Introduction: new horizons in regional studies

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NEW HORIZONS IN REGIONAL STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION: CHANGING TIMES

This issue marks the beginning of Regional Studies 49th volume. As we begin this new chapter in the journal’s history our inheritance will ensure Regional Studies retains its distinctive purpose, but these are new times, indeed they are changing times (TUROK et al., 2014). The 48th volume of Regional Studies saw profound intellectual developments, important journal developments (a new, more geographically dispersed, editorial team; a new Executive Editor; a first Early Career Editor; an increased impact factor), and as the Journal of the Regional Studies Association notable extensions to the activities of the wider regional studies community (e.g. the launch of Regional Studies, Regional Science as an open access journal; the opening of a new China Division of the RSA; the publication of two joint RSA-Regional Studies Virtual Issues). 2014 also saw notable territorial developments (increased submissions from, readership by people in, and research focusing on, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the Global South), political and policy developments (e.g. the no vote in the Scottish independence referendum), and methodological developments (e.g. continued improvements in accessing ‘big data’) present (re)new(ed) opportunities and challenges for Regional Studies. As the saying goes, the times are clearly a changing for Regional Studies and it was with this in mind that last year, under the editorship of Gordon MacLeod, the journal relaunched what hitherto had been entitled the Critical Surveys section as Urban and Regional Horizons (MACLEOD, 2014). Twelve months on and with five papers published under the new title we begin by reflecting on what makes this section and these articles distinct, before introducing the papers in this issue.
NEW HORIZONS

From MASSEY’s (1979) call for a relational perspective on regional economic development, through MARKUSEN’s (1999) arguments for greater methodological rigour and policy relevance, to ROY’s (2009) calls for ‘new geographies of theory’, Regional Studies has a long track-record of publishing articles which shape global academic agendas over many years. So if it is already in the journal’s DNA why is there the need for the Urban and Regional Horizons section to solicit papers which expressly seek to shape intellectual agendas, identify new fields of enquiry and conceptual approaches, and ultimately extend our urban and regional horizons (MACLEOD, 2014)?

The aim of the Urban and Regional Horizons section is to focus on the question of ‘horizons’ by allowing authors the scope and the freedom to reflect on the big intellectual questions and challenges facing regional studies. Of course, this is just the starting point. The ambition is for these papers to be agenda-setting. We want these papers to shape intellectual agendas by stimulating the new thinking and novel approaches necessary to deepen our knowledge and understanding of regions and regional change. This necessarily requires Urban and Regional Horizons papers to be ambitious, challenging, and accessible in equal measure. They need to be ambitious because they have to engage with the big intellectual questions in regional studies. They must be challenging if they are going to force us to rethink how we approach, and how we study, these topics. And they have to be accessible because to shape intellectual agendas ultimately requires other researchers to engage in constructive dialogue and to collectively advance regional studies as a multidisciplinary endeavour. Moreover, an important fourth principle will be the need for the research to be relevant to a changing world. Engaging with topical theories, concepts
and ideas is one part of this, but Urban and Regional Horizons is committed to publishing research which endeavours to move beyond the narrow confines of existing debate to address issues of profound relevance, significance and importance to the rapidly changing urban and regional world(s) in which we live and work.

Since the relaunch of the section as Urban and Regional Horizons five papers have been published, each tackling a big intellectual agenda for regional studies – economic crises (HADJIMICHALIS and HUDSON, 2014), megaregions (SCHAFRAN, 2014), regional resilience (BRISTOW and HEALY, 2014), evolutionary economic geography (HASSINK et al., 2014), and African urbanism (ERNSTSON et al., 2014). Tackling some of the big intellectual agendas in regional studies is not easy so the section provides a dedicated space within the journal to drive forward intellectual agendas. Indeed, many of published papers in the section have met this challenge by asking fundamental questions which strike at the heart of key intellectual debates. For example, ERNSTSON et al. (2014) begin their call for conceptual vectors of African urbanism by asking ‘Why develop an African urbanism?’ and ‘What draws together African cities?’. Likewise BRISTOW and HEALY (2014) argue that studies of regional economic resilience need to pay more attention to the role of agency by answering three fundamental questions: why agency is important in resilience; how agents are organised and might act in complex, regional economies; and what an agency perspective might mean for how resilience is conceptualised and analysed empirically. Focusing on these types of question is critical to advancing and shaping intellectual agendas, with the Urban and Regional Horizons section designed to provide a dedicated space in Regional Studies to facilitate this type of endeavour.

Retitling the section Urban and Regional Horizons behoves authors to focus on the question of ‘horizons’ rather than examining new configurations of the urban-region nexus.
(MACLEOD, 2014). Tackling big intellectual issues often puts authors on a collision-course with fashionable concepts (e.g. BRISTOW and HEALY, 2014 on resilience; SCHAFRAN, 2014 on megaregions) and dominant regional development theories (e.g. HADJIMICHALIS and HUDSON, 2014 on neo-classical, new economic geography, and new regionalist approaches). Of course, this does not necessitate one-way critiques. Indeed the sentiment of what papers in the Urban and Regional Horizons section aspire to achieve is best illustrated in the following text taken from HASSINK et al.’s (2014: 1304 original emphasis) contribution to the section:

“This paper facilitates theoretical continuity instead of provoking shifting and short-lived paradigmatic commitments caused by criticism and the rise of new ideas from neighbouring [disciplines] ... This does not mean that a complacent or static approach to conceptual development is being advocated, but rather that the proposition is to build on existing theories, instead of asking for another redefinition of the whole discipline.”

