

## **City regionalism as geopolitical processes: a new framework for analysis**

Andrew E.G. Jonas  
University of Hull, UK  
A.E.Jonas@hull.ac.uk

and

Sami Moisio  
University of Helsinki/RELATE Centre of Excellence, Finland  
sami.moisio@helsinki.fi

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### **Abstract**

This paper sets out a new conceptual framework for investigating how city regionalism is constituted as a variegated set of geopolitical processes operating within and beyond the national state. Our approach highlights: 1) the different forms of territorial politics through which city regionalism is conjoined with broader visions of the national state; 2) the material and territorial arrangements which support such a conjuncture; and 3) the political actors enabling city regionalism and the national state to come together within a geopolitical frame of reference.

**Key words:** city regions, the state, geopolitics, national territory, political actors

## I Introduction

Processes of city-region building have attracted considerable attention from urban and regional scholars. If progress already has been made towards an understanding of the processes of agglomeration and accumulation that underpin city-regional growth (Scott, 2001a; 2001b), researchers have also examined the corresponding structures of collective provision and welfare that sustain social reproduction within city regions (Jonas and Ward, 2007; Etherington and Jones, 2009). Attention is now turning to the political construction of city regionalism in different national contexts (Dierwechter, 2008; Hall and Pain, 2006; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008; Kantor *et al.*, 2012). In so doing scholars have exposed the hand of the national state in shaping new city-regional configurations of political authority and public administration (Brenner, 2002; Harrison, 2007; Harrison and Hoyler, 2015). As Storper has put it:

“City regions also develop in part as a result of politics. They are shaped by national policies in different ways, and in turn, they enter into national political and social life in a variety of ways that are often not apparent to the naked eye.” (Storper, 2013: 10)

Whilst the latter approaches promise to deliver fresh theoretical insights into the emerging political landscape of city regionalism, surprisingly little has been said about the social and political construction of city regions from the perspective of the contested and often contradictory geopolitical interests and strategies of the national state (see Harrison, 2007). If the state is becoming more visible in the literature, research on city regions nonetheless continues to foreground economic processes, such as agglomeration, accumulation and competition (Florida, 2008; Scott, 2012), at the expense of knowledge of how these processes enable the national state to project itself on an international stage. When the state has been the focus of investigation, such as in the literature on state rescaling (Brenner, 2009), studies demonstrate how neoliberal forms of state intervention map onto city

regions but neglect to consider how city regionalism is shaped by territorial politics – both domestic and international – operating around the state (Cox, 2009). Even studies of the politics of urban development, which recognise that the state’s territorial structure can be a focus for all sorts of societal tensions in capitalism (Cox and Jonas, 1993), often fail to consider the various ways in which city regionalism both frames and discloses the extra-territorial practices and discourses of the national state (e.g., competitiveness, security, etc.). Consequently, research has underestimated the variety of ways in which city regionalism is enacted as a geopolitical project, practice and/or discourse on behalf of the state.

In this paper, we attempt to fill a gap in knowledge by proposing a new conceptual framework for analyzing the variety of ways in which city regionalism gets constituted as a set of geopolitical processes within and beyond the national state. Rather than attempting to define city regions as political territories that function apart from the state, we conceptualize city regionalism as a set of discursively and materially produced acts of political regionalization, which can take on multiple forms within and across state borders. In our view, city regionalism has become a key focus of geopolitical experimentation and problem solving on the part of the national state as it strives to construct a more functional transnational statehood for the twenty-first century; indeed it might well be becoming central to how the state orchestrates international competitiveness. As such, city regionalism needs to be understood not solely as the medium and outcome of territorial reorganizations *internal* to the state – important as these are – but also a decisive moment in the *internationalization* of the state itself.

In setting out our approach, we conceptualize the state as a constant geopolitical process to territorialize political power/authority through a great variety of governmental technologies ranging from spatial planning and public administration to economic development and education. By means of its concrete powers and functions (e.g.,

administrative, electoral, technocratic, etc.), the national state increasingly mediates and orchestrates accumulation around city regions as part of more general efforts to secure economic growth, to generate competitive advantages for factions of capital, and to ensure societal order within its territorial jurisdictions. Here we follow Jessop's notion of the state and its constituent powers as made up of "an institutionally and discursively mediated condensation...of a changing balance of forces that seek to influence the forms, purposes, and content of polity, politics and policy" (Jessop 2016: 10). It is our claim that city regionalism is becoming an important medium through which the state exercises its powers in the twenty-first century. Whereas in the mid-twentieth century the development of relatively self-contained national urban systems was integral to nation-building activities on the part of the state, today there is a qualitative change in the manner in which cities and their surrounding regions are geopolitically positioned as actors on behalf of the state. In effect, city regions – especially mega-city regions – have become integral to the process of 'stretching' state territoriality and competitiveness in line with a global economic order.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we review the current state of work on city-region resurgence in order to highlight the variety of ways in which the state is (or is not) brought into the analysis. We note an emphasis in the literature upon the idea – or even ideal – of a polycentric competition state in which city regionalism is somehow becoming detached analytically from knowledge of territorial-political processes and pressures on the state, a position that we find to be problematic. Second, we offer an alternative geopolitical reading of city regionalism in which we re-examine city-region policies and discourses in relation to underlying dilemmas and processes of state territorialization and state internationalization, in particular. Thirdly, we set out an approach for analyzing the various ways in which city regionalism is taken up and articulated as a geopolitical project. Our approach highlights: 1) the different forms of territorial politics

through which city-regionalism is conjoined with broader political, cultural and economic visions of the national state in a given context; 2) the material and territorial arrangements, including investments in social and physical infrastructure, which support such a conjuncture; and 3) the actors and policy discourses that shape the political strategies and experiments through which city regionalism and the national state come together within a wider geopolitical frame of reference. In the conclusion, we offer a heuristic framework for investigating these processes in greater empirical depth, which we anticipate could open up opportunities for further research into the geopolitics of city regionalism.

