



**HAL**  
open science

## Conceptualizing the region - in what sense relational?

Krisztina Varro, Arnoud Lagendijk

► **To cite this version:**

Krisztina Varro, Arnoud Lagendijk. Conceptualizing the region - in what sense relational?. *Regional Studies*, 2012, pp.1. 10.1080/00343404.2011.602334 . hal-00790734

**HAL Id: hal-00790734**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00790734>**

Submitted on 21 Feb 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**Conceptualizing the region – in what sense relational?**

Journal:	<i>Regional Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	CRES-2010-0089.R1
Manuscript Type:	Main Section
JEL codes:	H7 - State and Local Government Intergovernmental Relations < H - Public Economics, H77 - Intergovernmental Relations Federalism < H7 - State and Local Government Intergovernmental Relations < H - Public Economics, R58 - Regional Development Policy < R5 - Regional Government Analysis < R - Urban, Rural, and Regional Economics, O2 - Development Planning and Policy < O - Economic Development, Technological Change, and Growth
Keywords:	regions, relational and territorial approach to space

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

1  
2  
3 Conceptualizing the region – in what sense relational?  
4  
5  
6  
7

8 Krisztina Varró – Arnoud Lagendijk  
9

10 k.varro@fm.ru.nl  
11

12 a.lagendijk@ru.nl  
13

14 Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning  
15

16 Nijmegen School of Management  
17

18 Radboud University Nijmegen  
19

20 P.O. Box 9108  
21

22 NL-6500 HK Nijmegen  
23

24 The Netherlands  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 (Received March 2010; in revised form May 2011)  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## Conceptualizing the region – in what sense relational?

### Abstract

Recently, the question of how to conceptualize the region seems to have created a division in geographical scholarship between those propagating the primacy of a relational view on the one hand and those defending the relevance of a territorial view on the other. This paper argues that two main factors have impeded a fruitful discussion, to the extent that even some points of convergence have been neglected. First, the two strands have drawn, sometimes implicitly, on incommensurable philosophical assumptions. Second, scholars in favour of a relational view have at times made statements that do not fit well (some of) their philosophical sources of inspiration. The paper suggests that we readdress the task of conceptualization by following consistently a discourse-theoretical relational ontology.

“At the moment only philosophical confusion reigns supreme  
in much writing about place, space and region.”

(AGNEW, 1999, p. 93)

### Introduction

In the past decade, a relational perspective on regions seems to have become widely accepted in geographic scholarship. This growing acceptance has been undoubtedly due to perceptions of an increasingly mobile and globally interconnected world. On the other hand, ‘the relational turn’

1  
2  
3 has been a controversial one, with scholars taking divergent stances on ‘how far’ we should go in  
4  
5 thinking regions relationally, and on how we should conceptualize territories, which are still very  
6  
7 much part of our spatial realities. The above divergence of views became manifest in particular in  
8  
9 the writings of a group of UK-based scholars, centred largely on the issue of England’s (the  
10  
11 UK’s) ‘regional problem’, and the newly emerging structures of regional governance under the  
12  
13 post-1997 Labour governments. However, in spite of their limited spatial-temporal empirical  
14  
15 focus, the above writings have supplied theoretical-conceptual arguments that are relevant for  
16  
17 ‘regional thinking’ more generally. While our review of these various arguments necessarily  
18  
19 reproduces the narrow focus on ‘New’ Labour’s England (UK) to some extent, our aim is to  
20  
21 contribute to the broader academic debate on the conceptualization of ‘the region’, i.e. both  
22  
23 beyond the electoral defeat of Labour in 2010 and beyond the confines of England (the UK).  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 So what divergence of views is at issue – what has the ‘relational vs territorial debate’  
30  
31 been really about? We propose to discuss the debate as an exchange between two camps of  
32  
33 scholars. We will use the label ‘radicals’ to refer to the group of scholars that has – although  
34  
35 without explicitly identifying itself as a collective – advocated a perspective from which regions  
36  
37 are understood primarily in relational terms. The other group, that of the self-proclaimed  
38  
39 propagators of “moderate relationalism” (Jones, 2009, p. 1), will be referred to hereafter briefly  
40  
41 as the group of ‘moderates’. Moderates have persistently countered radicals’ emphasis on the  
42  
43 relationality of regions, arguing that radicals’ view tends to ignore actual regional  
44  
45 differences/particularities, and how/why these differences/particularities persist. In fact, however,  
46  
47 considering that radicals have not responded to moderate relationists’ repeated criticisms, we  
48  
49 cannot even speak of a real debate. Possibly, others share the authors’ puzzlement about what  
50  
51 radicals and moderates have really disagreed about, and how we can come to grips with the  
52  
53 conceptualization of the region. This paper is motivated by the authors’ conviction that if we are  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 to have a fruitful debate about the above, undoubtedly important task of conceptualization, then  
4  
5 we first of all need to reconsider the terms in which statements from both the radical and the  
6  
7 moderate camp have been formulated. Above all, we need more clarity about the *kind of relations*  
8  
9 that are said to be implicated in the construction of regions.  
10  
11

12  
13 Based on the careful re-reading of some of the key writings of radicals and moderates,  
14  
15 this paper wishes to argue that two main factors have acted against gaining greater clarity. First,  
16  
17 moderate and radical relationists have been inspired by different – and incommensurable – meta-  
18  
19 theoretical frameworks, namely (critical) realism on the one hand, and various strands of post-  
20  
21 structuralist thought on the other. With scholars often not making their meta-theoretical choices  
22  
23 explicit, it has been difficult, both for ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ of the ‘debate’, to appreciate the  
24  
25 arguments made. Second and importantly, the apprehension of various statements has become  
26  
27 further complicated by the fact that some scholars, in particular radicals, have not consistently  
28  
29 adhered to the assumptions of post-structuralist frameworks.  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 Although moderates’ fervent criticism of radicals might suggest otherwise, we argue that  
35  
36 on the whole, the gap between the two strands is actually much smaller than we might think at  
37  
38 first sight. Radicals and moderates have largely converged on emphasizing the inherently  
39  
40 constructed character of regions, and adherents of both strands have done so on the basis of a  
41  
42 shared concern with spatial justice. We conclude by arguing that in order to adequately address  
43  
44 the nexus between the construction of regional spaces and spatial justice, we should hold on more  
45  
46 consistently to a discourse-theoretical relational ontology.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Relational vs territorial: the contours of the 'debate'  
4  
5  
6  
7

8 The 'radical' versus 'moderate' 'debate' originates primarily in radical relationists' call to think  
9  
10 regions in relational terms. The above call is rooted in turn in radicals' concern with the 'regional  
11  
12 problem' of the UK, i.e. the persisting dominance of the South-East vis-à-vis the rest of the UK.  
13  
14 From the late 1990s on, radical scholars have claimed more and more ardently that one has to  
15  
16 think of the UK's geography in relational terms if one is to address the UK's regional problem  
17  
18 adequately (ALLEN et al., 1998; AMIN et al., 2003; MASSEY, 2001; 2007). Actually, Doreen  
19  
20 Massey, one of the leading figures of the radical group, argued already in 1979 that the lagging  
21  
22 behind of certain regions cannot be explained in terms of characteristics internal to those areas; as  
23  
24 she put it: "inequalities do not result from a simple absolute deficiency" (MASSEY, 1979, p. 57).  
25  
26 Accordingly, regional policy can only diminish spatial inequalities effectively if it is addressing  
27  
28 the relations through which these inequalities are produced. Massey's above remarks were part of  
29  
30 a broader effort of Marxist scholarship from the 1970s on to challenge the hegemonic positivist  
31  
32 'spatial science' that was inclined to assume an autonomous sphere of the spatial in which  
33  
34 'spatial relations' and 'spatial processes' produced spatial distributions. Marxist scholars stressed  
35  
36 that all these spatial relations and spatial processes were actually social relations taking a  
37  
38 particular geographical form. The aphorism of the seventies was then that 'space is a social  
39  
40 construct', meaning that space is constituted through social relations and material social  
41  
42 practices. Actually, as MASSEY (1992) notes, the above seemed soon an inadequate  
43  
44 characterization of the social/spatial relation. For although  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51

