Rethinking city-regionalism as the production of new non-state spatial strategies: the case of Peel Holding’s Atlantic Gateway Strategy

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RETHINKING CITY-REGIONALISM AS THE PRODUCTION OF NEW NON-STATE SPATIAL STRATEGIES: THE CASE OF PEEL HOLDINGS ATLANTIC GATEWAY STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION: CITY-REGIONS AS POLITICAL CONSTRUCTS

Amid globalization city-regions are widely recognised as key to economic and social revitalization. Notwithstanding the fact that each geopolitical project is specific to the national context within which it is located, this paper focuses on recent developments in England to enunciate further the geopolitical construction of city-regions. England is a vivacious setting within which to pursue city-regional research owing to the smorgasbord of initiatives, policies, strategies and institutional frameworks which have been summoned up by policy elites in recent years to operate across a, variously defined, city-regional scale (Harrison, 2010). Yet for all of the international support, fervent posturing and triumphalism being marshalled by those advocating city-regions as the “ideal scale for policy intervention in a globalized world” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008, p. 1029), critics ultimately believe a ‘thin’ approach is being adopted (Harrison, 2007; Jonas and Ward, 2007). In England, for example, initiatives branded as city-regional have produced nothing more than a patchwork quilt of assorted, weak, and often contradictory and overlapping initiatives that have failed to live up to expectation. Nonetheless, a decade on the enduring appeal of city-regions remains undiminished among policy elites.

To be sure, the allure of city-regionalism as a geopolitical project was embellished in 2010 when the new Coalition Government announced the abolition of the regional tier of
governance in England, declaring their intention instead to establish Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Yet despite the change in political orientation at the centre of UK politics, there is little chance to celebrate. Early indications suggest only minimal change to the trajectory or fabric of the city-regionalism project in England. In sum, despite the allure of city-regionalism as a geopolitical project in England, as elsewhere, there remains limited hope that it will achieve the ambitious goals that its academic and non-academic architects and proponents purport.

Launched in 2008, the Atlantic Gateway Strategy (AGS) provides a radical alternative. The brainchild of Peel Holdings, a private investment company, the AGS is a bold and unique vision which aims to establish Liverpool-Manchester as a globally competitive urban area. In an era of state under-provision – certainly relative to the investment in infrastructure and state subsidy that once characterised the Fordist-Keynesian State – the Atlantic Gateway represents an important window onto what may ultimately turn out to be the next stage of city-regionalism as a geopolitical project (cf. Jonas, 2012). To develop this argument, the paper situates the AGS within the broader framework of city-regionalism as a geopolitical project. Section 3 draws on Cox’s (1998) distinction between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement to analyse the motivation and rationale for Peel constructing the Atlantic Gateway spatial concept, before Section 4 reveals the tensions which currently surround the Atlantic Gateway initiative.

CITY-REGIONALISM: ENGLAND’S MAGIC BULLET?

It is now over ten years since Is There a ‘Missing Middle’ in English Governance? became the antecedent to a resurgent interest in city-regions in England. Since then, swept along by a wave of international support, city-regionalism has been routinely championed as England’s
magic bullet for its urban and regional ills. Nevertheless, while it is widely accepted that England is seeking greater engagement with city-regionalism contradictions exist in policies aimed at increasing the institutional capacity of city-regions. What makes the Atlantic Gateway initiative stand out is that unlike many of these previous initiatives (1) it is not centrally orchestrated by the state but is genuinely business-led; (2) it has the critical mass to be an agglomeration economy à la Scott’s (2001) notion of the global city-region; (3) it does not map onto known political or administrative units; (4) it is not a scalar amplification or contraction of previous entities; (5) the promise of a £50 billion investment suggests it is well-resourced; and (6) contra the fragmentation of governance arrangements across England’s largest urban economic regions it seeks to provide a single governance arrangement to work across England’s second largest economic urban region (Peel, 2009, 2010a/b).

In this way the Atlantic Gateway Strategy presents an alternative vision of city-regionalism as a geo-political project. Yet it also poses a series of searching questions about what an alternative city-regionalism might amount to.

INTRODUCING ATLANTIC GATEWAY: THE ‘THAMES GATEWAY OF THE NORTH’

The Atlantic Gateway is the result of 25 years investment in infrastructure, transport and real estate, predominantly, though not exclusively, in the North West region of England. Peel’s latest initiative is its proposed £50 billion co-ordinated cross-sector investment strategy known as the Atlantic Gateway.

*Peel’s Vision: company vision becomes spatial vision*
The Atlantic Gateway concept was first launched on 5 September 2008, albeit at inception it was referred to as ‘Ocean Gateway’ (Peel, 2009). In the first instance, Ocean Gateway amounts to Peel’s company vision (looking to 2050) for how a planned £50 billion investment programme in 50 of its most significant projects will shape the long-term future of the company. But alongside Peel’s company vision, Ocean Gateway also constitutes a metropolitan spatial vision. The result of over 25 years investment in an ever expanding portfolio of activity across the real estate, transport and infrastructure, leisure, retail, media and energy sectors in the North West region, each of Peel’s 50 Ocean Gateway projects is located in close proximity to the 35-mile River Mersey and Manchester Ship Canal gateway corridor connecting two urban cores (Liverpool and Manchester).

