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The accident of the region. A strategic relational perspective on the construction of

the region's significance. second revision

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Short Abstract

What explains the strong performative of the 'region' in academic and popular

perceptions? This paper explores this question at two levels, namely that of broader

political, economic and social shifts and that of institutional and discursive

mediations. The assessment uses an evolutionary perspective based on the Strategic

Relational Approach (SRA) and recent institutional-discursive elaborations. Specific

attention is paid to questions of spatial-scalar configurations and economic versus

non-economic aspects of regional development.

Abstract

Both in academic debate and in popular perceptions the region is presented as an

important entity in economic, political, social and spatial processes. This has resulted

in a strong performative role of the region not only in mainstream debates across these

domains, but also in a wide range of political and policy processes and practices.

Recent critiques have challenged certain key features of the dominant perception of the region, notably its portrayal of the region as something bounded and fixed. But what triggered the emphasis on the region in the first place? To what extent can the significance of the region be attributed to broader political, economic and social shifts? To what extent does it present a more accidental outcome of processes and actions that, in combination, happened to put the region centre stage? To address explore these questions, this paper will adopt the Strategic Relation Approach (SRA) launched by Jessop and further developed by Hay and Sum. This approach advances a historical perspective on the production of hegemonic concepts and also seeks to integrate 'softer' discursive approaches within a broader, structuralist perspective. The result is a more precise identification of how certain more structural changes and shifts induced moments for the creation of new discursive articulations and actions oriented towards the region.

Introduction

Studies on region formation have strongly benefited from recent discussions on the constructivist and relational nature of regions and scale, and on 'scalar politics' against the backdrop of globalisation (BRENNER, 1999, HAMILTON, 2002, LAGENDIJK, 2002, MACLEOD and GOODWIN, 1999, SWYNGEDOUW, 1997). These accounts shed light on the proliferation of regional regimes as manifested across Europe, including city-regional regimes, cross-border regions, regional economic districts and clusters, rural development areas, various subnational/subfederal regional divisions etc. (HERRSCHEL and

NEWMAN, 2002, KEATING, 1998, LE GALÈS and LEQUESNE, 1998, LUKASSEN, 1999). But the critical question remains how the rising significance of the region, in both an analytical and normative sense, is itself predicated upon a wider set of cultural, political, economic and policy practices. How did the region, with all its associated concepts, turn into such an apparently dominant or 'omnipresent' imaginary (see Jones, Macleod and Harrison in this issue??)?

The answer to such questions has traditionally been sought in working with either a structurally oriented or an agency-oriented approach. Structurally, the rise of the region can be seen as a logical outcome of broader trends and pervasive developments, such as globalisation, flexibilisation of production, state restructuring, and urban expansion. The analysis then focuses on how a limited set of tendencies, economic, political, social, have privileged the region in spatial and scalar developments. In agency-oriented perspectives, regions are seen as constructed, discursively and materially, through a myriad of processes, performing through their own logics, routines and practices, and manifesting their own momentum and temporarily stable outcomes. Recent so-called 'soft' approaches have focused on specific practices related to economic innovation and clustering, strategic spatial planning, sustainability and collaborative, inclusive approaches to planning (CHATTERTON, 2002, CLEMENT, 2000, GLASMEIER, 2000, GOVERDE, 2003, LAGENDIJK, 2005, MASKELL and MALMBERG, 1999, RAVETZ and ROBERTS, 2000, VIGAR et al., 2000).

Recent theoretical work has attempted to bring these perspectives together rather than seeing them as opposites. More specifically, this paper responds to calls to embed such 'softer' notions in a more structurally and historically oriented account with more emphasis on broader political-economic conditions and transitions (GORDON MACLEOD, 2001). An intriguing question is for instance to what extent specific practices and associated ideas can be seen as channels of mediation, or even causal mechanisms for, broad-scaled political-economic and spatial processes (cf. JESSOP, 2004a, JESSOP, 2004c)? We need a perspective, therefore, that is able to straddle both levels of analysis, that of broader changes and specific practices. The main inspiration for such a perspective will be the Strategic Relation Approach (SRA) as developed by Jessop, Hay and Sum, amongst others.

The structure of the contribution is as follows. After introducing the key research question, the first part of the paper will discuss the SRA, with a specific focus on discursive developments. Then, Sum's perspective on the production of hegemony will be presented, which will shed light on the rise of 'regional imaginaries'. The combination of the SRA and Sum's approach is particularly helpful since it draws the attention to the way the discursive dimension is intertwined with material, economic as well as non-economic aspects.

Using this conceptual apparatus, the second part will shed light on the rise of 'regional imaginaries' in more detail. By necessity, the latter is based primarily on a review of broad observations and selected evidence.

The rise of regional imaginaries – an initial exploration

Geographers have long been struggling with the dilemmas of structuralism and functionalism on the one hand, and voluntarism on the other. In structuralist accounts, regional developments tend to be read off from broader developments, relegating regions to by-products of global change. In voluntarist accounts, regions basically determine their own fate. Massey (1979) was one of the first to discuss to what extent the region itself presents a causal force or an agent, versus the wider spatial structures through which regions are constituted, such as the spatial division of labour controlled by corporate power. Whereas Massey focused on the role of organisations, work inspired by the Regulation Approach explored the critical role of institutional development at various spatial levels in shaping a temporally and spatially differentiated capitalist economy (TICKELL and PECK, 1995). Marrying Marxist with institutionalist approaches, the Regulation Approach is concerned with how the fundamental contradictory and crisis-ridden nature of capitalism is mediated through time- and space specific institutional arrangements. These arrangements bear upon, in particular, labour relations, the role of the state, international relations, and the money and enterprise form. Recent work has also taken into account discursive aspects of socio-economic development, providing a richer picture of how certain arrangements become (temporarily) hegemonic (JESSOP, 2004a, LEWIS et al., 2002).

Inspired by the work of Massey and the regulationist writings, geographers have further explored the role of space-bound institutions in economic and social development, increasingly zooming in on the region. The interest turned, in particular, to 'soft' institutional factors, to conventions of communication, interaction and collective action embedded in regional socio-economic environments or 'worlds'(STORPER, 1997). In so doing, the literature attempted to move further away from what were regarded 'structuralist' approaches, countering their insensitivity to spatial diversity, and, in particular, to capacities of local agents and arrangements to make structural difference in the course of regional development. Both regulatory and institutionalist and writings, hence, provide a framework for understanding the position and significance of the region by looking how local forms of development, interaction and agency are shaped in the context of broader forms and changes. In such a view, regions are political, institutional and discursive *constructs* of which the development is structurally conditioned and enabled, but not fully determined, by external conditions (cf. AGNEW, 1999).

Despite these moves, however, determination and causality remain highly problematic issues. 'Soft' institutionalism, on the one hand, seems to have overstepped its mark by reducing the 'external' dimension to a simple set of global forces to which locally embedded, interactive agents may respond through collective forms of action (GORDON MACLEOD, 2001). They are so much focused on local (inter)action as a socio-cultural phenomenon that they ignore broader economic specificities and contingencies (JESSOP and SUM,

2006). Comparable to neo-liberal perspectives, local development presents as

endogenous responses to a uniform, and inexorable set of external challenges.

