a study of the history and geography of town twinning in Britain since 1945. For the purposes of the study, town twinning was defined as the construction and practice, by various groups and to various ends, of relatively formal relationships between two towns or cities usually located in different nation-states. The paper seeks to locate town twinning in two prominent narratives of contemporary political geography and urban studies: the new localism and the new politics of scale. This introductory section proceeds by outlining the two narratives, introducing town twinning, and justifying the exercise of locating town twinning in these narratives.

The new localism and the new politics of scale

Over the last two decades, numerous scholars have identified a 'new localism'. This new localism describes a search for market alternatives to bureaucratic organisation so that local authorities become 'enabling authorities' purchasing services from various agencies and regulating those agencies and services (Cochrane, 1993). It describes an attempt to secure welfare less through collective consumption and more through economic development – a move from the welfare state to 'the enterprise state' of partnerships between local authorities and businesses (Cochrane, 2007). For Harvey (1989), this shift has been to an 'urban entrepreneurialism' characterised by interurban competition, civic boosterism, gentrification, urban spectacle, public–private partnerships, and new 'security' measures. For Hall and Hubbard (1998), it heralds a 'new urban politics' incorporating both 'the entrepreneurial city' and a related move from government to 'governance' – from a set of formal procedures and institutions created to express social interests, resolve social disputes, and implement public choices, to a flexible pattern of public decision-making based on loose associations of individuals located in diverse organisations and territories (John, 2001). This new urban politics involves trans-sovereign activities of particular interest to scholars in the field of comparative politics. For them: 'paradiplomacy' refers to the international activities of non-state actors i.e. cities, regions, non-governmental organisations and so on (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Duchacek, 1990); 'multilayered diplomacy' emphasises the interaction between these internationally involved non-central governments and nation-states (Hocking, 1993, 1999); and 'post-diplomacy' or 'beyond diplomacy' specifies the character of this interaction which is more entangled than parallel (Aguirre, 1999). It is particularly in this comparative politics literature that discussion of the new localism overlaps with discussion of a 'new regionalism' or 'new federalism'.

For some, the new localism constitutes a response to the economic recession of the 1970s (Cochrane, 1993, Harvey, 1989). Spending on welfare was reduced at the national level by

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devolving functions to the sub-national level while making no additional funding available. Sometimes, for example in the case of Reagan's 'new federalism' policy, devolution was pursued to depoliticise certain policy areas (Hocking, 1993). Often, however, it followed from genuine disillusionment with a Keynesian welfare state that for the Right had undermined the efficiency of business and for the Left had failed to address class inequalities (Cochrane, 2007). Some of this disillusionment on the Left can be found in the new regionalism that arose in Western Europe during the 1960s – a regionalism that drew on anarchist and communitarian traditions, valued regional cultures and dialects, and became aligned with environmentalism and regionalist/ nationalist movements during the 1970s (Keating, 1998). Such disillusionment was fed upon, organised, and further generated by the discourse of 'New Public Management' that solidified during the 1980s – an incoherent set of ideas about how best to organise the administration of public services that includes: the centralisation of management through mission statements and performance measurement; the decentralisation of functions to micro-agencies; the introduction of quasi-markets in which micro-agencies compete for resources; and the contracting out of services to the private sector (John, 2001).

Of course, the economic context from which the new localism emerged was not just one of recession. It was also one of internationalisation and globalisation. These processes placed regions and cities in direct competition with one another for mobile investment capital (Harvey, 1989). They elevated certain cities and regions to the status of 'world cities' (Friedmann, 1986), 'global cities' (Sassen, 1991), and/or 'global city-regions' (Scott, 2002). Challenges generated at these new centres, including social polarisation and segmentation, demanded new political responses (Scott, 2002; Scott, Agnew, Soja, & Storper, 2002). Other new and complex problems such as increased migration and climate change also demanded political experimentation (John, 2001). Local authorities accepted responsibility for addressing these problems in part because of declining confidence in the foreign policy capability of nation-states (Hocking, 1993). They were also encouraged in this direction by new sources of funding and authority at the level above the nation-state, especially the European level (John, 2001; Keating, 1999).

