

The political-economy of Blair's "New Regional Policy"

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Abstract

The "region" and "regional change" have been elusive ideas within political and economic geography, and in essence require a greater understanding of their dynamic characteristics. Trailing in the backwaters of the devolution to the Celtic nations of Britain, the contemporary era of New Labour's political-economic ideology, manifest through "third-way" governance in England places the region and its functional capacity into the heart of geographical inquiry. Drawing upon a new regionalist epistemology, this paper seeks to recover a sense of (regional) political economy through a critical investigation of the development and formulation of Blair's "New Regional Policy" (NRP). I address how New Labour has attempted to marry *economic regionalisation* on the one hand, and *democratic regionalism* on the other. This paper specifically questions the wisdom of such a marriage of politically distinct ideologies through a critical investigation of the underlying contradictions of their strategy from both a theoretical and empirical standpoint. Demonstrated both in the North East "no" vote in 2004, and in the post-mortem undertaken by the ODPM Select Committee in 2005, the paper illustrates how a loss of political drive gradually undermined the capacity of devolution to deliver in England. Finally, I argue that through the lens of the NRP we can speculate on some of the wider issues and implications for the study of regional governance.

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"Offer[ing] a sympathetic review of certain institution-
alist perspectives currently at the vanguard of economic geographical discourse and urban – regional inquiry... the approaches are beset by several conceptual deficiencies and sources of potential confusion. These include... a thin political economy most conspicuous in the failure to appreciate fully the *critical role of the state* in shaping the urban – regional fabric and a related weakness in examining the *asymmetries of power* which enframe the governance of space economies."

MacLeod (2001a, p. 1146, emphasis added)

1. Introduction: from new regionalism to new regional political economy

Shortly after New Labour's landslide sweep to power in 1997, a comprehensive programme of constitutional modernisation was set in motion throughout Great Britain, which resulted in the creation of an elected Parliament for Scotland, a National Assembly for Wales, an Assembly for Northern Ireland, an elected London Mayor to lead a newly formed Greater London Assembly, and a working partnership of Regional Development Agencies and Regional Chambers in each of the eight English regions. For Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and London, the restructuring of their state institutions to install the new mechanisms of governance that would enable them to engage fully in devolved politics was relatively straightforward. However, in England:

"Striking images of people celebrating the birth of their new democratic institutions in Cardiff and

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Edinburgh reaffirmed the view that the way in which we “do” politics in the UK was changed forever...[However] the English have had little chance to celebrate. The governance of England represents a gaping hole at the centre of the Government’s devolution programme.”

Tomoney and Mitchell (1999, p. 2)

By the end of Labour’s first term (2001), England remained the only country in the United Kingdom to not be in receipt of additional elected political representation; but it appeared that the progressive nature of its institutional restructuring at the regional scale was moving inevitably towards addressing this imbalance. Between 2001 and 2003, with the momentum of Blair’s “New Regional Policy” (NRP) gathering pace in England, in early July 2004 the governments Regions Minister Nick Raynsford announced that in three English regions – the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber – referenda were to be held, offering the people of the north the opportunity to support the creation of Elected Regional Assemblies (ERA). However, by late July the referenda in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber had been dramatically postponed by the government, while in the North East campaigning began in earnest. Outlined in both the Regional White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice* (DTLR/Cabinet Office, 2002) and the Regional Assemblies Bill (ODPM, 2004), the people of the North East were presented with what the government described at the opportunity to set in motion their proposals to create an ERA for the region which “will allow the region to truly take control of its own destiny and enable it to move up the economic and social prosperity ladder”. Where the existing arrangements of RDAs and Regional Chambers had their roots firmly entrenched within the contradictions exposed in past waves of regional policy, the referendum on whether to create an ERA for the North East region provided the opportunity for two new breaks from traditional regional policy discourse: (i) top-down *economic regionalisation* no longer had to run parallel and distanced from bottom-up *democratic regionalism*; and (ii) *all* regions did not have to be treated alike, but individual regions could make an individual choice – through a referendum.

On 4th November 2004, however, traditional regionalised policy in England was reinforced when the North East electorate – to whom an ERA was designed to offer “a distinct political voice and a real say over decisions which matter to them” (Prescott, quoted in DTLR/Cabinet Office, 2002, foreword) – voted emphatically against the proposals (78% against) to enable the “twin-tracks” (Jeffery and Mawson, 2002) of economic regionalisation and democratic regionalism to be aligned more strategically. This statement of discontent with the government proposals by the North East electorate marked a dramatic end to the “new” in Blair’s NRP, and once more highlighted a series of important political-economic tensions in the way that academics understand the geography of regions, and how

policymakers interpret this in the formulation of regional policy. Labour’s determination (in principle) to devolve political and institutional capacities through a progressive programme of constitutional reform coalesced around (i) a desire to remedy a party political legacy of past failures to implement devolution; (ii) to align Britain more closely with its continental European neighbours; and (iii) to seek greater engagement with a populist belief that had been spreading throughout Western Europe and North America in the mid-1990s known as the “new regionalism”. The latter of these three themes raises critical questions about the emergence of the NRP, and it is this, which I want to develop here.

Aligning itself most prominently with a neo-Marxian institutionalised political-economic approach (Amin, 2001; Jessop, 2001), the new regionalism broadly claims that contemporary capitalism and its territorial configuration are best regulated and governed in and through the decentralisation of socio-economic decision-making and associated policy implementation to subnational institutional frameworks and supports. The dominant strand constituting the new regionalism coalesces under the banner of economic geography, and argues that the region is establishing itself as the scale where knowledge creation, learning, enterprise and innovation which are believed to be critical to economic development in the contemporary era of capitalism are coalescing (Amin and Thrift, 1994; Florida, 1995; Storper, 1997; Cooke and Morgan, 1998). This strand of the new regionalism elicits the claim that there is an *economic dividend* to be gained from harnessing and developing new structures of economic governance at the regional level.

The alternative approach is based in *political* science and advocates the adoption of a “progressive” new regionalism (Keating, 1997, 1998). This can be seen through three inter-related processes which appear to be challenging the authority of the nation state and constitute the arguments of progressive new regionalism: (i) there is a loss of power *upwards* through the processes of Europeanisation; (ii) there is a loss of power *downwards* through the growth of regional territorial identity, politics of assertion and policies of devolution; and (iii) there is a loss of power *outwards* through globalisation and market forces. Theories of devolution, therefore, tend to range from those which stress its economic value (which are predominantly new regionalist approaches) against those political science theories of multi-level governance which stress the intrinsic value of regional governance as good governance by providing decision-making as close to the governed as possible given the policy domain context.

Jointly under the banner of the “new regionalism” (Amin, 1999) and “regional political economy” (Agnew, 2000; MacLeod, 2000) they have given rise to a plethora of accounts of the economic resurgence of regions within an increasingly globalised arena. In short, consensus states that theoretically regions can dualistically induce both a *democratic dividend* as well as the aforementioned *economic dividend*, and that the regional scale offers “both a

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