So, ironically, while its 'soft' tone appeals strongly to academics and

professionals committed to regional development, there is a serious danger

that the approach actually plays into the hands of local agents pursuing a neo-

liberally oriented 'competitiveness' agenda (LOVERING, 1999).

The Regulation Approach, on the other hand, makes a major contribution to

critical institutionalist thinking in providing a sophisticated account of how

capitalism evolves in a variety of time- and space-specific forms, and of how

these forms interrelate at macro and meso levels. The approach shows a poor

capability, however, to conceptualise the micro-level (individual,

organisational, collective) in a non-instrumentalist way, to apprehend the

relation between culture, discourses and action, and to conceptualise the

interaction between global, national, local/regional levels (MACLEOD, 1997).

Despite the interest in how institutions are mediated through time and place,

and hence in institutional plurality and socio-economic variability, current

writings continue to show a marked tendency to infer institutional

transformations from perceived changes in capitalism at the macro level

(GORDON MACLEOD, 2001, PECK, 2003). In particular, geographical work

appears to hold on to models in which, and institutional change is associated

primarily with transitions between modes of regulation (Fordist, Post-Fordist)

(GOODWIN, 2001, JONES, 1997).

As GOODWIN (2001) points out, we should be very careful with translating and projecting regulatory concepts onto the regional or urban level (cf. COLLINGE, 1999). He thus advocates, in line with more sophisticated regulatory approaches (JESSOP and SUM, 2006) to perceive the notion of regulation more in terms of *process* than of structure or mode: "If we use the concept of 'regulation as process' rather than that of 'mode of regulation' (….) we can investigate issues at the urban level – such as transport, housing, social polarisation, employment change and economic development – and still maintain a purchase on how each of these is related both to each other and to wider sets of social, economic and political processes" (Goodwin, 2001, p. 82). Goodwin thus concludes that: "The use of the regulation approach would lead to the conclusion that for those interested in local changes in housing, planning and welfare provision, the local state and local governance cannot be fully understood outside their roles (both positive and negative) in the ebb and flow of regulation. However, the point should also be made that neither can they be fully understood within them. The institutions and practices of local and regional government have their own histories and patterns of development" (p. 84-85). This points, once more, to the need for a sophisticated account of both more structural and agency-oriented (or strategic) aspects of spatial development.

Bringing both 'structure' and the 'subject' back in: the Strategic Relational approach

How can we account for spatial phenomena, and the way they are, to repeat

Goodwin's words, "related both to each other and to wider sets of social,

economic and political processes", and how do we assess the forms and

objects of governance bearing on this kind of dynamics? The approach

adopted here is the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) initially developed

by JESSOP (2001). The SRA seeks to develop an evolutionary, non-

functionalist account of capitalist development, based on the claim that:

> "capitalist social formations and bourgeois social order do not pre-exist
>
> societalization. Instead, the spaces and scales on which they exist, their
>
> temporal rhythms, their crisis-tendencies, and so on, in short, their
>
> basic features and structural forms, are the product of attempts to
>
> envision, institute, and consolidate a more or less coherent and
>
> manageable set of economic relations and their extra-economic
>
> conditions of existence" (JESSOP, 2003, p.143-144)

Contributing to a cultural perspective on political economy, the SRA

acknowledges the value of 'constructivist' notions in assessing processes of

institutionalisation, identity formation and discursive turns, and the resulting

production of stable structures and (temporarily) hegemonic ideas. Such

processes, through repetitive strategic manipulations, become *structurally*

inscribed in more or less stable, selective settings. This makes structures

inherently *relational* and subject to strategic manipulations.

The SRA thus assigns a specific meaning to 'structure' and the role of subjects

(agency). Inspired by Offe's and Poulantzas' discussion on selectivity, the

SRA sees structures as inherently concrete, rooted in space and time. Agency

plays a significant role in (re)shaping structures, yet the scope for reflexive

action and learning is conscribed by what JESSOP (2004b, p. 9) calls

'structurally inscribed strategic selectivity': "the recursive selection of

strategies and tactics depends on individual, collective, or organizational

learning capacities and on the 'experiences' resulting from the pursuit of

different strategies and tactics in different conjunctures" (cf. Fig. 1). On the

basis of such behaviour, we may add, agents will acquire, and shape, particular

identities that will help to associate themselves with supportive actors and

processes. Structurally inscribed strategic selectivity will also result in the

constitution of particular objects of governance (like competitiveness,

sustainability or social responsibility). Grafted onto a social-constructivist

perspective on action, institutions and the formation of structures, the SRA

thus adopts an evolutionary approach to social change. Stable patterns, based

on what Jessop describes as 'structured coherence', emerge through a process

of recursive selection and retention of strategies and practices that are, also

through reflection, oriented towards 'structurally-inscribed strategic

selectivity' (Jessop, 2001). As a result, strategies and practices are both *path-*

dependent and *path-shaping*.

>>>>>>>>> FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE <<<<<<<<<<

Building on Jessop's work, HAY (2002) sets out to further explore the meaning

of strategic selectivity and strategic action from an agency perspective. In

Hay's view, actors are intentional, but also largely driven by intuition and

habits. Strategic action is based on a combination of reflexivity, learning and

practical consciousness: "Actors are reflexive and strategic and they orient

themselves and their strategies towards the environment within which their

strategic intentions must be realised. Yet they are by no means blessed with

perfect information of that context. At best their knowledge of the terrain and

its strategic selectivity is partial; at worst it is demonstrably false" (p. 9). An

important factor in this process of strategic orientation is how the wider

context and the consequences of past and possible future actions are

discursively mediated and understood. In each case, only certain ideas and

narratives shedding light on a situation will prevail, turning into temporarily

'hegemonic' imaginaries. The concrete *representation* of a particular context

thus plays an essential role in its evolution (Fig 2). One should bear in mind,

moreover, that the relationship between representation and the effect of action

is not a direct one, since the latter is also influenced by distribution of

resource, procedural specificities and the power agents can wield. However,

when certain critical conditions - economic, political or social processes-

underlying a specific situation are seriously misrepresented, this is likely to

result in failure or even crisis.

>>>>>>>>> FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE <<<<<<<<<

As Figure 2 shows, a key aspect of discursive selectivity is the role of the

strategically selective context. To conceptualise the more 'structural'

(selective) effects of discourses, Sum proposes to draw from the work of

Fairclough, particularly the notion of 'genre chains' (CHOULIARAKI and

FAIRCLOUGH, 2000). A genre denotes the way a specific professional or

academic community develops and applies certain conventions and uses of

language (discourse) serving a particular communicative goal. In the context

of regional development, one can think of genres on regional-economic

development, democracy and political significance, social-cultural aspects and

sustainability. A *genre chain* represents the networks that interconnect

separate genres, often through processes of re-contextualisation, and serves to

translate ideas in specific forms (such as policy documents and strategy

reports). Genre chains are the key discursive vehicles for powerful agents in

the field (such as government departments, business organisations, core

associations and consultants, academics, NGOs) to define imaginaries, notably

economic imaginaries such as on competitiveness, innovation and workfare. In

the words of Jessop (2004a, p. 5)

> "Economic imaginaries at the meso- and macro-levels develop as
>
> economic, political, and intellectual forces seek to (re)define specific
>
> subsets of economic activities as subjects, sites, and stakes of
>
> competition and/or as objects of regulation and to articulate strategies,
>
> projects and visions oriented to these imagined economies".

