

City-regions and the spatialities of urban-rural relations

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Introduction

This short paper offers the outline of a critique of the currently fashionable notion of city-regions, focusing on its understandings of urban-rural relations. I suggest that mainstream formulations of the city-region concept typically figure the rural in subordinate and peripheral terms as a residuum, a resource, a restraint, a refuge, a re-creator, or a reserve. These figurations arise from and depend upon a binary urban-rural logic that casts the rural as inferior. By failing to transcend territorial modes of thinking about place, city-region thinking reinforces this binary. Alternative relational understandings of place could provide the space within urban geography for a more nuanced appreciation of rurality.¹

City-regions

Policy concept

It might be inferred from the currently heated policy debate about urban and regional development in England² that city-regions are a new idea. In fact, urban researchers, planners and geographers have worked with the notion of the city-region, or analogous concepts, for decades. The importance of linkages between urban centres and their surrounding hinterlands is well-established, and the variability of such linkages through time and across space is also widely accepted. The recent upsurge in interest in the idea of city-regions among policy-makers seems to have arisen as a result of the combination of three factors: the failure of the policy of English regional devolution; the emergence of a powerful policy discourse identifying 'urban economic competitiveness' as a key driver of regional

¹ For the avoidance of doubt I want to make it clear that I write from a background in *urban* geography and the main target of my critique is a mode of thinking within *urban* studies (including urban geography) and *urban* policy-making. I am interested in the way questions of rurality are treated by urban scholars and urban practitioners. There is of course a large literature in rural geography and rural studies that adopts a sophisticated and complex understanding of rurality, but with which I shall not deal here.

² The starting point for this paper is the current interest in city-regions within the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which has responsibility for urban and regional policy in England only.

development; and the identification of the lack of fit between local government administrative boundaries and what Ruth Kelly has called 'real, underlying economic geography' as a policy problem.

There is no standardized vocabulary to describe different kinds of urban settlements and their spatial relationships. Terms such as metropolitan area, metropolitan region, city-region, conurbation, megalopolis, polycentric urban region and functional urban region are all used by different writers. For present purposes, however, it is worth distinguishing between concepts that refer simply to large cities and those, such as city-region, that draw attention to the functional linkages and flows between a city and its surrounding area.

A report setting out a *Framework for City-Regions* was prepared by a consortium of academic researchers for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now Department of Communities and Local Government). It acknowledges the historical baggage freighting the terms 'urban region' and 'city-region' and their lack of precision. The research for the *Framework* began from "the simple working assumption that City-Regions comprise a central urban area, or two or more closely inter-linked urban centres, together with those areas that surround them with which they have significant interaction" (Harding et al. 2006: 13). This assumption developed into the following definition:

City-Regions are the enlarged territories from which core urban areas draw people for work and services such as shopping, education, health, leisure and entertainment. The city-regional scale also plays a significant role for business in organising supply chains and accessing producer services. The City-Region is therefore an important *functional* entity. (Harding et al. 2006: 5)

The authors suggest that a city-region represents the 'footprint' or 'reach' of the city—a footprint that necessarily extends beyond the urban core, but whose geometry will vary depending on the type of flow, function, relationship or service under consideration (Harding et al. 2006: 13). This means that the 'geography of City-Regions is fuzzy' (Harding et al. 2006: 5). It also implies that neighbouring city-regions could overlap.

Nothing in these characterisations of city-regions implies that they will necessarily extend into rural areas. In principle the wider footprint of the urban core could cover suburban areas or smaller urban settlements, and most of the small number of mentions of rural areas in the report refer to rural areas outside city regions. In practice, however, it is highly likely that most city-regions will incorporate some rural and semi-rural as well as suburban areas.

Despite considerable governmental (and Ministerial) interest in the idea of city-regions and strong support from Blairite think tanks such as the New Local Government Network, the White Paper on local government published on 26 October 2006 drew back from endorsing them as a formal policy framework. According to media comment this was partly because of opposition from the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) and his officials, who, it has been suggested, would prefer a return to the 'old' model of regional devolution based on eight English regions. The White Paper contained numerous references to city-regions, but the term was used inconsistently. City-regions were posited variously as political actors, demarcated territories and planning units, as well as the functional, but fuzzy, spaces described by Harding et al.

