City Regions and Devolution in the UK

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Preface

City regions are riding high on the current political and policy agenda across the world. Their emergence is not accidental; they are being built in direct response to the deep ideological thinking exposed in key documents such as the World Bank’s 2009 World Development Report: Reshaping Economic Geography. This set-in-train ‘new economic geography’ influenced arguments closely following the work of policy advisors such as Krugman, Glaeser, and Katz on the ‘new municipalism’ and ‘new localism’, which collectively draw links between urbanism, city-region scales of state intervention, agglomeration economies, and more democratic socioeconomic development through business and civil society partnerships for prosperity.

In the UK, this motif is clearly evident in reports over the past decade, commencing with the ‘Haywood Report’ in Wales and the Royal Society of Arts’ ‘City Growth Commission’ in England, which through the mantras of the Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine, and Western Powerhouse argued for the ‘unleashing’ of growth through a series of city regions or ‘metros’ – defined as the ‘larger constellation of cities and towns that constitute a functional economy within build up areas’ – as the main drivers of economic growth in an increasingly knowledge-driven, global economy. More recently, city regions are pivotal to the Conservative Party’s post-Brexit governance-fix for ‘spatially rebalancing’ or ‘levelling up’ deep-seated geographical inequalities. In short, city regions are a conduit for redistributing prosperity, power and democracy from the South East to Northern ‘left-behind’ places, thereby reversing the long historical trend of uneven development and redevelopment. Or so the policy rhetoric goes …

City Regions and Devolution in the UK: The Politics of Representation examines this and particularly tackles the missing social sphere of these competitive relationships, equilibrating tendencies, and the vacuum around the politics of city-region building on-the-ground. It reports evidenced-based research probing on questions of social and spatial agency in practice: why civil society stakeholders are involved; what the motives are for their engagement or a lack of engagement; reasons for mobilisation or marginalisation (by interest groups and by geographical location); and, in turn, whether city regions can sustain economic agglomeration, anchor socioeconomic development, and deliver virtuous or vicious growth. The book addresses this by offering a geographical political economy framework for understanding the
dynamics of city-region building, highlighting the contradictions of state intervention, the experiences of civil society actors, and the ways in which policy problems are geographically played out.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of WISERD Civil Society (Grant ES/L0090991/1), work package ‘Spaces of New Localism’, ESRC Impact Accelerator funding for ‘Making City-Regions Work: Inclusive Governance, Skills, and Labour Market Disadvantage’, and WISERD Civil Society (Grant ES/S012435/1) ‘Changing Perspectives on Civic Stratification and Civil Repair’, the book draws on case study research in Wales (Cardiff, Swansea and North Wales) and England (Sheffield and Manchester), to put city-region building in its place. The book does not cover developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland or make any claims about these territories. Phase one involved the analysis of economic development strategies, construed firstly in national level government documentation (Bills, Acts, White and Green Papers) and secondly how this is translated through the various sub-national structures and projects of the state. Phase two looked at experiences of economic development through state-making practices and civil society struggles.

Each of the case studies featured in this book were designed to explore how effectively the institutions and actors of economic governance have been able, or not, to meet the challenges of economic development within their various localities. Ninety-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken between 2014 and 2019 with a wide variety of actors working in, and connected to, the field of economic development, ranging from Director and Chief Executive levels, to civil society engaged in policy formulation and delivery on the ground. This sample size and actor cross-section was deemed appropriate for rigorous qualitative insight into city-region building processes within the five case study sites. The interviews were mostly city region in situ office-based, digitally recorded, and draw from the governance structures and various sub-groups of economic development. Stratified actor sampling was undertaken, complemented by snowballing sampling techniques to assess more vulnerable and impenetrable groups (see Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Hitchings and Latham, 2020). For reasons of confidentiality, the individuals are not named; anonymous quotations feature in some chapters and in others, the ‘voices’ feature in the analysis of policy. These interviews were supported and triangulated by the analysis of policy documents, and vice versa, including institutional minutes, policy briefings, strategy papers, and media analysis.