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Economizing imaginaries of city-regionalism as politics of city-regionalization

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Abstract: In this chapter, we seek to provide some conceptual clarifications regarding the interrelationship between the concepts of ‘city-region’, ‘city-regionalism’ and ‘city-regionalization’. These relations have not been properly addressed in research that has otherwise carefully examined the various city-regional processes that bring together the private and the public, and the urban and the regional. Moreover, we argue that the analysis of city-regionalism warrants attention as regards economizing imaginaries of city-regionalization, that is, to the ways in which imagined territorial structures of the state and governance facilitate the realization of putative economies of scale and scope on the part of their economic and political proponents.

Introduction

Capitalist globalization is often associated with both urbanization and regionalization. In regional studies and human geography, this coupling of the urban and the regional has been particularly evident in the theorization of post-Fordism. One central claim regarding the urban-regional nexus pertains to the ways in which the so called global city-region (Scott 2001) as an actually existing and distinct urban form can be considered as a concrete manifestation of the processes of late capitalism, customarily associated with concepts such as the new economy, the knowledge-based economy, cultural economy, or cultural-cognitive capitalism. More generally, one of the central claims in the post-Fordist debate has been that city-regions occupy a central role in the organization of the contemporary global economy. Indeed, some key authors have argued that today ‘regions’ are constituted primarily as city-regions (see for example Scott 2019). Accordingly, city-regions should be comprehended both as central building blocks of capitalism, as well as manifestations of urbanization processes in knowledge-intensive capitalism.

In this chapter, we seek to provide some conceptual clarifications regarding the interrelationship between the concepts of ‘city-region’, ‘city-regionalism’ and ‘city-regionalization’. In our perspective, these relations have not been properly addressed in research that has otherwise carefully examined the various city-regional processes that bring together the private and the public, and the urban and the regional. For example, in *Keys to the City* Michael Storper (2013), when talking about regional institutions that bridge economy and civil society, arguably comes closest to making these connections. Yet ultimately he falls short in respect of identifying the state and political actors, processes and projects involved in such economic regionalization processes. In a similar vein, there is a raft of research emanating from the theory of industrial districts and new regionalism under post-Fordism dealing with the ways in which regions emerge as economic spaces or spaces of innovation yet much of it fails to engage with political processes of city-regionalism and regionalization.

We have previously argued that city-regionalism is often examined as a discrete set of, respectively, geo-economic and/or state administrative and geopolitical processes (see Moisio and Jonas 2018). Whereas economic-geographical investigations of newly-emergent territorial forms of capitalist development (such as global city-regions, industrial districts, high tech corridors, etc.) tend to emphasize the geo-economic, political-geographical perspectives often focus on the geopolitical by highlighting the power of domestic and international geopolitical interests in shaping different policy manifestations of city-regionalism. Territorialized political imaginaries in particular are central to building wider state and public support around city-regionalization processes. Such imaginaries enable the identification and demarcation of city-regions as objects of governance and regulation, thus mobilizing political support for future public investment, planning decisions and policy actions within the imagined territorial entities (Healey 2009). Accordingly, the analysis of city-regionalism warrants attention as regards *economizing imaginaries* of city-regionalization, that is, to the ways in which imagined territorial structures of the state and governance facilitate the realization of putative economies of scale and scope on the part of their economic and political proponents.

In this chapter, rather than treating city-regionalization as a discrete outcome of economic development processes operating apart from state and territory, we briefly discuss the territorialized social and political dimensions of what we conceptualize as city-regionalism and city-regionalization processes. In so doing, we highlight the strategic relational nature of city-regionalization, as well as the political role of economizing imaginaries in crafting metropolitan-scale city-regions. We further argue that city-regionalization may take the form of either metropolitan or regional government or governance, or a hybrid of both working more or less together. It is often orchestrated by coalitions that bring together the nation-state, the local state,

private firms, business associations and sometimes even civil society around more or less regionalized representations and imaginaries of the ‘public interest’. In this understanding, city-region is a field of societal forces and related strategic selectivities; a field on which the separation between ‘economy’ and ‘politics’, let alone ‘business’ and ‘the state’, is analytically problematic. In order to illustrate the above-mentioned claims, we briefly scrutinize some examples drawn from our own previous and ongoing research.

