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Associationalist regionalism: from 'powers of association' to 'associations of power'

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Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been an important shift in thinking about territorial governance. This involved both a move away from technical, hierarchical modes of government towards more open and participatory forms of decision-making (governance), and a rethinking of multi-level governance contexts in general. In response to (global) economic, technological, political and intellectual challenges, policy-makers in the western world therefore increasingly turned to a previously underexposed level of territorial governance: the region. Being attuned to the level of daily socio-economic interaction, regions would be better able to achieve the twin goals of economic competitiveness and socio-political cohesion than the traditional governance frameworks dominated by the central state (Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Keating, 1998; Keating, 2001; Storper, 1997). Within this new current of thought, two general trends of 'new regionalism' can be distinguished.

First there are the attempts of national states to scale up their economic and political authority through the development of multi-lateral systems of cooperation and coordination. Structures such as the EU economic zone, the NAFTA and Mercosur are examples of these. The second strand of 'new regionalism', which is perhaps more dominant in the western world (MacLeod, 2001), aims at the development of regional governance structures at the sub-national scale. By decentralising political decision making processes to regional agencies, policy makers aim to achieve more flexible structures of governance that can design and deliver policies better attuned to local circumstances.

In this chapter we explore the development of regional governance structures of the latter sort. We are particularly interested in the rhetorical and discursive grounds that are at the basis of these new regionalist strategies. What claims are made and how do such claims affect the actual practices and performances of regional governance institutions? Building on the idea that the region has become an overloaded concept to which too many (often conflicting) tasks and goals are ascribed, we will discuss the limitations of associational approaches. Employing a discursive exploration of new regionalist practices and a brief empirical analysis of the multi-level governance framework in the Netherlands, we will illustrate that tensions between the substantive and political grounds for regional governance are severely hampering the performance of regions in multi-level frameworks.

Associationalist regionalism: substantive and political claims for regional governance

Over the last decades, a myriad of extolling theoretical accounts, broad observations and political laudations has emerged in favour of regional governance. Alongside this, a great number of policy initiatives has been launched to try out new forms of regional governance and to learn and circulate the 'lessons' drawn from policy innovation. Lagendijk and Cornford (2000) speak of the development of a 'regional development industry' in this context, a mushrooming of development agencies, technology transfer centres, consultancy companies and research centres focusing on improving the competitive positions of regions through new forms of (regional) governance. In line with Thrift's conceptualisation of the 'cultural circuits of capitalism' (Thrift, 1999; Thrift, 2005), Lagendijk and Cornford explore what could perhaps be best labelled as the cultural circuits of regionalism - an important discursive apparatus of academics, consultants, EU officials and policy makers that engages in the circulation of regional governance concepts, discourses and practices across Europe. The impact of this discursive apparatus on the field of regional governance practices is considerable. Blending theoretical ideas with success stories of regional development, these circuits of regionalism bring concepts and 'stylised facts' such as 'innovative milieus', 'clusters' and 'learning regions' into the field. Through 'endless presentations and representations in seminars, conferences and publications', together with many practical applications and try-outs, such concepts and discourses have circulated widely and have influenced the working and setting up of a wide array of regional governance practices across Europe (Lagendijk, 2005; Lagendijk and Cornford, 2000). Generally speaking, regional governance is favoured on two grounds. First, there is the substantive case for regional governance where the region is described as the most apt level of governance to address spatial-environmental problems in a common governance framework. Second, there are the political claims (organisational-administrative) for regional governance, providing a means to facilitate a shift from government to governance. Both strands will now be discussed in more detail.

The substantive case for regional governance
The region plays an important role in discussions about the ways to approach substantive policy problems and goals. It features here as a more flexible scale of governance that is better able to confront problems arising from external trends, such as globalisation and growing global economic competition, and is believed to be a more appropriate site for policy coordination and collaboration. A wide variety of arguments and narratives on the substantive tasks and roles of regional governance circulates through policy making circuits and many of them are influencing regional governance practices across the world. Sorting the core claims from strong to more modest, the following summary emerges:

