Towards conceptual quality in regional studies: the need for subtle critique **- *A response to Markusen* -**

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SECONS Discussion
Forum
Contribution No. 3

February 2003

SECONS Discussion Forum
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Introduction

Markusen's (1999) provocative piece has been, in many ways, enlightening. In a brief, but carefully reasoned paper she draws up the balance of two decades of conceptual development in regional studies. Her verdict is damning: our conceptualisation is fuzzy, our methods of grounding our concepts empirically are weak, and we are not in touch with policy-makers. Basically, I endorse this view. Markusen's work has inspired me to continue my own reflective work on concepts of regional development and regional policy. In a synthesising paper (Lagendijk, 2001), I have recently tried to unravel the 'regional gaze', that is, the continued emphasis on the regional level as a core site of competitiveness and innovation. This account echoes Markusen's key points: the highly selective marshalling of evidence, the proliferation of certain types of concepts because they are associated with powerful agents and popular discourses, and the problematic link to policy-making, notably where it involves normative issues. In addition, these factors turn out to be mutually self-reinforcing, which explains why these concepts manage to resist a strong flow of continuous critique.

My general endorsement, however, does not mean that there are no points for further debate, qualifications and critique. On the contrary, as other contributors to this discussion forum have already illustrated (Hudson, 2002; Peck, 2002), Markusen provides far from a laid-out route towards a state of conceptual stringency and precision. My contribution focuses on the theme of conceptual development and quality, which I will address from a pragmatic standpoint. The underlying notion is that the quality of our concepts primarily stems from the quality and standards of our academic debate. It is the way we create, elaborate, foster and rebuff shared concepts, through a variety of academic practices, that undergirds much of the conceptual quality. Operationalisation of concepts for empirical verification provides an important contribution to this process, but other academic practices also play significant roles. After introducing a basic framework for discussing conceptual development, this paper will briefly discuss one conceptual genealogy, namely that of regional development concepts featuring knowledge and innovation, followed by a few comments on case-study work.

Conceptual evolution and conceptual quality: setting the stage

Within the lead activity of theoretical development, conceptual development forms an essential part in the evolution of an academic community. Many theories express relationships between two or more concepts, such as between 'innovation' and 'economic performance'. Concepts also represent shortcuts to theoretical notions. Theoretical accounts on innovation, intra- and inter-industry relations and agglomeration are captured under the heading of 'clusters'. Notions of changing roles and relations of government are covered by the concept of 'governance'. Complex interactions between the social and economic dimensions of an industrial area have inspired the notion of 'industrial district'. The question is now: what explains the coining, mainstreaming, endurance and demise of these concepts? And how can we gauge the quality of these concepts?

I do not intend to embark on a fundamental debate on the sociology of science, and the methodological issues involved. While this would undeniably represent a valuable exercise, neither the scope nor the length of this paper allows for such an approach (for an entry into such exercises, see Scott, 2000). I limit myself to develop a simple, and thereby admittedly crude framework for evaluating conceptual development. Inspired by pragmatic thinking and actor-network approaches to knowledge development, the framework is based on a historical-relational interpretation of conceptual development (Latour, 1987; Barnes, 1996; Rorty, 1979). The crux of this approach is that scientific concepts are interpreted as rhetorical devices, that gain prominence and endurance through the way they are interwoven with other established entities that make up an academic community of practice. Such entities include: established scholars, research agendas pursued by core institutions, critical cases and other supporting evidence, policy processes, and, not to forget, other concepts and theoretical constructs. At a broader level, the production of concepts and conceptual families is intertwined with social-political developments, and the way they bear on the basic institutions and representations within an academic epistemic and interpretative community.

As a result, the success of a concept depends on the amount of rhetorical power it accumulates through mobilising and extending the heterogeneous elements in networks of association. Concepts become durable because they gain central positions in proliferating webs of concepts and stories, turning them into 'obligatory passage points' for advocates as well as opponents. To give an illustration from our own field, not only Florida and Morgan, but also Lovering, Hudson and Markusen engage in work, however critical, on the 'Learning Region' (Lagendijk & Cornford, 2000).

