Much has been written about the necessity to rethink some of the basic concepts of international relations theory to take better account of changes in government and governance in a rapidly globalizing world (Paul, 2005a, 2000b; Barnett and Sikkink, 2008). The usual focus on the sovereign nation-state as the primary actor on the international scene is giving way to the growing realization that nation-states are losing much of their sovereign decision-making powers to other levels of government, both upwards toward supranational governing institutions like the European Union, NAFTA, and the WTO and downwards to subnational state institutions at the regional or metropolitan territorial levels (Agnew, 2009). At least this is an increasingly popular argument on the part of those who believe that the contemporary process of globalization is wreaking substantive change in international political, as well as economic and cultural relations.

If such a restructuring were happening, of course, it would necessitate a serious reconsideration of some of the fundamental assumptions of still dominant theories in international relations and political geography. Yet, much like the very notion of “globalization” as somehow different from previous periods of Western imperialism, such a view of contemporary geopolitics has met with no little resistance (Lovering, 2001, 1999; Cox 2009, 2001). On this contrary view, the power of the nation-state has not dwindled in the face of the supposed growth of supra- and sub-national power but rather has actually facilitated these latter
emergences. The national state, in other words, remains quite the major player in global geopolitics (Cohen 2001; Aman, Jr. 2004).

Restructuring Global Geopolitics?

In this paper, I would like to contribute to this discussion with a specific focus on the theoretical implication of what appears to be the growing prominence of subnational city-regions. The rise of so-called global cities as what some call crucial “nodes” of power within rapidly growing political economic “networks and flows” would seem to have enormous implications for the reality of contemporary political power relations across the globe, particularly in terms of metropolitan activities that apparently cannot any longer be entirely regulated by nation-states. This growth in city-centric international relations, on this view, is central to what has been called the “hallowing-out” of national state power from “below” (Brenner 2004).

Before addressing this issue directly, however, I want to think through an issue that I have addressed in some detail elsewhere (Archer et al., 2008). This concerns the very difficulty of thinking away from the nation-state as primary international actor as well as thinking more carefully about what “actor” means in this regard. Thinking away from the nation-state is so difficult because, as others have well-noticed (Lacher 2003), state-centrism has become normal science in the academy, and not just in the discipline of political science. There is a powerful path-dependence to our ontological commitments here which has rendered a rather broad and cohesive ontic community that cuts right through disciplinary boundaries. While perhaps only mythically real (Teschke 2003), the Westphalian episode, and accounts thereof and thereafter,
have solidified what is called in my discipline an absolute understanding of space and spatial relations that has become quite hegemonic over the long centuries since 1648.

The Westphalian proviso that the sovereign had sovereign decision-making over a “people,” both rural and urban, and entailing also religious affiliation and obedience is the very source of the still prevailing imaginary of space as consisting of absolute, bounded territorial containers of inside and outside. Exercising sovereign decision-making authority over a people rendered it necessary to determine precisely where this people were located with the utmost precision. In this new regime of political sovereignty, there could be no overlapping secular and ecclesiastic territorial jurisdictions like those that existed before.

While this may be a very common account of the geopolitical importance of Westphalia, I want to pause and tease out some other characteristics thereof. First, it should be clear that this restructuring of geopolitical relations did not happen overnight; that is, state-centric, bounded territorial space took time to be established out of the complex, spatially overlapping geopolitical relations of the Middle Ages. Again, this may seem an obvious point but it serves to underscore the current restructuring of now global geopolitics will also take time and only be observable contemporarily through the glass darkly. Indeed, for much of the former imperialized, capitalist or communist, world, nation-state centrism, imposed in most cases by imperial decree, never has been fully established.

Secondly, the now territorially bounded “people” over whom the sovereign exercised power were, in most cases, really “peoples” culturally speaking. The states most successful in exercising territorial sovereignty via the maintenance of their boundaries thus became those most able to create a more unified people more accepting of the decisions of the territorial state. Force
and civil war were not enough for this to hold, of course, so political concession and compromise were necessary in creating this territorially-based “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). The point is that what will become known as “nation-building” in the later age of nationalism was already a real issue very early in new state-centric post-Westphalian territorial geopolitics of “domestic” insides and “international” outsides.

Early on, then, both political and cultural relations in the West became bounded territorial projects, ever uneven in their progress, particularly in imperialized parts of the world. This spatial imaginary and uneven material construction of human relations was simply reinforced by the fact that, for more than a century and a half after Westphalia, the most powerful states were pre-capitalist, agrarian in economic nature. Strictly territorial itself, agricultural ways during this time did not change in any substantive manner rendering power relations among states one essentially of the maintenance or extension of geographic boundaries and the avoidance of reduction. In short, there was no internal engine of intensive economic change that would have necessitated a regular re-rendering of spatial constraints to such.

Of course, this latter condition eventually will change, but, on the basis of this brief historical vignette, it is no wonder that the spatial imaginary of territorially bounded national states remains the hegemonic academic and popular one among Westerners and Western-trained. To this day, the legendary originality of the Westphalian ur-episode has been rehearsed repeatedly in the scholarly and policy literature thereby ideologically reinforcing the lived reality of territorial sovereignty and the maintenance (fix and re-fix) of “international” boundaries. The “theory,” indeed, explained the “reality” of international relations all the way up to the last decades of the 20th Century; at least for most.
Others more critical, however, have long observed that some states are, in fact, more sovereign than others and that nations have never been fully “built,” even in the most powerful Western states as witnessed by recently resurgent ethno-nationalism and, most certainly, in less powerful imperialized states. These critical accounts are important because they successfully expose more than one myth in the legend of Westphalia (Teschke 2003). But my concern here is with what others have called the ‘methodological nationalism’ or the national state centric theorizing that cuts across social theory (Lacher 2003). This form of normal science, combined with what can be called banal national state centricism at more popular levels of discourse, makes it extremely difficult to develop an alternative spatial imaginary more conducive to understanding the restructuring of global relations in the contemporary age.