  Political: Regions are endowed with political significance in scalar accounts on political power and competencies and accounts of 'destatisation' (Jessop, 2004). In such accounts, economic globalisation and the enhanced mobility of capital produce selective processes of (induced) 'hollowing out' and (intentional)

devolution. The result is a shift in power from the national towards the sub-national level, as well as to other governance arenas such as the market and associational structures. In a positive sense, regions feature here because, they are pictured as the nexuses of interdependencies between state and non-state bodies that come up with novel, potentially radical, solutions and models sustaining regional performance (cf. Storper). In a more negative sense, regions are considered suitable places to carry the brunt of globalisation in terms of coping with rising social inequality and deprivation, ecological problems and the urgency of providing and maintaining a well-oiled, and hence competitive, infrastructure (e.g. high-profile business estates, luxury housing and amenities, modern consumption spaces, congestion-free transit and global connections)

Economic: Close in line with the political story, regions are presented as economic powerhouses, partially or largely substituting for the significance of national economies, due to a shifting basis of economic competitiveness. As the story goes, in the past, macro stability, basic infrastructures (e.g. education) and major state projects (and 'national champions') were key; now it is the relational synergy between spatially concentrated and embedded networks of businesses and knowledge organisations that is seen as the key to wealth (Keating 2001). The latter is fostered, moreover, by the specialisation of the local labour market and the educational sector that, together with economic specialisation, supports the development of particular regional clusters.

Policy-making: The latter role also draws on a notion of the region as an 'integral' site of policy making and customisation. A crucial shortcoming of what is considered as the old-style, technocratic and centralised policy making is sectoral and territorial fragmentation. Together with other spatial levels, notably the neighbourhood and the municipality, the region is thus considered as a suitable site for developing area-based policies, that, through integrating multiple sectorally defined fields of policy in an encompassing spatial framework can deliver more effectively in a way more in tune with local needs and conditions (Herrschel and Newman, 2002).

Territorial collaboration: Yet, picturing the region as a site of policy integration is not only a response to the alleged shortcomings of fragmentation between top-down sectoral policies. It is also seen as a solution for another form of territorial fragmentation, namely that between adjacent municipalities. In the most basic form, regionalisation can stem from the need for (or simply the benefits arising from) the co-ordination of services such as health, police, education et cetera. Another problem is that of inter-municipal rivalry, which, especially in larger city-regional areas, often presents serious bottlenecks for addressing local problems and shaping strategic policies. To address these problems, the municipalities involved, often assisted by the central state, embark on processes of shaping regional forms of governance that, in a negotiated style, produce shared views and common solutions.

The political case for regional governance
Regional governance also features as a response to debates on political decision-making and representation. Recent moves from 'government' to 'governance', and, in this wake, from technical to participatory forms of policy-making, can be seen as manifestations of a dominant transformation in political and policy

processes. Was the past, in broad terms, characterised by top-down, technocratic and sequential modes of decision making and policy implementation, over the last decades we have witnessed the rise of more inclusive and recursive models that aim at balancing bottom-up initiative and responsibility and top down facilitation, monitoring, and the provision of knowledge exchange (Bruszt, 2005). Subsequently, it is a small step from such a move towards inclusiveness and participation towards the interest in the sub-national level as a key arena of policy-making and even political initiative. Healey's work on collaborative planning, for instance, portrays the region as a core level to forge inclusive networks to promote broad engagement and the infusion of new ideas. After a period of strong top-down national control, the growth in co-operation between regional authorities, professional organisations and civil society groups is seen as an expression of a move towards bottom-up, participative forms governance and hence from technocracy to democracy (Herrschel and Newman, 2002).

Regions, according to Keating (1998), should thus be interpreted as nexuses of interchanges, involving government and civil society. Regions function as meeting places and systems of action, but they also present the basis for the shaping of identity and political mobilisation. As 'social constructs of a relational nature' (Gualini, 2001:7), they are *"a meeting place and an arena for negotiation of functional and territorial systems of action, in economics, society and politics"* (Keating, 1998:184). Through such dynamics they acquire a more stable and recognised institutional shape. The consequence is that regions increasingly have to compete with national and other levels of government not only for resources but also: *"in the provision of solution of policy problems"* (Keating, 1998:185).