## **II City regionalism and the territorialization of politics: from the polycentric state to the ‘geopolitics of capitalism’**

In this section, we examine three dominant ways in which city regionalism has been examined in relation to the state. We argue each perspective is based upon certain assumptions about the optimal territorial structure of the state as viewed from the standpoint of capital accumulation and competitiveness. When examined individually each reinforces claims about the rise to dominance of the ‘competition state’ (see Cerny, 2007). When viewed together in a critical light, however, they suggest that the territorial politics shaping city regionalism can assume many different forms. Such perspectives underestimate the reciprocal yet diverse ways in which city regionalism and national state territory are co-constituted.

### ***1 City-regional collaboration in a polycentric state***

In the early 1990s, there was a convergence of academic interest around exposing the rise of city regions as new spatial structures of capital accumulation alongside the processes shaping their political construction. This convergence was motivated initially by work on the

new economic geography, which argued that the new industries driving the global economy tended to agglomerate or cluster within large urban regions (Porter, 2001). It prompted researchers to identify and delimit competitive city regions on the basis of the presence of clusters of industries operating in key growth sectors (e.g., finance, high technology, etc.). Crucially, however, this did not mean delimiting city regions in respect to the local jurisdictional arrangements of the state. Instead, the secret to unlocking their competitiveness was located in the presence or absence of institutions, regulatory arrangements, and governance frameworks capable of supporting the economic development of industrial clusters and their surrounding urban agglomerations (Scott, 1998; Storper, 1997). Quite early on the analysis of city-regional economies and institutions became detached from knowledge of state structures and territorial politics.

Ongoing research into city-regional economies often highlights the national and global political significance of expansive urban agglomerations, especially those city regions whose territories encompass multiple local political jurisdictions, several metropolitan areas and, in a few cases, provinces and even countries. When examined as discrete territorial-political entities, such highly polycentric city regions are recognized to face all sorts of collective-action problems pertaining to public service provision and territorial administration (Scott, 2012). However, unlike the self-contained metropolitan forms idealized by earlier generations of economists and scholars of public administration (Tiebout, 1956; Bish, 1971; Ostrom, 1990), today's global city regions are sufficiently large and innovative to self-generate institutional solutions to such problems, including strong models of city-regional collaboration. Nevertheless researchers remain preoccupied with matters of economic efficiency and competitiveness at the expense of knowledge of state structures and political interests, prompting the claim that the hand of the state is to all intents and purposes invisible from mainstream economic analysis of city regions (Storper, 2013: 10).

To the extent that ideas about the economic and political benefits of city-regional collaboration do find their way into public policy, some prior knowledge of territorial politics is presumed. As a former Secretary of the United States (US) Department of Housing and Urban Development once put it, regional collaboration involves designing governance structures that better match ‘things’ (e.g. infrastructure, tax base, etc.) with ‘people’ (citizens, businesses, politicians, etc.) (Cisneros, 1995). This is especially the case in the US where city regions exhibit deeply-entrenched distributional problems, leading to all sorts of political demands on local politicians and regional policy makers for more regionally equitable land use and economic development policies (Benner and Pastor, 2011; Wheeler, 2009). In touting these new models of city-regional collaboration, national policymakers, think-tanks and consultancies in the US nonetheless continue to advocate free-market solutions and principles of fiscal federalism rather than national state intervention (Pierce 1993; Katz and Bradley, 2014). To the extent that the state is brought into this policy discussion it serves to highlight differences in national political cultures and institutions. In the European Union (EU), for instance, public policy interest in city-regional collaboration has prompted national states to strengthen spatial planning and cross-border arrangements (Hall and Pain, 2006), reflecting the growing importance of the supranational scale as a political space shaping city regionalism in the European context (see Brenner, 2004).

Despite such increasing sensitivity to differences in national policy contexts, state territorial interests and geopolitical processes remain for the most part absent from mainstream policy and planning literatures on city regionalism. If anything, research continues to highlight examples of major city-regional agglomerations in which local political and economic actors have successfully circumnavigated presumed weaknesses in national economic planning and state social provision (Hall and Pain, *op. cit.*; Neuman and Hull, 2011; Kantor *et al.*, 2012). The polycentricity of the state is, at best, a recognized part

of the policy context but not an explanatory vehicle in its own right. The same applies to the literature on urban economics which deals with agglomeration and the related economic performance of city regions. More often than not, urban economists take for granted city regions as statistical areas which are detached from wider state spaces (see, e.g., Glaeser and Resseger, 2010). In sum, there is little corresponding analysis of the role of the state in orchestrating, steering, or otherwise sustaining city-regional policy and governance processes (Jessop, 1998). As such, the new economic geography of city regions is predicated on a somewhat restricted understanding of the “technological and organizational worlds that make regions” (Storper, 1997: 48).

## ***2 The rise of global city regions and its geopolitical consequences***

A second important theme is how the literature approaches the relationship between city regionalism and state territorial organization from the vantage point of global urbanization processes. Received models of urban spatial structure (e.g., the Chicago School of Urban Ecology) imaged urban territory developing outwards from a given urban centre, forming neat concentric zones, regular polycentric settlement systems, and nested urban hierarchies. Although such models captured certain spatial patterns of growth deemed characteristic of urbanization in Western Europe and North America during the early-to-mid twentieth century, nowadays urbanization has spread far beyond the political boundaries of the central city and its surrounding suburbs, and even those of the wider administrative region. Whereas the ‘city region’ concept first appeared in regional planning in the early twentieth century (Hall, 2009), we are now in the midst of a period in which the concept is being remoulded and stretched in order to fit better the processes and patterns of urban development and territorial organization associated with globalization (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008).