52  
53 "it is surely correct to argue that space is socially constructed, the one-sidedness  
54  
55 of that formulation implied that geographical forms and distributions were simply  
56  
57 outcomes, the end point of social explanation. Geographers would thus be the  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 cartographers of the social sciences, mapping the outcomes of processes which  
4 could only be explained in other disciplines—sociology, economics, and so forth.  
5  
6 [...] The events taking place all around us in the 1980s – the massive spatial  
7 restructuring both intra–nationally and internationally as an integral part of social  
8 and economic changes – made it plain that, in one way or another, ‘geography  
9 matters’. And so, to the aphorism of the 1970s – that space is socially constructed  
10 – was added in the 1980s the other side of the coin: that the social is spatially  
11 constructed too, and that it makes a difference” (MASSEY, 1992, p. 70).

12  
13 The above-mentioned, dialectical conceptualization of sociospatial relations, as well as the  
14 understanding of regional spatiality through plural spatial interconnections was carried forward  
15 by the seminal book of ALLEN, MASSEY and COCHRANE (1998) entitled *Rethinking the region*.  
16  
17 The above authors’ drive to challenge the thinking of regions in terms of self-enclosed entities  
18 was rooted in the authors’ deep-going discontent with the (un)treatment of the regional problem  
19 under Thatcherism. In particular, ALLEN et al.’s (1998) main message was that the celebration of  
20 the South East by the neoliberal right as a region that – in contrast to the North – had successfully  
21 adapted to the requirements of global market forces is based on a fundamentally wrong view of  
22 sociospatial relations. Echoing MASSEY’s (1979) above-mentioned point that lagging regions’  
23 position does not result from those regions’ absolute deficiency, ALLEN et al. (1998) stressed that  
24 the South East “in itself” does not possess any potential that explains its success. Rather,

25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65  
66  
67  
68  
69  
70  
71  
72  
73  
74  
75  
76  
77  
78  
79  
80  
81  
82  
83  
84  
85  
86  
87  
88  
89  
90  
91  
92  
93  
94  
95  
96  
97  
98  
99  
100  
101  
102  
103  
104  
105  
106  
107  
108  
109  
110  
111  
112  
113  
114  
115  
116  
117  
118  
119  
120  
121  
122  
123  
124  
125  
126  
127  
128  
129  
130  
131  
132  
133  
134  
135  
136  
137  
138  
139  
140  
141  
142  
143  
144  
145  
146  
147  
148  
149  
150  
151  
152  
153  
154  
155  
156  
157  
158  
159  
160  
161  
162  
163  
164  
165  
166  
167  
168  
169  
170  
171  
172  
173  
174  
175  
176  
177  
178  
179  
180  
181  
182  
183  
184  
185  
186  
187  
188  
189  
190  
191  
192  
193  
194  
195  
196  
197  
198  
199  
200  
201  
202  
203  
204  
205  
206  
207  
208  
209  
210  
211  
212  
213  
214  
215  
216  
217  
218  
219  
220  
221  
222  
223  
224  
225  
226  
227  
228  
229  
230  
231  
232  
233  
234  
235  
236  
237  
238  
239  
240  
241  
242  
243  
244  
245  
246  
247  
248  
249  
250  
251  
252  
253  
254  
255  
256  
257  
258  
259  
260  
261  
262  
263  
264  
265  
266  
267  
268  
269  
270  
271  
272  
273  
274  
275  
276  
277  
278  
279  
280  
281  
282  
283  
284  
285  
286  
287  
288  
289  
290  
291  
292  
293  
294  
295  
296  
297  
298  
299  
300  
301  
302  
303  
304  
305  
306  
307  
308  
309  
310  
311  
312  
313  
314  
315  
316  
317  
318  
319  
320  
321  
322  
323  
324  
325  
326  
327  
328  
329  
330  
331  
332  
333  
334  
335  
336  
337  
338  
339  
340  
341  
342  
343  
344  
345  
346  
347  
348  
349  
350  
351  
352  
353  
354  
355  
356  
357  
358  
359  
360  
361  
362  
363  
364  
365  
366  
367  
368  
369  
370  
371  
372  
373  
374  
375  
376  
377  
378  
379  
380  
381  
382  
383  
384  
385  
386  
387  
388  
389  
390  
391  
392  
393  
394  
395  
396  
397  
398  
399  
400  
401  
402  
403  
404  
405  
406  
407  
408  
409  
410  
411  
412  
413  
414  
415  
416  
417  
418  
419  
420  
421  
422  
423  
424  
425  
426  
427  
428  
429  
430  
431  
432  
433  
434  
435  
436  
437  
438  
439  
440  
441  
442  
443  
444  
445  
446  
447  
448  
449  
450  
451  
452  
453  
454  
455  
456  
457  
458  
459  
460  
461  
462  
463  
464  
465  
466  
467  
468  
469  
470  
471  
472  
473  
474  
475  
476  
477  
478  
479  
480  
481  
482  
483  
484  
485  
486  
487  
488  
489  
490  
491  
492  
493  
494  
495  
496  
497  
498  
499  
500  
501  
502  
503  
504  
505  
506  
507  
508  
509  
510  
511  
512  
513  
514  
515  
516  
517  
518  
519  
520  
521  
522  
523  
524  
525  
526  
527  
528  
529  
530  
531  
532  
533  
534  
535  
536  
537  
538  
539  
540  
541  
542  
543  
544  
545  
546  
547  
548  
549  
550  
551  
552  
553  
554  
555  
556  
557  
558  
559  
560  
561  
562  
563  
564  
565  
566  
567  
568  
569  
570  
571  
572  
573  
574  
575  
576  
577  
578  
579  
580  
581  
582  
583  
584  
585  
586  
587  
588  
589  
590  
591  
592  
593  
594  
595  
596  
597  
598  
599  
600  
601  
602  
603  
604  
605  
606  
607  
608  
609  
610  
611  
612  
613  
614  
615  
616  
617  
618  
619  
620  
621  
622  
623  
624  
625  
626  
627  
628  
629  
630  
631  
632  
633  
634  
635  
636  
637  
638  
639  
640  
641  
642  
643  
644  
645  
646  
647  
648  
649  
650  
651  
652  
653  
654  
655  
656  
657  
658  
659  
660  
661  
662  
663  
664  
665  
666  
667  
668  
669  
670  
671  
672  
673  
674  
675  
676  
677  
678  
679  
680  
681  
682  
683  
684  
685  
686  
687  
688  
689  
690  
691  
692  
693  
694  
695  
696  
697  
698  
699  
700  
701  
702  
703  
704  
705  
706  
707  
708  
709  
710  
711  
712  
713  
714  
715  
716  
717  
718  
719  
720  
721  
722  
723  
724  
725  
726  
727  
728  
729  
730  
731  
732  
733  
734  
735  
736  
737  
738  
739  
740  
741  
742  
743  
744  
745  
746  
747  
748  
749  
750  
751  
752  
753  
754  
755  
756  
757  
758  
759  
760  
761  
762  
763  
764  
765  
766  
767  
768  
769  
770  
771  
772  
773  
774  
775  
776  
777  
778  
779  
780  
781  
782  
783  
784  
785  
786  
787  
788  
789  
790  
791  
792  
793  
794  
795  
796  
797  
798  
799  
800  
801  
802  
803  
804  
805  
806  
807  
808  
809  
810  
811  
812  
813  
814  
815  
816  
817  
818  
819  
820  
821  
822  
823  
824  
825  
826  
827  
828  
829  
830  
831  
832  
833  
834  
835  
836  
837  
838  
839  
840  
841  
842  
843  
844  
845  
846  
847  
848  
849  
850  
851  
852  
853  
854  
855  
856  
857  
858  
859  
860  
861  
862  
863  
864  
865  
866  
867  
868  
869  
870  
871  
872  
873  
874  
875  
876  
877  
878  
879  
880  
881  
882  
883  
884  
885  
886  
887  
888  
889  
890  
891  
892  
893  
894  
895  
896  
897  
898  
899  
900  
901  
902  
903  
904  
905  
906  
907  
908  
909  
910  
911  
912  
913  
914  
915  
916  
917  
918  
919  
920  
921  
922  
923  
924  
925  
926  
927  
928  
929  
930  
931  
932  
933  
934  
935  
936  
937  
938  
939  
940  
941  
942  
943  
944  
945  
946  
947  
948  
949  
950  
951  
952  
953  
954  
955  
956  
957  
958  
959  
960  
961  
962  
963  
964  
965  
966  
967  
968  
969  
970  
971  
972  
973  
974  
975  
976  
977  
978  
979  
980  
981  
982  
983  
984  
985  
986  
987  
988  
989  
990  
991  
992  
993  
994  
995  
996  
997  
998  
999  
1000

