EDITORIAL

Editorial for virtual special issue: The emergence of new forms of flexible governance arrangements in and for urban regions: an European perspective

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INTRODUCTION

There has been growing academic, theoretical and empirical interest in the past 35 years in ‘governance’, as employed to motivate cooperation in and across specialized systems, which impact the everyday life of citizens and organizations. Rhodes (1996) notes that ‘governance’ is a pervasive, albeit inconsistent, term, whilst Jessop (1998) traces its origin to the classical Latin and ancient Greek words for ‘steering boats’, in the sense of actions or manners of governing, guiding or ‘steering’ conduct, often overlapping with ‘government’. Academics define ‘governance’ in multiple ways (Stead, 2013), which are not all mutually cognate (Rhodes, 1996). Kohler-Koch and Eising (1999) argue that governance varies from country to country, and even within countries. The term is not static, but rather flexible and continually adapting, as shown by this special issue’s six papers.

Stead (2013) attributes this definitional disparity to different institutional settings between places as well as differences in the nature of influential non-governmental interest groups, key players and cultural factors. Jessop (1998) regards governance as representing the modes and manner of governing, government to the institutions and agents charged with governing, and governing to the act of governing itself. Kohler-Koch and Eising (1999) popularized the definition of governance as ‘structured ways and means in which the divergent preferences of independent actors are translated into policy choices “to allocate values”, so that the plurality of interests is transformed into co-ordinated action and the compliance of actors is achieved’ (p. 4). Stead (2013) regards governance as being primarily concerned with the attainment of binding decisions in the public domain, comprising both formal and informal, and horizontal and vertical, practices. Faludi (2012) defines governance being commonly perceived more broadly than by government institutions. Bevir (2011) argues that governance ‘refers to theories and issues of social coordination.'
and the nature of all patterns of rule’, as well as practices and dilemmas, which place ‘less emphasis than did their predecessors on hierarchy and the state’ (p. 1).

In the mid-2000s, primarily European spatial planners began to invoke the multilevel territorial governance concept (inter alia Schmitt & Van Well, 2016; and Faludi, 2012, for more critical views), just as the terms ‘territory’ and ‘territorial cohesion’ were entering spatial planning discourses. Multilevel governance approaches highlight vertical and horizontal coordination linkages, integrating relevant interest groups and key players. Multilevel governance mushroomed from the 1990s onwards in order to capture changing relationships between the European Union’s (EU) different territorial governmental levels. Despite this focus, little attention has been paid to governance’s more specific territorial-oriented dimensions or how knowledge of territorial specificities supports spatial policy-making. This is despite the increasing complexity of European multilevel governance (e.g., more innovative types of regional cooperation, cross-border interactions and soft governance spaces).

From fuzzy and overlapped territorial boundaries to flexible territorial governance
Rescaling and reterritorialization approaches, which are more focused on issues of economic development and competitiveness (Brenner, 2004) have provided a new setting for understanding how urban regions are driving the restructuring of nation-states (Tomàs, 2015). This has achieved European purchase, where the regional scale is increasingly considered as a ‘functional space’ for economic planning and political governance (Keating, 1998) alongside water management or spatial clustering, despite the absence of a coherent definition here of ‘urban regions’.

Rodríguez-Pose (2008) sees urban regions as typically defined by three dimensions: firstly, a city or urban core (or cores) surrounded by other cities; secondly, with a regional or suburban hinterland, with a clear centre–periphery distinction; and thirdly, with centre and periphery connected via functional links, often defined in terms of commuter flows, local or regional labour markets or different economic activities’ catchment areas. Following Tomàs (2015), urban regions can be regarded as spaces for social and political mobilization, whilst the OECD (2012) defines ‘urban areas’ as functional economic areas of similar size across countries. The urban and regional debate must urgently clarify these various terms, given the risks that there is a risk of lazy conceptual elisions between researchers who are actively debating the role of economic agglomeration in fostering growth, and regional policies in maximizing and rebalancing national economic performance, with Tomàs (2015) notably arguing that the region’s political dimension deserves more attention.

This special issue contributes to both the theory and the practice of governance in more flexible or fluid territories, in which new forms of flexible governance arrangements have followed the emergence of spatial planning activities outside the statutory planning system, including pioneering approaches to territorial management involving soft spaces and fuzzy territorial boundaries (Haughton, Allmendinger, Counsell, & Vigar, 2010). The term ‘soft spaces’ signals an attempt to understand the implications of relational and non-state-centric geographies for spatial planning and governance (Walsh, Jacuniak-Suda, Knieling, & Othengrafen, 2012). Critically, Faludi (2012) argues that Europe itself constitutes a soft space with fuzzy boundaries. This special issue focuses specifically on the emergence of new, flexible and informal governance arrangements, which can be found across Europe, in a variety of circumstances and with diverse aims and rationales. Taking these papers together, we can possibly draw pertinent lessons to inform the existing academic and policy-oriented literature.

