

## Whither regional studies?

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**Whither regional studies?**

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## Whither regional studies?

Revised Editorial for the 'Whither regional studies?' Special Issue

### Introduction

Regional studies are at a vibrant juncture. 'Regions' continue to provide a conceptual and analytical focus for often overlapping concerns with economic, social, political, cultural and ecological change. In the context of increased interest in inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, 'regions' remain an arena in which synthesis across disciplines – including economics, geography, planning, politics and sociology – can take place. Indeed, this cross-disciplinary ethos has long been integral to the Regional Studies Association and its journal *Regional Studies* (Pike *et al.* 2007). The regional studies field remains distinctive in its strong empirical grounding upon which contributors have built a sophisticated literature encompassing a range of research from a variety of disciplinary angles. Yet regional studies is a far from static entity with clearly or simply defined and rigidly demarcated boundaries. Sharing common concerns across and through multi- and inter-disciplinary and empirically-focused approaches to the sub-national, regional studies remains a broad sphere shaped by the interplay of its contributors and debates unfolding in their specific disciplines, evolving empirical phenomena and their regional manifestations and the internationalising foci of research and the geographies of contributors (see, for example, Pike *et al.* 2007).

In the current period, recent work has raised fundamental questions about how we think about and research 'regions' and regional change, 'development', governance and regulation. First, emergent conceptual ideas have introduced new thinking about space,

1 place and scale that interprets 'regions' as 'unbounded', relational spaces. This work has  
2  
3 sought to disrupt notions of 'regions' as bounded territories. Hierarchical systems of  
4  
5 scale have been questioned or even rejected by multi-scalar approaches that seek to  
6  
7 reflect more fluid inter-relationships between the international, national, regional, local  
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9 and community. Second, research methodology has grown in sophistication and  
10  
11 sensitivity but remains somewhat polarised between the binaries of positivist, often  
12  
13 quantitative, and more theoretically diverse, typically qualitative, approaches. Genuine  
14  
15 synthesis and mixed methods are evident but perhaps still too elusive. Last, regional  
16  
17 governance, policy and politics are wrestling with the conceptual, methodological and  
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19 political complexities of new modes and geographies of governance and emergent multi-  
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21 agent and multi-level institutional architectures. As one of several possible sub-national  
22  
23 tiers, 'regions' appear to have no necessary place in more polycentric and multi-scalar  
24  
25 systems of power and regulation. The status and agency of the region as a collective  
26  
27 actor is not innate and pre-given in any specific geographical context (Lagendijk 2007,  
28  
29 this issue). The concerns evident in contemporary regional studies mix new challenges  
30  
31 with some thorny issues that have long been the subject of analysis and discussion (see,  
32  
33 for example, Martin *et al.* 2003). While we are at an early stage in beginning to think  
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35 through what such conceptual, theoretical, methodological, governance, policy and  
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37 political innovations and developments mean for regional studies, the magnitude and  
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39 resonance of such issues underpin the vitality of research on the region.  
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51 This special issue, then, seeks to contribute to and reflect upon the current issues and  
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53 debates in regional studies. The editorial that follows does not attempt comprehensively  
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55 to document the depth and nuance of current work. This challenge is taken up by our  
56  
57 contributors. Instead, this editorial seeks only to highlight and outline some of the main  
58  
59 issues animating research and practice in regional studies in relation to  
60  
conceptualisation, methodology, governance, policy and politics. To close, it touches

1 upon possible concerns that may shape the evolution of regional studies. On the  
2  
3 occasion of the 40th anniversary of the journal *Regional Studies* in 2007, this collection  
4  
5 represents a forward look into the futures for regional studies and complements the 2007  
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7 publication of the special supplement of influential papers from the journal's first forty  
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9 years (see Pike *et al.* 2007).  
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### 18 **Defining the region**