“[t]he form of growth which took place in the south east was fundamentally influenced by state intervention and emergent forms of regulation, even if they sometimes appeared in the guise of ‘deregulation’. State policy has been fundamental to the construction of the south east as ‘growth region’” (ALLEN, MASSEY and COCHRANE, 1998, p. 125).



1  
2  
3 Accordingly, ALLEN et al. (1998) proposed that we rethink the growth of the South East – and  
4  
5 regions more generally – as existing in mutually constitutive interrelations with other regions. In  
6  
7 line with this proposition, the above-mentioned authors argued that they did not draw precise  
8  
9 boundaries to delimit their object of research (i.e. the South East), because  
10  
11

12 “[o]nce drawn, such lines of containment convey the impression that all the social  
13  
14 relations relevant to an understanding of growth in the region fall neatly within  
15  
16 the boundaries. The result, effectively, is to empty the region of meaning and to  
17  
18 fix its changing geography” (ALLEN, MASSEY and COCHRANE, 1998, p. ix).  
19  
20

21  
22 Ironically, following the 1997 defeat of Conservatives, which was interpreted by the above  
23  
24 scholars as resulting from the public discontent with the growth-oriented policies favouring the  
25  
26 South East, soon it proved that making a case for relational spatial thinking is still timely. In fact,  
27  
28 New Labour’s evolving, territorially framed apparatus of spatial interventions made protagonists  
29  
30 of relational thinking increasingly “fed up” (see MASSEY, 2001) and reassert their point about the  
31  
32 inherent relationality of regions and places. Actually, it was as a response to this reasserted  
33  
34 position that the stance of moderate relationists began to take shape. To turn back to Labour’s  
35  
36 spatial policies, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to give an extensive overview of the  
37  
38 above-mentioned spatial interventions that targeted most notably the scale of neighbourhoods and  
39  
40 (standard) regions. Briefly, considering the first, community-focused policy initiatives of  
41  
42 neighbourhood renewal became considered central to tackling micro-scale territorial disparities.  
43  
44 As analysts have noted, under New Labour, ‘communities of place’ became not only *a priori*  
45  
46 assumed to exist, but they have been given an ontological status as agents of (local) governance  
47  
48 (RACO, 2003), expected to be mobilized, shaped and activated in the pursuit of the broader  
49  
50 agenda of efficient service delivery (COCHRANE, 2003; IMRIE and RACO, 2003). Importantly,  
51  
52 under New Labour, a container-view of socio-economic processes – or as AMIN aptly put it, the  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 “repackaging of the economy and society as a series of territorial entities” (AMIN, 2005, p. 614)  
4  
5 was characteristic not only of interventions at the neighbourhood level. Regions became  
6  
7 imagined also as  
8  
9

10 “a jurisdiction beyond which the actors have no real business or influence, and as  
11  
12 a political community that, through mechanisms of deliberation, partnership, and  
13  
14 shared interest, knows what is best for the locality and can deliver solutions that  
15  
16 work for the common good” (AMIN, 2005, p. 618).  
17  
18

19  
20 Scholars propagating a view on space as produced through interrelations have strongly criticized  
21  
22 the shaping ‘local boosterism’ under New Labour. As the ‘radical’ scholars in question stressed,  
23  
24 it is not devolution to various sub-national scales per se that they oppose. Rather, they  
25  
26 disapproved the apparent assumption underlying new regional and urban policies according to  
27  
28 which  
29  
30

31 “there is a defined geographical territory out there over which local actors can  
32  
33 have effective control and can manage as a social and political space” (AMIN,  
34  
35 2004, p. 36).  
36  
37

38  
39 As Amin argued, the public sphere is trans-territorial by its very definition, for  
40

41 “[a]ny particular geographical site can only ever be a nodal connection in a  
42  
43 hydra-like network space that never coheres into a local public sphere” (ibid, p.  
44  
45 38).  
46  
47

48  
49 According to radical relationists, the above, relational reading of places and regions should make  
50  
51 us rethink the way we understand local (regional) democratic politics. The framework of the  
52  
53 *relational politics of place* propagated by radicals has built on the acknowledgement that  
54  
55 spatialities of connectivity and transitivity constitute the local (regional). Accordingly,  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 democratic local (regional) politics should not be seen as based on a territorially given, regional  
4  
5 'inside'; rather, the regional 'inside' has to be negotiated through public debate (AMIN, 2004).  
6  
7

8 With leaving the regional 'insides', on the basis of which devolution is (was) to unfold,  
9  
10 unquestioned, the Labour government's regionalization agenda has been regarded by radical  
11  
12 relationists as offering only an imitative model of democracy (ibid.). In particular, scholars have  
13  
14 dismissingly pointed out that Labour's devolution agenda (in particular for England) had failed to  
15  
16 engage with the power dynamics that underlie the UK's London-biased geography: a dynamics  
17  
18 that continue to return London and the South East as the centre of the nation (AMIN, MASSEY and  
19  
20 THRIFT, 2003). Instead of the misleading celebration of self-reliant regions that actually remain  
21  
22 entangled in centrally orchestrated policy frameworks, radicals have called for a more radical  
23  
24 revision of the UK's territorial management. Summarizing their arguments in the pamphlet  
25  
26 entitled *Decentering the Nation: A Radical Approach to Regional Inequality*, radicals have asked  
27  
28 more specifically – and evoking traditional, i.e. Keynesian regional policy measures – for a  
29  
30 dispersal of state investments, including public sector institutions.  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 As to moderate relationists, they have expressed their sympathy with especially the way  
37  
38 radicals have challenged the asymmetrical power geometries that continue to shape devolution  
39  
40 arrangements (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004). Also, moderates have welcomed radicals' relational  
41  
42 reading of regions as opening up "innovative ways of conceptualizing contemporary economic  
43  
44 and political spatialities" (ibid., p. 448). At the same time, however, moderates have stressed  
45  
46 repeatedly that we should remain aware of the persisting relevance of the territorial dimension of  
47  
48 sociospatial processes. In the words of Jones: "regions are made through *the territorial*  
49  
50 *specificities of social struggle* between political society and civil society, which involves several  
51  
52 integrated components" (JONES, 2004, p. 163, emphasis original). In similar vein, JONES and  
53  
54 MACLEOD (2004, p. 437), refer to the example of Cornwall's struggle for regional autonomy to  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 support a claim that “many everyday *realpolitik* acts of regionalization and/or regionalism”  
4  
5 continue to be framed in territorial terms”.