These papers greatly highlight the most prominent gaps in the current understanding of flexible modes of governance within the emergence of new territorial settings, with a view to sketching out future research agendas built on the intellectual fissures of current practical and theoretical
knowledge. The special issue involves six papers in which three specific knowledge lacunae are visible. The first is the emergence of new kinds of governance spaces dealing with this issue of fuzziness. Second, there is the emergence of a new setting of inter-territorial cooperation as flexible territorial-based governance arrangements. Finally, there is the emergence of new kinds of functionality regarding urban regions based on the labour market and home-to-work travel.

NEW FUZZY FORMS OF GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

One element here involves deepening our understanding of different kinds of cooperation emerging around territorial governance in order to address multilocal issues, specifically in the case of water governance covering macro-regions (Sielker) or within a single nation-state (Thaler). Stead (2013) argues that policy statements often miss out networked decision-making with variable geometries at multiple levels, as well as within fuzzy and often overlapping boundaries. Faludi (2012) attributes this to a mismatch between urban/regional networks cutting across administrative units and their formal delineations.

Sielker seeks to shed a further light on new approaches in European governance, building empirical evidence from the EU Strategy for the Danube Region to explain why a trend towards macro-regions arises and, specifically, why interest groups become involved in these informal activities. Sielker convincingly argues that in-depth analyses of interest groups and key players’ opinions regarding European macro-regions, such as the Danube Region, offer new insights into European policy process evolution, the search for new governance arrangements and related drivers of cooperation. Her analysis greatly contributes to the discussion on new flexible modes of governance, whereby stakeholders’ willingness to cooperate and commit to development depends critically on these ‘soft’ characteristics, as well as explains why these macro-regional frameworks are highly promising to other European regions and beyond.

The paper by Thaler focuses on a different sector of daily life, which is nonetheless of paramount importance: water management. He devotes particular attention to the roles that soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries play in shaping opportunities and barriers for partnership activities in flood-risk management. The case study in Thaler’s paper covers the Ill-Walgau inter-local flood risk management cooperation in the Austrian federal state of Vorarlberg. Ill-Walgau embodies a long tradition of riparian regulation, where upstream communities changed the river flow for the purpose of agricultural and industrial developments. He focuses on fuzzy boundaries and soft spaces, which have influenced Austrian flood-risk management strategy. In line with the literature, he defines new planning practices in terms of the use of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries. These new planning practices encourage flexibility and creativity in regional and local decision-making processes. One of the advantages of these soft spaces in flood-risk management lies in the ability to adapt to local interests and objectives. His findings indicate that the use of fuzzy boundaries and soft spaces shows the potential to change flood-risk management towards sustainability. In line with his paper, and an insightful remark, is that these new spatial planning concepts encourage the use of green infrastructure in flood-risk management.

NEW FORMS OF COOPERATIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE

The State of European Cities report (European Commission, 2016) highlights that new forms of urban governance are needed, so that European cities can effectively cope with population growth, housing needs and labour markets. As a recommendation, the European Commission describes how European urban regions are experimenting with metropolitan governments and inter-municipal authorities, such as in Lyon (France) or Stuttgart (Germany), in order to ensure effective urban governance. In this regard, urban regions need to enjoy sufficient autonomy and
resources, as well as a clearly identified decision-making process, support via civic participation and new forms of cooperative governance.

In her paper, Deraëve is also concerned with new governance arrangements in European urban regions, focusing on France’s newly created ‘Pôles Métropolitains’ (PM), meaning ‘Urban Poles’, which are the latest iteration of an evolutionary process dating back to the 1960s. She focuses on metropolization and city governance involving two PMs: the Loire-Bretagne Pôle Métropolitain, which has used intercity networking to reinforce its European visibility, and the G10 (in the Rheims region), which has been a more genuine (if rarer) functional interurban network. The PMs grew out of the French authorities’ attempts to overcome France’s fragmented governance, which suffers from numerous territorial divisions alongside barriers between institutional levels. They were certainly motivated by a desire to address French cities’ weak capacity to develop spatial planning projects, which were capable of coping with metropolitan challenges, including intercity competition and social inclusion. Deraëve ascribes the strength of the PM to the novelty of sharing competences at the municipal level by the means of a joint association. Indeed, she concludes that informal bonds between interest groups and key players, as well as further partial depoliticization, are the key for effective PMs.

Casula’s paper also addresses inter-territorial cooperation, specifically from a political science perspective, at the municipal level in Italy. By analysing two regional cases, those of Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, Casula compares the potential roles for Italian regions in supporting the consolidation of inter-municipal cooperation. Regardless of the economic crisis and consequential austerity measures, different regional strategies are path dependent and strongly conditioned by the legacies of the past. Given that national policies have required small Italian municipalities to manage cooperatively their core services and functions following rather top-down logic, this has paved the way for a new approach towards inter-municipal cooperation. Austerity measures and forced territorial reorganizations have been clearly influenced by regional practices, which have been embedded over the years in Italian regions. Casula’s study highlights that regions are ‘free’ to decide upon their respective inter-municipal cooperation, at a distance from national governments.