So what guides conceptual success? Many factors have an impact on how such networks of association proliferate, including research rating and funding systems, career mechanisms, personal acquaintances, and institutional linkages (Hull, 1988). Yet a most prominent role is played by an internal factor: discursive practices. When developing a particular strand of work, each academic community develops its own set of practices of conversation and inscription legislating how scholars develop, present and reflect on concepts (effectively, this is what generally binds an academic community). These practices are guided by conventions, that is, epistemological concepts that are themselves subject to debate and processes of selection and (re)shaping. In turn, such 'deeper' conventions are part of a wider, interdisciplinary debate on the philosophy of science, itself constituted of various, partially competing, conceptual networks developed under the headings of positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics, etc. What is important here is how, in daily practice, a particular field of inquiry reflects on its own conceptual development and the conventions underpinning that. Major vehicles for such reflection are reviews, in the form of keynote contributions to conferences, reviews of books and articles. By mapping, interpreting and valuing the various linkages built between concepts, theories, empirical evidence and ongoing research agendas reviews have the potential of guiding processes of pro- and demoting shared concepts. Good review practices and ethics, accordingly, are icons of academic reflexivity. They thus narrate the conceptual evolution of a discipline.

There is one more topic that merits attention, because it bears on the topic of case study use to be discussed later, and that is the philosophical debate between 'essential' and 'contextual' explanation (Barnes, 1996). These two basic forms of explanation correspond, to a large extent, to two archetypical models of research: deductive and inductive. In the essentialist approach, conceptual and theoretical development departs from an Archimedean point comprising foundational concepts and axioms. Empirical research is used to test contrived abstract ideas. Hence, an important impetus to conceptual development stems from disconfirming empirical observations, i.e. data that, consistently, cannot be linked to the established web of concepts and theories. Generally this will lead to the formulation of new concepts that mediate between established concepts and the disconfirming observations. Mainstream economics offers a good example of such an evolution. Deviations from the mainstream atomistic market model are explained by introducing concepts of 'increasing returns' (to address disequilibrium outcomes), 'information asymmetry' (to explain market imperfections) and 'transaction costs' (to explain the development on non-market coordination mechanisms such as the firm). These new concepts come with a 'logical' story of why they have emerged, which failing links they sought to remedy, and how they are anchored in mainstream postulates. As a result, the conceptual web, although reconfigured, can carry on.

The contextual approach, on the other hand, is rooted in the recognition of contingency and particularity of subjects, place and time. As a consequence, they are associated with inductive, qualitative forms of inquiry. Where the essentialist approach confines empirical work to top-down, conceptually structured, and theoretically controlled, acts of measurement, inductive approaches explore empirical cases and their context to derive, in a bottom-up way, plausible conceptual and theoretical statements. Yet, in moving towards more general statements, inductive approaches face the difficult task how to accommodate the uniqueness of the cases under study with the generic nature of conceptual development (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Although various epistemological conventions have been developed and proposed to balance this issue, for instance in realist philosophical approaches, it remains a highly contested subject. One of the most systematic methodologies dealing with the question of inductive conceptual development, following an interpretative perspective, is *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By prescribing an intensive, integrative process between empirical work and conceptual development, grounded theory claims to generate concepts and theories that are integrated, consistent, and close to empirical observations, and hence far from *fuzzy*. Yet despite several decades of development and application, one of the most disputed elements in grounded theory remains to what extent already existing conceptual and theoretical insights should be used when a new, unique case is explored (Alves Sousa, 2002).

In conclusion, conceptual quality is dependent not just on how individual concepts are used and defined (Markusen's call for 'How do I know it when I see it?'), but also on the characteristics and dynamics of the networks revolving around core concepts. This, in turn, is dependent on the conventions and practices bearing on conceptual development. Concepts are, in other words, *relational*, and it is only through *relational analysis* that we can fully assess their quality.

Conceptual quality: the conventions and practices of regional studies

Having outlined a rudimentary framework for analysing conceptual qualities, the remainder of the paper will present a series of concepts I am most familiar with, namely what Moulaert and Sekia (1999) have labelled as the TIM-family, i.e. the family of 'territorial innovation models'. The development of the TIM-family marked a shift from interest in spatial and economic contradictions and class-struggle to knowledge-based competitiveness and associational approaches, with growing interest in the social and institutional underpinning of the 'economic'. My own schematic interpretation of this family is given in Fig. 1. Remembering that the oldest concepts dates from 1980s ('New industrial spaces' and 'innovative milieux'), the figure endorses an impressive level of fertility. This burst of creativity can be attributed primarily to a group of highly productive authors. To give two illustrations: since the mid 1980s, Michael Storper with his colleagues in the US and France thought up concepts ranging from New Industrial Spaces and 'Core-Ring' to 'untraded interdependencies', 'conventions', and 'Regional Worlds'; since the early 1990, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have coined the notions of 'neo-Marshallian nodes', 'institutional thickness', 'powers of association', and, most recently, 'sites of translation and transmission in economies of circulation' (Amin & Thrift, 2002). As illustrated in Figure 1, many of these concepts have acquired nodal positions in the field.