This narrative of the new localism has been much considered by regulation and state theorists. Out of this engagement has emerged an alternative narrative – what Cox (2002) has called 'the new politics of scale' – in which the political-economic dimensions of the new localism are emphasised and, for this reason, the term 'spaces of neoliberalism' is preferred to that of the new localism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002a). This alternative narrative begins in the late 1960s when the Fordist-Keynesian accumulation regime entered a period of crisis (Swyngedouw, 1989). In the following years, while existing regulation failed to grow or even to sustain accumulation, neoliberal ideology became increasingly hegemonic (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2005). As a response, state space – the territorial governance of capitalism (Brenner, Jessop, Jones, & MacLeod, 2003) – was restructured both upwards to the supranational scale and downwards to the local, urban, and regional scales. Swyngedouw (1997) has termed this process 'glocalisation'. He has also identified a further restructuring outwards through privatisation (Swyngedouw, 2005). In this literature, what is approached elsewhere as the new localism is approached as the outcome of: neoliberal statecraft; state spatial strategies to unleash the presumed innovative capacities of local economies; post-Keynesian policies that concentrate investments in the most competitive cities or cityregions; and a move from Keynesian welfare national states to 'Rescaled Competition State Regimes' (Brenner, 2004).

Town twinning

The present paper emerged from a study of town twinning in Britain since 1945 and an attempt to locate the recent history of town twinning – including North–South linking and technical assistance partnerships – in narratives of the new localism and the new politics of scale. Town twinning was invented by local governments and/or their citizens in Western Europe after the Second World War, often to promote peace and local autonomy in a context of war and totalitarianism (Campbell, 1987). It was subsequently used during the 1950s by the Council of European Municipalities in attempts to construct European union (Weyreter, 2003), and during the Cold War by governments and social movements alike in attempts to relieve tensions between the USA and the USSR (Lofland, 1989). During the 1960s, it was used by French and German cities in attempts to improve local government (Campbell, 1987). During the 1980s, it was used by local economic development officers in attempts to facilitate trade (Cremer, de Bruin, & Dupuis, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; Zelinsky, 1990). The GDR used town twinning in attempts to promote socialism in West Germany during the 1980s (Weyreter, 2003). Various groups and organisations used town twinning to support the reunification of Germany after 1989 (Weyreter, 2003). Town twinning has also been used since the late 1970s in attempts to construct development in the socalled Global South (Weyreter, 2003; Zelinsky, 1991).

Taken together, the uses and agents of town twinning over the past 60 or so years and much of the world have been so varied that *town twinning is best conceptualised not as a movement, as it often is in the literature, but as a device*: a device for producing topological proximity between topographically distant places; a device with its own repertoire of formal agreements, trade delegations, joint projects, exchange visits etc. but that is also just one technology in numerous higher-order repertoires (those of peace activists, local economic development professionals, desk officers at the European Commission and so on); and a device that is modular since town twinning has been taken up and used by numerous different interest groups, in numerous different contexts, with numerous different ends in mind.

This conceptualisation informs Sections 2 and 3 of the paper. It is necessary because there is no settled definition of town twinning, neither in law nor in culture. There are strong views held on this question of definitions, however, by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, for example, and the Local Government Association of England and Wales (LGA). These are that town twinning describes one modality of international cooperation at the local level – a modality characterised by formal twinning agreements or charters, permanence of relationship, and formal recognition by local authorities. A historical perspective, however, teaches that such organisations are just two of many that have sought to represent, authorise, and discipline town twinning over the last 60 or so years (Clarke, in press). These organisations have included, at the international level, the International Union of Local Authorities, the International Union of Mayors, the United Towns Organisation, and the European Council, Parliament, and Commission, and, at the national level, the Association of Municipal Corporations, the British Council, and the Local Government International Bureau. When these organisations have provided funding for town twinning activities, as with the Rippon Programme (administered by the British Council during the 1970s) or Community Aid for Twinnings (administered by the European Commission during the 1990s), they have had some authority over the field of town twinning. At other times, however, this authority has waned. As a result, there exists a variety of interurban partnerships that are more or less formal, long-term, and recognised by local authorities, and a variety of labels attached to these