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### Editorial: Towards a Regional Political Science

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# Editorial: Towards a Regional Political Science

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## CHALLENGING METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM

This special issue challenges the tendency within political science to focus on the nation-state as the main unit of analysis in studying social and political life, and, in consequence, to neglect the region as a unit for political analysis. This tendency has been widespread in the social sciences and has been criticized as a ‘methodological nationalism’: social scientists all too easily reproduce unreflected, ‘naturalized’ assumptions that the nation-state, as MARTINS (1974, p. 276) put it in an early critique, is ‘the terminal unit and boundary condition for the demarcation of problems and phenomena for social science’. It is the ‘terminal unit’ in the sense that modernization and ‘progress’ were achieved through the institutionalization of mass democracy and welfare statehood within the nation-state. It is the ‘boundary condition’ because it demarcates what is held to be the most important scale at which social and political life is organized, and distinguishes between different nation-states so that comparative analysis at that scale can be carried out. To paraphrase Ulrich Beck’s comment, ‘it is a nation-state outlook on society and politics, law, justice and history’ that has governed the social science imagination (BECK, 2002, p. 52).

Such naturalized assumptions about the nation-state have fallen under a powerful challenge (CHERNILO, 2007). Much of that challenge has come from those working on *trans*-nationalism: in the advocacy of a new ‘cosmopolitanism’ by Beck and colleagues (BECK, 2000, 2002, 2007; BECK and SZNAIDER, 2006; BECK and GRANDE, 2007); in anthropological work on migration (for example, WIMMER and GLICK SCHILLER, 2002); in international relations work on globalization and European integration (for example, CERNY, 1997; SCHOLTE, 2005; EGEBERG, 2008); and (though with different terminology) in public law work on the emergence of new patterns of sovereignty that transcend the ‘nation-state’ (for example, WALKER, 2008).

Such work on *trans*-nationalism has been a powerful corrective to methodological nationalism. It has, however, had little to offer in understanding developments *within* the state. Indeed, in some cases the *trans*-national critique of methodological nationalism has had the effect of compounding the neglect of sub-

state regions as significant units of analysis by arguing that a European, or cosmopolitan, or globalized scale for the analysis of social and political life is, or should be, regarded as the most important for social science research (JEFFERY and WINCOTT, 2010, pp. 174–175).

This twofold neglect of the sub-state region – through the preference of nation-state and trans-state scales of analysis – does not apply uniformly across the social sciences. Work on the region is widespread in human geography and spatial economics, driven on by a number of seminal contributions (for example, OHMAE, 1993; STORPER, 1995; AMIN and THRIFT, 1995), and captured in a terminology of a (now not so) ‘new’ regionalism which has launched its own factional disputes (for example, LOVERING, 1999; WREN, 2009) carried out in bespoke journals including *Regional Studies* and *Spatial Economic Analysis*.

The importance of the sub-state region remains less well-established in political science, despite growing empirical evidence of the importance of the regional scale. There is compelling evidence that the region has become much more important as a locus for social and political life over the last few decades. There are – as compared with thirty years ago – now many more regional decision-making authorities in advanced democracies, exercising a widening range of policy responsibilities (HOOGHE *et al.*, 2008), producing widening inter-regional policy variations (for example, MORENO and MCEWEN, 2005; HARRISON, 2006), and contested by a growing number of region-only (that is, non-statewide) political parties (JEFFERY, 2010).

Yet the accumulation of evidence on the importance of regional-scale politics has not yet produced a ‘break-through’ into the mainstream of political science. JEFFERY and WINCOTT (2010) set out some of the reasons for this. Foremost is the continuing resonance of theories of modernization that were seminal for key fields of post-war political science – notably in the study of party competition and the welfare state. These theories of modernization – especially those of Stein Rokkan (FLORA *et al.*, 1999) and T. H. Marshall (MARSHALL, 1992) – presented powerful accounts of how over the preceding centuries political community, institutions, and policies became increasingly integrated

and consolidated on the spatial scale of the nation-state. That process and its consequences caught, and has tended to dominate, the political science imagination. Significantly, as the term 'nation-state' implies, nation and state became increasingly elided in that imagination.

A consequence has been that phenomena not manifest or not perceived to be significant at the scale of the nation-state could remain 'hidden from view' (WIMMER and GLICK SCHILLER, 2002, p. 302). Or, as KEATING (1998) put it more directly about regional-scale politics:

territorial effects have been a constant presence in European politics, but ... too often social scientists have simply not looked for them, or defined them out of existence where they conflicted with successive modernization paradigms.