The latter conclusion bears directly on a second issue, that of legitimacy. In addition to policy change in a substantive sense, regions in a multi-level governance setting are to provide a response to what is conceived as a major governance gap, namely that between systems of representation and actual processes of decision making (Heinze and Schmid, 1994; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Keating, 1998). Regions are thought to close this gap by building two bridges, namely between different state levels and between state and non-state actors. The EU, in particular, has embraced regional governance as part of a wider set of multi-level governance strategies to promote the legitimacy, transparency and accountability of its actions. From this perspective, participatory approaches at the regional level can serve to enhance the legitimacy of policy actions that have a national or international scope. Especially interesting in this respect are the way the 'bottom-up' cross-border initiatives of the EU are part of the European project of territorial integration and cohesion.

At the national level, issues of legitimacy often stem from problems local and national authorities face when trying to develop and implement major infrastructural projects. It is no coincidence that regional governance structures often stem from the need to find support, both amongst state and non-state actors, for major transport investments and business estates (Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Vigar et al., 2000) Regions as part of a wider multi-level governance framework then serve to find an appropriate structure for wheeling and dealing between the various agents and scales, in such a way that sufficient levels of resources and commitment can be mobilised to carry on particular projects. However, as many cases show (e.g. Horan and Jonas, 1998), such

models do not always manage to stem the problems of political fragmentation and territorial conflicts. On the contrary, the search for administrative fixes always turns out to be illusive. While new forms of governance are able to address certain issues more efficiently and effectively, they also create new tensions and conflicts. In other words, whatever the 'logic' followed, governance remains deeply political. There are no simple administrative fixes for complex social, economic and spatial problems.

Irritatingly Full?

One can take the discussion one step further. As shown above, various 'functional' logics serve to ascribe regions with many virtues. However, regions are not outcomes of these logics; they result from political projects and ambitions that employ these logics, although they generally fail to endow regions with clear cut objectives and mandates. The leading imaginary of the region is one of a synergetic powerhouse that is economically, socially, environmentally, politically, democratically and spatially rewarding. But taking it all together, the region appears as over-determined and 'irritatingly full' (Miggelbrink, 2002). In reality the narratives, notably in the action they imply, are fraught with tensions and ambiguities. As an example, the political account of regions against globalisation inspired Amin and Thrift (1995) to call for nurturing "powers of association" that present *"an attempt to set up networks of small firms and intermediate institutions that can act as a counter to the power of the networks of large corporations and dominant institutions"*. The more policy-oriented perspectives, on the other hand, present an image of horizontal and vertical collaboration, based on a more consensual notion of the overall (economic, social, environmental) aims of regional development. Where they see oppositions to address, it is more in the area of administrative competencies and 'petty' rivalry between adjacent territories and scales than in the struggle against the 'forces of capitalism'.

Partly in response to these tensions, state actors and policy-makers have turned to approaches that present the local/regional as a kind of learning 'laboratory' for developing joined-up solutions, within a broader (inter)national setting producing overall aims and conditions, facilitation, monitoring and learning (cf. Gualini, 2004). This translates into a policy learning ecology that, through cycles of variation and selection, may overcome the problem of mono-cropping that characterises many fields of policy-making. According to critical voices, for instance, the field of regional development policy is replete with 'boilerplate approaches' that even frequently succeed in repeating previously failed approaches (Storper and Scott, 1995). Such configurations can be found in national policy programmes in which the development and implementation of area-based policies is guided by interregional or national 'centres/networks of expertise'.

An interesting question is now to what extent such an 'irritatingly full' region can meet the promise of moving from 'old' top-down, technocratic and sequential modes of decision making and policy implementation. On the one hand, these configurations can be labelled as 'non hierarchical' in the sense that they have generally more scope for offering bottom-up and novel perspectives

with the potential of uprooting mainstream notions and practices of policy-making, at least at the local/regional level. In the words of Bruszt (2005:4), regions are thus presented *"as sites of institutional experimentation to counter deficiencies of the defunct hierarchical steering of development and correct market failures."* On the other hand, the central level (national or international) continues to set the broader conditions of local action and, most significantly, the lessons and consequences drawn from that. In the end, state action will always be strategically selective in what is facilitated and what is reproduced (Jessop). This raises, once more, the issue of legitimacy and democratic support. Are regions indeed sites of governance that acquire legitimacy and power through associationalist practices? Or is it the way certain associative discourses are employed, through the powers-that-be, that counts?