A major network characteristic of the TIM family is that the concepts strongly draw from ideas from other (sub)disciplines, as Fig. 1 tries to map out in some detail. Compared with other strands in economic geography, this external borrowing even appears to be more varied and diverse in terms of its intellectual origins. Each of the TIM-concepts tell a specific story (or set of stories) about the resurgence of the region, inspired by external conceptual developments. This ranges, in brief, from the increasing importance of interfirm transactions, new forms of capitalism, social (non-material) relationships, institutional analysis, communicative practices, and resources, carried over through concepts such as 'embedding', 'institutions', 'networks', 'innovation', 'regulation', and 'governance'. An emerging common emphasis, in line with general trends in social science, is an increased emphasis on knowledge and agency. The recent attention for unique (or to use the words of Storper, 1997, 'non-cosmopolitan') assets as a bedrock for enduring regional competitiveness echoes, in particular, the actual discussion on knowledge management and resource development in organisational theory and strategic management literature.

At a broader level, certain shifts in the field have been interpreted as manifestations of 'cultural' or 'institutional' turns; these turns are even used as a kind of structural explanations of why standards in the field have changed and allegedly slipped (cf. Barnett, 1998). A relational approach, however, will throw another light on the matter. In a relational perspective, the success of a concept is not so much an achievement of the original author, but primarily a product of the way other authors quote and use these concepts in follow-up work. The same process, moreover, may contribute substantially to conceptual refinement and clarity. So it is through subsequent translations, reflections and reviews that concepts gain their prominence, their relatively stable position in larger conceptual webs, and their quality. In practice, a relational analysis may trace such translations in three directions: through *forward*

linkages (operationalisation), through *horizontal* linkages, i.e. the construction of relations/ comparisons with other concepts in the field, and through *backward* linkages (e.g. links to inspiring ideas, such as from other disciplines). Note that these directional terms do not suggest a working order, but are only used for the sake of presentation; the movements between 'abstract' and 'concrete' are multi-directional.

Obviously, tracing conceptual development in this way requires an great amount of work. Although I can draw on some previous work (Lagendijk, 1997, 2001), and reviews by others (see Figure 1), I am essentially confined to drawing preliminary conclusions, based on selective reading of the literature. These conclusions should be read as speculative contributions to the debate, which may nevertheless illustrate how the approach proposed here may shed further light on Markusen's account of 'fuzzy concepts'. I structure my speculative statement following the three directions distinguished above (forward, horizontal and backward relations).

To start with, most *operationalisation* (forward linkages) takes place through case studies analysis of particular regions. To bridge the link between regional concepts and particular cases, various authors have contributed to more operational concepts and, classificatory categories, and typologies. There are, for example, elaborate specifications of the concepts 'industrial districts' and 'regional innovation systems' (Cooke, 1998; Gray et al., 1996, amongst many others). What is striking, however, is that these contributions have not received much response, and thus tend to be less 'sticky' than the core concepts themselves. Even for core concepts such as the ones listed in Figure 1, the literature does not abound in discussions about operationalisation. Highly interesting papers have been written on these issues, but they have not triggered a broader debate about methodological issues, on the practicalities of doing new forms of geographical studies (Yeung, 2000). What we miss, hence, in the words of Markusen (1998, 872), are standards of evidence. Moreover, this relative neglect of forward backfires on the development of the core concepts themselves. Engaging in collective processes of conceptual specification and operationalisation, followed by empirical grounding, also contributes to conceptual clarity and change.