**Disciplinary Path-Dependency and the Maintenance of the Westphalian Spatial Imaginary**

A major aspect in the maintenance of national state centric normal science, besides those characteristics that Kuhn (1962) himself emphasizes more generally, has been the very disciplinary approach to scholarship. The study of politics, disciplinarily speaking, has as its main focus the formal institutions of government the jurisdictions of which are normally delineated according to an absolute division of space. What I will call the space-time of politics thus consists of formal institution building which variously carves up space with relatively enduring boundaries clearly separating jurisdictions. Such institutions and boundaries have a relative spatial fixity once they are made which is normally not changed either easily or rapidly but only incrementally and periodically and, indeed, only after conscious public deliberation. This space-time of politics essentially lends itself to an absolute or “container” view of spatial relations as a result of the durability of institutions of government themselves. Political space changes over time, but only on the basis of conscious public decision-making the results of
which is merely a new gestalt of containerized political space-time. In the end, the very object of study constructed for, and reproduced in normal, disciplinary political science biases scholars and policy makers toward a spatial imaginary which renders alternatives to absolute spatial conceptions of human relations very difficult to recognize, let alone adopt.

This point is corroborated by recent debates in my own discipline of geography. Unlike that of the discipline of international relations, the object of study of geographers is essentially about space and human spatial relations. Critical geographers have long recognized the importance of understanding humanly constructed space in relative, instead of absolute terms. Space is not a container, in this regard, rather space is always relative to what it includes. Humans construct their spatial relations, their spaces, according to how they construct lives, economically, politically, and culturally. And since such a construction process is always ongoing and open to change, so are spatial relations. In the most abstract terms, the form human relational space takes at any one point in time is merely the spatial confluence of ever changing social relations at that particular point; in short, social process creates spatial form which in turn conditions social process which creates spatial form and so on (Smith 1990; Harvey 1982).

This socially constructed, relative understanding of space has been most worked out by Marxist geographers concerned with the production of space as a result of the process of capitalist accumulation. In a very real sense, as Marx points out, capitalism speeds up socio-spatial change “annihilating” space by time where all that is traditional, all that is solid “melts into air” (Berman 1982). But more recently geographers have argued that while capitalism speeds up social change, space can never be annihilated. Rather capitalist space is continually made and remade in the very process of capitalist accumulation. As Cox (2001, 753) so crisply summarizes:
…capital transforms both the objects that constitute space and their arrangement with respect to one another. Capitalist space is, to an unprecedented degree, an artificial one in which knowledge of the properties of naturally occurring substances and forces has been mobilized so as to transform the world and convert it into a form that will facilitate accumulation. Swamps are drained, drylands irrigated, rivers and estuaries bridged, electricity available seemingly everywhere. The result is a space that is uniquely suited to the expanded reproduction of capital. The enhanced substitutability of locations reinforces the law of value with a brutal insistence. The creation of new spatial arrangements, new concrete spaces, further the development of the productive forces; while the speeding up of the circulation of capital made possible by improved means of transportation and communications, increases the mass of capital which can be valorized in a given period of time and indeed space.

This is a major sense of what Harvey (1982, 1985, 2006) calls the “spatial fix” (and re-fix) of capital accumulation; once capitalist space is constructed it conditions the next round of accumulation and the construction of new spaces of production and consumption.

Because of this understanding of the relativity of capitalist spatial relations, there is a rapidly growing literature in geography that, I think, captures significant aspects of contemporary changes in international relations quite well. This literature will, then, be the basis for my argument below. Yet, grasping what may be the significant reordering of contemporary political relations still presents a problem, even for geographers, given the very nature of political space-time as described above. For example, there has been much discussion in the geography literature about new spatial “scales” of the government and governance that are emerging as a result of globalization (Brenner 2001; Jones 1998; Lobao et.al. 2009; Swyngedouw 2004, 1997). As described below, this notion of the “rescaling” of the state is meant to capture the relativity of political spatial relations. Yet, as others also have noticed, this “rescaling” literature tends in fact to reify scales in the same absolute spatial manner that normal nation-state centric literature does;
so much so, that others in geography have argued for a conception of space “without scale” altogether (Marston et.al. 2005).

**Toward a New Spatial Imaginary of International Relations**

Rather than proceed down the post-structuralist path with these last cited authors, I suggest a two-fold gesture in order to break away from an absolute, state-centric, container view of political space. First, and as mentioned, a focus on the differential construction of space-times is useful. In other words, the construction of political space-time proceeds at a different historical pace than that of economic space-time. This particularly has been the case with the emergence of capitalism but the argument, I think, could be generalized. Yet, even capitalist economic space-time tended to move to rhythms mostly congruent with political space-times, as capital was nationalized via national state regulatory regimes and internal homogenization on through the Keynesian era of the late 20th Century. The exception was outward economic imperialism but even this was regulated in a nation-state centric way. The gist of the present argument is that, most recently, the ongoing construction of capitalist space-time has come out of sync with political and, indeed, cultural space-time, as has been noticed, with varying sophistication, by the myriad commentators on contemporary “globalization” (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991)

Second, one needs to interrogate more carefully the concept of the “state” itself. There has been much written about the nature of the “state” that makes it clear that it is an institution that encloses political negotiation and even class conflict (Jessop 2002). In other words, the state, like all socially constructed institutions involves dynamic social processes, both in construction and function. And, yet, most commentators continue to reify the state as a
homogeneous actor, one that, for example, is either losing agency in the face of globalization or is actively facilitating this very process. Consider the following set of questions posed in a recent book concerning the ‘emergence of private authority in global governance’:

Where evidence exists that functions that were once the exclusive, sovereign prerogatives of the state have devolved to the responsibility private actors, the question of state complicity arises. In such cases, is the state complicit in the devolution of its authority to private actors? Has the state delegated authority, enabled authority, or simply allowed authority to slip away, and for what purpose? Or is the state merely impotent to do much about this devolution of authority? (Hall and Biersteker 2002, 7-8).