Responding, in particular, to the policy challenges arising in the late 1980s and 1990s, the so-called 'New Regionalist' literature shifted from a critical political-economy perspective to a 'softer' institutionalist approach (MacLeod, 2001). Building, in a relational manner, 'institutional capacity', regions could nourish 'associational modes of economic organisation' that would sustain, in turn, a region's competitive and innovative capacity (Cooke and Morgan, 1998). Storper (1997), in his elaboration of the notion of a 'Regional World' that acts and interacts on the basis of locally embedded 'conventions', emphasises the crucial role of talk between regional agents to shape regional political and economic strength. Yet, such attempts to move to more constructive and developmental perspectives on the region have not really managed to address the issue of fullness. Also the broader literature appears to be lacking in this respect. Rather than critically examining, conceptually and empirically, how the different stories fit together in concrete cases of region formation, the literature tends to focus on advocating overarching concepts that, in different configurations, selectively draw on the regionalist narratives. For instance, planning oriented accounts tend to take the economic and political accounts as 'received wisdom', employing these to inform and support conceptualisation of strategic regional governance (Healey et al., 1997). Economically oriented accounts, on the other hand, often invoke relatively simple notions of spatial governance to elaborate notions of spatially embedded 'collective learning' and systematic innovation. Detailed empirical work, furthermore, is often lacking in theoretical reflection, often rather simply presenting a case as an endorsement of the wonders of associational practices. Below, we will assess these issues by exploring associationalist regionalism in the Netherlands, first in a broader historical context, and then focusing on more specific recent developments.

Associationalist regionalism in practice: the case of regional governance in the Netherlands

Since the early 1800s the Dutch governance system has been dominated by the central state. The lower level authorities (the provinces, water boards and municipalities) are endowed with competences devolved to them by the central state. At first sight, the provinces are the closest thing to a regional government in the Netherlands, but their role in the Dutch multi-level governance system remains limited (Hulst, 2005). Moreover, the province mainly acts as an

intermediary agent between the central state and local government and has little power on itself (Vries, 2008; Peters, 2007). Until recently (the early 1990s) no other powerful body of regional governance existed in the Netherlands.

Although some developments go back to the early 1900s, claims for regional governance have really become more pressing in Dutch policy-making circuits from the 1970s onwards. It was believed that a system of regional governance would provide better and more flexible means for integral-strategic intervention, regional cooperation and territorial governance than the traditional state-province-municipality framework (ROB, 2003; Hulst, 2005). A specific claim put forward drew on policy discourses on territorial collaboration (see Hulst, 2005). Because of the weak mandate of the Dutch provinces, cooperation and coordination between municipalities to address problems and issues of supra-local scale proved to be extremely difficult. The main reason was that the provinces simply lacked the power or the interest to overrule individual municipalities. As a result, municipalities often let their individual interests prevail over the regional interest, often leading to a 'race to the bottom' between municipalities. So, instead of bolstering benefits from regional cooperation, the competition between individual municipalities actually hampered regional development on the whole (see for instance Gualini, 2007:304; VNG and Pröpper, 2008).

However, these pressures did not directly lead to institutional change. There would be no significant changes in the Dutch governance framework until the mid-1980s (Hulst, 2005). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many municipalities therefore decided to build upon the existing institutional infrastructure to develop ways to cooperate regionally. The most important legal context was provided by the Joint Provisions Act (WGR) of the early 1950s, which was enacted to stimulate and regulate territorial collaboration amongst municipalities. Inspired by discourses on territorial collaboration -that stressed the importance of achieving higher levels of efficiency through functional cooperation- municipalities set up a wide variety of regional, single-purpose agencies aimed at coordinating and integrating different public services regionally. This often involved functional cooperation between municipalities in the field of collective waste disposal, fire fighting, disaster contingency plans, ambulance services et cetera.