From city-regions to city-regionalism

The concept of city-region signals the ‘urbanization of society’ (Lefebvre 1970) in which the free-standing city is a significant but not the only territorial outcome of the spatial processes of urbanization. Today, urbanization has spread far beyond formal city limits into the wider region. The new metropolitan ‘city-regions’ may be understood as dynamic societal phenomena rather than static physical platforms for societal processes. These city-regions administer transport systems, waste-management practices and other forms of inter-municipal cooperation through the upscaling of service provision, human mobility, and various regional governance experiments. Their borders are often porous and contested rather than fixed and constitutive of spatial identities.

City-regions are often somewhat ‘messy’ and incoherent rather than administratively well-defined; they are more likely to correspond to functional labour market territories than with the administrative divisions of the state. In this respect, the problem of territorial non-coincidence, which refers to the non-correspondence of international flows of capital with the regulatory powers of the nation state (Murray 1971), can equally be applied to local and metropolitan territories of the state (Cox 2002). City-regionalism is often represented as a solution to this problem: it is a means by which the state strives to exert greater regulatory control over transnational flows of capital.

Nonetheless, efforts to align metropolitan jurisdictional boundaries with the spatial interests of businesses, workers and consumers, public officials and politicians often generate political struggles, which can assume a territorial rather than a class, racial, or other form (Cox and Jonas 1993). Although larger city-regional structures may be desirable from the vantage point of the exploitation of economies of scale, resistance to metropolitan political integration is typical in many areas (Scott 2008: 560). City-regions can therefore be conceptualized as continuously evolving, changing and always contested ‘project spaces’ that attempt to bring together the economy and infrastructure, with political actors, institutions, networks and resources.

The concept of city-region is often associated with that of city-regionalism, but little work exists on the relationship between these two concepts. To aid conceptual clarity, we propose that city-regionalism refers to a discourse that ‘fuels’ the construction of city-regions which are actually existing spatial phenomena. As such, the process that leads from the discourse of city-regionalism to forms of spatial politics and regulation that fuel city-regionalization remains an important research topic.

City-regionalism, moreover, is an ideology pertaining to the sphere of politics, spatial strategies and projects, conflicts, contestation, negotiation among economic interests. Political discourses of city-regionalism might range from neoliberal competitiveness to the progressive politics of tackling social inequality and racial segregation. In the United States, for instance, new regionalist governance initiatives often incorporate progressive rhetoric with a strong emphasis on regional equity and metropolitan fiscal redistribution (Pastor *et al.* 2011). The underlying motives for city-regionalism can hence be made visible through analyses of, for instance, planning documents, political strategies, investment portfolios, public-private collaborations, and all sorts of state and

governance reforms, as well as interviews with its ideologues and opponents alike (Jonas and Pincetl 2006).

City-regionalism often blurs the received boundaries existing between the public and the private, government and business, and economy and civil society, thereby detaching economic and social motivations from underlying political interests. Nonetheless, city-regionalism is both state-orchestrated and society-orchestrated, and these orchestrations often come together in growth-oriented city-regionalization in particular (Harrison 2020). In other words, private stakeholders such as firms and business associations often figure prominently in the politics of city-regionalism and attendant regionalization policies and practices (Jonas and Pincetl 2006). It is equally clear that, as national states begin to see links between economic globalization and metropolitan expansion, players such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) also play an increasingly significant role as actors in, and proponents of, city-regionalism and city-regionalization.

During the past two decades, city-regionalism has been often bound to the processes of neoliberal economization championed eloquently by both the public and the private sectors. For instance, finance-dominated capitalism and associated investment into all kinds of built environments has been an essential driving motor of city-regionalism in different geographical contexts. Importantly, the interests of local and transnational growth coalitions have been buttressed by the decisions of state and local governments, actors who seek to facilitate economic growth in order to secure both tax revenue and particular capital-friendly societal dynamics. Indeed, in countries such as the USA the formation of ‘multi-city growth coalitions’ has been accompanied by a commensurate rescaling of state spaces around newly imagined multi-jurisdictional metropolitan and regional structures (Wachsmuth 2020).