A form of *horizontal* linkages very common in regional studies is cross-referencing. That is, in explaining and positioning TIM concepts many authors seek endorsement by invoking other TIM concepts. This leads, however, as I have argued in an earlier paper, to a high level of circularity, notably amongst the spatial concepts (Lagendijk, 1997; if all these references would be included in Figure 1, many more linkages would emerge). Such circularity, and the resulting rise in overlap between concepts, appears to be more prominent when concepts become more established. Not unsurprisingly, when concepts are introduced, authors tend to point out their specific contribution, and the way they stand out against conventional thinking. For instance, the concept of 'Learning Region' was coined to take more account of the evolutionary, knowledge-based approach of economic development (Morgan, 1997). Equally, Storper (1997) introduced the term 'Regional World' to underpin the untraded, tacit, communicative dimensions of production, contrasting with the material approach to economic linkages. When concepts are absorbed through the conceptual web, however, they tend to lose some of their novelty, and are interpreted as yet another backing of the general trends. In much of the debate, they become buzzwords endorsing the increased significance of: (1) knowledge, notably

tacit knowledge, (2) associational structures underpinning collective learning, (3) uniqueness-based economic specialisation and competitiveness in the face of globalisation, and, combining this with spatial stories, (4) the region as core site of competitiveness (cf. MacKinnon et al., 2002, amongst many others). In terms of disciplinary conventions, there is no strong tradition to put the *novelty* of concepts under scrutiny, and to explore how new ‘fashions’ may yield genuinely new insights, or even new styles of working. This requires, however, an on-going critical debate that seeks to challenge what Barnett (1998, p. 390) describes as the ‘readings of big-name-theory-heads’.

One may wonder how established practices of conceptual scrutiny and reflection could be lacking in what is generally regarded as highly assertive and self-critical academic debate (Scott, 2000). Indeed, at first sight, there does not seem to be a shortage of critical reflections addressing conceptual development. The problem is, however, that most critical accounts in our field do not so much reflect on the relative value of concepts within one conceptual family, but provide ‘grand’ critiques in which the value of entire strands is discussed. Core examples are Amin and Robin’s (1990) critique of the flexible production approaches emerging in the 1980s, Lovering’s (1999) reproach of the ‘new regionalist’ approach, and, indeed, Markusen’s accusation of conceptual fuzziness. While such block reviews thus point at the overall weaknesses of families of concepts in terms of underlying ideas, conventions and practices, they are less instrumental in incremental processes of conceptual development and selection (although see, amongst others, Moulaert & Sekia, 1999; MacLeod, 2001; Barnes, 1996, for proposing conceptual agendas on the basis of more refined comparative conceptual overviews).

Backward linkages, finally, have generally played an important role in the conceptual development of TIM-concepts, especially through the absorption of ideas from other (sub)disciplines. Figure 1 illustrates how regional studies have been inspired by academic fields ranging from neoclassical economics and Marxist theory to cognitive and organisational approaches. So what do these linkages, apart from giving food to a highly diverse intellectual landscape, mean for conceptual development and quality? Basically, backward linkages entail two kinds of translations, namely that of reinterpreting the original idea within the domain of regional studies, and the addition of the spatial dimension. In terms of Figure 1, the first kind of translation occurs primarily in the extraction and (re)formulation of explanatory concepts inspired by ‘external’ thinking (embedding, institutional thickness, non-ubiquitous or non-cosmopolitan assets, etc), while the second kind, the ‘spatialisation’, becomes most manifest in the way these explanatory concepts inform spatial-regional concepts such as ‘industrial districts’ or the ‘Regional World’.

So what is the contribution of backward linkages to conceptual selection and quality? Obviously, we should be aware of the challenges and risks posed by extracting ideas from other field and debates. To be effective, such extracting will necessarily involve generalisation and simplification, and, at best, a partial transfer of the ongoing debates surrounding the original concept. We cannot, in any way, expect translations to be comprehensive. Yet, we could expect translations to be accompanied by a critical reflection on how they are constructed, as well as a continued monitoring of the relevant debates in the original domain. While, once more, a proper verdict would require an in-depth analysis of translations across the TIM-family, available

indications do not yield a very positive image. Discussing the influence of the Regulation approach, for instance, Peck (2000, p. 65) claims that the discourse on flexible specialisation has used a vulgar rendering of Regulationist thinking, which is 'literal', 'denuded', and 'concretist'. More in general, he laments the slippery conception of 'institution' in geography. Other translations of Regulationist ideas in associationalist regional approaches seem to have converted the macro-meso Regulationist perspective into a micro-meso competitiveness perspective. Regulationist ideas are then invoked to explain how regions can build a institutional base securing their competitiveness in global markets arenas, rather than for elucidating the complex institutional basis of market-based economic processes (Lagendijk, 2001).