Identifying city-regions

The fuzziness of functional city-regions is often seen as a major hurdle to the use of the concept of city-regions for policy purposes. Their variable catchments seem inimical to conventional territorial systems of public administration. The *Framework for City-Regions* research team undertook a study of the identification and demarcation of city-regions. The resulting working paper, *Mapping City-Regions*, begins with the following definition, which re-emphasizes the one used in the main report:

City-Regions essentially comprise a central urban core together with the relevant commuter hinterland. Their conceptual underpinning is clear: City-Regions are essentially functional definitions of the economic but also of the social 'reach' of cities. The aim in defining them is therefore to identify the boundaries of those areas in which a majority of the population see the core city as 'their' place - in which they may work, shop for certain types of goods, visit for entertainment and leisure pursuits, and with which they identify. As

with any such geometry, there is bound to be fuzziness and overlap at the boundaries of many City-Regions; and the degree of self-containment is likely to vary for different kinds of activity - whether for commuting to work, shopping, leisure, or whatever. (Robson et al. 2006: 1)

Mapping City-Regions notes that there are several bases on which city-regions might be identified in practice. These include labour market flows, housing market transactions, business supply chain linkages, service districts and administrative territories. Although the last of these can be queried as endorsing an 'artificial' set of boundaries, *Mapping City-Regions* points out that such administrative geographies shape public service provision and promote the integration of the territory in question and can thus be seen as contributing to city-region formation. Using labour market flows as a starting point the paper seeks to identify city regions on the basis of quantitative empirical data. Two alternative methods are described and applied. The first, labelled 'bottom-up' or 'inductive', uses a non-nodal and exhaustive approach. This makes no assumptions about the destinations of commuters, but tries to demarcate boundaries that divide the entire territory of England into a set of a regional labour markets with a certain level of self-containment. For example, 65% self-containment means that 65% of commuters live and work within a region's boundaries. Higher levels of self-containment generate larger regions.

This method is computationally sophisticated, but has two characteristics that undermine its applicability to the definition of city-region outlined above. First, the fact that the regions are non-nodal means that any given region may not necessarily contain the kind of major urban centre usually understood as being at the core of a city-region. Second, the fact that the method is exhaustive means that every part of the country is allocated to one (and only one) region, whereas in practice some rural areas lie beyond the 'reach' of city-regions defined as 'urban core plus hinterland', and some neighbouring city-regions may overlap.

Partly for these reasons the authors of *Mapping City-Regions* also offer an alternative 'top-down' or 'deductive' approach to demarcating regional labour markets. This second method, starts by identifying the urban cores that are assumed to lie at the heart of city-regions. The empirical mapping used a list of 39 such cores, from Plymouth in the south-west to Newcastle/Gateshead/Sunderland in the north-east.

Each local authority district was then assessed according to the proportion of its residents who commute out to one of the nodes. The threshold percentage of out-commuters can be adjusted to produce different sets of regional boundaries. A threshold of 35% of out-commuters produces smaller regions than one of 15% (because rates of out-commuting to a given urban centre decline with distance). This approach is nodal, because it defines the destination nodes for commuting flows and non-exhaustive, because it accepts that some parts of the country may fall outside any city-region labour market. It also allows neighbouring regions to overlap. One shortcoming evident in the top-down analysis is the use of local authority districts as the units for analysis. This produces 'lumpy' regional boundaries that follow administrative, rather than labour market geographies. However this is a technical problem rather than one inherent in the methodology and could presumably be addressed through the use of data disaggregated to smaller spatial scales (e.g. wards).

The data analysis in *Mapping City-Regions* found strong spatial similarities between top-down regions based on 25% out-commuting thresholds and bottom-up regions based on professional and managerial commuting flows with 80% self-containment. Almost all of the regions demarcated by the bottom-up analysis contained one or a closely linked pair of the urban centres identified by the top-down approach. However, five of the most rural of the bottom-up regions in England contained none of the 39 major urban centres. This is consistent with the idea that demarcating city-regions cannot be done on an exhaustive basis if the concept is applied consistently.

The other methods of city-regional demarcation such as housing market transactions, supply chain linkages and service provision were examined in the report through case studies of Bristol and Manchester, and were not applied to the whole country.

City-regions and urban-rural relations: six Rs

Framework for City-Regions reflects and informs current policy thinking about city-regions in England and its conceptual and methodological approaches accord with the main trends in academic research in the field. It is therefore a good benchmark against which to assess the theoretical and practical implications of city-regionalism for urban-rural relations.

This dominant model of city-regionalism reveals a paradox in relation to rural areas. On the one hand, rural areas can be seen as integral to the idea of city-region. A city-region comprises a city and its (by implication at least partly rural) hinterland. On the other, the necessarily urban focus of the city-region concept means that rural areas are at most included as a subordinate component of an essentially urban phenomenon and may be neglected entirely.