The above-mentioned understanding of city-regionalism needs to be accompanied by a heuristic distinction between two aspects of city-regionalism as an urbanizing spatial strategy. First, city-regionalism can be understood as geopolitical strategies of state territorial re-structuring such as internationalization. Here we refer to attempts to produce large urban areas that are purportedly ‘heavy enough’ in global capitalism in terms of their attractiveness and overall dynamism. The coming together of the ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ in the context of city-regionalism indicates particular geopolitics of state spaces (Jonas and Moisio 2018). Second, city-regionalism also refers to local and metropolitan strategies related to economic planning and land use in all its dimensions. The two dimensions of city-regionalism may come together and support different kinds of political-economic processes of public consumption, collective provision and private investment. From the perspective of politics, these two forms of city-regionalism may also create contradictions and tensions between local governments, as well as within the state apparatus, and between the state and local governments.

The previous discussion further indicates that state power is always in operation in city-regionalism, but the ways in which this occurs differs across geographical contexts. Given the strategic nature of city-regionalism, we have suggested that more attention should be paid to the geopolitical construction of city-regions. In such a view, the production and re-production of city-regional spaces embodies a mixture of sometimes subtle but nonetheless quite instrumental processes of state spatial re-structuring that brings together the ‘internal’ (often dubbed as domestic) and external (that is transnational) aspects of state space. For instance, the state contributes to the activation of new multi-city growth coalitions, and enhances the coming together of the private and the public in various city-regions (Wachsmuth 2020). In so doing, state power is constitutive in the process of reconfiguring the so-called ‘subnational’ state spaces.

Indeed, the role of the state in city-regionalism signals the alignment of domestic policies of urban development with those designed to promote the state's international competitiveness. This geopolitics of city regionalism (Moisio and Jonas 2018) is itself fraught with contradictions. Competition strategies enacted in response to apparent external competitiveness pressures simply exacerbate those pressures. Rather than becoming a 'solution' to local urban competitiveness pressure, competitive upscaling leads to a new set of multi-city competitiveness pressures, co-existing alongside the existing local (city) ones.

The role of imaginaries in city-regionalism: on the politics of economic regions

City-regionalism is a sphere of political action that renders visible spatial imaginaries and political rationalities. Imaginaries constitute spaces, as well as socio-spatial relations, and become materialized in political action and practices of spatial planning, which produce, reproduce and reinforce them (Baker and Ruming 2015; Wetzstein 2013). Imaginaries guide present and future (non-)decisions, actions and inaction and play a performative role, when expectations unfold to mobilize resources, produce incentives, and justify certain actions in preference to other ones (Jessop 2012). Imaginaries are essential in rationalizing political processes and in performing development policies as if they are inevitable. As such, they are always selective, and therefore always open to contestation. Imaginaries often construe the reality that they portray as already existing. Today, imaginaries of city-regionalism often touch upon issues such as fostering economic growth and competitiveness, reforming governance, enhancing sustainability of any kind, and tackling social polarization. In this context, spatial imaginaries are not mere reflections of already-existing city-regions as 'fixed' social systems. Rather imaginaries are constitutive of city-regions and transformative of capitalist processes. This understanding on the role of imaginaries in city-

regionalism resonates with the idea of structuration as put forward by Giddens (1984): the structural properties of city-regions are both the medium and the outcome of the imaginaries and related practices that constitute those city-regions as social systems. In other words, city-regional agency is influenced by social structures (including state structures), but city-regional spaces are constructed and maintained through the exercise of agency.

The role of imaginaries in power struggles over places and spaces is enacted by the processes of politicization or de-politicization (Davoudi *et al.* 2018). Imaginaries are hence subject to political contestation, and new imaginaries may lead to change in political spaces and institutions. The contemporary imaginaries of city-regionalism disclose particular layering of highly depoliticized knowledge (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019). Arguably, we have been witnessing particular economization of city-regionalism over the past three decades. In these economizing imaginaries, different kinds of social phenomena are turned into economic matters as if they belonged solely to the sphere of the economy, market forces and the overall dynamics of economic development.