When established, such imaginaries breed discursive selectivity, acquiring

their own performative and constitutive force. They are, in turn, an important

factor in producing broader strategic selectivities (cf. Fig. 2). Yet, this

selectivity, and the hegemony it sustains, can always be contested through the

ways subjects, intentionally or even unintentionally, create new varieties and

(re)combinations in meanings and practices. In some cases such a

development may come to the aid of existing forms of structural coherence, by

further limiting the scope of imaginable actions and possible material and

political support for alternative trajectories. New varieties may also have

destabilising, path-changing effects, by mobilising sufficient discursive,

political and material support to envisage and enable alternative courses of

action. However, given the uncertainties and complexities surrounding social

change, achieved transformations are unlikely to be fully intentional. While

they may be triggered and driven by intentional actions often of a visionary

nature, they are the outcome of an accumulation of incremental changes each

guided by recursively produced strategies and tactics (JESSOP, 2001).We will

now assess this evolutionary process in more detail with the help of Sum's

account of the emergence of hegemonic imaginaries.

The historical production of hegemonic imaginaries

The production of hegemony is the result of a long-winded, unique history

which can be characterised by various crucial moments of discursive and

strategic selection. Periods of gradual change, which can be explained largely

in terms of path-dependency, are punctuated by moments in which paths may

change. In such moment, 'counter-hegemonic' discourses and practices may

cause new imaginaries to take priority, power relations to be overturned, and

new forms to emerge. Building on the SRA and its discursive elaborations,

SUM (2004) distinguishes between five crucial moments within the production

of hegemony, which, in a slightly modified form, will be adopted here to

reflect on the emergence of the region as a powerful imaginary (Fig. 3).

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>>>>>>>>> FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE <<<<<<<<<<

The *first* moment is when a window for change opens. Changes in structural circumstances prompt the development of new discourses that aim at the reconstitution of core objects of governance and identities of agents. Such changes can be twofold. They can be triggered by a (perceived) political-economic transformation *external* or *internal* to a particular process, producing a turning or tipping point that open a window for change (BUITELAAR et al., 2007). *Second*, new or modified repertoires of discourses emerge that, however, remain constrained by overall structural conditions and social relations. *Third*, this structurally inscribed strategic selective moment is followed by an (inter)discursive selective moment, in which genre chains play a critical role. In the words of SUM (2004, p.9): "These genre chains impose limits on what can be articulated with what across different discourses. This guides the combination of certain symbols that contribute to the support or reinvention of the hegemonic objects, imaginaries and projects." Genre chains are mediated by key actors that set about to articulate new 'problems' and 'aims' (including notions of *objects* of governance) and associated 'solutions' and 'means' (including notions of *subjects* of governance). These actors also play a key role in translating these in general codes for wider circulation and absorption. Further stabilisation is achieved by the shaping of new metaphors and technologies of knowledge. These serve four prominent goals:

(1) the framing of problem-solution perceptions,

(2) the definition of the discursive position of 'experts',

(3) the production of standards and scripts for assessment and documentation

    (e.g. ways of assessing 'successful' regional performance, scripts for

    policy evaluation, templates for drafting regional plans, etc.) and

(4) building regimes of control through setting key mechanisms of ordering,

    labelling, categorising, and prioritising.

The *fourth* moment occurs when the new discourses and genre chains become
somehow embodied in the subjectivities, practices and performances of agents
and organisation 'in the field'. New hegemonic imaginaries and associated
codes of practice thus start to infuse routine practices and events. *Fifth* and
finally, these discursive practices become regularised and institutionalised in
new forms of governance. These forms of governance serve to secure a certain
level of patterning of structural coherence, and embody new kinds of power
relations and social privileges.

The spatial production of hegemonic imaginaries

So far we have largely focused on the temporal dimension of hegemony. In
what sense do the SRA and Sum's approach present a spatially relevant
approach? This issue is met with some ambivalence. JESSOP (2001, p.1227)
himself stresses the inherent spatiotemporal character of the SRA:
"spatiotemporal features should not be seen as accidental or secondary features
of institutions, but as constitutive properties that help to distinguish one
organization, institution, or institutional order from another." (…)
"spatiotemporal selectivity of an organization, institution, or institutional

ensemble involves the diverse modalities in and through which spatial and

temporal horizons of action in different fields are produced, spatial and

temporal rhythms are created, and some practices and strategies are privileged

and others made more difficult to realize according to how they `match' the

temporal and spatial patterns inscribed in the structures in question" (see also

HAY, 2004).

Jessop focuses, in particular, on the notion of *spatio-temporal fixes*.

Conceptualised at the meso level, such fixes present the sites where economic

and non-economic elements are aligned to secure the stability of actual modes

of regulation and where capital can be valorised along structural and strategic

lines. *Structurally*, spatio-temporal fixes are formations that facilitate mobile

capital to turn into spatially embedded assets connected with essential

economic, notably and non-economic factors. This takes place within a

broader context of societalization and the search for institutional compromises,

through which the 'market economy' is embedded in a 'market society'

(JESSOP and SUM, 2006). *Strategically*, agents and groups will pursue specific

aims in the interest of particular forms of capital (international, national or

local) and social positions (civil society, labour). Such fixes can thus be seen

as the outcome of structurally inscribed strategic selectivities that, in a

reiterative confrontation with economic and non-economic conditions, create

relatively and temporarily coherent and stable configurations. Such interests,

and their privileging and articulations, are supported by imagined 'general

interests' and associated spatial imaginaries. These can range from the local

level ('industrial districts', 'science parks') and regional ('growth poles',

'clusters') to the national ('gateway', 'knowledge economy') and even

international level (cf. Europe's Lisbon Agenda). Under global capitalism, it is

economic imaginaries that prevail, although most imaginaries also address the

broader embedding of the economic in social (political, ecological)

formations. Imaginaries serve to define subjects and objects of regulation and

to articulate visions underpinning particular strategies and projects. So it is

here where we can see 'regulation as process' at work.

Yet, some authors have criticised the SRA for providing only a limited

conceptualisation of the relationship between strategic selectivity and the

regulation of territorial development (MACLEOD, 1997, UITERMARK, 2005).