In seeking to capture these trends, the concept of regional urbanization refers to how capital accumulation takes place around mega-urban agglomerations, whose growing political influence threatens the sovereignty of the nation state (Soja, 2011). The concept further implies a shift underway from the organized (i.e. state-centred) capitalism of the post-World War II era to the contemporary de-territorialized form of global capitalism, which is characterized by an enhanced political authority of global city regions and a correspondingly weakened sovereign political autonomy of the territorial state. Scott (2001b: 813–814), for instance, has referred to the global city region “as an emerging political-economic unit with increasing autonomy of action on the national and world stages” which is “becoming increasingly central to the conduct and coordination of modern life”.

The rise of mega-urban agglomerations was anticipated in Jean Gottman’s description of Megalopolis, an imaginary term used to describe an urban agglomeration stretching from Washington, DC, to New York and Boston on the east coast of the USA (Gottmann, 1961; see Harrison and Hoyler, 2015). In revisiting Gottman’s thesis, it is not suggested that urban development is driven primarily by the locational needs of Fordist manufacturing (as was the case in the 1950s and ‘60s); nor are the variable costs of transporting goods and people a major constraint on regional economic development today. Rather the process of regional urbanization captures the idea that today’s mega-urban agglomerations are comprised of multiple employment nodes, which are interconnected regionally through extended labour markets or infrastructures, as well as globally through networks and flows of knowledge, information, and capital (Castells, 2000).

These global city-region networks and their supporting industrial agglomerations represent a significant threat to models of economic growth based around the assumption that cities operate in relatively self-contained national urban systems or, as Florida (2008: 42) has put it, “...bigger and more competitive economic units – mega-regions – have superceded

cities as the real engines of the global economy” (see also Jacobs, 1984). So pervasive is the new territorial imaginary of the global city region that scholars are even referring to the possibility of a profound geopolitical shift in the world system from sovereign territorial states to city networks within which a sort of ‘paradiplomacy’ is practised (see Keating, 1999). Taylor (2011: 201) states revealingly how:

“The prime governance instrument of the modern world-system has been the inter-state system based upon mutually recognized sovereignties of territorial polities. It is possible that we are just beginning to experience an erosion of territorial sovereignties and their replacement by new mutualities expressed through city networks. This is what the rise of globalization as a contemporary, dominant ‘key word’ might be heralding.”

Such a profoundly geopolitical view of the contemporary urban condition has been widely adopted and implemented in policy-making across different national contexts. Many governments in different parts of the world have sought to connect the state with newly-conceived mega-urban formations that are supposed to transcend state borders. These spatial formations are not just of intellectual curiosity; rather the relational imaginaries and territorial indicators used to describe such formations increasingly guide policy-making and planning practice within the host territorial states (cf. Ohmae 1993; see Harrison and Hoyler, 2015).

As the city-region concept becomes enrolled in the service of the state, it is in turn adapted and moulded to fit the state’s wider policy agendas. For example, the idea of mega-urban regions offers a strategic policy impetus especially to those national state governments that do *not* host major metropolitan areas within their territory. These governments therefore strive to ‘mega-regionalize’ themselves as a strategy to overcome their preconceived disadvantages in respect of international competition. It is also noticeable how the idea of mega-urban regions has been orchestrated by international organizations, supranational

polities, and global consultancies. For instance, the EU has promulgated the idea of mega-urban regionalism as a means to enhance economic competitiveness, thereby furthering the internationalization strategies of its member nation states (Moisio, 2011a; 2011b).

Superficially the rise of mega-urban regions with the capacity to supplant the nation state (and the wider state system) makes for an appealing argument; but it conveniently ignores the geopolitical significance of the national and transnational regulatory topologies sustaining these new mega city-region territorial formations. It fails to recognise that both the nation state and the city region are historically contingent political and social constructs, the development of which is bound up in historical struggles over social order and capital accumulation. Hitherto state theorists such as Poulantzas had argued that the presence of a dominant metropolitan centre in a national territory portends the rise of new forms of territorial politics around, variously, regionalism and transnationalism; a politics that is nevertheless deeply permeated by class struggles (see Poulantzas, 1998). Given the enduring efficacy of such territorial politics, any claim that the rise of global city regions *necessarily* undermines the nation state warrants careful scrutiny since other possibilities cannot be discounted out-of-hand. Instead we suggest that the rise of city-regionalism is a geopolitically significant yet historically contingent moment in the development of global capitalism, which brings us to a third theme in the literature.

### ***3 City regionalism as state rescaling***

This third theme arises from a reading of the literature on state rescaling (see Brenner, 2009). This corpus of work claims that the rise of city regionalism is closely associated with the spatial dictates and crises tendencies of the capitalist mode of production and, more specifically, with uneven development arising from the spatial concentration of global finance within city regions. It follows that the political construction of the city region as a

‘new state space’ (Brenner, 2004) reflects not so much economic inefficiencies operating inside city regions as it does larger-scale political-economic logics and contradictions, not least the need to construct new scales of social regulation and capital accumulation through neo-liberal policy measures. From this perspective, efforts to bolster the competitiveness of city regions represent, in effect, a struggle for the political and economic control of capitalism at a new spatial scale extending well beyond the territorial confines of a given metropolitan area (see Wachsmuth, 2015).