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23 Determining what it is we mean when we think about the 'region' is a longstanding,  
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25 recurrent and fundamental issue in regional studies, originating in the pioneering work of  
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27 Herbertson (1905), Fawcett (1919) and de la Blache (1926). Definitions and  
28  
29 conceptualisations of the region are bound up with evolving attempts to interpret the  
30  
31 essence, meaning and nature of regional territory and its relations with economy,  
32  
33 society, polity and culture (see, *inter alia*, Agnew 2000; Lagendijk 2006; Massey 1979;  
34  
35 Paasi 2002; Storper, 1997). This long and diverse history imparts a breadth and variety  
36  
37 to regional studies that signals its strength but frustrates attempts easily to circumscribe  
38  
39 its scope. Amidst the recent resurgence of interest in the region in spatial disciplines and  
40  
41 social science more broadly, views have differed on how best to understand and practice  
42  
43 a regional approach (Hudson 2007; Jones and McCleod 2007, this issue). Arnoud  
44  
45 Lagendijk (2007, this issue) characterises this as a historical and ongoing struggle  
46  
47 between structuralism and functionalism, interpreting 'regions' as by-products of broader  
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49 changes, and voluntarism, seeing 'regions' as endowed with varying degrees and kinds  
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51 of agency.  
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Currently, a centrally important issue for regional studies concerns the ways in which  
contemporary debates in thinking about space, place and scale have destabilised and

1 questioned the traditional and long-established notion of the 'region' as a 'closed',  
2  
3 'bounded' and territorial entity (see Hudson 2007; Jones and MacLeod 2007; Lagendijk  
4  
5 2007, this issue). Understanding 'regions' as fixed and demarcated units in the context of  
6  
7 globalisation has been questioned alongside challenges to hierarchical notions of spatial  
8  
9 scales, running from the global to the community in clearly delineated levels. This recent  
10  
11 re-thinking of space, place and scale is based upon a relational approach that sees  
12  
13 geographical entities – such as regions – as constituted by spatialised social relations  
14  
15 stretched over space and manifest in material, discursive and symbolic forms (see Allen  
16  
17 and Cochrane 2007, Lagendijk 2007, this issue; Amin 2004). In a more pronounced  
18  
19 inter-connected and inter-dependent context, 'regions' are defined by their linkages and  
20  
21 relations within and without any predefined territorial boundary. In this sense, regions are  
22  
23 seen as open, porous and 'unbounded'. The topographical space of absolute distance is  
24  
25 displaced by topological understandings of relative and discontinuous space,  
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27 emphasising connections and nodes in networks.  
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37 While both strong and weak versions of relational thinking are evident in the literature,  
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39 such ideas are profoundly challenging to regional studies. Where contributors to this  
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41 special issue might make a distinctive advance in the debate is by demonstrating  
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43 empirically the value of such ideas and arguing and demonstrating how it might be more  
44  
45 productive to view these relational and territorial approaches not as competing 'either/or'  
46  
47 choices but to see them from a 'both/and' perspective shaped by theoretical,  
48  
49 methodological and political context (see Hudson 2007, this issue). Indeed, several of  
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51 our contributors reveal the value of such an approach in tackling the challenge of  
52  
53 developing genuinely multi-scalar understandings of regions, including Jones and  
54  
55 Macleod's (2007, this issue) engagement with 'networked topologies' and Lagendijk's  
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57 (2007, this issue) development of a strategic relational approach. Such work is perhaps  
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59 only a beginning, however, and underlines the need for much further empirical  
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1 exploration. Difficulties will no doubt arise from the disjuncture of such research, primarily  
2 situated within geography, with other constituencies and disciplines involved in regional  
3 studies. Debates will likely resonate with concerns about the integrity and quality of  
4 concepts and theory (Markusen 2003) and the need for analytical consistency and  
5 definition (McCann 2007, this issue), especially if the research is concerned with  
6 confronting relational thinking with questions of quantification, measurement, evaluation  
7 and engagement with policy.  
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### 23 **Researching the region**