The implication is that the state is, indeed, an actor which acts, variously, as one who “chooses” one mode of action over another. And, I suppose, if one were to focus only on the end result, or the final political decision made, this description has some credence. But characterizing state “activity” in this way makes it difficult to understand or even conceive just how these final decisions get made; that is, whose interests within the state have, in fact, prevailed and why. In this respect, the “state” becomes what Marcuse (2005) suggests the “city” has become in the literature on urban development in the global age: a “perverse metaphor” that hides more than it reveals in that it suggests that the “city” acts as one when in fact only certain, more powerful, agents within the city act in a certain way, to the detriment of less powerful agents.

For the present purposes, the explicit recognition that the state is a dynamic social institution renders it possible to conceive better how different state agents pursue their interests as opposed to others. In terms of the quote above, it would be those with the most interest in privatizing governance who are pushing their agenda through the state. If the state seems to be “complicit” in actually promoting such privatization, then these agents have won the day within
the state. The most interesting questions that arise at this point thus become: who are these agents and how were they so successful?

In terms of the issue at hand, those state agents most interested in promoting the process of globalization are the ones attempting to use state authority to promote this process at all levels, federal, state, and local. These agents are global actors within localized institutions: or what have been called “glocal” actors (Swyngedouw, 1997). But, importantly, when continually conceived in this way, it becomes apparent that the success of such state actors is never certain. Rather it is always a contested outcome in this institutional arena of competing interests. This opens the possibility for conceiving points of resistance to globalizing pressures as well as recognizing state agents most likely to resist.

This twofold gesture toward differential economic, political, and cultural, space-times as well as toward conceiving the state as a dynamic social institution allows for a quite different spatial imaginary to emerge. Now space is conceived as always relative to different social relations and complexly so. Similarly, the institution and authority of the state is conceived as relative to the social relations within the institution as well to the ultimate decisions that are rendered from amongst competing interests. Thus, the relationship between the processes of globalization and the state, at any level of jurisdiction, cannot be determined apriori. Instead the role of the “state” in this process can only be determined via close examination of the process and outcome of competitive social relations within both the national and the subnational states.

**An Emerging Regional World?**

To render this somewhat abstract discussion more concrete necessitates a closer examination of the rapidly growing literature concerning what appears to be the uneven,
subnational or regional nature of contemporary global development (Beaverstock et. al. 2000; Brenner 2004; Cox 2009; Etherington and Jones 2009; Hudson 2006; Jones and Macleod 2004; Scott 2001; Storper 1997). This transdisciplinary “new regionalist” literature can be characterized as having a loosely fourfold focus, with admitted overlap. First, there is a focus on the importance of agglomeration economies of proximity involving what are called untraded interdependencies in the regionalization of particular “clusters” of firms in similar or related industries. Sometimes considered as industrial districts, the argument here is that clustering is the result of the competitive advantage of the spatial proximity of linked or otherwise related firms and, it follows, such clustering should be encouraged actively by policy-makers as a means to generate economic growth in general (Porter 2001; Storper 1997; Saxenian 1994). The emphasis of this literature is on the ways in which such agglomeration economies, if left to generate themselves with little state-regulation, represent a denationalization of economies to the regional level in a highly uneven mode of development. In turn, the very unevenness of such spatial development fosters an overall economic environment of increasing regional competition or, alternatively, increasing global cooperation at the subnational level. My approach to this emerging economic geography of globalization below will make full use of this literature but will broaden it by focusing on the more general process of the capitalist construction of space.

A second focus of this new regionalist literature on the growing prominence of subnational regions considers the more cultural aspects of regionalization. On the one hand, there are those who put emphasis on the creation of “social capital” (Putnam 2000; McLean et. al. 2002; etc) as part of the untraded interdependencies noted above: the idea of so-called “learning regions,” “innovative milieux” and, in close respects, “creative cities” (Florida 1995, etc). On the other hand are those who emphasize the human attachment to place, the continuing
need for ‘belonging’ in an apparently increasingly place-less world of globalization (Budd, L. 2005; Jones and Macleod 2004; Macleod 1998). Overall, this more cultural approach to regions is useful in its emphasis on actual human agency. Such place-based/place-making human agency will be noted below in terms of the class-differential material relationships of humans to particularly constructed places.

A third focus of the new regionalist literature is arguably more specific in its emphasis on the emergence and hierarchy of so-called “global cities” (Abu-Lughod 1999; Sassen 1991; Beaverstock et. al. 2000). Emerging out of the wider world-systems literature, global city scholars describe what they consider to be global networks and flows which come together in metropolitan “nodes” or sites of more or fewer command and control centers of such flows. The implication is that such city nodes have more in common with, and are more related to, other such nodes than they do or are with other national cities or with the national state itself. This “world system” of cities is considered the frontal spatial manifestation of globalization. Monitoring the expansion, as well as the changing hierarchy of power within the global city network, thus provides a gauge of the progress of globalization itself. There is certainly a gesture toward this literature here in my use of the broader term global “city-regions,” but, overall, this literature tends to reify, perversely, “systems,” “flows,” “networks,” and, indeed, “cities” in a never-ending exercise of description and classification with little explanation or examination of the actual human agency involved.