From this vantage point, moreover, city regionalism is closely linked with the idea of a ‘spatial fix’ (see Harvey, 1982) or, in other words, a specific system of accumulation that centres upon state and governance processes operating around urban regions (Jessop, 2000: 335–336). This city-regional fix, moreover, is constructed upon an apolitical ‘general interest’ – often articulated as the ‘national interest’ – which endorses selected ways of thinking and acting on economic growth, and marginalizes others. In so doing, the fix facilitates “the deferral and displacement of contradictions, crisis-tendencies, and conflicts to the benefit of those fully included in the ‘general interest’ at the expense of those who are more or less excluded from it” (Jessop, 2008: 1). The spatial fix, therefore, reflects and discloses the ongoing social processes and power relations underpinning the territorial organization of the state. As such, a crucial consideration is the different ways in which city regionalism becomes enrolled around the conflicting state strategies associated with the ‘geopolitics of capitalism’ (Harvey, 1985).

The rise of city regionalism is often marshalled as evidence of the ‘downscaling’ of state power alongside the ‘upscaling’ of social-regulatory institutions in line with the global territorial reach of capitalist firms and institutions. Yet city regionalism is never solely a downscaling of state power because the national state is always self-interested in managing both its internal territoriality and also its extra-territorial reach. Sometimes this works in

response to local social and political interests, in which case it is important to investigate how members of the ‘growth coalition’ stand to gain or lose from the different state territorial arrangements that emerge within and around metropolitan areas (see Cox, 2011). On other occasions, city regionalism can in fact be integral to the internationalization of the state itself; across the world, many of the attempts to construct a ‘global city’ are bound to the processes of state spatial reconfiguration (e.g., Kangas, 2013). In other words, mega-urban agglomerations are identified not only to be the leading motors of global economic development but also particular strategic spaces for *national states* rather than city regions (or their constituent ‘growth coalitions’) to enter an imagined ‘global sphere’ within which certain segments of people, factions of capital (especially finance), and economically powerful ideas are understood to circulate. Rather than undermining (or being undermined by) the national state, the political orchestration of city regionalism on an international stage can in fact reveal a lot about how the state seeks to reorganize its territorial structure in order to attract global investment and ensure the economic development of its most politically privileged urban centres (Jonas, 2013).

### **III Towards city regionalism as geopolitical processes**

To summarize the above discussion, we have identified three ways in which the state is examined in relation to the rise of city regions. First, some argue that city regionalism is an outgrowth of a polycentric settlement system, a development that poses challenges for territorial structures of economic governance which address issues of economic efficiency and collective action. Second, there are those diverse perspectives that highlight the rise of city regions in a global context, a development which appears to signal not only the demise of the nation state and the global system of territorial states but also the gradual replacement of inter-state territorial competition by inter-city rivalries. Finally, for others city regionalism

represents a decisive moment in the territorial reorganization and rescaling of the state, contributing to a globally imbricated economic and social order (Brenner, 2013). Each approach offers useful insights into how one might conceptualize city regionalism in relation to the state; yet each in turn begs questions about the role of geopolitics in shaping city regionalism.

Building on these critical observations, we now highlight the importance of exposing city regionalism as a set of geopolitical processes; the insurmountable diversity of city regionalism is generated in these processes, and the ‘urban worlds’ so constituted become crucial constituents of state spaces. We thus claim that city regionalism has important implications for reconfiguration of national state territoriality, and that city regionalism needs to be understood in the context of national state spatial transformation rather than its demise. The task is to identify and investigate the variegated processes through which city regionalism is produced and re-produced through the state by various societal forces which bring together the economy and society in different geopolitical tapestries. Such a perspective underlines the modern state’s need to territorialize urban order both within and also outwith its borders. This effort has not withered away due to globalization or the rise of the global knowledge-based economy, even if one may argue that the capacity of the government to practice such a territorialization has qualitatively altered.

During the twentieth century, the state territorialized economic space around a constellation of national urban centres and systems in the context of social policies and practices related to the ‘national economy’. Consider, for instance, how city regionalism was a constitutive element of the so-called Rhine-model of state-capitalism that was predicated on particular ‘social’ state interventionism (the demand-side regulation), and collective and egalitarian decision-making (e.g., Hall and Soskice, 2001). In such a Keynesian-Fordist context, metropolitanism underpinned a geopolitics of security and coherence, which was

geared around the 'national' as the primary locus of political virtue. Territorial ideas and discourses based around functional 'metropolitan areas' or 'city regions' were nationalized and codified by the state through political symbolism, urban policy, and national planning. Albeit such processes often worked out differently within specific national contexts, depending on the geopolitical priorities and interests of Cold War-era security states.

Consider in this regard the rise of a metropolitan polity in the US context. The expansion of metropolitan regions, and thus the birth of particular 'American' variety of metropolitan regionalism during the Cold War, was partly based on channelling population and resources into larger urban areas (e.g., of the Sunbelt states) through a heavy support by the federal government in the form of federally-regulated road construction and secured home loans through which city regions emerged. Both of these governmental interventions were predicated on US military and security policies (Gillham, 2002), which furthered the genesis of metropolitan regionalism. Throughout the Cold War, geopolitical discourses of national security and state territorial integrity legitimated the raising of US federal and state taxes (e.g. the gasoline tax) for inter-urban highway spending, which in turn fostered further urban sprawl and metropolitan political fragmentation, eventually triggering strident calls for new models of regional collaboration. Now compare these developments to debates in the European context. Even though some supranational polities, most notably the EU, have recently sought to generate an EU-wide polycentric urban order, thereby challenging state-centred urban hierarchies, these efforts have remained modest (Moisio, 2011b). Be that as it may, institutional change and experimentation in multiple registers are significant aspects of the new geopolitics of city regionalism and the associated genesis of new state spaces.