6  
7  
8 In fact, moderates have regarded regional territories as key manifestations of the  
9  
10 institutionalization of regions, where ‘institutionalization’ is understood, following Paasi’s  
11  
12 seminal work, as the process in which regions acquire a “status in the spatial structure and the  
13  
14 social consciousness of society” (PAASI, 1991, p. 246). For moderates, clinging to a territorial  
15  
16 perspective has been a way of acknowledging the “spatial relations of permanence” (JONES,  
17  
18 2009, p. 8); in other words, a way of remaining aware of the solidified ways of thinking and  
19  
20 acting in “regional terms”. On the whole, moderates have argued in favour of a combination of  
21  
22 territorial and relational readings. As HUDSON (2007) put it, we should not regard the relational  
23  
24 and the (hierarchically scalar) territorial as either/or conceptions, but as both/and conceptions.  
25  
26 ‘Territorially embedded’ and ‘relational and unbounded’ conceptions of regions are  
27  
28 complementary alternatives, and actually existing regions are a product of a struggle and tension  
29  
30 between territorializing and de-territorializing processes. Consequently, for moderates, the main  
31  
32 task is to elaborate  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 “a conceptual middle road between space as territorial anchorage and fixity and  
39  
40 conceptions of space as topological, fluid and relationally mobile” (JONES, 2009,  
41  
42 p. 10, emphasis original).  
43  
44

45  
46 We agree with moderates’ stress concerning the persisting importance of the territorial dimension  
47  
48 of spatiality. But have radicals ever stated the opposite? Have radicals, as JONES (2009) claims,  
49  
50 discarded the territorial view because they are uncomfortable with acknowledging “the spatial  
51  
52 relations of permanence”? Have territories, as Paasi contended, been “like a red rag to a bull for  
53  
54 many relationalists” (PAASI, 2008, p. 406)? We would like to argue that radicals are incorrectly  
55  
56 accused of the neglect of territorial structures. These incorrect accusations are in turn, so we  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 further suggest, at least partly due to the inattentive reading of radical accounts by moderates. To  
4  
5 begin with, MASSEY seems to echo moderates' call for a combined territorial-relational approach  
6  
7 when she argues in favour of a "territorially grounded politics that is responsive to relational  
8  
9 space" (MASSEY, 2007, p. 156). Furthermore, while the South East and London often figure  
10  
11 central to their writings, scholars ascribing to the radical agenda do emphasize that their  
12  
13 arguments are not specifically about these territories. As AMIN (2004, p. 34) puts it, London is  
14  
15 not any more relationally constituted than any other place. Allen and Cochrane similarly  
16  
17 underline that they did not argue "that the South East of England was simply 'unbounded', but  
18  
19 that it, indeed any region, is made and remade by political processes that stretch beyond it and  
20  
21 impact unevenly" (ALLEN and COCHRANE, 2007, p. 1172). In spite of the above explicit remarks,  
22  
23 a recurring comment from the moderate side is that given its long-standing involvement in  
24  
25 international networks, London/the South East is a very specific English region, and as such an  
26  
27 inappropriate base for generalization (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004; JONES, 2009).

28  
29 However, it is not only the inattentiveness of moderates that can be blamed for making  
30  
31 the standpoints of the two camps appear as irreconcilable. The seeming disagreement concerning  
32  
33 the question "What kind of a region is London?" (or: "Is London a more relational kind of a  
34  
35 region than others?") is a good entry point to discuss those philosophical divergences that  
36  
37 prevents moderates from appreciating the actual message of radicals. This is the issue the next  
38  
39 section explores in more detail.

40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51 The different "faces" of relationality

52  
53  
54  
55 Mapping the underlying philosophical assumptions of the radical and moderate standpoints is not  
56  
57 a straightforward task, as proponents of both stances have made only few if any explicit  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 statements that would help position them philosophically. Nonetheless, based on the sporadic  
4  
5 explicit comments that they have made, and their general line of argumentation, we can sketch  
6  
7 the positions in question.  
8  
9

10 As to moderates, they have tended to adhere to (critical) realism. Two quotes from Jones,  
11  
12 one of the most prominent representatives of moderates, are illustrative here. According to Jones,  
13

14 “[f]or *realist relationists* [such as moderates], true statements about space are  
15  
16 made true by *facts about material bodies* and the way they related, which can  
17  
18 involve detailed and diverse empirical observations and abstractions from reality”  
19

20 (JONES, 2009, p. 10, emphasis original).  
21  
22

23  
24 Furthermore, Jones emphasizes that “[a]ll things [relations] considered potential does not  
25  
26 necessarily become an actual” (JONES, 2009, p. 7) and that, consequently, it is crucial to attend to  
27  
28 those “forces that restrict, constrain, contain, and connect the mobility of relational things”  
29  
30 (JONES, 2009, p. 10). Or, using the conceptual vocabulary of critical realism, we should  
31  
32 “distinguish between necessary and contingent [empirically observable] spatial relations” (ibid.,  
33  
34 p. 9). More concretely, moderates caution that the empirical observation concerning the rising  
35  
36 prominence of networks of flows in times of globalization should not lead us to think that all  
37  
38 regions (spaces) can be thought of in relational terms. Actually, moderates argue that radicals, by  
39  
40 focusing predominantly on a global city such as London, make the mistake of drawing this false  
41  
42 conclusion. False because London/the South East is “a very specific English region [...] given  
43  
44 its long-established networks into the internationalizing economy” (MACLEOD and JONES 2004,  
45  
46 p. 437). By developing their relational perspective on the basis of the example of London/the  
47  
48 South East, radicals run the risk of “translating uniqueness into one-region-tells-all-scenarios”  
49  
50 (JONES, 2009, p. 7).  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 We would like to argue that this accusation of radicals is unjust and stems from an undue  
4 acknowledgement of radicals' philosophical sources of inspiration. Radicals have conceptualized  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

We would like to argue that this accusation of radicals is unjust and stems from an undue acknowledgement of radicals' philosophical sources of inspiration. Radicals have conceptualized relationality by drawing on various lines of post-structuralist thought, most notably actor-network theory (ANT) and discourse theory. Before we consider how these lines of thought have entered the arguments of radicals, let us briefly discuss their central assumptions. As to ANT, it is a relational and process-oriented sociology that treats agents, organisations and devices as interactive effects, i.e. as an effect of stable arrays or networks of relations (LAW, 2002; 2003). As to discourse theory, it can be seen as a framework of inquiry starting out from the assumption that meaning in the social world depends on contingently constructed rules and differences (see e.g. TORFING, 1999, 2005). What is particularly relevant in view of the argument of this paper is that – in contrast to (critical) realism – the fundamental concern of ANT and discourse theory is not to make true statements about material reality in the vein of “What kinds of objects and relations are there?”. Importantly, in spite of recurrent affirmations of the opposite by critics, this lack of concern does not imply the denial of materially existing objective relations. Actor-network theory and discourse theory is, however, interested in ‘*how what is is*’ (see ELDEN, 2005). ANT’s and discourse theory’s concern lies namely not with the concrete relations between people or entities that are implicated in (re)constructing particular objects (including spaces). Rather, their focus is on the *existential preconditions* that make the existence of objects possible or effective (see e.g. GLYNOS and HOWARTH, 2007). Thus, contrary to common misinterpretations, ANT “has very little to do with the study of social networks” (LATOUR, 1997) in the narrow sense of studying actual relations between (‘given’) human actors. Instead, by advancing that objects are network effects enacted by humans *and* non-human materials, ANT wishes to stress that the latter materials, as mediators, have a crucial role in constituting sociospatial order. Within the framework of discourse theory in turn, the primary understanding