So, in addition to spatiotemporal fixes, other notions of spatiotemporal

selectivity have emerged. One is *scalar selectivity*, stemming from the way

particular forms of activities become organised, and dominate, at different

spatial levels. The result is that, in terms of COLLINGE (1999, p. 568), certain

levels take priority over other levels, due to "the power which organizations at

certain spatial scales are able to exercise over organizations at other, higher or

lower scales". Yet these other levels may acquire important subsidiary roles,

such as regions in global production networks, or the international level in the

pursuit of nationally oriented interests. Collinge makes a useful distinction

between 'dominant' and 'nodal' (subsidiary) scales. Within the context of the

discussion here, a key question is how discursive scalar representations –

which scales are deemed dominant – face up to the organisational and material

needs and constraints of scalar structuration, an issue to be further explored

below.

Closely linked to scalar selectivity is *spatial selectivity*, the priorisation of

certain places in a wider territory, notably that of a state or configuration of

states (e.g. EU). JONES (1997, p. 849) asserts how, through both material and

discursive practices, "the state has the tendency to privilege certain places

through accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects", such as large urban

agglomerations or core regions. This happens intentionally through decisions

on spatial planning, infrastructure, physical investments, regional policy and

the design of multi-level governance structures. It also happens

unintentionally, since most political decisions and policy outcomes are

spatially biased, advantaging some areas while disadvantaging others. The

state, in this context, should not be read as a unitary organisation, or be reified

in substantive or functionalist terms (BRENNER, 2004). Rather, following an

SRA line of thinking the state is considered as a *social relation*, itself a

product of structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity. Structural inscription is

born both internally, through the way the political system and state apparatus

is organised, and externally, through the way the state is connected to other

societal domains, notably business and civil society, and thus affected by shifts

in societal governance and the role of capital. Such a relational (and relative)

perspective on the state allows for a strong variety in state roles and effects.

Close to Gramscian thinking, it explores the state in an inclusive sense,

through its close ties with civil society and capital interests, while it also

allows for major contradictions between economic and political orders

(JESSOP, 2004c). Inclusiveness, relationality and relativity, however, do not

mean a loss of the state's centrality. The state remains a key agent in allocating

material resources and (co)producing development strategies, hegemonic projects and critical imaginaries.

A final point concerns the role of economic vs. non-economic aspects of (spatial) developments and their representation. In conjunction with conceptualising the role of the state, Regulationist writings have aspired to assign more significance to non-economic factors than Marxist approaches, an important agenda further pursued by Jessop and other scholars working on the SRA. However, as illustrated by the characterisation of spatio-temporal fixes and the state, economic tendencies and factors remain imperative. What is problematic is not so much this pervasiveness as such, but the fact that it is perceived in terms of abstract tendencies rather than concrete processes and imaginations. On assessing the role of selectivities and fixes, economic 'forces' should not be reified or naturalised. Their role and determination should be seen as shaped and endorsed by particular actors, selected forms of knowledge and concrete courses of action, subject to specific economic conditions and constraints. Economic imaginaries should not be seen as the symbolic translations of material necessities. Rather, they are concepts that, leaning on the hegemonic position the economy has in the *discursive* articulation of societal processes and spatial development, serve a variety of economic and non-economic interests of capital, the state and other powerful actors. A critical question is thus to what extent the role and significance assigned to economic factors presents more of a *discursive* than a strategic selectivity (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 1996, HAY, 2002). With this caveat in mind, we will now discuss the rise of regional imaginaries following Sum's model.

The rise of the 'region': from the windows of change to discursive-selective

moments

Of Sum's five moments, one could argue that recent literature on regional

formation has largely been oriented towards the latter two, and especially the

last one, that of institutionalisation and the shaping of new forms of (regional)

governance. PAASI's (1991, 2001) conceptualisation of region formation, for

instance, runs from the concrete imagining of regions as bounded and

somehow distinct territorial units (fourth moment) to the development of

regional institutions and the establishment of a region in the consciousness of

the wider community (fifth moment). More than reflecting historical and

cultural entities, or direct responses to 'global' structural change, as Paasi has

compellingly argued, regions result from processes of regionalisation that

should be understood in terms of social construction, with emphasis on the

narrative dimension of such construction. Like other elements of social space,

regions are "both products and constituents of social action" (PAASI, 2001, p.

13), sustained by four basic processes, namely territorial, institutional and

symbolic shaping, and internal and external recognition ('establishment').

Regions are perceived as 'action spaces' (SCHMITT-EGNER, 2002), territorially

bounded on the basis of (sometimes self-induced) discursive and institutional

processes. In the words of another prominent theorist on region formation,

BLOTEVOGEL (2000, p. 500): "the region is a social construct as well as

vehicle of goal rationality and power". The nurturing of a collective ('we')

identity forms an important part of boosting internal and external recognition, and the way regions are seen and treated as 'bounded'. But, as Blotevogel indicates, there are serious limits to what processes of identity shaping can do, notably when they are driven by the allegedly strategic actors in processes of region formation: "it is striking with how much thoughtlessness and outright imprudence politicians, planners and particularly marketing 'experts' seek to construct regions and regional identity" (BLOTEVOGEL, 2000, p. 502).

KEATING (1998), on the other hand, pays more attention to the wider political, economic and social context in which regions have emerged and settled. Yet, his analysis remains confined to explaining, in rather broad terms, the regional phenomenon against the backdrop of grand economic, political and societal shifts, complemented by more specific institutional reviews at national levels. This does not explain how strategic choices and practices in the production of narratives and imaginaries privileging the region have actually worked. Other authors have provided partial clues to this question, by addressing some of the aspects within the realm of the first three moments (e.g. G. MACLEOD, 2001). Yet, there remains considerable scope for a more systematic analysis of how the rise of the region as eminent objects and subjects of strategic action came about. Following Sum's framework, such an analysis should start several moments back, when the windows of change open and inter-discursive selectivity manifests itself.

Various windows of change can be identified that, from the 1980s onwards, have had a major impact on the discursive and strategic position of the region.

The first window can be understood in terms of the widely debated transition

from a Fordist to post-Fordist forms of regulation and accumulation. This

transition is seen as being accompanied by a fundamental shift in the basic

focus of regulation from the wage relation to dynamic competition (JESSOP

and SUM, 2006), affecting, in particular, the distribution of wealth and

management of demand. Regulation thus moved from an interventionist

'Keynesian' financial transfer from capital to labour, to one focused on

innovation, fostered by close links by research and business activities, flexible

work practices, and novel forms of financing and financial management, for

instance through venture capital schemes. Because of the increased

significance of specialisation and networks, one can add to this list a

regulatory need for more communication, coordination and strategic

orientation. While old 'Keynesian' arrangement continued to play a major

role, although in a reduced form, in securing basic macro economic conditions

at the national level, these new regulatory practices have been developed and

tried out in the context of new forms of *regional* governance. In Jessop and

Sum's (2006) terms, these forms thus present the loci of the search for new

spatio-temporal fixes. Such fixes should not be understood as fully substituting

for national 'fixes', but as particular arrangements that play a specific role in

the overall regulatory processes, subject to a wide range of specific mediations

and strategic manipulations (JONES, 2004).