In this context, the performative and productive aspects of the economy-centred academic theories on post-Fordism are particularly interesting. Here, we refer to theories that seek to explain and understand the regional changeover from Fordism to post-Fordism. In economic geographic reasoning in particular, this shift is almost invariably associated with the rise of so-called flexible specialization and the purported heightening role of ‘regions’ in late capitalism. The ideas of industrial districts, new regionalism and agglomeration have become highly influential in urban and regional studies over the past decades. For instance, Piore and Sabel (1984) proclaimed that the success of some firms clearly had a regional basis: the local and regional institutional arrangements related to inter-firm cooperation and competition sustained agglomerations of highly successful and specialized small and medium size firms. This, in turn, influenced regional policies that sought to

reproduce the purported economic efficiency of regions or ‘districts’ which were widely adopted in countries such Italy, Germany and France. The idea of agglomeration economies was further developed in equally powerful work on the ways in which territorial agglomeration had become a means for small and medium size firms operating in high tech and cultural industries to minimize transaction costs (see for example Storper 1997). In almost the entire corpus of work on industrial districts and new regionalism, the ‘region’ refers to more or less dense concentrations of firms in a particular economic sector, as well to the auxiliary industries and specific services (see Dunford 2006: 27).

Over the past three decades or so, the economic understanding of a region in the contemporary historical conjuncture has become pervasive not only in regional studies but also in policy-making. As such, the ‘economic region’ has found its heyday as a policy desideratum, and has been tirelessly articulated in strategic spatial planning practices, for instance, whereby informal practices often meet formal or statutory planning regions (for example Mäntysalo 2015). Be it as it may, it may not be too bold to suggest that the so-called new regionalism that provides a highly seductive vision of regional potentialities has figured prominently in the context of policy-making regarding city-regions and regional innovation (see Jonas and Pincetl 2006), thus further contributing to the pervasive economization of city-regionalism).

Similarly, the dominant academic literature concerning the role of large cities and city-regions as nests of innovation, creativity, talent, productivity and, thus, economic growth, prosperity and overall social development and well-being have been an integral part of city-regionalism in different geographical contexts, and resulted, again, in the economization of city-regionalism (see for example Glaeser 2012; Florida *et al.* 2016: 2; see also Moisio 2018b). As Rodríguez-Pose (2018: 191) proclaims, the message of urban agglomeration ‘has been enthusiastically picked up by

policymakers over the last decade and increasingly drummed into inhabitants of lagging and/or declining areas as the way forward’.

On metropolitanization as a form of city-regionalization

City-regionalization can be understood as being a state-orchestrated process of state re-territorialization rather than as an expression of the ways in which the territorial state is de-territorialized or hollowed out in front of purported global market forces. As such, it can be associated with the strategic urbanization of the state (Moisio 2018a), a process in which urbanizing imaginaries fundamentally penetrate, transform and structure the spatial policy agendas and regional development schemes of the state apparatus.

In our view, city-regionalization does not signal straightforward business intentionality; nor is city-regionalization a mere spatial accretion of economic activity. Rather city-regionalization can be conceptualized as complex societal, political, geopolitical and even cultural processes which are co-constitutive with the capitalist economic and social order. Simultaneously, city-regionalization plays out differently in different contexts and is therefore inescapably an expression of local social relations and state territorial structures.

During the past two decades or so, metropolitanization, broadly conceived, has been a salient expression of the process of city-regionalization in tandem with the rise of knowledge-intensive capitalism and high-tech industry. If earlier incarnations focused on the political and administrative integration of cities and suburbs, in today’s metropolitanization large urban agglomerations are being imagined and performed as strategic economic spaces that are needed in order to reposition political entities at the age of global capitalism and inter-territorial competition. As such, the rise of

metropolitanization in its present form should neither be comprehended narrowly as a technical attempt to upscale the provision of public goods so as to realize economies of scale, nor as a simple inter-municipal or public coordination or collaboration, and nor even as an illustration of neoliberal public-private governance. Rather metropolitanization can be conceptualized as a geopolitical process that is fueled by imaginaries related to the ways in which meaningful political spaces – both within and outside national state territory – should match the borders of the actually existing economic territories. In this project of producing city-regions as units of global competition, economization and metropolitanization become two sides of the same coin.