There are at least three important aspects of seeing city regionalism as a central part of a wider set of geopolitical processes. Firstly, attempts by the national state to orchestrate city regionalism centrally 'from above' (see Harrison, 2008) require some understanding of

the specific nature of national political issues involved, be these issues of fiscal distribution, settlement, citizenship, identity, or some other facet of what might be called the ‘national question’. Second, there is the matter of how the state gives material support to city regionalism in the forms of investments in social and physical infrastructures, and how in turn these investments and institutional arrangements are given legitimacy by geopolitical discourses.

Thirdly, there is the question of what actors – state and non-state – are involved in orchestrating city regionalism internationally. Here we need to establish more precisely which economic and political actors speak and act on behalf of city regions, perhaps by drawing down the aforementioned infrastructural investments or developing stronger relationships between city regions, supranational regulatory structures, and flows of global finance. While such actors often operate as ‘regional spokespersons’ (Metzger, 2013), the whole issue of political ‘actorness’ in the context of city regionalism should be understood as operating not just at the regional scale but also nationally and internationally. Further research is required into the ways in which business organizations, state departments, investment consortia, private firms, and public institutions (e.g., regional councils or city administrations), as well as individuals, consultants, and transnational academic gurus, actively construct the discursive and material practices of city regionalism. Precisely how these actors develop bodies of expertise around the issue of city regionalism in particular spatial and temporal contexts is a crucial research question informing the geopolitical analysis of city regionalism.

#### **IV A framework for analyzing the geopolitics of city regionalism**

This section discusses some examples as a prelude to proposing a heuristic framework for analyzing city regionalism as a set of geopolitical processes. Important to our argument is



a need to understand the co-constitution of efforts to define and delimit city regions as material spaces, political structures, and/or discursive formations. Rather than reinforcing the duality between the national state and the city region, our perspective highlights the coming together of the state and city regionalism as a set of geopolitical processes which can be empirically analyzed. In order to simplify the discussion, we highlight three geopolitical aspects of the relationship between city regionalism and the state as follows: 1) the territorializing processes in which city regionalism is conjoined with broader political, cultural and economic visions of the national state in a given context; 2) the material arrangements that characterize such conjoining; and 3) the actors (and their capacities to act) which play a crucial role formulating the political strategies/experiments in which city-regionalism and the national state come together.

### ***1 City regionalism and the national question***

Given the powerful economic imaginaries circulating through the global knowledge-based economy, the need to tailor policies around city regionalism has become an important strategy to modify national economic strategies and institutions, modes of governance, and indeed the very form of the state. Contemporary approaches to city regionalism often choose to focus on how the reconfiguration of sub-national spaces of the state enhances global economic competitiveness and mitigates for national deficits in the societal regulation of capitalism. However, such approaches are based on the questionable assumption that city regions are functional economic spaces whereas the nation state is becoming *dysfunctional* (e.g., for maintaining societal order necessary for accumulation). In fact, by enrolling the city-region concept around domestic political projects, the national state has quite a potent weapon in its already extensive armoury of policy ideas and practices for dealing with pressing national problems, including but not limited to those relating to economic

competitiveness and societal regulation. Depending on the context, the geopolitical reordering of national political space around city regions can be seen, variously, as a vehicle for promoting state territorial redistribution, addressing regional imbalances in economic and political power, maintaining the national socio-political order, or facilitating national planning and settlement. Our approach thus invites due consideration of the great variety of ways in which city regionalism assists the state in addressing the national question.

Take, for example, the UK where the city-region concept has already informed national economic policy but now increasingly plays into various national political problems and strategies. In the early 2000s, city regionalism was deployed by the national Labour government as a policy tool designed to counterbalance the dominance of London and the South East region of England in national economic decision making (ODPM, 2006; Harding, 2007). The major regional cities (e.g., Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, etc.) were encouraged to organize around a lobby group, the Core Cities, which was encouraged to secure so-called ‘city deals’ involving a limited devolution of powers for economic development to the city regions. This process has continued under a new national Conservative government. For example, in July 2014 the civic leaders of Greater Manchester signed an agreement with the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, to create the first directly elected metro-wide mayor outside London having powers over transport, economic development and policing. Other ‘city deals’ have since followed.

In the meantime, however, the political landscape of city regionalism in the UK has been transformed by the devolution question in Scotland. Prior to the Scottish referendum held in 2014, and fearful of a vote in favour of Scotland becoming an independent country, three major national political parties in the UK promised to devolve more power to the regions, a promise which in turn intensified demands to devolve more powers to the *English* city regions. The ruling Conservative national government has since identified the ‘northern

powerhouse’ as a potential city-region solution for England, not only to the problem of regional economic imbalance, but also that of political devolution:

“We have a comprehensive plan to rebalance the economy and create a northern powerhouse by bringing together the great cities and counties of the north of England, alongside plans to support other vital economies in our country, such as the south-west. Those plans involve major investment in transport infrastructure, backing science and skills, and supporting local businesses. The centrepiece of the northern powerhouse is the commitment to a major transfer of power to our great cities and counties so that local people can take more control of the decisions that affect them.”