The fourth new regionalist focus is different from the previous three and I will make much of this difference in what follows since it gets right to the problem at hand. There has been much written about what some have called the emergence and spread of “multilevel” government or what others, more critically, have called the “rescaling” of the state as a result of
an apparent weakening of national states in the face of globalization. The idea here, as noted above, is that government has migrated “above” the national state toward supranational institutions like the EU, NAFTA, etc., as well as “below” the national state to regions and localities. This focus on state-rescaling is actually part of a much larger literature concerning the social production of spatial scale, as alluded to above and as elaborated in more detail below. Of interest here, however, is the specific focus on what one of the main authors in this literature calls the process of “state rescaling” toward “post-national” scales of government (Brenner 2004).

It is apparent from this wide and ever growing body of “new regionalist” literature that the process of globalization is materializing spatially in a quite uneven manner. International relations appear, in this respect, to be changing rapidly as a result of this regionalization of the global political economy. The key, however, is whether or not these changes actually signify a geopolitical move toward “post-national state” centric relations---or even a “neo-medieval” return to pre-national state centric relations (Holsinger 2007)--- or, instead, that national state agents are simply restructuring governmental relations on the basis of the neoliberal market fundamentalist ideology of competition and efficiency. According to this latter view, the national state is not weak or disappearing in the face of globalization but, rather, it is being retooled in terms of regulatory oversight by some state agents in order for the national economy to “succeed” in the face of perceived global competition. And, given that global economic success is based on regional agglomeration according to the new regionalist literature, such success must needs be highly uneven geographically. There is really nothing that can be done about this.
The Discursive and Material Construction of Regions

It is worth dwelling a moment on this last assertion. It is now commonplace, for example, to state that “globalization” is as much a discourse as it is a reality. Real world economic relations are really quite geographically specific to certain rich countries and, for most classes of people, real world political and cultural relations are overwhelmingly place-based, not global. To the transnational elite, including academics, the world may be becoming ever flatter as a result of “globalization” or “global cities” may be becoming increasingly alike and networked. To most, however, the world and its cities remain highly variegated, economically, politically, and culturally. “Cities” are not homogeneous actors any more than “globalization” is an inevitable process of change from without with which we all have to adapt, or remain developmental failures.

This is less a matter of simply not being able to recognize quite completely, at this point, the precise geopolitical changes in this apparently global age, as alluded to above. Rather it gets to the notion of the construction and maintenance of what I have called ontic communities both in and outside of academia. The ontic community of new regionalists, for example, provides study after study corroborating their particular focus on the “regional” nature of economic, political, and cultural relations as a result of globalization. But is any of this new or, in fact, real? Agglomeration economies have always existed in the process of capitalist accumulation (Marshall 1890) and the possibility of consciously creating such as a means toward successful development has long been in vogue amongst policy-makers (Perroux 1961; Boudeville 1966).

The lack of conceptual and related empirical specificity in much of this new regionalist literature in fact have led some to argue that the new regionalist assertions are merely ‘fuzzy,’
vague generalizations (Hudson 2003). As a result, they afford precious little opportunity for the empirical verification of either the descriptive/explanatory or the proscriptive/policy oriented proclamations. This is particularly true of notions like ‘clusters,’ ‘learning’ or ‘innovative’ regions or ‘creative’ cities. Martin and Sunley (2003, 25), for example, describe one recent governmental study on biotechnology “clusters” which identifies such clusters in virtually every region of the U.K.; surely news to those in more peripheral, less ‘developed’ regions. These authors go on to list no fewer than ten distinct definitions in the literature of what a regionally specific industrial “cluster” might be.

Similarly, precisely defining, let alone empirically identifying, “untraded interdependencies” or social “capital” and collaboration is well-nigh impossible. No wonder then that new regionalist approaches which emphasize such have caught on with policy makers (OECD 2009, 2007, 2005). Who can be against social cohesion as a development goal? In short, it is well worth recalling that the specific discourses of new regionalism, much like those of globalization, do not necessarily depict reality but certainly can create a reality, particularly when absorbed and acted upon by policy makers.

This is why it is important to more thoroughly and critically interrogate such spatial imaginaries. Reflecting on the four main, yet quite differing, foci of the new regionalist literature outlined above, the question becomes what the relationship among them might be, or even if there is a relationship. For example, the driving force behind regionalization would seem to depend on which of these foci one adopts. If the emphasis is on learning and creativity, then, it is the uneven, perhaps consciously induced, manifestation of learners and creators that drives regionalization. Similarly, if the emphasis is on the agglomeration of similar or linked firms in an industry then that is what needs to happen or be made to happen. In turn, if the capture or
spawning of as many command and control centers of global flows is what will render a global city than all cities must attempt this. Finally, if successful regions are constructed on the basis of less centralized governance, than the devolution of national state authority to regional and local levels is the key.

This is not an entirely fair depiction, of course, as most authors do indeed recognize the linkages which can be made among regionalizing processes. Yet, it does point to the very real possibility that new regionalists are not describing the same evolving regional reality, whether in more objective descriptive, or more hopeful prescriptive, terms. This goes some way toward explaining why, as others have noticed (Hudson 2006; Lovering 2001, 1999), political devolution to the regional level has not led, in many cases, to regional economic success; or, alternatively, why even “global cities” at the top of the network hierarchy still suffer from internal wealth polarization and otherwise quite uneven economic development (Marcuse 2005); or why, finally, cities like New Orleans or Detroit, with all the traditional and contemporary “creativity” they enclose, cannot get on the bandwagon of global developmental success.