Metropolitan spatial development and planning strategies, as well as the rise of strategic spatial planning more generally, effectively disclose the ways in which the urban and the capitalist economy come together in spatial development and planning practices related to the constant search for new metropolitan policies. In Europe, these metropolitan policies have surfaced in attempts to bring into existence metropolitan authorities as legal and authoritative steering bodies that would help to overcome the burden of local cherry-picking and harmful competition between municipalities or other jurisdictions within a given locale. In the Helsinki city-region, for instance, the lack of metropolitan coordination is often articulated as hampering the efficient delivery of public services and goods. On the other hand, the lack of city-regional land use planning (i.e. the dominance of the municipal land use monopoly) is accused of causing political tensions between cities that produce master plans individually without sufficiently taking into account the interests of their neighbours, let alone purported city-regional needs. This latter aspect has been one of the reasons why the Finnish state apparatus is currently re-working the land use planning act, and possibly introducing the city-region as a separate scale at which land use planning should be conducted around the largest cities in Finland.

In the German context, in turn, metropolitanization is increasingly taking the form of strategic planning and urban entrepreneurialization rather than the founding of metropolitan governments. According to Fricke and Gualini (2020), the introduction of metropolitan regions by the German Federal State in the 1990s has significantly contributed to the shift of regional policies from balancing territorial development towards a growth and competitiveness based model, thus interestingly revealing the shift from ‘managerial urbanization’ to ‘entrepreneurial urbanization’ that has been visible across many contexts during the past decade or so. By using the concept of entrepreneurial urbanization we refer in particular to the recent development in advanced capitalism whereby large cities and city-regions are understood increasingly as nests and concentrations of high-level human capital that is capitalized in the processes of production in contemporary ‘global’ knowledge-intensive capitalism. As such, metropolitanization discloses ambitions to build the ‘global’ inside the ‘national’, and thus to de-border territory through specific global enclaves (see, Sassen 2013). In the Finnish context too, the attempts of local authorities, think-tanks, and some state related institutions to produce a globally significant metropolis aim at increasing the attractiveness of state spaces in the eyes of international investors and highly skilled labor force (Moisio and Paasi 2013).

In the USA, however, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-8, metropolitanization has often been revived as a vehicle for leveraging additional private financing for city-regional economic development and infrastructure projects. Such attempts reflect not just the precarious fiscal predicament of local government but also a growing geopolitical alignment of entrepreneurial urbanism with what amount to highly territorialized strategies and strategic interests of local, state and federal government often working in close partnership with factions of global capital, such as private investment consortia (Jonas 2020).

Metropolitanization is also closely associated with attempts to create large city-regions as ‘superstar cities’ (Florida 2018), as new and ‘innovative’ production spaces for technology-intensive industry (see for example Zukin 2020), business services, finance and other activities that generate significant economic value around often speculative accumulation strategies. In Germany, Finland and even the USA, metropolitization symbolizes local and nation-state centred ambitions to rise the status of some cities and city-regions to a sort of global ‘premier league’ of locales, as destinations for foreign direct investments and high-skilled labour working in high tech, finance and business services, for instance.

In sum, metropolitanization nicely discloses the operation of economizing imaginaries of city-regionalism and the related efforts by nation-state governments to optimize their spaces as attractive and efficient territories that integrate the state with the global accumulation process and help to stave off the long-term fiscal consequences of the 2007-8 global financial crisis. Indeed, the same attempt to find new spatial fixes that would fuse together the urban and the capital has been salient in the international networking of large cities that consider themselves as metropolises (for instance, the Forum of European Metropolitan Authorities, EMA). Even if the projects related to metropolitan governance have often failed in Europe and the USA, the wider processes of metropolitanization nonetheless disclose the constant re-shuffling of the city, the urban and the state in late capitalism, as well as the presence of highly economizing imaginaries of city-regionalism. Simultaneously, we are currently witnessing increasing penetration of the imaginaries of sustainability, ‘climate change neutrality’ and ‘smart growth’ into the processes of city-regionalization (Dierwechter 2020). The ways in which these imaginaries alter the highly economizing processes of city-regionalization is however still largely an unexplored field of research. The next section briefly explores some examples of these emergent territorial forms and processes.