The conceptualisation and practicing of governance forms and institutional

fixes at the regional level are dominated by attempts to articulate the economic

with the non-economic. This affects, in particular, the shaping of localised

systems of production. Regional governance and institutions serve to build up

and sustain specialised assets that can not be easily subjected to 'pure'

economic coordination and calculation, but that are vital for the creation of

innovative potential and increasing productivity. Such assets include high

levels of education, interactive processes of innovation and flexible

production, the attuning of spatial-environmental factors, and the more

advanced regulatory demands as documented above. Moreover, the emphasis

on 'institution building' and the nurturing of 'governance capacity' at the

regional level has been pushed by the disapproval of direct forms of state

intervention and subsidies (CERNY, 2006, GUALINI, 2001). Rather than

(sectoral groups of) firms, territorially defined entities such as regional

clusters, networks and partnership turned into popular objects of economic

support.

Parallel to the first window, a second window can be identified which stems

from developments in state governance. The post-war rise of the welfare state

has resulted in a countless number of regulatory 'interventions' and practices,

posing major problems of coordination and control. The sheer number and

complexity of these interventions have meant that state apparatuses in Western

countries have lost much of their strategic overview and administrative

capacity to manage societies. Supported by calls for 'modernising'

government, states feel the urgent need to search for new ways to coordinate

and align policy processes, in what can be called new forms of 'meta-

governance' (JESSOP, 2004c). This includes the advocacy for more market-

conform and market-oriented forms of policy-making, more public

participation in all stages of policy-making, and a better use of modern

technologies (such as ICT) to enhance effectiveness and reduce policy

fragmentation. Through their potential to realign and reorganise policy

domains, spatial-scalar strategies represent appealing instruments to meet such

intricate demands. Regions, in particular, feature as domains where new forms

of policy effectiveness, public participation and, as a result, legitimacy can be

cultivated and tested (GUALINI, 2004). The problem of coordination is

compounded, moreover, by the rising importance of supranational bodies and

treaties. The EU, in particular, has turned to the region as a site to align its

territorial strategies with that of the national and local levels. From a more

negative point of view, such new state spatialities and selectivities can also be

read as attempts to offload difficult responsibilities and financial burden onto

lower levels in order to reduce the administrative and financial distress for

central state levels.

The local-regional level itself provides a third window, or more precisely set

of windows due to a number of recent developments. Changing physical

conditions and usages, notably in transport and land-use patterns, have

increased the need for coordination at the inter-municipal or city-regional

level. Urban sprawl, fiscal crises in core cities, congestion, land shortages and

other territorial problems require the build-up of coordination and planning

capabilities at supra-local levels. In many cases, this is not easy to achieve,

since there is often much distrust and rivalry between adjacent local

authorities, notably between core cities and suburban municipalities

(HERRSCHEL and NEWMAN, 2002, PORTER and WALLIS, 2002). On a more

positive note, regional governance and strategy making has been fostered by

the advocacy of sustainable territorial forms of transport, housing, energy use

etc. Images of sustainable regions and 'eco-regions' have made major inroads

into the vocabulary and practices of regional planning (HAUGHTON and

COUNSELL, 2004). A final impetus stems from a cultural-political drive

through which the imagining of regions and the creation of regional

governance is advanced by notions and expressions of territorial identity and

difference (KEATING, 1998, PAASI, 2001). In the words of Agnew (1999, p.

93), "[r]egions both reflect differences in the world and ideas about

differences. They cannot be reduced to one or the other. Observers and people

in the world use regional designations to make sense of the world and these

draw on real differences between parts of the world but they cannot claim total

fit to the world because they are based on ideas about regional differences that

are not simply about those differences per se but also about ideas of how the

world works".

These various windows, with their embedded selectivities, are being framed,

performed, and associated by variety of genres and genre chains. As explained

before, genre chains provide the re-contextualisation of prevailing

communicative ideas and conventions, and serve to translate these in specific

forms like policy-making processes, in what is called an 'inter-discursive

selective moment'. Genres that have made a major contribution here include

the emphasis on competitiveness in a 'globalising' economy, grafted onto neo-

liberal economic perspectives, the emphasis on participatory and integrative

forms of policy making associated with a shift from 'government' to

'governance', debates on the 'nodal' region embedded within 'global' flows of capital, goods, and knowledge, and sustainable perspectives on territorial development. The critical question is how these ideas and issues have been sutured into the canvass of the region. Who and what mediated the selection? What kind of metaphors, knowledges and technologies become dominant? What presentations of 'problems' and 'solutions' are adopted in policy processes? How are policy outcomes and associated territorial developments monitored and relayed? And to what extent are these aspects differentiated in space and time?

There is no space here for responding to these questions in detail (see also other papers in this issue SPECIFY??). What is especially interesting for the purpose of this paper is the outcome in terms of *discursive* selectivity. How is strategic selectivity perceived and translated into strategic ideas and actions? What kind of ideas and translations are feasible and pressed forward? In other words, how are genre chains constructed and performed? What we are after, in particular, is how, in a complex environment, specific multiplicities emerge and evolve, how certain themes are articulated, and how these are associated with particular, powerful imaginaries. For the conceptualisation of the region, this will be debated by focusing, in the light of the windows just presented, on two aspects: the spatial/scalar dimension and, as a major substantive issue, the articulation of the 'economic' and 'non-economic'.

Spatial-scalar configurations

Scale presents a core theme in the literature on the region and wider

geographical debate. What is interesting for the discussion here is the way the

region is associated with both scalar and non-scalar perspectives. All windows

identified above give rise to *scalar* perspectives. They all provide accounts of

how governance aspects are scaled 'down' or 'up' to the regional level to

make the latter 'strategically selective'. From an economic angle, the

coordination of economic support, notably on the supply-side, is seen as partly

shifting from the national-sectoral to the regional level. The state governance

window advances similar shifts in terms of strategic responsibilities for policy

integration and planning. Amongst the territorial windows, an upscaling of

core competencies is envisaged from the local to the region levels. Initially,

this debate was centred on a political notion of *devolution*, in which regions

would gain substantial political autonomy against a 'hollowed out' central

state, with Spain and Belgium as exemplary cases. More recent observations,

based on for instance experiences in England and Eastern Europe, or

discussions on multi-level governance in the context of Europeanisation, point

at policy *decentralisation*. This means that, under a continued role of the

nation state as a central orchestrator, the region becomes part of a nested

system of policy-making and implementation (GUALINI, 2006, JONES, 2004,

MCMASTER, 2006). Scale management then becomes an intrinsic part of

detailed forms of state regulation (JESSOP, 2004b).

Non-scalar perspectives do not start from a territorially compartmentalised

and nested worldview. They focus on the spatiality of socio-economic

practices, with emphasis on flow and connectivity. In an economic sense,

regions are seen as hosting novel forms of socio-economic governance, able to

position their territories strategically in wider circuits of economic and

political interaction. Well-known, iconic examples of such territories are

Silicon Valley, the Italian industrial districts and various high-tech clusters

across the globe. These regions do not fill preordained scales but present, to

use Storper's label, 'worlds' of action operating in the context of global flows

and networks. Interestingly, also in policy debates and agendas, regions are

associated with spatial configurations not in a 'partitioned' or 'devolved'

sense, but as the basis for new, often network-oriented, policy practices.