Inevitably there has to be a strong element of critique to these papers, but it must be a critique foregrounding the (re)construction of an approach which leaves that line of intellectual inquiry in a stronger position to tackle the challenges presented at the outset. For example, the last volume has papers showing how engaged pluralism can strengthen evolutionary economic geography (HASSINK et al., 2014), how distinguishing between ‘megaregional spaces’ and ‘spaces of the megaregion’ can advance geographical understandings of megaregions (SCHAFRAN, 2014), and how ‘engaged theory-making’ and ‘platforms of engagement’ provide conceptual vectors for improving the explanatory capacity of African urbanism (ERNSTSON et al., 2014).
The final point this brings up is the accessibility of papers published in Urban and Regional Horizons. A consistent thread running through the papers published to date is their ability to contribute to the opening up of a debate. Each begins with a synthesis of the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches, but more than this, they successfully situate current debates within a context that usefully explains how the debate arrived at this point. This serves two important roles: on the one hand it is necessary to reflect on past theoretical and empirical research before we can reasonably expect to be able to begin extending our urban and regional horizons by identifying new fields of enquiry and conceptual approaches; on the other hand it is a prerequisite for making the research accessible to the widest possible audience. This is vitally important because the emphasis of the Urban and Regional Horizons section is to publish papers which address big intellectual issues and fundamental questions in regional studies, do so in an open and constructive way, and engage a broad audience of the Regional Studies readership. Inevitably this requires clear concise writing which avoids jargon and obscure ideas and concepts.

PAPERS IN THIS ISSUE

Regional Studies has a long tradition of publishing state of the art special issues that open up new fields or new directions for regional studies research. This issue is no exception. We begin with a collection of papers examining “Industrial Dynamics and Economic Geography”. Prefaced by an introductory paper outlining the aim and structure of the issue (STAM et al., 2015), the collection as a whole successfully shows how the increased cross-fertilization of ideas between the field of industrial dynamics and economic geography is extending the research of the former from dealing with questions of firm entry, growth and exit to ask
critical questions as to how spatial clusters of economic activity can be understood through firm entry, growth and exit, and how spatial clusters of economic activity in turn affect the entry, growth and exit of firms (FRENKEN et al., 2015).

Following the special issue papers, we are very pleased to be publishing Jamie Peck’s 2014 Regional Studies Annual Lecture ‘Cities beyond compare? iii with an accompanying commentary by NIJMAN (2015). In the paper PECK (2015) directs his attention towards what has been an intellectual call to arms to internationalise urban theory through more worldly, comparative modes of urban-theory making in recent years (ROY, 2009; ROY and ONG, 2011; PARNELL and ROBINSON, 2012; ERNSTSON et al., 2014). Criticising urban theorists for wanting to replace the privileged narrative of ‘extraordinary (global) cities’ (TAYLOR, 2013) by privileging a counter-narrative of ‘ordinary cities’ (ROBINSON, 2005), Peck proceeds by acknowledging that our different vantage points undeniably impact how we perceive urban-theory making, before arguing in the strongest possible terms that “the test of urban theories should surely be their explanatory veracity, not (just) where they come from” (PECK, 2015: 000).

Peck also reveals something of how our urban and regional horizons are influenced by our own particular vantage point. After all we think from where we are, are influenced by where we have been and where we believe we might be heading, with our thoughts constantly shaped by the encounters we have along the way. A striking insight into the future of Regional Studies is also revealed because as the journal becomes increasingly global in scope we are beginning to see – and the Editors want to encourage more – discussion and debate taking place between authors coming at regional issues from different vantage points.
This leads us neatly on to the final paper of the issue, which is a new contribution to the Urban and Regional Horizons section. Arguing that there has been an absence of cultural factors in analyses of subnational economic change and development, HUGGINS and THOMPSON (2015) compare the regions of the UK, alongside different localities in Wales, to demonstrate how cultural change at local and regional levels is strongly associated with two forms of place-based culture – the prevailing economic culture and community culture. As the authors admit their analysis is shaped by their own vantage point – the relatively peripheral region of Wales – but as befits the aims of Urban and Regional Horizons their endeavour to conceptualise and operationalise a framework for measuring place-based culture opens up a fresh debate about how we go about developing more sophisticated analyses which can better account for the influence of culture on subnational economic change and development.

On a final note, this is the last paper to be published with Gordon MacLeod as the overseeing editor. Gordon performed sterling work for the journal, overseeing the relaunch of the Critical Surveys section as Urban and Regional Horizons, explaining the rationale for the section (MACLEOD, 2014), and guiding the first papers through to completion. On a personal note, I am delighted to be taking on the role of Editor for Urban and Regional Horizons and to be inheriting a section which has been carefully sculpted by Gordon to ensure it plays a pivotal role within Regional Studies and enabling intellectual agendas to be shaped and our urban and regional horizons extended.
REFERENCES


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1 To mark the establishment of a Chinese division of the Regional Studies Association (RSA) a virtual issue on China was published drawing together papers recently published in the journal and prefaced with an editorial from Michael Dunford and Weidong Liu (http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/pgas/rs-china-vi). Likewise to celebrate the immense contribution of Sir Peter Hall to establishing and promoting the field of regional studies a collection of his articles in the journal were published as a virtual special issue (Sir Peter Hall and ‘Regional Studies’) edited by Nick Phelps and Mark Tewdwr-Jones (http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/pgas/peter-hall).

2 Setting out to answer fundamental questions has also proved successful in a number of prominent main section papers published by Regional Studies in recent years (e.g. CHARRON et al., 2014; CUARESMA et al., 2014; RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, 2013; RIGBY and BROWN, 2015; SORENS, 2014).

3 The annual lecture was delivered at the Association of American Geographers annual meeting in Tampa, FL in April 2014.