Variegated geographies of economic regionalization

City-regionalization processes vary considerably from region to region, and country to country. Whilst theorization necessitates abstracting general structures and processes, it is important nonetheless to incorporate historical-geographical contingencies into concrete causal accounts of city-regionalism. Attention to variations in state territorial structures is critical in this regard. In the USA, for example, federalism and local fiscal autonomy continue to fuel resistance to metropolitanization, prompting the aforementioned ‘multi-city growth coalitions’ (Wachsmuth 2020) to enter into quite unexpected regional coalitions and alliances in order to compete for economic development and partner with global investment consortia as can be illustrated by the example of metropolitan Denver.

In Denver, new regionalist imaginaries, discourses and governance processes have resonated powerfully ever since the early 1990s, a time when local city mayors, environmental and civic groups and economic development organizations sought to set aside internecine competition for major economic development projects in favour of regional political consensus. The major institutional vehicle for this was the Denver Metro Mayors Caucus (MMC), which was set up in 1993 to broker behind-the-scenes regional deals on key economic development projects, such as major extension to Denver’s regional mass transit system known as FasTracks (see Jonas *et al.* 2019). A powerful ‘Denver region’ imaginary has since circulated nationally and internationally, as personified by Denver’s former mayor, John Hickenlooper, who has used his experiences in Colorado to tout the message of ‘collaboration for competition’ as laying the foundations for more effective regional economic development (see for example Ferrier 2019). Nonetheless, the gloss surrounding this imagery has been somewhat tarnished of late by a crisis in the funding of

FasTracks in the wake of the 2007-8 global financial crisis, which prompted the Denver-led regional consortium subsequently to enter into a contractual agreement with a global investment partnership to deliver the Eagle P3 project: a major extension of rail services from downtown Denver to Denver International Airport and nearby suburbs (Jonas *et al.* 2019). However, in prioritizing this particular transit corridor at the expense of other regional commitments, the Eagle P3 project threatened the regional political consensus built around the original FasTracks project. At least in Metro Denver, efforts to draw in extra-territorial interests and resources may well have disrupted the virtuous circle of ‘collaboration for competition’ regarded as essential for realizing economies of city-regionalization.

State territorial structures vary in other respects besides national difference in fiscal arrangements. Given their youthful and often fragmented nature, the coordinated development of so-called infrastructure development ‘corridor regions’ (Wiig and Silver 2019) poses particular challenges for local states and business actors, not least the question of where to draw boundaries around such regions (Allen and Cochrane 2007). A case-in-point is the Oxford-Cambridge (O2C) Arc, an emergent city-regional imaginary located in the South Eastern part of the United Kingdom between Greater London and the Midlands. The political processes that led to the O2C Arc imaginary can be traced back to a growth crisis discourse, first propagated by high-tech entrepreneurs operating in and around the city of Cambridge in the mid-1990s (While *et al.* 2004). Initially coalescing around an imagined ‘Greater Cambridge’ region, a putative high-tech corridor regional imaginary soon stretched across county council jurisdictional boundaries eventually to link up with a formative ‘Technology Arc’ initiative being led by economic development partnerships in Oxfordshire and the city of Milton Keynes (Valler *et al.* 2020). With the university cities of Oxford and Cambridge occupying strategic ‘knowledge poles’ at either end of the Arc, it was hoped that improved collaborative working across the region as a whole would enhance competitiveness and secure the

Arc's place within a global network of high technology regions. Nonetheless, since its initial conception in 2003, the O2C Arc imaginary has struggled to resonate with diverse local political factions and interests, such as city and county planning agencies, local economic partnerships, chambers of commerce, and universities and other research institutes, notwithstanding its growing profile within UK national infrastructure policy (Valler *et al.* 2020).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have discussed the nature of city-regionalization not only as a reflection or outcome of contemporary capitalism, but also as a form of 'strategic urbanization'. In our view, strategic urbanization refers, firstly, to the peculiar urbanization of political strategies tailored by various political bodies ranging from the EU to nation-state and local governments. Second, it stands for the various ways in which urbanization is understood as a political (survival) strategy in and of capitalism. It thus refers to the ways in which urbanization becomes a strategy to increase the profitability of capital, that is a strategy of capital circulation and accumulation that serves both economic and political needs. Yet, strategic urbanization is a contested yet often de-politicized terrain through which a range of political actors seek to extend their agendas and powers through operationalizing particular imaginaries. These imaginaries reveal much about the ways in which both cities and the state are being spatially reconfigured by different actors, and the political rationalities behind the production of new state territorial formations at the scale of the city-region.