**Peel’s motives: from space of dependence to space of engagement**

Peel’s company vision is by virtue of its geography a subregional metropolitan spatial strategy. But it goes further than this. For the extent of Peel’s existing portfolio, which sees them control many of the region’s prime economic assets (across the real estate, transport and infrastructure, leisure, retail, media and energy sectors), the fact they are now one of the major landowners in the area, and the proposed level of investment into this urban area have all made Peel one of the most powerful political voices in the region. One important consequence of this is Peel’s vision majorly impacts the spatial visions developed by other governmental structures, in both statutory and non-statutory strategies, operating within or across the area now defined by Peel’s Ocean Gateway spatial concept. This is no coincidence. Echoing earlier debates on the governance of cities and city politics through the formation of territorial alliances, Ocean Gateway signified a carefully thought out strategy by Peel to actively engage and use their growing influence to enrol other state/non-state actors.
operating outside the locality (at regional, national and international scales) to defend, expand, and enhance their corporate interests in and through the formation of a ‘new’ *metropolitan regime* or *metropolitan growth coalition*. More to the point, what Ocean Gateway has is all the hallmarks of Cox’s (1998) erudite conceptualisation of the distinction between ‘spaces of dependence’ and ‘spaces of engagement’, its connection to the politics of scale and the search for local urban politics – a problem recently revisited by Cox in the context of metropolitan governance (Cox, 2010; 2011).

What I want to suggest here is Peel’s company vision (the 50 Ocean Gateway projects) can be seen as representing their space of dependence, and the spatial vision (the Ocean Gateway spatial concept) their space of engagement. What thinking like this alerts us to is on the one hand, if city-regionalism has for the past decade been conceptualised as part of the state’s spatial strategy to enable it to govern (certainly true for England), conceptualisation of alternative visions of city-regionalism as a geopolitical project must be cognisant of the fact space is constructed in order to defend, enable certain essential interests to be realised – in the case of the Ocean Gateway spatial concept, this is Peel’s corporate interest in the future of 50 of their most strategically important sites/projects. On the other hand, it points us toward the potential for tension and struggle between those constructing the space of engagement and the other centres of social power they have to engage in order to enable certain essential interests to be realised. For quite simply this is where the politics (of city-regionalism) unfolds, determining what is possible and what is not (Cox, 2010).

But while this heuristic is useful in providing the broad framework, more detailed analysis needs to be undertaken to account for why Peel sought to construct the Ocean Gateway as a space of engagement at the time they did.
TENSIONS AROUND THE ATLANTIC GATEWAY

From Ocean Gateway to Atlantic Gateway: Reconstructing the Space of Engagement

Part and parcel of constructing their space of engagement, a month after Ocean Gateway was launched Peel met with the Department for Communities and Local Government and HM Treasury (finance ministry) in October 2008 to lobby ministers for a single planning authority model – a la Thames Gateway – in order to streamline, and by implication speed up, the planning permission process. One key outcome of this meeting, and subsequent meetings held locally within the North West region over the next couple of months, was that for the Ocean Gateway to achieve the statutory status desired by Peel through the 2010 Regional Strategy process, the Ocean Gateway had to be developed and expanded in such a way that it became a regionally-owned product of which Peel was a key stakeholder.

From Gateway Corridor to City-Regions: A Case of Reluctant City-Regionalism?

Reflecting Peel’s particular interest in the River Mersey and Manchester Ship Canal the Atlantic (Ocean) Gateway spatial concept started out as a transportation gateway and urban corridor. But this all changes as Ocean Gateway becomes Atlantic Gateway as Peel’s endeavour to construct their space of engagement became predicated on the prominence afforded to the city-region concept (Peel, 2010a). To understand why the AGS geography became compromised in this way we need once again to reflect on the unfolding politics of Peel’s endeavour to construct their space of engagement. The first point to emphasise is that Peel’s major ally, the NWDA, was itself a key advocate of focusing attention on city-regions. Alongside this, a second point worth emphasising is how SQW consultants (2009, p.
24) reported back that “there is no tangible integrated growth corridor between the two core cities in the North West region” and stakeholders “did not recognise Atlantic Gateway as a geography”. A third point is that not only did Peel have to engage with the NWDA, they also had to engage and secure the support of the city-regions themselves.

**Peel’s Capacity – Losing its Main Ally**

The 2010 announcement that RDAs were to be abolished undid much of the work Peel had done to secure the support of the NWDA. Part and parcel of this announcement was the Coalition Government’s prioritising of Local Enterprise Partnerships, Amounting to “a total surprise”, according to Peter Smith, Leader of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, Peel responded to the changing politico-institutional landscape by submitting the Atlantic Gateway spatial concept as the basis for “private-led special purposes LEP” (Peel, 2010b, p. ii). A regional Leaders Forum was hastily convened for 7 September, and the next day it was widely reported that Peel had withdrawn their LEP proposal, yet what was to emerge in the days that followed was Peel had secured approval to pursue the creation of a specialist delivery vehicle which would be loosely accountable to the three LEPs (if approved by Government) and lead to the formation of a new public-private governing coalition.

**In what sense a new non-state space?**

Perhaps the question which arises from the experience of Peel’s attempt to construct the Atlantic Gateway is for how long the state will be able to maintain this degree of control in an era where state under-provision of investment in urban economic infrastructure behoves institutions of the state to become ever more reliant on private investment groups to deliver the jobs, growth and regeneration of the future (see Harrison, 2013 for more on this).
REFERENCE LIST