Examples include the experimental regions hosting novel forms of economic

and territorial governance in Germany and The Netherlands (GUALINI, 2004),

and the advocacy of (city)regional nodes and gateways as part of network

perspectives on spatial development and as responses to specific territorial

problems (PORTER and WALLIS, 2002). In all these cases, spatiality is

constituted primarily through the specific policy practice, rather than a

premeditated aspiration to engage in scalar structuration and patterns of state

spatiality (BRENNER, 2004). In the Dutch and German case, for instance, the

experimental regions have emerged at levels and in configurations that differ

markedly, and explicitly, from well-established regional partitions, such as

'Provincies' and 'Bezirke'. Obviously, engagement with scalar politics may be

inevitable once policy practices become more established.

As discussed in much more detail in Jones et. al (THIS ISSUE??), scale is

subject to a hefty theoretical and political debate. While some authors tend to

see scalar and non-scalar perspectives in strongly oppositional terms, the

position adopted here (and throughout this issue??) is one of exploring and

advocating the articulation and mutual constitution of both perspectives. For

assessing the inter-discursive moment for producing hegemonic notions of the

region, such a complementary view is certainly most relevant. One could

argue that, in the intersecting of the three types of windows identified above,

the *compatibility* between both perspectives is critical. It is the way more

innovative, strategic ideas based on notions of nodes-in-network and territorial

forms of policy-integration are embedded in multi-scaled accounts privileging

regional governance that provides a major source of inspiration and rhetorical

strength for the articulation of regional imaginaries. And it is, moreover, the

economic orientation of such accounts that have contributed to this strength, as

will be discussed now.

Economic vs. non-economic orientations

Discourses on the region, and the imaginaries they sustain, tend to be strongly

oriented towards economic aspects of regional development, both in circuits of

practitioners and academics (LAGENDIJK, 2006). This dominance has been

documented, in more detail, by Jones (2004) for the English regions, De

Bruijn et al. (2005)for the EU and Jensen and Richardson (JENSEN and

RICHARDSON, 2004) for a wider variety of regions and policy domains. This

does not mean that economic development, notably its neoliberal connotation

of 'competitiveness', is always framed as the primary goal or condition. It can

also present a strategic aspect that needs to be 'accommodated' in the light of

non-economic social, ecological or territorial objectives, induced by the

second and third set of windows identified above. Accordingly, what prevails

in the inter-discursive moment, through the articulation of genre chains, is the

interweaving of economic notions of the region with symbols and stories on

sustainability, social cohesion, community development, governance building,

and participative and strategic forms of planning (JENSEN and RICHARDSON,

2004, LAGENDIJK, 2005). Especially the EU has been a key mediator of genre

chains that link 'competitiveness' aims to conditions of sustainability and

spatial-social cohesion ('balanced development') (DE BRUIJN and LAGENDIJK,

2005). It has also been a core catalyst in nurturing process of institutional

change and network building. To a varying degree, many other (supra)state

organisations have played similar roles, with in their wake a large number of

consultancies, advisory councils, business associations, regional organisations

and figureheads, and not to forget, academics (LOVERING, 1999)

This articulation of economic and non-economic aspects happens at various

levels, from goal-setting and strategy-making to concrete operations. First, the

level of *goal- and agenda-setting* is inspired primarily by the more socially

and ecologically accommodating perspectives of neo-liberalism, in which the

emphasis on the economy has been somewhat tempered (CERNY, 2006). The

latter helps to respond to pressures coming through the second and third

window, supported by different state bodies (from local to international

levels), to include non-economic orientations and demands. Second, at the

level of *strategies and practices*, the economic primarily plays a conditional

role. The preferred modes of action and coordination are based on notions of

social interaction and governance (collaboration, partnerships, institution

building) and even planning (programmes and projects). This is not the result

of external pressures, however, but of the discursive selectivity of the first

window itself, in which the embedding of non-economic assets and values is

seen as critical for economic performance. From the policy side, another

combination arises. Pushed by neoliberal perspectives on state management,

non-economic interests in effectiveness and legitimacy are blended with a

strong emphasis on financial prudence, efficiency and accountability. The final

level is that of specific *initiatives and projects*. This is also subjected to the

mix of effectiveness and efficiency/accountability conditions carried over

from the strategic level, now interwoven with notions of internal

communication and project management.

Like the spatial-scalar theme, the topic of economic vs. non-economic

manifests the multiplicity of ideas underlying the shaping of 'regional

imaginaries' and associated practices. What is different, however, is the nature

of discursive selectivity. Not only is a certain economic orientation

inescapable, this also applies to non-economic aspects. Because of this double

constraint, achieving some form and degree of coherence poses a major

challenge. The situation is compounded by the fact that the regional setting for

strategy making and project development only presents a fragment in a much

wider 'policy space' (GUALINI, 2004), which subjects them to additional sets

of constraints and interdependencies. A major handicap, partly resulting from

this, is the spurious nature of many regional knowledges, and their

incompatibilities once they are put into practice (PAINTER, 2002). In terms of

Fig. 2, long feedback loops and a high of misrepresentations, reducing the potential for effective strategic learning and .

Towards the configuration of subjects and institutionalisation of regions

In constructing imaginaries, regions, and core agents and processes associated with regions, are framed as both objects and subjects of governance. More specifically, state agents including local, national and international state organisations, as well as non-state regionally dependent actors, such as businesses, community actors and NGOs employ the genre chains discussed above to charge regions politically and strategically (JONAS and PINCETL, 2006, JONES, 2001). This charging is double edged. On the one hand, it comes with strong discursive and strategic selectivity, in the form of specific ambitions ('balanced development'), categorisations (e.g. EU's NUTS-II partition), knowledges (SWOT, innovation, sustainability, etc), and governing procedures technologies (scripts for writing strategies and funding applications, etc). On the other hand, embedded within this selectivity is the notion of the region as a prominent *subject* of strategy making and orchestrator of policy initiatives and projects, and as a globally active broker to obtain ideas, partners and funding. The exemplary agent caught between manifold demands and the urge to be proactive and strategic is the Regional Development Agency (MCMASTER, 2006).

In regulatory terms, such double-edged subjectivisation can be attributed to the

move from an interventionist state dealing directly with economic and social

subjects, to a more 'distant' state facilitating and regulating sites of

governance such as local communities (e.g. for social policy), sectors or

clusters (e.g. for labour market and economic policies) and regions (e.g. for

innovation policy and all kinds of territorial management). It is in this context

that regions have been constructed as specific, novel new regulatory sites

endowed with a strategic form of agency. At a concrete level, while there are

strong similarities in selectivities, one should note the differences in the ways

such constructions have worked out notably in specific nation states. For

instance, regionalisation in Spain and Belgium, driven by community and

identity interests, differs markedly from developments in England, led by a

centralised political agenda, or most East European countries, where the

administrative processes of EU accession have played a dominant role.

Similarly, means of control and funding vary from high levels of autonomy

(Spain, US) and contractual approaches (France) to detailed centralised

budgetary control (England, Netherlands) and meticulous accounting practices

(EU). Accordingly, these various types come with different, although often

comparable practices of shaping the territorial, symbolic and institutional-

political form of the region (PAASI, 1991, 2001).