(p. ix)

### TOWARDS A REGIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE

This special issue of *Regional Studies* is about how better to identify and analyse such 'territorial effects'. The contributions draw out three kinds of issues, initially identified by JEFFERY and WINCOTT (2010), which have kept territorial effects 'hidden from view' and hampered the emergence of what might be termed a regional political science:

- First, there is a common view that because state-scale politics is (undeniably) so important, regional-scale politics must by definition be both less important than and subordinate to state-scale politics. Such a priori assumptions can skew research designs and produce spurious findings. One area in which this has very obviously been the case is in the study of regional-scale voting behaviour. A number of scholars – including Rokkan (ROKKAN and URWIN, 1982) and others inspired by his work (ROSE and URWIN, 1975; HEARL *et al.*, 1996), most recently and comprehensively CARAMANI (2004, p. 291) – sought, and expected to find evidence of regional differentiation of voting behaviour. Yet they failed to do so – not least because each of them sought that evidence solely in voting behaviour in statewide and not in regional elections. If the regional election is taken as the unit of analysis rather than the regionally disaggregated statewide election, findings are very different. Regional elections display significant region-to-region variation in how voters behave (for example, PALLARES *et al.*, 1997; VÖLKL *et al.*, 2008). However, the main strand of elections research which does take the regional election as the unit of analysis (discussed by Schakel and Jeffery in this issue) presents such variations as subordinate, 'second-order' consequences of state-scale factors rather than reflective of regional-scale influences. In

this and in other fields there is rarely a concern to identify and explore other forms of relationship that might exist between regional and state-scale politics, for example where regional political dynamics have a distinctive logic, unrelated to state-scale politics, or even – to reverse conventional causality – where regional dynamics shape what happens at the scale of the state as a whole. Too often one looks in the wrong places (for example, in statewide election results) or in the wrong ways (through an a priori assumption that the regional must be subordinate to the national) and as a result one fails to understand the regional dimension of politics adequately.

- A second set of issues arises from the frequent assumption that 'nation' (a form of political community) and 'state' (a form of collective political organization) are territorially co-terminous. There is obvious evidence to the contrary: nation-building within particular state boundaries was in many cases an uncompleted process (for example, in Spain or Canada) and in others never a coherent aspiration (for example, in the UK). The assumption of co-terminosity can drag attention away from indicators of territorial differentiation of political community within the state (in KEATING's, 1998, p. ix, terms 'defining them out of existence'). Contributions to this special issue seek to identify such indicators – whether around sub-state nationalism, regional economic disparities, or simply the logic of political mobilization and opportunity around regionalized political structures – and to reflect on their importance for the conduct of contemporary politics. Such reflection needs to contend with a further consequence of the elision of nation and state: the association of nation-statehood with a modernization discourse that implies 'progress'. That association can become a platform for normative bias in which state-scale politics are not just held to be more important, but also *better* than regional-scale politics. That bias is perhaps most notable in the literature on welfare states, which tends to prize statewide uniformity of policy outcomes and to regard regional policy variation as damaging or regressive (JEFFERY, 2002, pp. 186–192) – rather than, for example, as alternative, legitimate (and perhaps even 'better') outcomes of regional-scale aggregation and articulation of interests (KEATING, 2009). A concern in this special issue is to treat regional-scale politics, and evidence of territorial differentiation of political attitudes, behaviour and outcomes at the regional scale, on their own terms and not through normatively laden prisms that disparage distinctive regional scale political agency.
- A third set of issues revolves around data. Because of a long-standing social-scientific preoccupation with the nation-state as a unit of analysis, social scientists have typically sought to collect data for their research at that scale. And over time, initial choices about what data were important to collect can compound

themselves, as the benefits (and sunk costs) of generating ever-longer series of the same data crowd out, both intellectually and financially, competing data-collection priorities. While these national data have made possible outstanding research, nationally and comparatively, they are rarely appropriate for the exploration of regional-scale questions. There is no quick fix through sophisticated multilevel modelling; the assumptions that designed the research that generated the data are often, and manifestly, irrelevant for understanding regional-scale politics (data on statewide elections reveal little about voting behaviour in regional elections; public attitudes data collected at statewide scale can only tell something of regional politics if questions are asked about what citizens think, and do, in regional-scale politics; the statewide data used to characterize types of welfare statehood typically present statewide averages masking what can be wide region-to-region variations; and so on). In other words, one is limited in what can be known about regional-scale politics because social scientists have presumed it is overridingly important to know about state-scale politics and, at best, a low priority to know much about regional-scale politics.

This special issue is designed to confront and identify solutions to the problems that have hampered the emergence of a regional political science. It is timely. Recent regionalization and devolution reforms in the UK, Belgium, Spain, Italy and elsewhere, and vigorous debates in established federal states such as Germany, Canada, Switzerland and the United States have prompted a new level of interest in regional politics. This interest is unlikely to wane. Regionalization has meant that important policy fields such as health, education, environment and regional economic policy are now the responsibilities of regional institutions.

Regions now matter much more directly to voters, parties and interest groups. Winning control of – or access to – regional government is now a bigger prize than it was thirty years ago. Unsurprisingly, the growing political importance of regions has begun to prompt more research: many individual case study projects, but also a number of larger scale comparative projects that have generated bespoke, regional-scale data. Contributions to this special issue draw on some of this new research.

Importantly, though, none of these contributions sets out to make claims, or indeed finds, that the nation-state is becoming redundant or rendered insignificant as regional-scale political becomes more important. The nation-state scale remains the primary focus of most citizens, political parties and interest groups in most advanced democracies. What the contributions seek to show is rather that what regional institutions, actors and processes do is to transform the nation-state, in important respects ‘de-nationalizing’ it, and recasting it as a more complex multi-scaled form of political organization that needs to respond to the demands of distinctive regional political communities as well as the political community as organized at the statewide scale. Our claim to build a ‘regional’ political science is, in that sense, a foundation stone for comprehending better the complexities of the multilevelled character of most contemporary states.

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