The concept proved to be popular and in the mid-1980s a heterogeneous and scattered patchwork of over 1500 regional, single purpose agencies existed in the Netherlands (Andeweg and Irwin, 2005). At one moment there were even more regional collaborative arrangements than municipalities in the Netherlands! This created problems in terms of policy-coordination and transparency. Different single purpose agencies in the same area had different definitions of the region and its boundaries, and the wide variety of different agencies active in the same area created an almost chaotic institutional environment. This heavily complicated the synchronisation and coordination of regional policy, leading to many conflicts, tensions and inefficiencies (Geelhoed, 2002). These problems demanded a more integral and coordinated approach to regional cooperation.

In the mid-1980s therefore, the national government revised the Joint Provision act of the 1950s (WGR+), now forcing municipalities to integrate the different single purpose agencies into one larger multi-purpose regional governance body. The latter would also have a democratic body consisting of

members of the elected councils of the participating municipalities. Under the new scheme, the regional agencies delivered some satisfactory results with respect to cooperation on public services. However, as the basic premise of regional cooperation remained one of voluntary participation and cooperation, not much happened in the field of economic development (Andeweg and Irwin, 2005). Municipalities in the Netherlands were rather reluctant to give up their autonomy on economic matters and they were certainly not willing to transfer these competences to regional agencies (Nota kaderwet, 1994).

The need for regional cooperation and coordination in the field of economic development was expressed more urgently in the early 1990s. Under the (alleged) pressure of growing economic competition, especially with other European (urban) regions, the Dutch national government initiated a project which was directly concerned with regional economic development, aimed in particular at the main urban regions in the Netherlands (Geelhoed, 2002). The city regions of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Eindhoven/Helmond, Arnhem/Nijmegen and Enschede/Hengelo were the main targets of this new policy. The temporary framework act 'Kaderwet Bestuur in Verandering' (the Act Administrative Change 1994) obliged municipalities that partook in a regional governance framework to transfer several of their competences (in particular on the field of economic development) to the regional agency. The act provided a firmer institutional basis for regional governance, endowing regional agencies with more competences, in particular, in the field of spatial planning (notably infrastructure) and economic development. The main competences ascribed to regional governance agencies involved (obligatory) collaboration in the fields of spatial planning, housing, transport and infrastructure, economic affairs and environmental issues. Yet, because the 'obligatory collaboration' in regional governance agencies was still based upon consensual politics, municipalities still pulled the key levers (Hulst, 2005; Geelhoed, 2002:39). As a result, regional governance agencies remained rather indecisive and powerless.

Regional governance in practice: problems and discrepancies, the case of Arnhem-Nijmegen.
As Hulst remarks, in theory, the new context constituted regional agencies with sufficient power to coordinate local governments and create coherent regional policies. In practice, however, these agencies did not fulfil the series of tasks that were the very reason of their existence (Hulst, 2005). First of all, there were many discrepancies between policy competences and decision making procedures of regional governance agencies. This relates, in particular, to the conflicts between the democratic/ representative structure of the regional governance agencies (based upon the polder model/ consensus) and the need to go beyond the interests of individual municipalities in favour of regional interest. The design of the democratic structure and the processes of decision making within these governance bodies has severely hampered their output. As the management of the regional agencies mainly lies in the hands of indirectly elected representatives from the participating municipal councils, municipalities are still pulling the most important levers. This has led to major legitimacy and accountability gaps and a vast indecisiveness of these regional agencies which made them unable to address the urgent matter of regional policy integration and

the development of coherent and strong regional economies. Instead of generating a powerful proactive regional authority with sufficient capacities to deal with major economic, political and societal changes (Gualini, 2001), decision-making within the regional governance agencies was severely bound by the self-interest of municipalities (Geelhoed, 2002:42). This has hugely negative effects on the overall sharpness and decisiveness of regional governance agencies.

Another set of problems comes out of the tensions between the different substantive goals for regional governance. Most important to mention here are the conflicts arising from tensions between political-economic claims for regionalism and the policy-making/collaboration discourses. Such problems are mainly caused by the different economic interests of the municipalities involved in regional governance. Whereas most regional governance areas in the Netherlands are dominated by one or more core cities, they also consist of several smaller, often more sub-urban or even rural municipalities. As major cities tend to have different (economic) interests than rural and sub-urban municipalities, there is often more competition over regional economic development policies than one that can actually speak of real territorial 'collaboration'. Rather, instead of pursuing regional policy coordination and cooperation, struggles over economic policy (notably competition in providing business parks and attracting firms) are actually producing territorial fragmentation. Such tensions are also intensified by the different hierarchical positions that municipalities take up in regional governance agencies. As Dutch regionalist policy is first and foremost targeted at city regions, it is often the core cities that have the dominant voice in regional governance agencies, at the expense of sub-urban and rural municipalities. This often leads to conflicts (see the discussion in Geelhoed, 2002).