Taking the argument one step further, the question is to what extent regions, or

more precisely, regional engagement in 'regulation as process', can be

associated with new spatio-temporal fixes. Put differently, what kinds of

strategic positions and selectivities result from the discursively hegemonic

position of regional imaginaries? Beyond doubt, strong positions have been

achieved by regions that, as sub-states, form part of (semi)federal states. These

regions have generally benefited from the devolution of major regulatory

powers, which does not rule out the possibility that the distribution of certain

responsibilities and resources can be strongly contested. A less clear-cut

picture emerges for regions in non-federal countries. Here, regulatory practices

tend to remain heavily dependent on external knowledges, sources and control.

'Regulation as process' takes the form of complex, multi-layered networks in

which regions only present a fragment in wider chains of political actions and

policy-making. While they may be endowed with significant roles of

experimenting and synthesising, notably of 'soft' kinds, it does not present a

good basis for achieving 'structured coherence' in a regulatory sense.

There is a certain tension, accordingly, between the discursive and strategic

aspects of region construction. Discursively, the region tends to be portrayed

as a dominant site and scale of 'advanced' and 'globalising' capitalist

development, both in how it can support economic dynamism and how this is

embedded in a territorially bounded social-institutional formation. Discursive

selectivity, to use the terminology of COLLINGE (1999), points at the region as

a 'dominant' scale of regulation. This selectivity strategically serves the

interests of other sites and levels, notably that of the nation state, but also

points at the role of strategies pursued by local and international capital

(JONAS and PINCETL, 2006). Although regional positions vary strongly notably

across regions, in a regulatory sense their role is generally confined to a nodal

one. In effect, as recently manifested by the English case, the way regions tend

to be portrayed as generic 'powerhouses' for addressing socio-economic problems from the local (inequality) to the national level (competitiveness) presents a form of *regulatory conceit* based on a double misrepresentation (JONES, 2001). First, the way economic dynamism is projected onto a single (regional) scale is highly problematic. And second, in JONES' own words: "This philosophy is doubly misleading if it then assumes that all regional governance structures can effectively intervene in the economy, regulate its contradictions, and ensure economic growth" (JONES, 2001, p. 1196).

There is, however, another side to the way regional governance is subjected to external imperatives and constraints, namely that of strategic action initiated by regional agents themselves. By employing alternative repertoires of regional discourses and action, potentially resisting economically imperialist, 'global' accounts (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 1996, MASSEY, 2004), regions may at least partially become their own author of subjectivities. One example of such counteraction is the way certain American city-regions and even states have taken (sometimes legal) action to conform to the Kyoto agreements on greenhouse gas reduction, against the Washington doctrine of non-compliance. Another example is the drive of semi-autonomous regions like in Spain or Belgium to stretch the boundaries of their political autonomy, also by subverting the present political and institutional division of power and resources (KEATING, 1998). Obviously, such local shifts in discursive and strategic selectivities do not automatically come with a window for (positive) change. Structural constraints, notably of a material kind, may impose strong limitation on actual possibilities for developing alternative tracks of action.

Moreover, like with state selectivities, such shifts may prioritise certain

interests and scales at the expense of others (for instance social vs.

environmental, or a wealthy, powerful region against weaker ones).

Conclusion

How can we understand the rise of the region as an apparently 'omnipresent'

phenomenon? And what does that mean for regional governance and

practices? Recent contributions to this debate have been criticised for

overemphasising 'soft' aspects of regional socio-economic developments, thus

loosing sight of the broader picture as provided by 'harder' approaches as

inspired by Regulationist ideas. Also, although 'soft' approaches are keen to

explore discursive aspects of regional development, due to an inward-looking

nature they do not shed much light on the 'omnipresence' in a broader context

of political-economic developments and policy-making. In response, this

paper has sought to reflect on the unfolding of specific regional practices and

forms within the light of broader changes and tendencies. Core concepts for

this approach have been drawn from the Strategic Relational Approach and, in

particular, Sum's evolutionary model of 'discursive hegemony'. A core result

is the linking of socially constructive and institutionally oriented notions of

region-building as advocated by Paasi (corresponding to the latter 'moments'

in Sum's model) to the role of structurally inscribed strategic selectivity and

associated discursive selectivities (corresponding to earlier 'moments'). The

latter are, in turn, embedded in a regulatory perspective on political-economic development.

The 'omnipresence' of the region, we may conclude, presents a form of discursive hegemony associated with strategic selectivities manifesting complex spatial and scalar (and often non-regional) orientations. From a historical perspective, the region presented an available window to experiment with new regulatory forms and 'fixes'. This has been aimed, in particular, at improving economic performance through its embedding in the non-economic, and on accommodating non-economic targets (cohesions, sustainability). On this account, it is not so much the regional spatial configuration or scalar reconfiguration, but the need for a 'blank' (sub-state) level of governance that has given a major impetus to regional discursive 'hegemony'. At the level of regulation as 'process', on the other hand, practices and forms of governance have evolved as fragments in a much wider space of political actions and policy-making. It is in this wider (national and international) space that multiple ideas and scripts are circulated and combined with the help of genre chains. Through these chains, regions are portrayed as core sites to promote policy integration and territorial coordination, and, last but not least, innovative (but also 'balanced') forms of economic development. The result is enacted significance, but not coherence. On the contrary, with the exception of regions where coherence is institutionally induced (like in federal systems), these fragments are themselves torn in many directions. Regions are continuously subjected to multiple spatial and scalar selectivities of state and other dominant organisations. It comes down to organisations like RDAs to

cope with such centrifugal forces and instabilities. Accordingly, together with

local business, state and community organisation, they have to weave an

image of coherence, functionality and identity through a myriad of

programmatic activities.

Is the region an accident? As an object of governance, the region turned out to

be at the right place and time, responding to, and bringing together, various

windows of opportunity. Perceived from that background, the 'discursive

hegemony' sustaining the region's significance, including the emphasis on its

regulatory position, seems far from accidental. However, although facilitated

and framed by this hegemony, the rise of a large variety of concrete, regionally

oriented forms and practices of governance and policy-making can be

attributed to numerous accidental combinations of economic, political and

institutional developments and representations. While privileging the region,

they may also constitute forms of centrifugal instability opening the window

for other spatialities and forms of governance. Whither the region?