1  
2  
3 of relationality is rooted in Saussurean linguistics, in particular in the assumption that the  
4 meaning of signs lies in their systematic relation to each other. Accordingly, from a discourse-  
5 theoretical perspective, objects come into existence as they become meaningful through relational  
6 systems of signifying discursive practices (see e.g. TORFING, 1999). Clearly, the two perspectives  
7 allow for different conceptualizations of ‘the region’: from an ANT perspective, any region is an  
8 interactive effect of humans and non-human materials; from a discourse-theoretical standpoint,  
9 any region’s significance is constituted by the articulation (and institutionalization) of a range of  
10 differential meanings. However, it is rather evident that both from ANT’s and discourse theory’s  
11 perspective, not only is every region ‘relational’, but no region is ‘more’ relational than any other  
12 region; London/the South East is thus *just as (relational as) any other region*.  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26

27 But why asserting the ‘relational sameness’ of regions, which are on the other hand so  
28 obviously different? And, accepting that regions can be seen as interactive effects of human and  
29 non-human materials, or as articulations of differential meanings, which mechanisms shape and  
30 structure those interactions and articulations? Furthermore, if the heterogeneous networks and the  
31 web of differential meanings that constitute regions are principally fluid and never-ending, then  
32 how can we come to terms with the boundaries that unquestionably delimit regional territories?  
33 Re-reading moderate scholars’ accounts, it seems that it is these interrogations that underlie their  
34 dismissive comments on radicals’ views. According to MACLEOD and JONES (2007, p. 1186), “a  
35 network-topological perspective is less adept at locating the asymmetrical geometries of power”,  
36 and we should recognize that in many cases, territorially bounded spaces are spaces of  
37 dependence for various actors. JONES (2009) elsewhere speaks of the risks of spatial voluntarism  
38 and stresses repeatedly the importance of power relations.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54

55 As noted above, however, drawing on actor-network theory or discourse theory does not  
56 imply that one denies materially existing relations, thus the fact social reality is shaped by power,  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 and is characterized by fixity. On the contrary, Law emphasizes that the objective of ANT is  
4 exactly to characterize the above interactive networks in their heterogeneity, and “explore how it  
5 is that they come to be patterned to generate effects like organisations, inequality and power”  
6 (LAW, 2003, p. 3). Discourse theorists recognize that “the world around us appears for the most  
7 part to be rather decided and unambiguous” (TORFING, 1999, pp. 64–65). In other words,  
8 meanings – of what and where a region is – seem to be rather fixed than floating, and discourse  
9 theory’s key concern is to show how power works through limiting the potentially endless re-  
10 articulations of meaning.  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21

22 An ANT or a discourse-theoretical perspective is particularly apt for stressing that no  
23 matter how solid (‘fixed’) and unquestioned power relations and structures seem to be,  
24 fundamentally (i.e. ontologically) they are always unstable. The emphasis on ‘flat’ ontological  
25 relationality and on the ultimate instability of structures is of crucial importance here. Ascribing  
26 to a flat ontology does not entail ascribing to an ‘empty ontology’ (JONES, 2009). Rather, it is a  
27 way of making sure that one avoids the trap of essentialism, i.e. the assumption that patterns of  
28 actual – definitely ‘non-flat’ – relational interdependencies and power geometries are preordained  
29 through some transcendental logics. Furthermore, the ultimate precariousness of object-  
30 constituting relations is seen by discourse theorists as a condition of being able to conceive of  
31 social change. From a discourse-theoretical point of view, meanings might be, and indeed are,  
32 fixed durably, but without assuming that they are inherently unstable, we would exclude the  
33 possibility of politics, and ultimately, suppress the room for social change. In line with the view  
34 that we need to conceive of meaning as inherently unfixed for politics to be possible, LACLAU  
35 and MOUFFE (2001[1985]) reject the (normative) idea that diverging social demands could be  
36 reconciled for good on the basis on rational consensus. Rather, they assert that without conflict  
37 and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible (ibid., p. xvii). Mouffe  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 elsewhere further emphasises that we should acknowledge that the very condition of possibility  
4 of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a  
5 society from which antagonism has been eliminated (MOUFFE, 2005). According to Mouffe, we  
6 should not take policy ambitions concerning more cohesion in terms of development at face  
7 value, but work towards an agonistic democracy that recognizes the inevitability of conflict in  
8 political life, and the impossibility of identifying rational decision-making procedures. In her own  
9 words: “[f]ar from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is the very condition of its  
10 existence” (MOUFFE, 2005, pp. 29-30). So, discourse theory is especially helpful for underlining  
11 that the construction of regional particularities is of an inherently *political* nature – this is also  
12 why we will argue that it serves as a good basis for readdressing the conceptualization of ‘the  
13 region’. Before we develop this argument, however, let us now briefly reconsider how the above  
14 assumptions of ANT and discourse theory have become incorporated in radicals’ standpoint.  
15 According to MURDOCH (1998), by stating that “each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of  
16 wider and more local relations”, MASSEY (1991) is already echoing actor-network theorists.  
17 MASSEY (2004, p. 8) herself refers to Latour by saying that

18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
“[i]f space is really to be thought relationally, and also if Latour’s proposition is to  
be taken seriously, then ‘global space’ is no more than the sum of relations,  
connections, embodiments and practices”.

Similarly, AMIN (2004) has also drawn on ANT’s insights in order to underpin his view that in  
current times of globalization, whatever we see as local economic activity is always part of, and  
inseparable from, proximate and distanced transactions; ultimately, it is a product of varied  
spatial practices.

As to inspiration by discourse theory, Massey, for example, connects her view of the  
‘continuous becoming of space’ with the discourse theory of Laclau, in particular discourse

1  
2  
3 theory's assumption that we can engage in any serious notion of politics if we conceive the future  
4  
5 as open. Accordingly, for Massey, space is  
6

7  
8 "neither a container for always-already constituted identities nor a completed  
9  
10 closure of holism. ...*For* the future to be open, space must be open too" (MASSEY,  
11  
12 2005, pp. 11–12, emphasis original).  
13

14  
15 Amin's statement that there is no "defined geographical territory out there over which local actor  
16  
17 can have effective control and can manage as social and political space" (AMIN 2004, p. 36) is  
18  
19 also expressive of the point that territorial boundaries as social structures are always incomplete.  
20  
21 It is thus not, as critics (e.g. JONES, 2009) mistakenly have tended to interpret it, signalling a  
22  
23 neglect of the *actual* "givenness" of territorially defined regulatory frameworks, strategies of  
24  
25 intervention or identity narratives. Rather, it wishes to underline that such frameworks, strategies  
26  
27 and narratives, no matter how well-entrenched and of benevolent appeal, embody particular  
28  
29 claims of inclusion and exclusion that are and should remain open to contestation. ALLEN,  
30  
31 MASSEY and COCHRANE (1998, p. 54) explicitly note that what they mean is not  
32  
33

34  
35 "that there are no lines or boundaries in social space. But – like all the other  
36  
37 relations which together form social space – they are social constructions, put there  
38  
39 for specific purposes and within particular sets of power relations; they are in  
40  
41 principle contested, and they may be used in the course of social contests".  
42  
43  
44