(George Osborne cited in Hansard, 2015)

Where the territorial boundaries of the ‘northern powerhouse’ are drawn (if at all) has been a matter of political debate in the UK parliament. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate how a quite specific economic debate about city regionalism has been transformed around a much wider set of political and discursive strategies, which are designed to address pressing territorial-political problems inside the UK state, not the least of which is the ‘national’ question.(1)

The UK devolution question suggests that it is sometimes useful to draw a distinction between the political construction of city regionalism as an electoral project undertaken on behalf of a national political party, on the one hand, and the idea that city regionalism might embody national settlement goals and imaginaries, on the other. This latter form of territorial politics is most apparent in states where national structures of urban planning and economic growth reflect the settlement policies of the national state, as is the case in Israel (Kirby and Abu Rass, 1999). Since 1948, the Israeli planning system has served not only as a tool for promoting Jewish settlement in the different regions of Israel but also a strategy to promote the nation-building objectives of the State of Israel and, in doing so, control the country’s

Palestinian minority. In this and in other respects, efforts undertaken on behalf of the state to promote the reconfiguration of a country's internal settlement systems, including those that involve consolidating cities with their surrounding administrative regions, often have profound national and international political ramifications, especially in places where struggles around race, religion, and/or identity have shaped the structures, institutions and patterns of urban development (Cochrane and Jonas, 1999), or where national independence movements remain strong (e.g., the Basque region and Catalunya in Spain).

Our approach to city regionalism further invites investigations of the relationship between national economic development and the wider geopolitical practices and imaginaries of the nation state. Evidence from research in countries such as Australia (McGuirk, 2007), South Korea (Park, 2008) and Malaysia (Roy, 2009) suggests that city regions play a strategic role in constructing new imaginaries of national economic development. Often this requires that the state selects certain city regions – usually the primate city and perhaps also the national capital (these might be the same places but not necessarily so) – as privileged locations for strategic investments in infrastructure, social provision, and culture (e.g., Kuala Lumpur in the case of Malaysia, Seoul in Korea, and Sydney in Australia). Here, too, the imaginary of the ‘metropolis state’ (Moisio, 2008) – whereby certain city regions are seemingly better able to articulate and represent a vision or ideal of how the nation can compete and prosper on an international stage – is pertinent. Of course, that vision is itself subject to political negotiation and contestation over time as can be illustrated by the case of Finland, which has been in a transition process from decentralized welfare state, to decentralized competition state, and eventually to a metropolis state. In the latter context, the future of the state is bound to the capacity of the state to anchor itself to the imagined global sphere through a few city regions (Moisio and Paasi, 2013) as well as particular spaces within these (Moisio and Kangas, 2016).

It is quite notable that Finland's Ministry of Finance and its ministerial allies have formed a geopolitical power coalition which guides the reconstruction of state spatiality through city regionalism. The geopolitical vision of this coalition gets its power from the discourses of the global knowledge-based economy (e.g., Government of Finland, 2009; 2014). Together with the equally important political discourses of austerity, such discourses inform reforms that seek to locate the state at the epicenter of the conceived global networks but also make possible a more efficient and cost-effective welfare state. The following quote is exemplary, not exceptional:

“... good economic growth and employment most likely require urbanization and regional concentration which is much more intensive than earlier [...] The recent economic research supports strongly an idea that future's growth engines will indeed be found in large and diverse cities. Urbanization and concentration are most likely untapped assets for Finland, assets which are now badly needed. The benefits of regional concentration are large in the light of research. When people equipped with particular abilities gather together the average productivity of all improves [...] Future's wealth will be found in growing metropolises, and the more we have such metropolises, the more we have wealth which the decision makers can re-distribute also to peripheries of Finland.” (Vartiainen, 2014: 12–13, trans. from Finnish)

If certain city regions are thus discursively represented as 'global' because their perceived economic reach stretches far beyond national state boundaries, in other respects city-regionalist discourses simultaneously reflect inherently national political problems and imaginaries. The Finnish case illustrates how a growing emphasis on city regionalism is part of prioritizing 'wealth creation' in the face of the purported threat of international competition. The establishment of powerful and networked city regions having an international reach thus become central to national imaginaries of economic success, social

redistribution and welfare. In a similar vein, albeit from a global South perspective, Roy (2009) suggests that the rise of the mega-city region helps to foster quite nationalist(ic) developmental imaginaries, such as those of the aspirational nation forging its way into a brighter, better, and more global future (on Taiwan, see Lee, 2015). Our analysis provokes the question as to whether such increasingly dominant – at times even nationalistic – political imaginaries associated with city regionalism resonate alongside, or perhaps come into conflict with, the corresponding geo-economic practices associated with the assumed political demise of the nation state.

## ***2 Materialities of city regionalism: geopolitics of competition and social investment***

With a few exceptions (e.g., Ward and Jonas, 2004; Keil and Adie, 2015) the literature on city regionalism has had surprisingly little to say about the geopolitical practices, governance technologies and policy arrangements that are used by the state to manage spaces of social investment and collective provision. Yet decisions in respect of where to invest in all sorts of social and physical infrastructures are quite central to how the state organizes and manages territorial politics simultaneously internal and external to its borders. Therefore which city regions are deemed to qualify for such investments can say a lot about the geopolitical priorities of the state. We now consider how the state deploys city regionalism as a geopolitical strategy for managing competition and social investment. As before, we are interested in the specific city-region practices, knowledges, actors and imaginaries supporting these arrangements.

The policy landscape shaping material investments in city regions is replete with all sorts of territorial practices and imaginaries, many of which are geared not just to a domestic audience but also international organizations, such as global investment consortia. On the one hand, decisions about where to build transportation systems, enhance urban mobility, invest

in ‘smart city’ infrastructure or develop logistics around ‘multimedia supercorridors’ and ‘global gateways’ comfortably resonate with the state’s internationalization agenda. On the other hand, such ongoing investments in fixed capital and infrastructure can reinforce regional inequalities, which feed into a domestic politics of territorial distribution. Given these conflicting geopolitical processes, it is necessary for the state to deploy sophisticated technologies of governance for managing its spaces of social investment and competition. The specific manner in which the city-region idea is mobilized is central to how the state manages these conflicting priorities in respect of investment in social and physical infrastructure.