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Fig 1 The strategic relational approach (after Hay 2002)
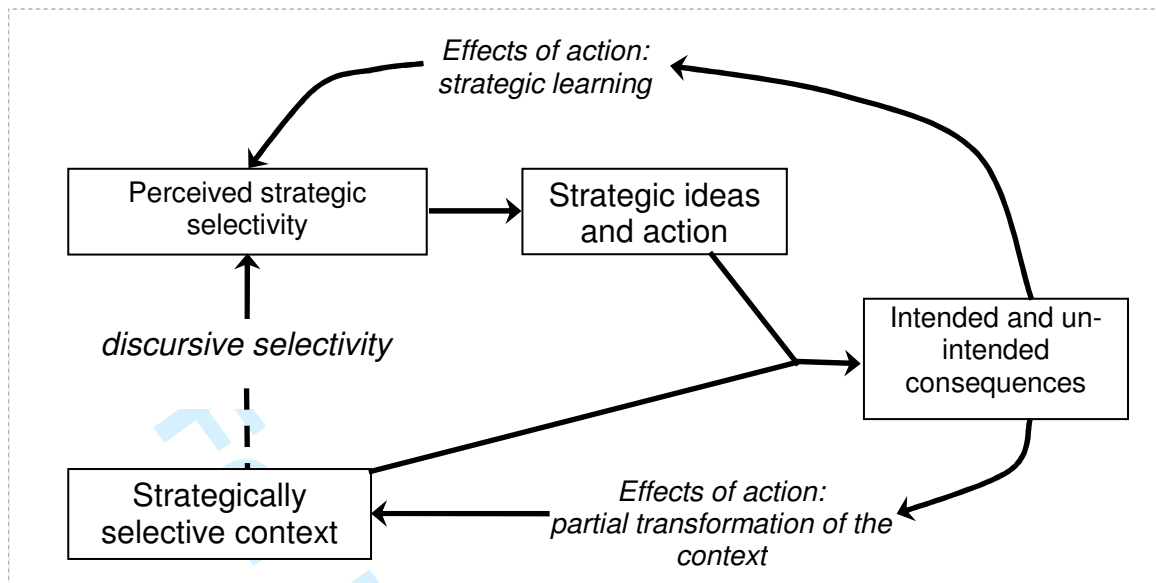
Fig 2. Discursive selectivity, after Hay (2002)

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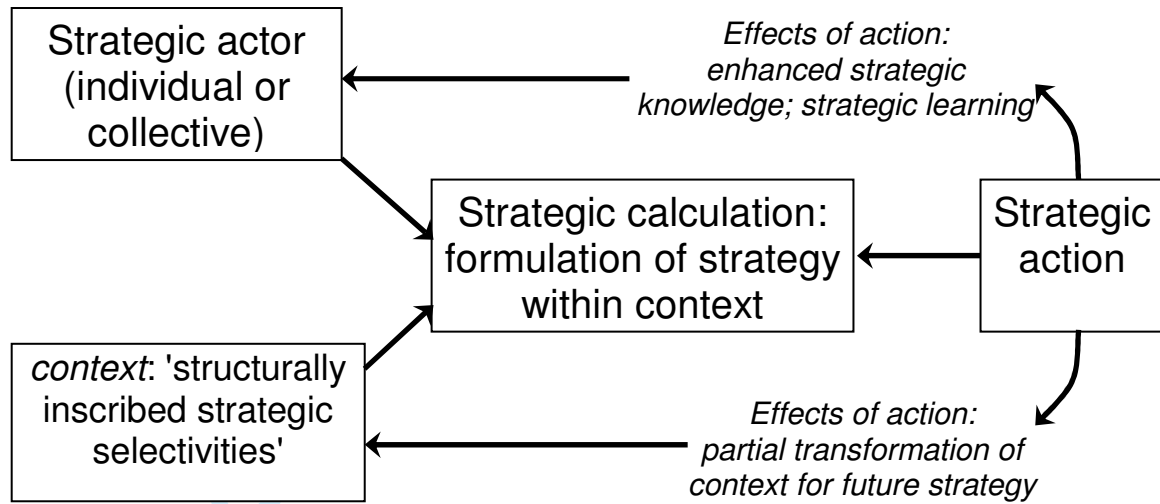41
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changing circumstances
(externally or internally induced)

window(s) of change: emergence of (1) new discourses and
genre chains and (2) new structurally inscribed strategic

(3) (inter) discursive-selective moment: mediation through new
key actors, new translations, new knowledge technologies and
standards and conventions of action

(4) reconfiguration of subjects and subjectivities, formation of
new hegemonic imaginaries

(5) institutionalisation and realisation of (partial) coherence
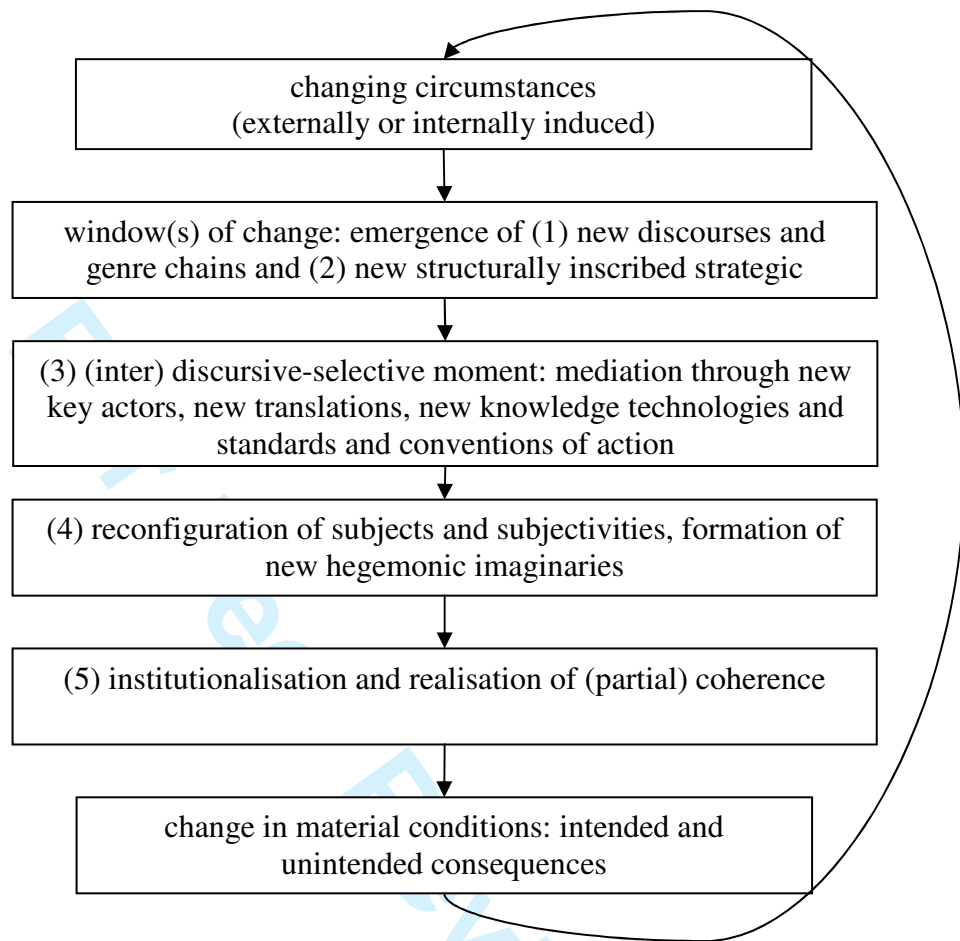
change in material conditions: intended and
unintended consequences

Figure 3 The production of hegemony, after Sum (2004)