**NEW FUNCTION-BASED PERSPECTIVES ON REGIONAL DEFINITIONS**

The final special issue theme involves researcher perspectives on defining regions based on functional characteristics, such as intrinsic characteristics (Quinn) and travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) (Ozkul). This theme is relevant as there is no consensus regarding the definition of regions, urban regions or functional urban regions. Functional urban areas, according to the EU–Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition, consist of a city and its commuting zones (European Commission, 2016).

Quinn’s paper explores the idea of functionality in regional development processes in England’s East Midlands region, specifically related to efforts to attract EU regional funds. He argues that, in light of the new EU Financial Framework 2014–20, nation-states have been trying to establish new areas to attract EU regional funds, which raises an interesting question about the nature of regions and whether policy-makers actually need to consider place-specific characteristics when devising economic development interventions. He advocates that ‘functionality’ is crucial to regional coherence and the subsequent success or failure of region-level policy initiatives. This notion of regional coherence is often completely absent from the academic and policy literature, while Quinn highlights how these funding approaches are creating new places at the sub-national level. Quinn contends that regions lacking economic, cultural or political cohesion will struggle to build governance capacity and networks, as well as to attract public and private sector involvement in policy initiatives. His empirical evidence and analysis demonstrate how regional characteristics can affect policy outcomes and that governments should consider these when making decisions about local economic interventions.
Ozkul explores the changing nature of commuting behaviour in England and Wales, drawing parallels with the evolution of the corresponding statistical unit known as travel-to-work areas (TTWAs). With TTWAs expanding since the 1980s, functional city-regions have also increased in scope in the intervening period. Ozkul takes data from the 1981 and 2001 censuses, which relate to commuting patterns, in order to analyse longer-term socio-economic dynamics affecting city-regions’ structures. Echoing Quinn, Ozkul estimates that if commuting distances continue increasing around metropolitan areas, then nearby areas will soon be ‘captured’ by many of the functional areas, such as Reading near London. This has important policy implications due to the expectation that significant increases in labour market sizes will lead to encroachments on multiple administrative areas. The overall effect here is likely to create larger metropolitan areas that are more strongly attractive to workers, polycentric and contain fuzzy boundaries, which will contribute to more interconnected and flexible functional regions.

NETWORKING, COOPERATION AND GOVERNANCE: A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA?

In our estimation, there is still a need to embrace critical thinking, as well as to conduct further research into these evolving flexible governance arrangements in and for urban regions within the European context and beyond. Furthermore, metropolitan regions, city-regions or urban regions, whatever we call them, also have a symbolic and political dimension that is worthy of being researched. Addressing and dealing with these new modes of ‘doing governance’ in urban regions is a challenging task for academics, spatial planners and land-use planners, as well as regional policy-makers.

These six papers, when taken together, provide empirical-based lessons which could allow for overcoming established institutions’ parochialism and rigid governance arrangements. Developing networks of innovative regional actors, along with engaging a diverse range of interest groups and key players in developing governance arrangements, emerges as a path for effective governance practices in and for urban regions. One of the core conclusions of Quinn’s paper is that regions need a sense of functionality if the territorial networks and institutions set up within them are to gain policy–business traction and maximize impact. Based on his case study, he argues that the East Midlands can be defined as a cartographical region, but not as a political, cultural or economic region, as it does not meet the criteria presented by Tomaney (2009) and Paasi (2009). Ozkul’s paper demonstrates the potential for a revised TTWA construct for the UK’s 2011 Census with a possible extension to the wider EU community as an effective tool for regional development and territorial cohesion, thereby contributing to the attainment of territorial cohesion goals, as postulated in the Lisbon Treaty.

The papers confront the emergence of new types of cooperation and the implications for the existing European multilevel governance system and actor networks. They greatly allow for the reinforcement of the mechanisms of flexible governance, and show that governance arrangements within soft spaces must change in response to different contexts, while allowing for negotiation involving manifold interest groups and key players. Such negotiation and multilevel cooperation ought to facilitate political actions. Sielker’s paper reinforces this idea. While Deraève emphasizes the notion that informal bonds between interest groups and key players are key to effective PMs, Thaler concludes that fuzzy territorial boundaries and soft spaces show the potential to change flood-risk management towards greater sustainability. The approaches debated in these papers encourage flexibility in governance practices at the urban regional level. A final important remark relates to the fact that these papers assertively warn against a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, while emphasizing the need to recognize local social, cultural, historical and economic contexts when addressing urban regional challenges.
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