A more productive approach would be to pay closer attention to the connections among these economic, political and cultural “regionalizations.” In the geography literature just such an attempt is made by way of the broader focus the social production of spatial scales in general, not just politically (Brenner 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). This is closely related to, in fact is the inspirational source of, the state rescaling approach to be sure, but unlike this latter it emphasizes the production of spatial scale as an inherent aspect of the production of space in general, as described above. There is a vast literature on this Marxist-inspired focus on the social construction of spatial scale and what are called periodic “scalar transformations” or, in terminology introduced above, the “fix” and “refix” of spatial forms in the process of capitalist
accumulation (Smith 1990; Swyngedouw 2004) Importantly, in this literature, scales are not just produced via some deus ex machina of “flows” through “networks” condensing into agglomerative “clusters” and “nodes” and so on. Rather:

> Emphasis...is...put on the making and remaking of social, political and economic scales of organization...of regulation...of social and union action...and of (political) contestation...In addition, attention has been paid to the significance of differential scalar positionings of social groups and classes in the power geometries of capitalism...and on scalar strategies mobilized by both elites and subaltern social groups...In other words, it has been suggested that the social power that can be mobilized is dependent on the scale or spatial level at which social actors operate. Consequently, the success or effectiveness of social and political strategies for empowerment is related to the ways in which geographic scale is actively considered and mobilized in struggles for social, political, or economic resistance or change...(this scalar imaginary)...permits one to recast the alleged process of globalization in ways that are more sensitive to the spatiality of the process, the centrality of the political domain, and the shifting relations and geometries of power. (Swyngedouw 2004, 26-27).

This scalar approach to the spatial development, whether global or regional, pays closer attention to the contested political nature of the process. What regions actually are, as well as how they are formed, depends on the production of confluent (or power-geometric) subnational economic, political, and cultural scalar spaces. And this production process, and the spatial gestalt that is forming thereof, are inherently politically contested phenomena rather than foregone conclusions that can be simply read off of economic agglomeration processes.

**The Real Geopolitics of Global City Regions**

The scalar approach to the production of spatial relations makes it easier to conceive of human agency in the process. In turn, the notion of periodic scalar change as well as what has been called “scalar jumping” provides a useful lens through which to view current changes in global political economy. As noted in the citation by Swyngedouw above, some human groups
have more power in both the production and use of space than others. In the present context, most would argue that some factions of capital who produce and operate within supranational space have much more power to secure their interests than other factions more tied to space at subnational levels. Yet, the scalar argument suggests that this might not be such a done deal. More subnationally-bound human groups may be able to “jump scales” with their interests to contend on a more even political field. Prominent examples of this would be the Zapatista movement’s successful global appeal for support for its subnational Yucatan movement or the European-wide labor movement against Renault in opposition to the closing of a major Belgian plant (Swyngedouw, 2004). Indeed, a major political goal of much of the scalar literature is precisely to reveal the necessity of such a “jump” on the part of the more place-bound oppressed in this age of globalization.

Nevertheless, the notion of “scales,” as noted above, tends to bias this otherwise sophisticated spatial imaginary toward an absolute view of space in that it connotes closed or bounded scales. Read more critically, other than the emphasis on active social construction, there is not much difference between this imaginary and that of the more traditional one of local, regional, national, and international levels of human activity. While I intend to make sympathetic use of some of the insights of this literature on the production of spatial scales, in what follows, I will emphasize the ongoing construction of space and place as a result of the process of capitalist accumulation. Specifically, I make extended use of the Harvey’s (1985; 2006) twin conceptions of what he calls the “spatial fix” in the capitalist accumulation process and the related understanding of the construction of spatially “structured coherences” of economic, political, and cultural lived realities. The central argument is that proceeding thusly is the best way to explicitly relate the spatial processes and outcomes identified by the four foci of
the new regionalist literature. It also makes clearer the importance of recognizing the differential space-times of capitalist economic, political, and cultural relations.

The Spatial Fix and Regional Class Alliances

As introduced above with the help of Cox (2001), the basic idea is that capitalist accumulation always produces a concrete space of production and consumption via investment in production plant, transportation and communications networks, buildings to house command and control functions, and so on. Capital has to materialize in a concrete geography of production and consumption and this geography is open to change as production processes change. Capital cannot be somehow ‘detrimentalized’ even in its most ethereal state of finance, as Sassen (2001), for example, has been at such pains to point out in her influential and ongoing account of “global cities.” Harvey’s notion of “spatial fix” underscores this but also has another connotation concerning the very necessity of continually fixing and re-fixing space as a result of the needs of ongoing accumulation. The ongoing (re)production of space is thus a “fix” that helps ensure the survival of the system as a whole:

A certain portion of the total capital is literally fixed in and on the land in some physical form for a relatively long period of time (depending on its economic and physical lifetime). Some social expenditures (such as public education or a health-care system) also become territorialized and rendered geographically immobile through state commitments. The spatio-temporal ‘fix’, on the other hand, is a metaphor for a particular kind of solution to capitalist crises through temporal deferral and geographic expansion (Harvey 2006, 115).

Capital continually needs to produce new spaces because of the general tendency toward overaccumulation. The construction of new spaces absorbs underutilized capital and labor surpluses via the actual construction of new spatially fixed production/consumption complexes
as well as the new production processes that these complexes will host. And so regions are industrialized and deindustrialized and, perhaps, reindustrialized anew, as the experience of some parts of what, in the 1970s and 1980s, was called the “rust-belt” of the United States exemplify. Spatial restructuring of capitalist accumulation thus is a crucial means by which capitalism survives.