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27 Intertwined with conceptualisation and definition, how we research the region is a  
28 similarly longstanding concern for regional studies given its strong empirical traditions  
29 and is marked most recently by debates about methodological plurality and standards of  
30 analysis and evidence (see, for example, the contributions in relation to Markusen 2003  
31 in *Regional Studies*). While the sophistication and sensitivity of research methods in the  
32 social sciences has grown in recent years, in regional research Phillip McCann (2007,  
33 this issue) sees a continuing mismatch between what he interprets as the 'stylised  
34 constructs' or somewhat loose conceptualisations translated and utilised in regional  
35 policy frameworks and their inability to support empirical evaluation through hypothesis  
36 formulation and testing. He situates his argument in a contrast drawn between a broad  
37 and pluralistic disciplinary base of 'regional studies', typically deploying non-quantitative  
38 and non-mathematical forms of analysis, and a narrower, more economics focused  
39 'regional science', utilising more mathematical and empirical approaches. The critical  
40 problem is one of 'observational equivalence' (Overman 2004). That is, how to infer  
41 causality and determine the most appropriate explanation from empirical observations for  
42 which alternative and competing interpretations exist. For Phillip McCann (2007, this  
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1 issue), 'regional studies' is good at developing multiple conceptualisations, although they  
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3 are not always founded on strong theoretical and empirical bases. But it is less effective  
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5 at empirically verifying and testing its ideas.  
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10 Even if we accept the broad depiction of 'regional studies' and 'regional science' – or  
11  
12 wish to debate it – such approaches may remain characterised as different in purpose,  
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14 focus, the kinds of questions they can ask and answer, method, research design,  
15  
16 analytical capability, policy implications and so on. Too strong readings of the ontological  
17  
18 and epistemological differences in this interpretation may render or even deepen any  
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20 divide. A more complementary even if difficult relationship may prove more productive.  
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23 Indeed, Phillip McCann (2007, this issue) argues that 'regional studies' is useful in  
24  
25 raising topical questions since it is more open and engaged in more widely based  
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27 disciplinary dialogue and issues but 'regional science' is always required empirically to  
28  
29 evaluate the usefulness and use of such ideas in public policy. Otherwise, he suggests,  
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31 major difficulties for public policy design and evaluation will follow. Closer dialogue and  
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33 relationships may, however, raise the possibility of synthesis and mixing in the context of  
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35 appropriate and rigorously handled research designs. Indeed, innovation may become  
36  
37 more pressing because the emergent and unsettling debates about space, place and  
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39 scale present formidable issues for regional research strategy in terms of data  
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41 specification, collection and analysis in the context of more open, unbounded and  
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43 discontinuous spatial units.  
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### 56 **Governance, policy, politics and the region**

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Governance, policy and politics are other critical dimensions of regional studies that have recently been subject to thorough going change and reflection. Emergent kinds of