By way of concluding, we suggest four topics on city-regionalization that merit scholarly attention. First, the ways in which city-regionalization is related to the dynamics of knowledge-intensive capitalism – whether this is called cognitive-cultural capitalism, the knowledge-based economy, the cultural economy, cognitive capitalism, or something else – remains an important research topic.

The imaginaries of knowledge-intensive and technology driven capitalism are structured around the urban, and forcefully articulate the relationship between the new ‘creative’ forces of production and urban spaces. Some authors have even suggested that twenty-first century capitalism is marked by global city-regions that function as epicentres and command centres of knowledge-intensive capitalism.

However, one could also argue that the concept of city-region is not located at the core of the latest developments in knowledge-intensive capitalism, often articulated with banners such as start-up urbanism. Rather, one may instead argue that the concept of city-region, as an economic strategy, belongs to the earlier phase of knowledge-based economization: the late Keynesian era of technopolization that peaked in the 1990s in the form of high-tech industrial districts (see Moisio 2018b). In today’s economic development imaginaries, as well as in business consultancy and policy-making more broadly, cities take the form of ecosystems for experimental governance and creative human activity. The intimate connection between the urban, the capitalist extraction of value, and entrepreneurial forms of life is certainly a defining feature of the latest round of knowledge-based economization. The capability of the new start-up entrepreneurs to commodify digital formats and contents as successful businesses, and the associated shift from ‘mere technology’ to ‘content’ is thus almost invariably associated with the dense urban space and particular innovation districts. In such a view, the new, economically profitable ideas arise from a cooperative and culturally rich urban fabric rather from wider city-regional spaces. In these urbanophile imaginaries, lively and dense urban environments contribute fundamentally to the production of a new generation of ‘creative’ entrepreneurs, essential to the operation of the knowledge-intensive form of capitalism (Moisio and Rossi 2020). The relationship between the spatial imaginaries of start-up economy and the imaginaries of city-regionalism thus merit more scholarly attention.

Second, the narrative of agglomeration economies, with its straightforward focus on urban economics, productivity and urban economic growth, is problematic in many geographical contexts which are not characterized by spatial density and urban economies of scale. As a political strategy of the state, the agglomeration driven city-regionalism hence has the potential to marginalize and stigmatize geographical spaces as ‘lagging regions’ or ‘places without a future’ and, in so doing, discursively nullify the futures of many places and regions.

Third, city-regionalization is characterized by complex power geometries, power asymmetries and conflicts, and city-regionalization in the form of governance experimentation (increasing the steering capacity of a city-region, for instance) quite often seeks to solve the existing tensions and conflicts that exist between steering bodies and related jurisdictions and other stakeholders within a given urban locale. These governance experiments however sometimes miss one important aspect: the spaces of political representation, and hence the spaces of democracy. In fact, city-regionalization often occurs beyond the general public and associated public debate, and thus might lack democratic legitimacy and political transparency. In short, city-regions as actual spaces of political economy do not always match with spaces of political representation or, indeed, any forms of political control – let alone spaces of collective identity and legitimacy. City-regions may of course be understood as mere accretions of economic activities, but their social production, their functioning as spaces of steering, and their role as somehow meaningful political spaces for people who inhabit these spaces require increasing scholarly attention too. Herein lies the challenge of conceptualizing city-regions as both economic and social phenomena. Regarding the latter aspect, the socio-spatial re-stratification and differentiation of city-regions remains an important research topic.

Fourth and finally, in striving for imaginaries that resonate with diverse publics, advocates of city-regionalism often seek to enroll progressive discourses of sustainability and equity alongside those of economic development. Following the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and resulting austerity measures, even mainstream business interests will struggle to galvanize support for their city-regional projects unless they address mounting problems of social redistribution, inequality and environmental crises associated with contemporary urbanization trends. To be sure, the language of sustainability is itself symptomatic of the post-political condition, being detached from knowledge of class relations, social conditions and material interests (Swyngedouw, 2007). Nevertheless the emerging spectre of combined climate crisis, global pandemic and austerity today is likely to haunt those who fail to craft city-regional imaginaries that can capture, motivate and sustain the public interest in the medium-to-long term.

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