An illustrative example of this is the case of the city-region Arnhem-Nijmegen. Via the regional governance agency (the KAN) the core cities Arnhem and Nijmegen aimed to set up a multi-mode transport centre in the rural area of the municipality of Elst (which is located just between the two core cities). For both Nijmegen and Arnhem, the setting up of this transport centre was a matter of economic urgency. Through its development, the cities tried to hook on to an international trade-route from Rotterdam to Germany and Eastern-Europe. The municipality of Elst and some smaller rural/sub-urban municipalities in the region agreed to the importance of such a development but also feared the impact it would have on the local environment and infrastructure. In other words, they supported the idea but operated on a 'not in my backyard strategy'. Despite this opposition, the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen pushed on with the planning of the development of the transport centre using their power over the regional governance agency (in which they had the most powerful votes). However, they did not succeed. The municipality of Elst, together with some of the smaller municipalities in the region, resisted the development of a transport centre in their proximity by linking up to citizens groups, environmental NGOs and activists. This created widespread public opposition to the plans. When they finally appealed against the project in the higher court, the court ruled against the project (on the basis of environmental law) and the development came to a complete stop. This also led to political fragmentation in the city-region's governance agency. At present, the regional agency continues to

coordinate, in particular, regional housing and transport planning. It is also investing more in region-marketing. The region now sells itself under the label of 'cool region', see http://www.coolregion.nl). This presents, to some extent, a move away from primarily economically oriented discourses and towards issues that may appeal more to local citizens, like housing, education and leisure. The future will tell what this will mean for the position of the regional agency in terms of legitimacy and capacity to act.

Conclusion

Regional governance has emerged as an increasingly popular concept. It has been represented as a synergetic and coherent mode of governance that embraces a variety of policy discourses of both substantive and political character, notably through its capacity to enrol a variety of resources and to harness public support. Cherished even by the traditional territorial 'powers', notably the central state and the municipal administrations, the region features as a cure-for-all, meeting a broad set of policy challenges.

However, as the case of associationalist regionalism in the Netherlands shows, in real life, regions seem to be severely hampered by way they are loaded with tasks and goals. Behind its powerful and appealing image, regional governance has become replete with contradictions, ambiguities and tensions. In particular, in contrast to its function as a lubricator and catalyst, the comprehensive and associative character of regional governance often appears to be a major stumbling block. To achieve their goals, regional agencies therefore often resort to the strategic use of the powers-that-be without much attention to the broader governance context in which they operate.

The question then arises as to whether regions could still become the highly potential 'associations of power' as initially represented. Are regions actually able to fulfil the wide array of tasks and goals set out for them, in an open and democratic way, as expected? In the current state of affairs, we are inclined to answer this question negatively. The region has become an intrinsically ambivalent concept and many (internal) conflicts arise from tensions between the multiplicity of tasks and discourses it has been associated with. Not only are there many conflicts between the many substantive claims for regionalism and accounts of political legitimisation, the specific governance settings in which regions operate make it far from easy to adopt democratic and associate practices. What we thus see is that the myriad of appealing narratives on regionalism, the various consultancy practices which spawn out of it and the legion of examples, texts, lectures and presentations that circulate have perhaps been too enthusiastically establishing the region as a governance panacea.

What is required, accordingly, is a greater sensitivity in both academic work on and policy experiments with regionalism. Rather than overloading regional governance practices with 'stylised facts', appealing concepts and promises, there is a need to approach things more reflexively. In order to create regions that have sufficient political standing, policy makers and academics should better consider how ideas and theories about regional governance will actually work out in the field. This asks for a closer relationship between discursive knowledge and governance practice. Only through such reflexive practices will regions be

able to meet the promise of 'power of association' beyond a mere performance of 'associations of power-that-be'.

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