Harvey (1982) has rigorously worked out this necessary (re)production of space within capitalism from his interpretation and extension of Marx’s analysis of capitalism. I do not intend to rehearse this theoretical project here (see, also, Smith 1990). Instead, I want to emphasize that this conception of fix and re-fix is most useful in developing a spatial imaginary that can understand the ongoing process (capitalist accumulation) which constructs the spatial form (spatial fix) which then may be deconstructed as a result of the ongoing process. Given the inherently expansionist needs of capitalist accumulation, the emphasis here is on the relative rapidity of the construction/deconstruction/reconstruction of capitalist space-time.

The second part of this argument concerning the construction of capitalist space-time is also noted in the Harvey citation above in the allusion to place-based “social expenditures.” Unlike much of the literature on economic agglomeration emphasizing flows, networks, and nodes, Harvey makes much clearer the relationship among these economic structural forces and human relations within the spatial forms constructed. Borrowing the notion from the French theorist Aydalot (1976), Harvey (1985, 146) considers more broadly the construction of a “structured coherence” of both production and consumption:

This structured coherence...embraces the forms and technologies of production (patterns of resource use, inter-industry linkages, forms of organization, size of firm), the technologies, quantities and qualities of consumption (the standard and style of living of both labour and the
bourgeoisie), patterns of labour demand and supply (hierarchies of labour skills and social reproduction processes to ensure the supply of same) and of physical and social infrastructures…

Of particular importance for the present concern, Harvey (ibid.) takes this early definition of spatially structured coherence even further:

The territorial coherence becomes even more marked when formally represented by a state. Policies regulating the labour process, labour organizing, standards of living of labour (welfare policies, etc.), appropriate regulation and remuneration of capital and the like, apply across the whole territory. The coherence is reinforced informally, though no less powerfully, through the persistence or creation of national, regional, or local cultures and consciousness (including traditions of class struggle) that give deeper psychic meaning to territorial perspectives.

It is all of these processes, economic, political, and cultural, according to this spatial imaginary, which give rise, Harvey argues, to the “regional spaces” of capitalist accumulation.

Given the ongoing process of accumulation, however, the spatial “boundaries” of such regional spaces are necessarily highly porous. As Harvey (1985, 147) himself notes, the “persistence of any type of structured regional coherence…appears surprising” in the face of this process, especially as the spatial mobilities of now even industrial capital and labor have increased over the last several decades. In the terminology put to use in this paper, the velocity of the constructed space-time of the capitalist economy has increased dramatically in relation to that of politics and culture. This explains why, as others note (Keating 2001,1998; Painter 2008; Hudson 2006), the spatial boundaries of contemporary regional economic clustering are generally “incongruous” with those of political and cultural “clustering.” A differing answer to Macleod and Jones (2007) question “in what sense a regional world?” then has to be ‘in many senses’, but not in simply chaotic ways. As well captured by the new regionalist literature, the
continuous drive of capital accumulation which leads to the fix and re-fix of spatial coherences of production and consumption ultimately forces adaptation of previously structured political and cultural spatial coherences. But, importantly, this adaptation is never smooth, nor is its outcome a foregone conclusion. Instead it is always a highly contested social process whether in terms of conflict between more or less place-bound state actors or, indeed, other actors with more or less cultural capital invested in previous “regional spaces.”

A Harbinger for a “Regional World”? : The Experience of the United States

The subheading is intentionally provocative. The discourse concerning the contemporary process of globalization is overwhelmingly dominated by the idea that it entails a stark neoliberalization of the global political economy. The neoliberal ideal imagined worldwide to deregulate markets, shrink and otherwise model government and governance on market principles, privatize hitherto public institutions and functions, devolve public authority and decision-making from national to subnational institutions and actors (or, indeed, for global “efficiency” to supranational institutions and actors) apparently rules the day in both the public and private sectors. In the words of the Democratic President Bill Clinton, the “days of big government are over”, a phrase repeated mantra-like ever since in the United States. In a word, a market fundamentalism has spread globally and, since the fall of communism, no alternative seems to exist in this globalizing ‘end of history’ discourse.

While the current economic depression may have slowed the rate of this neoliberal ideological saturation, it remains hegemonic among scholars, policy makers, and individuals of seemingly all political persuasions. The new regionalist literature both describes and reflects this hegemony in its focus on the “rise of regions” as a result of the deregulation of spatial
development at both the national and subnational state levels. And this literature includes an ever increasing number of empirical accounts of an emerging regional world resulting from the ever evolving materialization of this globalizing discourse. But is this regionalizing world an inevitability or even really as real as it is being depicted?

I am not alone in wondering whether the new regionalist literature is rather more of a path-dependent ontic community that is constructing a world more than it is discovering it (Allen et al. 1998, 2). While this may be a commonplace assertion in these post-positivist times, it must be asked, particularly of what is really a quite conventional developmentalist discourse and particularly of a discourse from which emerges such a vacuous concept as “creative cities” which nevertheless has become quite the global rage among subnational policy makers. Not only that, but from the point of view of one who works within the context of the United States, it is difficult not to feel a certain deja-vu after reading this largely European-dominated new regionalist literature. While some have argued that, even within the European context, the new regionalist literature overstates its case (Cox 2009, 2001; Hudson 2003), within the context of the United States this case seems to describe what has always, more or less, been the case. The national state has always been “hollow” in the United States, compared to more centralized polities in Europe and government and governance has always been highly decentralized, even through the Keynesian post-war period. Moreover, active state policy aiming at spatially-balanced development has never been a major concern at any level, national to subnational. In short, compared to Europe, neoliberalism already has been the norm in the United States rendering state regulation ever weak vis-à-vis private sector power and the hegemonic ideology of market fundamentalism.
While surely an overstatement, this does point to something that needs much more attention in the literature. Indeed, I do not think it is an accident that the most recent “world-” and then “global-city” hypothesis emerged from the pens of scholars based in the United States (Friedmann 1986; Sassen 2001; Abu-Lughod 1999). This is similarly the case with those most taken with the notion of global “city-regions” (Scott 2001; Storper 1997). It would seem, then, that a more thorough look at the socially contested construction of globalizing space-times in the United States would be essential to understanding the likely effects elsewhere. In the remainder of this paper, I can only gesture toward such.