1 networked and partnership governance involving multiple actors and forms of  
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3 participatory and democratic engagement (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2006; Tomaney  
4  
5 and Pike 2006), processes and new geographies of devolution and multi-layering  
6  
7 amongst the institutions of government and governance (Jones and McCleod 2007,  
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9 Morgan 2007, this issue; Pike and Tomaney 2004; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill 2005) and  
10  
11 the emergence and articulation of new policy responsibilities such as science and  
12  
13 technology at the sub-national level (Perry and May 2007) – to name but a few  
14  
15 developments – have underpinned a more fluid and complex backdrop for considering  
16  
17 regional governance, policy and politics. Fundamental is the extent to which regions are  
18  
19 objects of policy and/or subjects endowed with the agency to shape, develop and deliver  
20  
21 policy (Hudson 2007, this issue). Power relations are critical in defining the ‘region’, its  
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23 interests and ‘development’, for instance in contesting the politics of collective provision  
24  
25 and consumption at the sub-national scale (Jonas and Ward 2004), challenging the  
26  
27 narrow mainstream economic focus on ‘regional economic development’ (Hudson 2007,  
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29 Pike *et al.* 2007, this issue) and interpreting the governance of regional firm networks  
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31 (Christopherson and Clark 2007, this issue).  
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41 Such is the depth and rapidity of recent change that discerning what current  
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43 developments mean for regional studies is challenging. Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue)  
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45 captures the essence of such uneven changes in regional governance, policy and  
46  
47 politics by reflecting upon the emergence of increasingly polycentric states wherein  
48  
49 multiple centres of deliberation and decision-making are at least challenging and  
50  
51 disturbing the certainties of formerly centralised, national and hierarchical structures. Yet,  
52  
53 drawing from empirical research in the UK, within this shifting context it remains an  
54  
55 empirical question whether recent changes are creating ‘new spaces of empowerment  
56  
57 and engagement’ and finding more sustainable balances between democracy and equity  
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59 (Morgan 2007, this issue). Significantly for those interested in the ‘region’, in this more  
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1 complex and changing context the 'region' appears to have no guaranteed place in  
2  
3 contexts within which the national central level retains a pivotal and often decisive role.  
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5 Indeed, as Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue) demonstrates, in the UK the very scale of the  
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7 'region' is being contested in the context of the promotion of emergent spatial  
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9 imaginaries at the 'city-region' and 'local' levels.  
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15 Elsewhere, the imprint of new thinking about discontinuous and unbounded space marks  
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17 interpretations of emergent regional governance and politics. Drawing upon their  
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19 empirical work on England's South East, John Allen and Allan Cochrane (2007, this  
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21 issue) deploy a relational approach to characterise the complex, multi-agent and multi-  
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23 scalar 'regional assemblage' that constitutes the governance of the region. For them, a  
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25 more diffuse and to a degree networked form of governance has underpinned the  
26  
27 emergence of a spatially discontinuous region. In this relatively strong relational view,  
28  
29 grounded in empirical research, such change is not best captured by the territorial  
30  
31 approach, despite its more flexible spatial vocabulary and conceptualisations of  
32  
33 'regionalisation' and state re-scaling (see Jones and McLeod 2007, this issue). As  
34  
35 suggested above, however, rather than constructing unhelpful binaries, thinking of  
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37 relational and territorial approaches as complementary might prove constructive even if  
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39 challenging to undertake given the potentially very different questions and forms of  
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41 analysis they suggest. For Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue), for example, political space  
42  
43 is bounded in administrative and electoral territories *and* porous through people's  
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45 multiple identities, mobilities and relations across space and place. A challenging  
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47 regional research agenda, then, might be concerned with examining the ways in which  
48  
49 existing institutions of representative democracy wedded to the territorial space of  
50  
51 political jurisdiction struggle to address issues of democratic renewal and participation in  
52  
53 the changing political context (see, for example, Massey 2004; Tomaney and Pike 2006).  
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1 Recent developments raise the question of the place of regional studies in regional  
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3 politics and policy. Regional studies have long grappled with their relationships and  
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5 relevance to the politics and public policy of government and governance (Hadjimichalis  
6  
7 and Hudson 2007; Markusen 2003). The Regional Studies Association and *Regional*  
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9 *Studies* journal have historically had policy engagement at their heart, marking out a  
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11 distinct and to varying degrees a separate trajectory from regional science from the  
12  
13 1960s (Pike *et al.* 2007). Regional studies is not alone in this regard. Geography, for  
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15 example, has constantly struggled with questions of relevancy, influence and policy  
16  
17 practicality (e.g. Martin 2001). A recurrent issue is the degree of incorporation into or  
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19 distance from the political and policy process. The traditionally conceptually and  
20  
21 theoretically robust and empirically grounded research in regional studies should have  
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23 much to offer, although engagement is not without its difficulties and frustrations due to  
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25 different priorities, rhythms, timescales and languages (Peck 1999). Critical regional  
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27 research, for instance, may not always be well received in the context of more narrowly  
28  
29 defined and limited research needs. Examples of independent views articulated in this  
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31 special issue include the fundamental questioning of what is meant by 'development' and  
32  
33 its distributional implications in localities and regions (Pike *et al.* 2007, this issue) and  
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35 Christopherson and Clark's (2007, this issue) challenge of the policy support for TNC  
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37 and SME network co-operation given TNC's tendencies to dominate the resources  
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39 critical to innovation including university R&D and skilled labour markets. The context of  
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41 more complex governance structures within which regional studies is practised and,  
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43 perhaps, seeks to engage makes its relationship with regional policy and politics no less  
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45 problematic.  
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## Conclusions