Similar critique can be levelled against the way the competence or resource-based approach has drawn from business organisation and strategic management thinking. While the regionalist literature has been quick to absorb the notion of competitiveness based on unique, or to use the words of Storper (Storper, 1997), 'non-cosmopolitan', assets, less attention has been paid to the context in which these ideas have developed. The notion of uniqueness, for instance, is part of a hefty debate about the meaning and role of knowledge in the context of competitiveness (Swan & Scarborough, 2001). What has been absorbed is merely the appealing idea that economic agents can take their fate in their own hands by developing unique, inimitable and therefore most valuable economic resources. Again, we cannot avoid the impression of a rather crude translation, induced by neglecting the nuanced debate taking place in the conceptual home base.

Turning to other translations, like from the sociological notions of social embedding and social networks, the impression of crude translation stems in particular from the second side of translation, the 'spatialisation'. Geographers have often been quick in replacing the adjective 'social' by 'spatial', yielding notions like 'spatial networks' and 'spatial embeddedness' (Pike et al., 2000). One can even note a strong spatial-ontological ring in more applied work using the philosophical notion of actor-network. Similarly, regional concepts such as 'Learning Regions' and 'Regional innovation systems' tend to fall in the trap of reification, by presenting the region as a coherent unit of activities and action in the face of external pressures (Keating, 1998). Against these form of reification, recent discussions on scale and circulation have, once more, pointed at the relative meaning of space and the regional scale (Brenner, 2001; Amin & Thrift, 2002). Hopefully these observations will contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the region, as well as to improved practices of conceptual borrowing in the field of regional studies. Yet, given past experiences (and warnings), kicking the habit of 'spatial reification' will not be an easy job.

Conceptual translations also have normative implications. The various domains of conceptual origin mentioned so far represent different normative positions. Ideas from, let's say, mainstream economics or resource-based organisational approaches bring with them an entirely different normative setting than, for instance, ideas from the Regulation approach. Furthermore, the meaning of this setting is transformed when ideas are absorbed in the domain of regional studies. Poor translations, in which the normative settings and transformative implications are obscured, may result in murky or even contradictory outcomes.

Normative dilemmas can be illustrated by reviewing the absorption of the resource-based approach (Lagendijk & Kramsch, 2002). In business studies, the resource-based approach provides an explanation of why firms operating in similar market contexts show divergent performances, contrasting with the conventional market-structure thinking. While the latter stress how firms gain monopolistic or oligopolistic power through exploiting market imperfections, the resource-based approach attributes superior performance to the capacities of firms to improve their productive capacities, i.e. to innovate. This change in perspective has important normative consequences. Rather than associating divergent performances with incidences of market exploitation and imperfection, the resource-based approach offers a justification of persistent differences by invoking the role of innovation. These ideas have been further explored in the context of evolutionary approaches that see markets as environments selecting 'winners' and eradicating 'losers'. Such evolution is normatively endorsed by the acceptance of business failures, and even its institutionalisation through bankruptcy laws. Obviously, transfer of these ideas to regional studies raises all kinds of questions both of an analytical and normative kind. To what extent can regions be considered as repositories of resources like firms? Do we see regions subject to similar evolutionary processes? And, most significantly, how do we translate these insights into policy recommendations geared to addressing regional inequality. While many authors have cautioned against crude notions of innovation-based regional competitiveness that ignore the winner-loser dilemma, there is still need for a broader discussion about the implications of absorbing a resource-based approach in our academic domain. Such a discussion should also take into account relevant debates about firm development and regional/national competitiveness.

These judgements are, admittedly, based on an unmethodical process of participant observation from just one researcher in the field, partially supported by critical notes from other authors. They should be read as an invitation to further systematic research of, and serious reflection on the practices and conventions underpinning regional studies. Nevertheless, the approach followed here suggests that there are deeper causes to the conceptual fuzziness detected by Markusen. Conceptual fuzziness should not just be attributed to how researchers frame one concept, but also to how an academic community engages in a disciplinary process of conceptual development, and the way it strives for conceptual quality. This should not only involve interest in the 'forward' linkage of operationalisation, as emphasised by Markusen, but also in other types of linkages.

The position of case study research

As pointed out by other contributors to this debate, there appears to be a tension between, on the one hand, Markusen's emphasis on agency and action, and on the other hand, her call for more quantitative methods. Like Peck, I am a strong advocate of 'intensive' research methodologies. Not for any principal reasons, but because I share the view that actual research on regional development requires insights into how, in particular places, a multitude of forces, factors and actors produce specific outcomes, that are beyond the reach of model-based approaches. Moreover, regarding the role of 'agents', and somewhat divergent from Peck's preference, I tend to attach much value to agents' discretionary, strategic behaviour. One of the key

challenges in geography still is to improve our theoretical understanding of how self-reflexive individuals, as part of social networks, behave in space (Ernste, 2002).