This paradox has led to some acute dilemmas for local policy-makers. For example, the idea of city-regions has been built into many of the new Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). The North-east RSS proposes a spatial planning framework organized around two city-regions: one focused on Tyne and Wear and one focused on Tees Valley. Some of the most heavily populated parts of County Durham (including the university and market town of Durham City) lie between the two. Local officials have had to decide whether to argue that these in-between areas do (and/or should), or conversely do not (and/or should not), form part of one or other (or even both) city-regions. What might seem to be purely a matter of nomenclature could have significant practical consequences. If Durham City, for example, were included in the Tyne and Wear city-region it might benefit from a policy framework and system of resource allocation designed to prioritize city-regions. However, if it were included only as part of the hinterland, rather than the urban core, then it might find itself relegated to commuter-belt status. Other, more remote, rural parts of the County have no real prospect of being considered part of either city-region and nor would most of the people who live in them wish them to be. The dilemma for public officials in such areas is how to prevent an emphasis on city-regions from reducing their capacity to meet the needs of their residents for adequate housing, jobs and services.

This section of the paper considers how rural areas and rurality are figured in current city-region thinking. I want to suggest that in cultural terms there are at least six figures that can be identified: rural as residuum, rural as resource, rural as restraint, rural as refuge, rural as re-creator, and rural as reserve.³ The first three of these are immanent in the city-region concept, at least in its English form. The latter three do not appear much in the principal academic and policy formulations of the city-region

³ These or comparable figures can also be found in other many other policy discourses. City-region thinking is not unique in according subordinate or dependent status to rural areas.

concept, but they form part of a wider contemporary public discourse on urbanization and its discontents.

Residuum

A residuum is 'that which remains' and in some ways this is the most obvious way in which rural areas are marked (or perhaps that should be *unmarked*) in the city-region concept. In spatial terms, the most fully rural areas are those that lie beyond the reach of the urban footprint, beyond the boundary of the city-region. The residual character of rurality is revealed in the two approaches to labour market geography used in the *Mapping City-Regions* report. In the bottom-up, exhaustive approach, there are no residual areas. Everywhere is included and everywhere is treated equally (there are no nodes or cores). Rural areas are accorded exactly the same status as urban areas from a computational point of view. However, the result is a set of regions that runs counter to the spirit of the city-region concept, which is explicitly defined in core-hinterland terms. The alternative, top-down, approach conforms to the spirit of the city-region idea, but as a result leaves residual rural areas.

The residual marking of rurality can also be seen in public policy initiatives such as the various 'rural renaissance' programmes advocated by the Regional Development Agencies. While in many ways these demonstrate a strong positive commitment to rural areas, it is also the case that they have been initiated in part in response to the much higher profile attention accorded to the 1999 report by Richard Rogers and the Urban Task Force which was titled *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. The current emphasis on cities as drivers of innovation and economic competitiveness also tends to cast rural areas (at least by implication) as residual zones of intellectual stasis and economic dependence.

Resource

Although the city-region approach tends to figure rurality as residual by default, the concept also suggests a much more substantive (though still arguably subordinate) role for rural areas: as a resource. As the hinterland for the urban core, rural and semi-rural areas contribute (according to the model) to the functioning of the city region through various kinds of provisioning. The two most obvious are interlinked: labour and housing. Indeed the predominant labour-market-based descriptions of

city-regions cast the hinterland primarily in the role of commuter belt. However, hinterlands may also provide water (from rural reservoirs, for example), energy (though today energy distribution networks are organized mainly on a national or international basis), demand for goods and services, transport facilities such as airports, motorways and park-and-ride facilities, leisure facilities and tourist attractions. As concern about the contribution of 'food miles' to climate change grows we are also seeing a gradual return to the idea of the hinterland as a source of food, albeit on a small scale and mainly for elite consumption sectors. Examples include the growing popularity of farmers' markets, AOC certification programmes, organic box schemes and the 'slow food' movement.

Restraint

The third main way in which rural areas are figured in city-regionalist thinking is as restraints on urban growth and sprawl. This is particularly true in countries like England that have an active green belt policy. Green belts may be considered as integrated parts of their respective city-regions for two reasons. First, they form a key part of the urban land-use planning system. Without the city, the green belt is redundant. Conversely, their proponents argue that without green belts cities would dissolve into an amorphous urban sprawl. Second, and something of a challenge to that view, the growth in urban employment and service provision means that city-regions now often extend *beyond* their green belts. Commuters increasingly leap-frog the green belt in search of cheaper housing or a rural residential location. This means that green belts may gradually become *internal* parts of functional urban social and economic spaces.