This editorial has sought to sketch out several of the critical issues for regional studies relating to concepts and theory, research methodology, and governance, policy and politics. The contributors to the special issue that follows connect with the critical issues outlined above and, in so doing, provide thoughts and reflections of value to the contemporary debates in regional studies. It remains to reflect upon potential issues shaping the possible futures for regional studies. First, current research contains plentiful reasons to prompt reflection upon the fundamental questions concerning the purpose and aims of regional studies. What is regional studies for and what is it trying to achieve? But one response suggests that, as researchers in regional studies, we need to become more explicit in recognizing and, where appropriate, articulating the normative content and intent of our work (Markusen 2006). Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney (2007, this issue), for example, have argued this much in their version of more holistic, progressive and sustainable forms of 'development' at the local and regional levels. Clearly, this stance is more of an issue for debate and challenge to those approaching regional studies from a positivist stance. Second, we might consider where regional studies sits and what it might have to contribute to the 'spatial turn' in social sciences more broadly (Grabher 2006) and even to the emergent notion of 'postdisciplinary studies' (Sayer 2000). Breaking down disciplinary (and sub-disciplinary) boundaries within and without regional studies may be fruitful albeit difficult. One example might be re-engaging with the internationalism evident at the founding of regional studies in the late 1960s but reworking it in the current context of the blurring between the formerly more discrete and separate domains of 'Development Studies' in 'developing' and 'transition' contexts and 'Regional and Local Development' in 'developed' countries (see, for example, Pike *et al.* 2006; Scott and Storper 2003). Reflected in this journal (Pike *et al.* 2007), in terms of the geographical focus of its research and contributors regional studies has grown and

1 extended from its Anglo-American origins in the 1960s through 'Europeanisation' in the  
2  
3 1980s and 1990s to an emergent and growing internationalism addressing the insights  
4  
5 and challenges of conceptual, empirical and policy developments especially in Asia (see,  
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7 for example, Zhiang and Wu 2006). At the very least, perhaps opening up dialogue with  
8  
9 other disciplines and sub-disciplines about what regional studies is, where it is heading  
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11 and what it can contribute may be fruitful (see Pike *et al.* 2007). Research issues shared  
12  
13 across disciplines provide a common ground upon which to work involving longstanding  
14  
15 concerns about growth, innovation, agglomeration, spatial inequalities, welfare and  
16  
17 equity and disparities alongside emergent topics such as the evaluation of  
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19 competitiveness and growth-oriented spatial policy, especially at the national and supra-  
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21 national levels (Bachtler and Wren 2006), living, working and mobility (Bramley *et al.*  
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23 2006; Jones *et al.* 2006), creativity and entrepreneurship (McGranahan and Wojan 2007;  
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25 Fritsch and Falck 2006), social and spatial justice (Johnston *et al.* 2006); sustainability  
26  
27 and the post-carbon economy (Morgan 2004; Zuideau 2006) and wellbeing and quality  
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29 of life (Brown and Rees 2006; Marchante and Ortega 2006). New methodologies,  
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31 techniques and applications too have their place in encouraging such cross-disciplinary  
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33 dialogue (e.g. Baussola 2007; Lundberg 2006). A productive future for regional studies  
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35 can be envisaged, then, providing strength in and through multi- and inter-disciplinary  
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37 approaches to empirically grounded and policy sensitive research.  
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