45  
46 Furthermore,

47  
48 "[t]his is not to say that such boundaries will never adequately define a region, nor  
49  
50 that they can be assumed not to be important; rather it is merely to stress that they  
51  
52 should never be taken unquestioningly as adequate definitions" (ibid., p. 137).  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Ultimately – and seemingly aligning with the insights of discourse theory – radicals emphasize the inherent openness of spaces in order to uphold the possibility of questioning any (institutionalized) claim concerning regional unity and coherence. In view of radicals’ ambition to “shake up the manner in which certain political questions are formulated” (MASSEY, 2005., p. 9), the degree to which one interprets cities or regions as territorial and scalar or topological and networked is definitely *not* “a matter to be resolved ex post and empirically rather than a priori and theoretically” (MACLEOD and JONES, 2007, p. 1186; see also HUDSON, cited by JONES and MACLEOD, 2004, p. 448). For if we are to remain alert to the ways cities and regions embody actual spaces of exclusion, then we always have to start out from the (ontological) relationality of all – territorial, scalar and networked – spaces. In other words, if we assume that those excluded can effectively challenge established ways of regional thinking, than we necessarily have to assume also that regions are constituted in a field of claims and counterclaims, i.e. in a field of agonistic engagement (AMIN, 2004). We should thus beware of taking the region “as a practical and ‘prescientific’ bounded territorial space that has ... become ‘identified’ as such a discrete territory in the spheres of economics, politics and culture” (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004, p. 437). Boundedness as a real feature of spatiality namely might pre-exist scientific analysis, but critical scholarship should be focused exactly on the power relations that make it (appear) not only real, but also natural (cf. PAINTER, 2008).

Actually, the open and contested character of regions as social constructs has been also repeatedly stressed by those supporting a moderate viewpoint concerning relationality. Paasi, for example, argued that regions are not independent actors, but “exist and ‘become’ in social practice and discourse” (PAASI, 2001, p. 16). Furthermore, Paasi stressed that the boundaries, symbols and institutions of regions “are not results of autonomous and evolutionary processes, but expressions of a perpetual struggle over the meanings associated with space, representation,

1  
2  
3 democracy and welfare” (PAASI, 2002, p. 805). In fact, moderate accounts have commonly  
4  
5 asserted the ‘becoming’ of regions, and that political struggles are inherently implicated in the  
6  
7 construction of regions (e.g. HUDSON, 2007; JONES and MACLEOD, 2004; MACLEOD and JONES,  
8  
9 2007). Also, HUDSON (2005) seems to echo the above-mentioned point made by Amin  
10  
11 concerning local (regional) politics as a field of agonistic engagement when he notes that we  
12  
13 should rethink regions as the products of agonistic politics.  
14  
15

16  
17 A further parallel that we can observe between radical and moderate accounts is that the  
18  
19 latter have, just as the former, been critical of the territorial framing of spatial interventions of  
20  
21 the post-1997 Labour governments. JONES (2004b), for example, seems also dismissive of  
22  
23 England’s new regionalism, where Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have appeared as  
24  
25 institutional sites through which national state power, defined as the ability to exercise  
26  
27 intervention through a *territorial* programme of action (the regionalist project), can be realized  
28  
29 (JONES, 2004b, p. 195, emphasis original). As JONES (ibid.) notes, Regional Development  
30  
31 Agencies have become designated as ‘territorial managers’ of change, promoting an  
32  
33 associationalist form of coherence at the regional scale. HUDSON’s (2005) account is also  
34  
35 evocative of radicals’ writings at several points. According to Hudson, perhaps the most  
36  
37 important task is to rethink the region  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

43 “to escape the limitations of the myth of a unified (and unifying) regional interest  
44  
45 and explicitly acknowledge the existence of different – and at times openly  
46  
47 competitive, grounded in different class structural positions and other sources of  
48  
49 social power – interests held by individuals and social groups living in the same  
50  
51 space” (HUDSON, 2005, p. 624).  
52  
53  
54

55 Arguably thus, radicals and moderates have largely converged on emphasizing the inherently  
56  
57 constructed character of regions. However, they arrive at this principally shared standpoint from  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 divergent philosophical assumptions, and this is arguably a key source of still persisting  
4 disagreements or, rather, misunderstandings. As noted above, (critical) realism on the one hand  
5 and strands of post-structuralist thought on the other are motivated by fundamentally different  
6 inquiries. In connection with that, the above perspectives not only take a different ontological  
7 perspective, but embody a fundamentally different – and irreconcilable – view of what ontology  
8 *is*. While for (critical) realists, ontology refers to the independently existing world, for post-  
9 structuralists ontology is the plane for the relational constitution of the existence of any object  
10 (space). In view of this elementary difference, it becomes finally understandable why moderates  
11 could not apprehend radicals' insistence on seeing relationality as a fundamental dimension of  
12 spatiality. At the same time, we would like to argue that the incommensurability of philosophical  
13 inspirational sources has not been the sole reason for the moderate-radical disagreement  
14 (misunderstanding). While drawing on post-structuralist frameworks, radical relationists have  
15 namely not always consistently adhered to the assumptions of the above frameworks. Our point  
16 here is not that piecemeal borrowing is illegitimate. Neither of the two camps forms a  
17 homogenous whole, and scholars 'belonging' to either camp have developed their own  
18 frameworks by drawing on a wide range of intellectual sources. However, even though all  
19 theoretical frameworks are born through a combination of perspectives, we believe it is crucial  
20 that any such combination is ontologically and epistemologically consistent. Only this way can  
21 we overcome the "philosophical confusion" observed by AGNEW (1999, p. 93). As to the  
22 inconsistent line of radicals' arguments, we regard it as the second obstacle to clarity in the  
23 moderate vs radical 'debate' and examine it in more detail in the next section.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Towards a 'truly' relational ontology  
4  
5  
6  
7

8 As we discussed above, radical relationalists have argued that we should regard all spaces as  
9 relationally constituted. Insights of various strands of post-structuralist thought, in particular  
10 actor-network theory and discourse theory, have been key – and explicitly mentioned – sources of  
11 inspiration for the claims of radicals. At closer look, however, we find that radicals' accounts do  
12 not build firmly on the main assumption underlying the above strands of thought, notably that  
13 relationality is first and foremost an ontological concept, capturing the fundamental condition of  
14 being of any object. Instead, radicals have tended to see relationality (also) in terms of actual  
15 relations – and have thus, rather absurdly, paralleled moderates' view. AMIN (2002), for example,  
16 refers explicitly to ANT but argues in the same article that “the very ontology of place and  
17 territoriality itself is altered by the rise of world-scale processes and transnational connectivity”  
18 (AMIN, 2002, p. 387). However, from the perspective of both ANT and discourse theory, the  
19 ontology of place and territoriality has *not* changed with the proliferation of actual relationships  
20 and with the increase in observable interdependencies. Possibly, the formation of ANT and  
21 discourse theory as conceptual-theoretical frameworks can be linked to the growing awareness of  
22 the above-mentioned relationships and interdependencies. However, following both strands,  
23 relationality *has been always-already* constitutive of objects.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

45  
46 Similarly, radicals actually do not seem to ascribe to discourse theory's ontological  
47 understanding of 'difference', and the view that the existence of all objects depends on  
48 contingently constructed differences. For Massey, for example, the term difference designates  
49 *actual* difference, and figures as a synonym for heterogeneity/multiplicity/plurality. The  
50 emphasis on what she calls 'positive multiplicity' is important for Massey in order to do away  
51 with the Western/Northern-biased perspective in defining what  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 development/progress/modernization is. The above perspective implies namely that places are not  
4 genuinely different, but simply 'behind' or 'advanced' within the same story of progress.  
5  
6 MASSEY (1999) wishes to challenge this powerful imaginary geography that according to her  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

development/progress/modernization is. The above perspective implies namely that places are not genuinely different, but simply 'behind' or 'advanced' within the same story of progress. MASSEY (1999) wishes to challenge this powerful imaginary geography that according to her obliterates, among others, the 'real differences' between the global South and the global North. As she says, "a fuller recognition of difference would entertain the possibility of the existence of a multiplicity of trajectories" (MASSEY, 1999, p. 271).