Under Fordism-Keynesianism, the state’s role in supporting accumulation involved a certain form of technocratic thinking about state territory as a single functional space in which cities could be connected by national transportation systems (motorways, freeways, autobahns, single-gauge rail networks, etc.). The decline of collective provision by the Keynesian welfare state and the rise of more fragmented modes of delivering infrastructure have undermined this ‘Keynesian myth’ (Radice, 1984) of a semi-fixed national geography, throwing into sharp perspective ensuing political struggles around the scalar distribution of state capacities for urban development and social provision (Cox and Jonas, 1993). City regionalism potentially offers a technocratic means of managing these struggles. For example, state support for certain city regions can give credence to corresponding calls for investments in selective improvements in inter-urban connections across state territory (e.g., high-speed rail corridors, digital highways, etc.). Recent years has seen all sorts of new city-regional configurations of the administrative structures of the state devoted to delivering investments in transport systems and related infrastructures (Addie, 2013; Enright, 2015). At the same time, however, the state continues to confront demands to improve the security of its citizens against various perceived ‘external’ threats (e.g. terrorism, climate change, etc.),

which often means bolstering investment in the national capital. In this respect, the analysis of city regionalism can shed a powerful light on the technologies of governance used by the state to manage not just social and physical infrastructural investments but also perceived geopolitical risks within/to its territory.

Since the global financial crisis of 2007-8 the economic development priorities of the state have focussed specifically on how investments in social and physical infrastructure can be offset against future financial risks and thereby stimulate sustainable national economic recovery. Here supranational organizations can and do play a crucial role in assisting states in identifying those city region territories that are deemed to ‘safe bets’ from the standpoint of financial risk, geopolitical security, climate change, sustainability, and so forth. For instance, there have been growing calls by international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for strengthened models of territorial governance at the city-region scale. Whereas the UN has enrolled private and public interests around principles for responsible investment (e.g., for major urban infrastructure projects) (UNPRI, 2015), the OECD has talked up the role of mega-city regions as territorial units of competitiveness and sustainable development. In its *Territorial Reviews*, the OECD has documented the growth and investment performance of city regions as measured against a range of economic and social indicators (see, e.g., OECD, 2006; 2015). Underpinning such reports is the argument – often quite explicit – that an overly polycentric state can sometimes be a deterrent to global investors. In making this apparently counterintuitive link between political fragmentation and underinvestment in social infrastructure, supranational organizations lend credence to claims that strong models of city-regional collaboration are a required for securing investments in social and physical infrastructure. Such claims would be inconceivable without explicit knowledge of how the state operates within a geopolitical frame of reference.



Supranational organizations help the state to prepare the ground for global financiers, land developers, infrastructure firms, and other agents that invest in city regions. Such global investment consortia derive income from fixed equity-based investments and assets, such as infrastructure, residential land and property, and commercial real estate. These investments are often located in a city region or, in the case of larger holdings, are spread across more than one city region, the territorial limits of which accordingly can become stretched and redefined to suit investor interests. Such investments, being tied to particular (local) state territories, represent a fixed asset class whose value depends on harnessing revenue as capital circulates through the city-regional economy and built environment. In this context, investment consortia promote all sorts of territorial imaginaries as part of ongoing efforts to position their host city regions more favourably in relation to wider circuits of state social and physical investment. A case-in-point is Peel Holdings' use of the imaginary of the Atlantic Gateway to describe its business strategy for the Liverpool/Manchester city region in the UK (Harrison, 2014). Such overt orchestration of city regionalism internationally, in turn, raises questions about how we should identify and investigate the specific interests and actors who speak for city regions in a global context.

### ***3 City-region political actors: constructing transnational bridges***

We now briefly consider the role of different economic and political actors in using city regionalism to promote the state on an international stage. The territorialization of the state around city regions is bound up with quite broad and yet also competing and conflicting visions and ideas, which are conveyed by all sorts of political and economic actors having different capacities to act. Such actors and in turn their actions and words orientate the various ways in which city regionalism can be understood as a political and economic strategy. Storper has eloquently argued that the most economically successful city regions tend to be those that develop bonds between economic and political actors that can override

the tensions and political schisms caused by metropolitan political fragmentation (Storper, 2013: 120-125). One might therefore anticipate that the presence of local actors involved in the development of strong mechanisms of regional collaboration within city regions is a necessary condition for addressing problems of collective action. But is it always a sufficient condition? Our preliminary answer to this is ‘no’ insofar as there must also be a plethora of institutions and agencies outwith a city region, which in effect ‘speak’ for the city region with respect to state spatial developments.

A variety of actors mediate between city regions and national and international regulatory structures; these include politicians, consultants, business consortia, public-private partnerships, transnational firms, investors, and supranational organizations. These actors – the transnational bridging agents of city regionalism – play a crucial role in positioning city regions in national and international strategies of spatial development. Consider, for instance, the recent outcry by the chief executive officer of one of the leading multinational corporations in Finland concerning the need to construe the Finnish state increasingly around city regions in order to survive in global economic competition (Raeste, 2016). Such transnational bridging agents not only play an important role in cementing a material economic connection between the city regions and global sources of capital investment but they also increasingly operate on behalf of the state in internationally orchestrating city regionalism. In these respects, city regionalism creates a political action space for different actors to vision, measure and assess new state spatial configurations.