What regional studies require, therefore, is not *less* but *better* forms of case study. Peck's initial wish list provides important suggestions for how to achieve that. At a deeper level, the role of case study research harks back to the long-standing discussion in geography on contextualisation (Barnes, 1996). Despite the many wise words said about contextualisation within and outside our discipline, and the various strands that have contributed to the discussion, such as critical realism, the yield in terms of methodological refinement has been poor. Partly this has been the result of conceptual difficulties and ambiguities, as manifested, for instance, in the way critical realists have tried to distinguish between 'necessary' and 'contingent' factors, as a way to cope with the essentialism-contextualism dilemma (Sunley, 1996; Barnes, 1996). More generally, however, this methodological poverty may be attributed to a factor already mentioned, namely the lack of reflection on how conceptual discussions are, and should be, translated 'forward' into methodological agendas (Yeung, 2000). The latter may explain, for example, the rather plain, descriptive methods applied in many innovation system studies, and the uncritical way 'regional world' studies tend to portray the views and interests of powerful actors (Lovering, 1999). In this context, recent progress in the field of qualitative, contextualised research, as advanced by Flyvbjerg (2001), may provide new sources of inspiration. Flyvbjerg's handling of power and rationality may help to build a case study methodology that is thorough and critical, and that can overcome certain shortcomings that have characterised case study work in the past.

The question of how to practice regional studies (and economic geography more broadly) is very much on the agenda (Barnes, 1996; Yeung, 2000; Kramsch & Boekema, 2002, amongst many others). In part, this is a matter of organising the movement from the concrete to the abstract, and back. In addition, it also includes a reflection on the various moments of interpretation and reinterpretation involved in scientific work, which make us move in intricate circles of (re)interpretation and debate. It is through this organisational and reflexive endeavour that we may seek to tackle 'fuzziness'. We should accept that the relationship between theoretical concepts and observable facts is complex and multi-faceted; we should not accept, however, the lack of standards that help us to assess the quality and robustness of the discursive links built between theory and empirical observations.

Conclusion

There are, in principle, three ways to deal with the problem of fuzzy concepts. First, in line with more conventional perspectives on scientific development, a discipline may aim for more rigorous standards of conceptual development and selection to curtail fuzziness. Second, following the post-structuralist imagining of disciplines as plural, diverse fields, one could dismiss a notion of 'shared concepts' (in the sense of commonly defined terms). Diversity in conceptual meanings and use may then be seen as a token of plurality and creativity, rather than as a shortcoming. Third, one can think of a middle position. On the one hand, there are clear benefits from having disciplinary 'shared concepts'. Not only may this provide focal points for internal debate, it also contributes to teaching and dialogue with other disciplines and policy-

making. It is especially in influencing policy-making where geographers have performed poorly, also due to internal fragmentation and lack of clear messages (Yeung, 2000). Such 'shared concepts', on the other hand, should not be perceived as foundational, or as constructed through a pre-given epistemological script. They are not more than the focal points of a scientific conversation, which, in turn, is based on a set of shared (albeit evolving and contested) discursive practices and conventions.

Some fuzziness will thus remain. One cannot expect concepts to be entirely unambiguous in a definitional sense. Yet one can strive for a level of debate that tries to cope with the fuzziness in an intelligent way, through good practices of conversations. In terms of the relational framework developed above, this should involve a careful, and ongoing consideration of how concepts are translated from other fields, discussing standards of empirical grounding, and in-depth conceptual review. All these processes are fraught with ambivalence, complexity and uncertainty. They may require new skills, new ways of communication and debates on ethical questions: What and how do we want to contribute to our world? Whom do we involve in what ways in our research? The central message of this paper is that, if indeed it is true that standards in regional studies have slipped, this should not be attributed to alleged substantive changes in the form of 'cultural' or 'institutional' turns, but to lacking standards of academic conversation. More specifically, what is lacking is not so much 'grand critique', i.e. the rhetorical competition of one conceptual family against another, but subtle critique. That is, the painstaking, and admittedly less imaginative work of discussing the relative value and significance of established and as well as emerging concepts within one family, on the basis of in-depth relational assessment.

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Figure 1 An impression of the conceptual genealogy of the 'TIM family' (inspired by Moulaert and Sekia, 1999; Barnes, 1996; Kramsch and Boekema, 2002; Scott, 2000)