In connection with Massey's arguments in favour of a fuller recognition of 'real difference', the question arises why there cannot be multiple regional trajectories, corresponding to real regional differences *within* nation state territories? Why should we acknowledge macro-regional differences above the national scale, and assume the possibility of a more coherent trajectory for the development of national territories, overwriting local/regional differences? A possible answer can be traced in a more recent book of Massey entitled *World City* in which Massey notes that

"The biggest interests of ordinary people, in both London and 'the regions', are in common. Neither regional inequality nor poverty within London/the South east will be seriously addressed without a shift in the national model of economic growth" (MASSEY, 2007, p. 155).

In line with that, she holds a politics of place desirable that recognizes "the commonality of interests in spite of the very different geographical positioning within the wider geographies" (p. 156). Again, there is a striking parallel between moderates arguing that under certain circumstances the region can be taken as a practical and 'prescientific bounded territorial space', (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004) and radicals who seem to take national territories as a given object of analysis.

To be sure, MASSEY (2001) acknowledges that the isomorphism between space and society embodied in the nation-state has been an outcome of, and a support for, particular forms



1  
2  
3 of power and politics. Also, she is well aware of the fact that relations constituting spaces stretch  
4  
5 over national boundaries (MASSEY, 2007). But can we assume the commonality of interests  
6  
7 within a nation? What about those – by MASSEY (2007) much-criticized – claims of policy-  
8  
9 makers that assert the necessity of privileged state support for London and the South East by  
10  
11 arguing that this also serves the nation’s common interest? Here it is useful to refer to Critchley,  
12  
13 according to whom  
14

15  
16  
17 “the main strategy of politics is to make itself invisible in order to claim for itself  
18  
19 the status of nature or a priori self-evidence. In this way, politics can claim to  
20  
21 restore the fullness of society or bring society into harmony with itself”  
22  
23  
24 (CRITCHLEY, 2004, p. 114).  
25  
26

27 In other words, the political character of claims is often concealed by the appeal that such claims  
28  
29 attempt to make to some natural, harmonic state of affairs. Paradoxically, while Massey  
30  
31 recognizes that claims supporting London’s privileged treatment and those picturing regional  
32  
33 inequality as ‘natural’ are political claims, she seems to be unaware of the fact that her  
34  
35 assumptions of a national common interest are not apolitical ones either.  
36  
37

38  
39 On the whole, we suggest that it is imperative to recognize – and we can do so by  
40  
41 following more consistently the postulations of discourse theory – that national development is,  
42  
43 just as regional development, also a *politics* that can be best apprehended as a field of agonistic  
44  
45 engagement. It is thus not only the case that choices of regional development interventions cannot  
46  
47 be grounded in a presumption of a unified regional interest. Also, we should avoid seeing these  
48  
49 choices as rooted in a unified national interest. Recognizing the impossibility of an ultimate  
50  
51 consensus on spatial justice at *any* scale is a precondition for addressing spatial justice in a  
52  
53 democratic way.  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Concluding remarks  
4  
5  
6  
7

8 This paper set the objective of bringing more clarity into what we could call the relational *vs*  
9 territorial ‘non-debate’ that has unfolded in the past years about the conceptualization of the  
10 region. Based on a careful re-reading of texts, we argued that the critique expressed by moderates  
11 that radicals disregard *actual* regional differences/particularities does not hold. ‘Radicals’ might  
12 be seen as such by others because they – in an attempt to ground their agenda on a new politics of  
13 space – have drawn upon various insights based on forms of post-structuralist relational ontology.  
14 Taken out of context, statements based on such insights indeed might appear as “bending the  
15 stick too far” (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004, p. 437). However, thinking about regions through  
16 post-structuralist ontologies does not in any way imply a neglect of concrete regional  
17 differences/particularities. Rather – and this is what radicals wish to direct our attention to – the  
18 above way of thinking enables an awareness, and also a critique of, the constructed character of  
19 any regional particularity. Radicals thus cannot be simply accused of falling into the ‘non-  
20 territorial trap’ (see JONES, 2009).  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 In an attempt to trace the sources of – what are in our view, erroneous – accusations of  
39 radicals by moderates, we found it useful to review the deeper (ontological) philosophical  
40 anchoring of both strands. This review showed that arguably, a key source of disagreements  
41 (misunderstandings) between radicals and moderates has been that the understanding of  
42 relationality as a fundamental condition of being of any object on the one hand has become  
43 confused with relationality in terms of actually existing relations on the other. For while radicals  
44 have, by drawing on actor-network theory and discourse theory, (seemingly) aligned with the  
45 former view of *ontological relationality*, moderates have continued to interpret relationality in the  
46 latter sense of *empirical connectedness*. Regarding the divergence of their (mostly implicit) meta-  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 theoretical inspiration, the above camps might be surely seen as two worlds apart. A close  
4  
5 reading of their accounts reveals actually that purported radicals do not embrace fully any post-  
6  
7 structuralist ontology. In fact and rather paradoxically, radicals' standpoint bears much  
8  
9 resemblance with that of moderates and, eventually, it is arguably only (some of) radicals'  
10  
11 propositions for concrete state spatial reforms in England/the UK that would warrant the 'radical'  
12  
13 label.  
14  
15

16  
17 Although both radicals and moderates have largely focused on how regions are (and  
18  
19 should be) thought of in England/the UK, we contend that our review of their 'non-debate' is  
20  
21 giving clues for the conceptualization of 'the region' more generally. More specifically, we  
22  
23 would like to argue that the way forward in conceptualizing the region is to think of regions, and  
24  
25 by extension, of all – thus also national – spaces as constituted relationally through agonistic  
26  
27 struggles. Admittedly, an agonistic democracy still needs consensus concerning the institutions  
28  
29 through which such struggles can take place (MOUFFE, 2005), and it is highly questionable  
30  
31 whether the appropriate institutions – in the broad sense – are in place to move towards an  
32  
33 agonistic engagement with the spatiality of development. Concerning the UK more specifically,  
34  
35 many have pointed out, for example, that the lack of a National Spatial Planning Framework for  
36  
37 England seriously impedes the establishment of an open debate about the “what we want to do,  
38  
39 why we want to do it, and what the implications might be” (SHEPLEY, 2005, p. 263; see also  
40  
41 SHEPLEY 2005b; TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ASSOCIATION, 2006). Certainly, a wide range of  
42  
43 structural institutional constraints stand in the way of the elaboration of such a framework,  
44  
45 including the fact that thinking about British political space in London-centric terms seems to  
46  
47 “deeply engrained in the national psyche” (AMIN *et al.*, 2003b, p. 271). Addressing and changing  
48  
49 such constraints is of course a great challenge that can surely use the efforts of critical  
50  
51 scholarship. We would like to suggest that such efforts should be best grounded in the  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 assumption of the fundamental relationality of all spaces: this assumption is namely the condition  
4  
5 for being able to conceive of change at all.  
6  
7  
8  
9

#### 10 Acknowledgements

11  
12 The authors wish to thank for a grant provided by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research  
13 (NWO-Shifts in Governance, 450-04-142).  
14  
15  
16  
17