The globalization of city regionalism has been greatly influenced by transnational policy fashions; and these policies would not circulate internationally without the knowledges held by transnational bridging agents. In recent years, city regionalism has been firmly anchored to, and is constituted through, the increasingly powerful circuits of fast policy development and experimentation. These experimentations have been instigated in particular

by “epistemic communities of experts, practitioners and advocates” (cf. Brenner *et al.*, 2010: 216). The aforementioned example of regional collaboration (viz. the new regionalism) is a case-in-point. Some of these regionalist experimentations have been shown to have limited purchase beyond their host states, regions and urban political jurisdictions (Jonas and Pincetl, 2006); but their relative effectiveness in other contexts does not come as revelation given that the recent round of state transformation has been more generally characterized by the increasing power of all sorts of consultants in the practices of state apparatus (Prince, 2012). They are part of larger transnational networks of “like-minded technocrats” (Peck, 2001: 451), which operate in the name of the state through various channels. The actors of these networks have notable capacities to frame value-based political choices and thus set city-regional policy agendas, for instance, through production of ‘evidence-based’ knowledge (Ahlqvist and Moisiö, 2014).

One of the remaining challenges is to analyze the geopolitical formation of city regionalism through the lens of transnational policy mobility. Both the inherited institutional landscapes of the state and the transnational fields of inter-spatial policy transfer should be taken into account in an analysis of the political construction of city regionalism in a particular state context. In other words, as a geopolitical process of state transformation city regionalism has been gradually re-worked through a series of smaller or larger experimental practices in which Keynesian-national territorial structures of the welfare state have been transformed around, if not entirely replaced by, new state structures (see Golubchikov *et al.*, 2014). In this process, the inherited territorial/institutional structures of the state have been gradually re-worked through a peculiar ‘Porterian-Floridian’ geopolitical rationality (see Kivelä and Moisiö, 2016).

## **V Conclusions**

This paper has set out an approach to city regions that gives priority to their geopolitical construction in the context of the national state. This approach is summarized in Table 1 in which we identify three framing research questions. Each of these questions invites an investigation of the different geopolitical processes that align city regionalism with the interests of the state. Each in turn is associated with specific state territorial-institutional structures, economic and political actors, geopolitical practices, and city-region knowledges and imaginaries. This heuristic framework is designed to provoke further detailed empirical research into the different forms of territorial politics through which city regionalism is conjoined with broader national state objectives within a wider geopolitical frame of reference.

+++ **insert Table 1 about here** +++

Our approach is inspired by ongoing research into the different ways in which city regionalism is politically constituted within the national state. For example, Harrison (2010) has shown that, whilst city regionalism remains premised on ideas of economic growth, efforts to mark out these city regions as territories has been conditioned and constrained by existing state administrative boundaries and associated traditions of making claims to territorial space. Accordingly, the territorial politics shaping city regionalism can either be centrally orchestrated by the state or, alternatively, regionally orchestrated by non-state interests (Harrison, 2008). Likewise state spatial theorists have emphasised how state rescaling around city regions manifests a struggle to find new territorial solutions – spatial fixes – to crisis tendencies in neoliberal capitalism (Brenner, 2004). What distinguishes our approach from these perspectives, as well as others likewise interested in politically mapping city regions in relation to the state, is the desire to interrogate city regionalism as a more diverse set of territorial-political processes through which national state interests are

orchestrated; moreover, these processes operate domestically and, crucially, also internationally.

Our call for researchers to address the co-constitution of the state and city regionalism within a geopolitical framework arises out of claims that capitalism is in decisive moment in terms of the underpinning state territorial organization and the heightening importance of internationally-orchestrated city regionalism. However, rather than comprehending such city regionalism as unravelling the global system based on sovereign nation states (Jessop *et al.*, 2008), or suggesting that topological representations of political processes are superior to their territorial counterparts (cf. Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Morgan, 2007), we have outlined an approach to understanding how particular territorial-political processes, material structures and actors are involved in promoting city regionalism. Each, in turn, contributes to the incessant territorialization and re-territorialization practices of the state at large. As such the many and varied efforts to organize, manage and transform state territories around city regions disclose wider geopolitical rationalities and knowledges, not least those involved in repositioning the national state in regard to international competitiveness.

In our view, city-regionalism is a contingent expression of wider territorial-political dilemmas confronting the national state which are partly informed by, but not reducible to, global neoliberal logics of economic growth and competition. We accept that global capitalism could be at a decisive moment in terms of its underpinning state territorial organization and, as a crucial part of this, city regionalism occupies an increasingly central place in the wider geopolitical calculus of the state. However, we have offered a different perspective on these developments. Through its various efforts to organise, manage and transform national territory around city regions, the national state is seemingly better able to achieve external objectives in regard to competitiveness even as it confronts ongoing territorial-political problems and tensions within its borders. We are not claiming that city

regionalism represents a step-change in the scale of urbanization and territorial organization, one which can somehow be separated from the existing geopolitical configuration of the global economic order. Instead, we suggest that city-regionalism has assumed a geopolitical significance which is best understood as an historically contingent moment in the development of global capitalism.

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### **Notes**

1. In the UK, the national question – specifically, the failure of the UK state to use city regionalism to rebalance the economy – has become even more vexed in light of the June 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. A narrow margin in favour of Brexit (a proposal that the UK should leave the EU) has exposed a territorial division within the national electorate between, on the one hand, voters in London and the South East region who favoured remaining in the EU and, on the other, those in the provincial English cities and regions who voted for leaving. A clear majority of voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland expressed a preference to remain in the EU.

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### **Author biographies**

**Andy Jonas** is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Hull. His research interests include regionalism, city regions, the state and urban politics. Recent books include *Territory, the State and Urban Politics* (Ashgate, 2012, co-edited with Andy Wood) and *Urban Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015, co-authored with Eugene McCann and Mary Thomas).

**Sami Moisio** is Professor of Spatial Planning and Policy in the Department of Geosciences and Geography at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His research interests include geopolitics, political geographies of Europeanization, state spatial transformation and the geopolitics of the knowledge-based society.