In the literature concerning national state governance from what has been called the crisis of Keynesianism in the early 1970s to the present, for example, the emphasis has been on the ever greater neoliberalization of national state policy via deregulation, privatization, and the use of state power to shrink state oversight of market processes in order better to face perceived global economic competition. While becoming most public with the coming to power of Reagan Republicans in the mid-1970s, the process really began under the previous administration of Democrat Jimmy Carter. Of more importance, the characteristics of this neoliberal narrative has changed from the traditional conservative attempt to cut back government altogether, the populist mantra of many a Reaganite, to running government on the model of the lean and mean, flexible and competitive, private corporation of the Clinton and George W. Bush years. Democrat Clinton’s attempt to render “big government” more “efficient” and competitive via the supranational discipline of NAFTA and the WTO and the subnational discipline of devolving authority over the welfare to workfare transition quite successfully spread a purer neoliberal gospel across the political spectrum in the United States.
Yet, this hyper-neoliberalizing strategy has been largely successful not because of dwindling national state power but, in fact, as a result of a restructuring of such to better facilitate the insertion of the United States in global processes of capitalist accumulation. At the same time that much national state authority is being devolved to subnational states and localities, there has been a trend at the national level toward greater power assumed by the executive and judicial branches, circumventing that of the Congress. This is a direct result of the perceived need during the Clinton administration to “reinvent government” along the lines of corporate governance as outlined clearly in an official report reviewing “national performance” conducted under the authority of Vice President Al Gore. As Aman Jr. (2004) summarizes, this report:

..treated government like a business---since government bought and sold goods in the process of carrying out its functions. In addition, like a business, government was expected to deliver its services, regulatory or otherwise, as efficiently as possible. (the report) emphasized that the government, in its roles as both producer and consumer, was like any good business or smart consumer. It must be flexible, responsive, and efficient.

To create a “government that works better and costs less,” as the subtitle to this report demands, necessitates the ability to render decisions with a singular voice unimpeded by too much political negotiation (National Performance Review 1993). So, for example, trade negotiations like those involved in NAFTA or regarding the WTO had to be “fast-tracked” away from too much Congressional oversight and subnational states were not allowed to have trade rules differing from those of the national state. What has been called the “imperial presidency” of Republican George W. Bush, in other words, was not his invention, although he took the charge much farther and deeper into the realm of private decision-making (Healy and Lynch 2006). Of importance is that the continuing attempt to render state activity “more efficient” is
the result of the perceived need to be more competitive in a ruthlessly competitive global economy.

This scenario is the result of a growingly hegemonic ontic community of scholars and policy-makers that came, in this instance, to consider the crisis of the 1970s to be one most originating from the increasing inability of major U.S. manufacturers to withstand competition from foreign producers. A dominant reason for this inability was regarded as the result of corporate incapacity to change processes of production due both to prior labor-market agreements and industrial regulation. Corporations, in short, were not ‘flexible’ enough in their decision-making characteristics to meet these new forces of global competition.

In this evolving neoliberal imaginary, restoring flexibility simply necessitated harder negotiations with unions and a more critical look at industrial regulations, as has been described often enough to obviate rehearsal. Instead, the emphasis here is threefold. First, while the corporations most affected by the rise of the Japanese and German economies back to the global stage were large and important producers, arguably they were not as central to the national economy as their growing political clout suggested. Much like today, most economic activity in the United States was small and medium-sized firms more or less regionally- and locally-based in terms of production and consumption. Secondly, big labor contracts with big capital were a standardized means to ensure labor peace, to be sure, but they were also an important part of the nationalization of economic prosperity via the multiplication throughout the economy of the living wages that they included. Thirdly, industrial regulation necessitates a buy-in by the very industrial firms that come to be regulated. The particular attraction of uniform regulations concerning workplace safety, clean air and water, and interstate commerce, for example, is that it ensures that competitors cannot accrue economies by producing in an unsafe, dirty, and
fraudulent manner. Such regulations are only meaningful if all firms are made to buy-in in order to be allowed to conduct business.

For the present purposes, the first issue suggests a path toward determining which factions of capital represented within the national state have been most successful in pushing their agenda in terms of national state policy (what Galbraith, 1967, described long ago as the “new industrial state”). It also suggests a path toward determining which factions of capital and other interests would be most likely to resist such an agenda if a different imaginary were to become more successful than the currently hegemonic neoliberal one. There is, for example, a growing split in with the conservative movement between those fully supporting this administrated insertion of the U.S. economy with global flows of capitalist accumulation and those who increasingly do not. This split between neoliberals and what are identified as “neoconservatives” is one, arguably, between those more or less attached to the structured coherence of the national economy. Recent titles authored by neoconservatives such as The Great Betrayal (Buchanan 1998) or Death of a Nation (Noble 2002; see also Healy and Lynch 2006) suggest no little dissent within the conservative movement. There is similar dissent within the liberal movement as the books by Faux (2006) and Galbraith (2008) cited below suggest. Such dissent needs to be examined more closely in the context of state policy making to render this latter more intelligible as a thoroughly contestable process.