#### 18 References

- 19  
20  
21  
22 AGNEW, J. (1999) Regions on the mind does not equal regions of the mind. *Progress in Human*  
23  
24 *Geography*, **24**, 23–36.  
25  
26  
27 ALLEN, J. and COCHRANE, A. (2007) Beyond the Territorial Fix: Regional Assemblages, Politics  
28  
29 and Power, *Regional Studies* **41**, 1161–1175.  
30  
31  
32 ALLEN, J., MASSEY, D. and COCHRANE, A. (1998) *Rethinking the Region*. Routledge, London  
33  
34 AMIN, A. (2002) Spatialities of globalisation, *Environment and Planning A* **34**, 385–399.  
35  
36 AMIN, A. (2004) Regions unbound: towards a new politics of place, *Geografiska Annaler* **86B**,  
37  
38 33–44.  
39  
40  
41 AMIN, A. (2005) Local community on trial, *Economy and Society* **34**, 612–633.  
42  
43  
44 AMIN, A., MASSEY, D. and THRIFT, N. (2003) *Decentering the Nation: A Radical Approach to*  
45  
46 *Regional Inequality*. Catalyst, London  
47  
48 AMIN, A., MASSEY, D. and THRIFT, N. (2003b) Rethinking the regional question, *Town and*  
49  
50 *Country Planning*, October, 271–272.  
51  
52  
53 COCHRANE, A. (2003) The new urban policy: towards empowerment or incorporation? The  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

- 1  
2  
3 practice of urban policy, in IMRIE, R and RACO, M (Eds) *Urban renaissance? New Labour,*  
4  
5  
6 *community and urban policy*, pp. 223–234. Policy Press, Bristol  
7
- 8 CRITCHLEY, S. (2004) Is there a normative deficit in the theory of hegemony? in CRITCHLEY, S.  
9  
10 and MARCHART, O. (Eds) *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, pp. 113–122. Routledge, London  
11
- 12 ELDEN, S. (2005) Missing the point: globalization, deterritorialization and the space of the world,  
13  
14 *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers*, **30** 8–10.  
15
- 16  
17 GLYNOS, J. and HOWARTH, D. (2007) *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political*  
18  
19 *Theory*. Routledge, London  
20
- 21  
22 HUDSON, R. (2005) Region and place: devolved regional government and regional economic  
23  
24 success? *Progress in Human Geography* **29**, 618–625.  
25
- 26  
27 HUDSON, R. (2007) Regions and Regional Uneven Development Forever? Some Reflective  
28  
29 Comments upon Theory and Practice, *Regional Studies*, **41**, 1149–1160.  
30
- 31  
32 IMRIE, R. and RACO, M. (2003) Community and the changing nature of urban policy, in IMRIE, R.  
33  
34 and RACO, M. (Eds) *Urban renaissance? New Labour, community and urban policy*, pp. 3–36.  
35  
36 Policy Press, Bristol  
37
- 38  
39 JONES, M. (2004) Social Justice and the Region: Grassroots Regional Movements and the English  
40  
41 Question, *Space and Polity* **8**, 157–189.  
42
- 43  
44 JONES, M. (2004b) The Regional State and Economic Governance: Regionalized Regeneration,  
45  
46 or Territorialized Political Mobilisation? in WOOD, A. and VALLER, D. (Eds) *Governing local*  
47  
48 *and regional economies. Institutions, Politics and Economic Development*, pp. 177–204,  
49  
50 Ashgate, Aldershot  
51
- 52  
53 JONES, M. (2009) Phase space: geography, relational thinking, and beyond, *Progress in Human*  
54  
55 *Geography* **33**, 487–506.  
56
- 57  
58 JONES, M. and MACLEOD, G. (2004) Regional Spaces, Spaces of Regionalism: Territory,  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Insurgent Politics, and the English Question, *Transactions of the Institute of British*  
4  
5  
6 *Geographers* NS **29**, 433–453.

7  
8 LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. (2001[1985]) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical*  
9  
10 *Democratic Politics*. London: Verso

11  
12 LATOUR, B. (1997) On actor–network theory: A few clarifications. Paper presented at the  
13  
14 conference ‘Actor Network and After’ at the Centre for Social Theory and Technology, Keele  
15  
16  
17 University

18  
19  
20 LAW, J. (2002) Objects and spaces, *Theory, Culture & Society* **19**, 91–105.

21  
22 LAW, J. (2003) Notes on the Theory of the Actor Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity.  
23  
24 Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University, Lancaster  
25  
26  
27 <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Law-Notes-on-ANT.pdf>

28  
29  
30 MACLEOD, G. and JONES, M. (2007) Territorial, Scalar, Networked, Connected: In What Sense a  
31  
32 ‘Regional World’? *Regional Studies*, **41**, 1177–1191.

33  
34 MASSEY, D. (1979) In What Sense a Regional Problem? *Regional Studies* **13**, 233–243.

35  
36 MASSEY, D. (1991) A global sense of place. *Marxism Today* June 24–29.

37  
38  
39 MASSEY, D. (1992) Politics and Space/Time, *New Left Review* **I/196**, November–December, 65–  
40  
41 84.

42  
43 MASSEY, D. (1999) Space–Time, ‘Science’ and the Relationship between Physical Geography and  
44  
45 Human Geography *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS **24**, 261–276.

46  
47  
48 MASSEY, D. (2001) Geography on the agenda, *Progress in Human Geography* **25**, 5–17.

49  
50 MASSEY, D. (2004) Geographies of responsibility, *Geografiska Annaler* **86B**, 5–18.

51  
52 MASSEY, D. (2005) *For space*. Sage, London

53  
54  
55 MASSEY, D. (2007) *World City*. Polity Press, Cambridge

56  
57  
58 MOUFFE, C. (2005) *On the Political*. Routledge, London

- 1  
2  
3 MURDOCH, J. (1998) The Spaces of Actor–Network Theory. *Geoforum* **29**, 357–374.  
4  
5 PAASI, A. (1991) Deconstructing regions: notes on the scales of spatial life, *Environment and*  
6  
7 *Planning A* **23**, 239–256.  
8  
9  
10 PAASI, A. (2001) Europe as a social progress and discourse. Considerations of place, boundaries  
11  
12 and identity, *European Urban and Regional Studies* **8**, 7–28.  
13  
14  
15 PAASI, A. (2002) Place and region: regional worlds and words Progress in Human Geography,  
16  
17 *Progress in Human Geography* **26**, 802–811.  
18  
19  
20 PAASI, A. (2008) Is the world more complex than our theories of it? TPSN and the perpetual  
21  
22 challenge of conceptualization, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **26**, 405–410.  
23  
24  
25 PAINTER, J. (2008) Cartographic anxiety and the search for regionality, *Environment and*  
26  
27 *Planning A* **40**, 342–361.  
28  
29  
30 RACO, M. (2003) New Labour, community and the future of Britain’s urban renaissance, in:  
31  
32 IMRIE, R. – RACO, M. (Eds) *Urban renaissance? New Labour, community and urban policy*,  
33  
34 pp. 235–250. Policy Press, Bristol  
35  
36  
37 SHEPLEY, C. (2005) A National Spatial Planning Framework for England? I–Context and need,  
38  
39 *Town and Country Planning*, September, 261–264.  
40  
41  
42 SHEPLEY, C. (2005b) A National Spatial Planning Framework for England? II –Options and  
43  
44 mechanisms, *Town and Country Planning*, October, 305–308.  
45  
46  
47 TORFING, J. (1999) *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek*. Blackwell, Oxford  
48  
49 TORFING, J.(2005) Introduction. Discourse theory: achievements, arguments, and challenges. in  
50  
51 HOWARTH, D. and TORFING, J. (Eds) *Discourse Theory in European Politics, Identity, Policy*  
52  
53 *and Governance*, pp 1–31. Palgrave, New York  
54  
55  
56 TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ASSOCIATION (2006) *Connecting England. A Framework for*  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *Regional Development.* Town and Country Planning Association, London  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

For Peer Review Only