Refuge

The figures of residuum, resource and restraint are all in some senses integral to the very idea of city-regions at least in their current policy guise in the UK. The three other Rs, refuge, re-creator and reserve, are not logical corollaries of the city-region concept, but are consistent with it and appear in many public debates about contemporary processes of urbanization. First, rural areas are often seen as a refuge from the urban. Unlike the unmarked residuum, a refuge has positive content—it is a place of sanctuary from what are seen as harmful or destructive aspects of urban life. There several ways in which the rural may be figured as a refuge. It may take the form of an imagined rural idyll. It may be a material space within which certain

kinds of social, cultural and economic practices, seen incompatible with urbanism or under attack by urbanites, can be carried on. Examples include 'traditional' agricultural techniques, artisanal forms of production and 'country sports'. The rural may be figured as a refuge for sets of knowledges, beliefs and skills that are thought to be irrelevant to urban living ('woodcraft' and 'natural history', for instance). Finally, the rural may be figured as a psychological refuge from the anxiety and speed of city life. The figure of the refuge is by definition conservative with a small 'c', and is often (though perhaps not inevitably) yoked to right-of-centre politics

Re-creator

Those who like the idea of the rural as a refuge from the depredations of contemporary urban living tend to have strong objections to the notion that a principal function of the countryside is to provide a set of leisure consumption spaces for urban dwellers. However, the notion that rural areas are places that city folk go for recreation is hardly new. The figure of the rural as re-creator incorporates the use of the countryside for holidays, weekend cottages, campsites, theme parks, nature trails, long-distance footpaths, cycleways, boating, bird-watching, day-trips, sightseeing, 'leisure shopping' and a host of other activities. Unlike the figure of 'resource' which may also include leisure consumption opportunities of various kinds, rural recreational spaces need not be contiguous to the urban core and can include remote rural areas lying outside city-regions, or the rural hinterlands of other cities. At the same time there is still a functional relationship between rurality as re-creator and urbanism in that the focus is primarily on meeting the consumption demand of urban populations.

Reserve

The final figure casts rural areas as a reserve or reservation. This is a longstanding trope in geographical writing, and in previous generations it encompassed the role of the countryside as a provider of food security, and of reserves of timber, among other things. Food security, at least in terms of quantity, no longer a major concern, but the idea that the countryside offers a bulwark against a wide variety of risks is of continuing importance. This figure overlaps to some extent with that of the refuge in that the emphasis is partly on preservation and conservation. However, whereas the relationship between city and refuge is antagonistic, that between city and reserve is complementary. While the refuge protects rurality from the city and seeks to

conserve objects and practices that the city may see as redundant, irrelevant or malign, the reserve is partly about protecting the city from itself and protecting things that the city values. For example, reserves might 'protect the city from itself' by mitigating the effects of urban-induced climate change through forestry. National Parks are refuges and re-creators, but they are also reserves, because they seek to ensure the survival and development of species, landscapes and activities that are *non-* rather than *anti-*urban.

Spatial imaginaries

What can we conclude from these different figurations of the rural in city-region policy discourse? First, the city-region concept clearly (unashamedly?) privileges the urban over the rural. For a start, it is predicated on the assumption that cities are the dynamos of their regional and national economies. To be sure, there is considerable (though not unanimous) evidence supporting this assumption, but that fact does not undermine the point that rural areas occupy a subordinate position within the schema. Even when rurality is figured in positive terms, as a resource or a reserve for example, it is secondary to and dependent upon a logic of urbanization.

Second, city-regional discourse depends on an largely unspoken binary distinction between the urban and the rural. Such binary thinking maps onto dichotomous spatial imaginaries. There is little scope in the city-regional view of the world for hybrid spaces or ways of being. Urban is core, rural is hinterland. The region is urban, the residuum beyond the region is rural. The urban is the sphere of employment, production and growth, the rural is the sphere of domesticity, reproduction and conservation. The urban is masculinized, the rural is feminized, and so on.

Third, the concept of a city-region invokes and reinforces the long-standing dominance of territoriality as a mode of thinking about cities and other kinds of places. The territorial mode of thinking is evident in spatial policy-making, urban planning, urban and regional politics and boosterist place-marketing as well as in academic urban studies (including urban geography). By a territorial mode of thinking about place I refer to the tendency to understand a place as a spatially contiguous, non-overlapping, functionally integrated and structurally coherent geographical area. Such a vision of place is exactly what underpins most accounts of city regions. In sharp contrast, contemporary spatial theory has largely abandoned territorial

accounts of place in favour of accounts of spatiality that emphasise relationality, networks, unboundedness (Amin 2004), 'splintering urbanism' (Graham and Marvin 2001), discontinuity, folds, and action-at-a-distance.

The origins of the city-region concept can be traced to Christaller's hierarchical and highly ordered account of central places. From this viewpoint, rural areas will always be subordinate, dependent, secondary and marginal. A fully relational account of the urban, on the other hand, might just generate the space if not for an autonomous rurality (autonomy is a fool's paradise given the depth of relational interconnections), then at least for an understanding of the rural as integral to the constitution of regionality. As long as academic and policy discourse remains dominated by territorial conceptions of the urban, rurality will inevitably be a subaltern category. A non-territorial understanding of the urban may not be a sufficient condition for taking the rural seriously, but it is surely a necessary one.

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