The second issue concerning big labor contracts suggests clearly that “national” prosperity has come to be regarded in this neoliberalizing age as not a community or national endeavor as much as one in which firms and people have been increasingly individualized and privatised to sink or swim in the global marketplace; something Brenner (2002, 15) describes as “fend for yourself” federalism. The dominant ideological legitimation of this regard is that the
“winners” will eventually pull the “losers” along via a process of trickle-down prosperity. This is a goal of prosperity first “in” the nation but not “of” the nation, so to speak.

In the present context, the first issue simply underscores the necessity of studying the state, national or subnational, as a dynamic social institution. Glocal activists push, but others, importantly, can push back. The second issue, in turn, can be regionalized. The restructuring of national state power in the United States has entailed an increase in the administrative and regulatory responsibility of subnational states and a decrease in that of the national state, as discussed below. This has, in turn, individualized, or de-nationalized, subnational state behavior and performance in significant ways in a similar competitive context of sink or swim. Even within subnational regions, as discussed above, prosperity is really not a region-wide phenomena; growth in the region but not of the region.

But it is the third issue concerning industrial regulation that really founds the other two. If global competition is as important an issue for the national economy as maintained by the neoliberal ontic community of scholars and policy makers, national regulation must needs be modified as other national states have quite differing national regulatory regimes. In such a globalizing world, regulatory “buy-in” to specific national preferences becomes a losing proposition in the quest for corporate competitiveness. As Galbraith (2008, 143) puts it with regard to the present:

..the critical ingredient for the success of a regulatory regime, which is the potential for an alliance between public groups that define the need for regulation and those parts of business that make it a success, is suddenly lacking. If the potentially progressive element of an industrial sector exists primarily in enterprises based overseas, it becomes that much more difficult to bring the political coalition to life that would use regulation effectively…Instead, the entire political weight of business becomes devoted to blocking effective regulation in every sphere.
This is precisely the process by which the construction of capitalist economic space-time has become de-nationalized, of course, but it also points to the source of the pressure to reconstruct regulatory space at both the supra- and subnational levels of governance. In the end, however, the actual and potential results of the construction of such regulatory spaces are qualitatively different. Building territorially-based social and cultural capital is not the goal of this new form of economic regulation. As Faux (2006, 221) points out with regard to an example at the supranational level:

…the motivation for NAFTA was not to improve the competitiveness of the United States, much less North America. It was to sever the competitiveness of the private corporations from the competitiveness of any particular country or continent. Once NAFTA established that principle, there was no need to be restricted to North America.

And, of course, the WTO represents this process even more generally. Again, the now “global” construction of capitalist space-time apparently has come quite out of sync with that of politics and culture.

**U.S. City Regionalization**

As several others describe (see Savitch and Kantor 2002), there has been an increasing involvement on the part of subnational states in the United States in the international arena. Most of this activity has been concerned with economic issues but there have also been some attempts on the part of states like California to involve themselves in global environmental regulation. In turn, there have been the traditional cultural relationships like international “sister-city” arrangements that appear to be expanding.
Of interest here, is that this growing international role of subnational states has been essentially a perceived necessity becoming reality. As responsibility for much social, economic development, and regulatory policy authority has devolved from the national to the subnational state, subnational states have to ensure their own fiscal viability as well the economic and social sustainability of their jurisdictions. And given the hegemonic neoliberal discourse concerning the economic exigencies of “globalization,” to ensure such things necessarily requires, in the first instance, more competitive engagement with global economic forces.

While economic boosterism on the part of what Logan and Moloch (1987) long ago termed the ‘urban growth machine’ (see also Jonas and Wilson, 1999) has long been a characteristic of decentralized urban politics in the United States, there are two current trends that require more notice here. The first is the changing nature and focus of urban growth machines and the second is the characteristics of what also has been called, in the United States, the “new regionalist” movement, although with different, singularly political, connotation. In terms of the first, traditional growth machines involved major economic actors most central to the structured coherence of particular places: those representing major department stores, local newspapers, industrial firms, local banks, etc., in alliance with local politicians. These actors, in other words, were thoroughly embedded in the specific territorial coherence the fortunes of which they hoped to “boost.”

With the economic changes wrought by the fall of Keynesian policies and the rise neoliberal, efficient market-state policies, however, most of these actors have declined in local economic significance or have relocalized altogether, either nationally or globally. Traditional manufacturing firms have disappeared and corporate changes have rendered department stores, banks, and even newspapers merely local brands of chains operating at the national and even
global levels. As Kantor (2007, 48; see also Savitch and Kantor 2002) so well describes, in this new postindustrial economy:

Many businesses that once were strongly tethered to the factories, downtowns and railway terminals of major cities were now liberated from these central places and became freer to relocate to other areas well outside of the big cities where they could reap cost advantages. Computer technologies, telephone services, and the availability of lightweight and other man made materials, such as plastics, enabled manufacturing businesses to move away from sources of raw materials. The growth of services rapidly replaced manufacturing production as the major sector of the economy. Transformation to a predominantly office-based economy permitted more businesses to shift these operations more easily in suburbia, the Sunbelt, and abroad. The organization of capital also changed fundamentally, typically decentralizing divisional operations in scattered locations while only concentrating corporate headquarters functions in traditional urban centers…(d)ispersal of jobs was accompanied by the scattering of urban populations.

Thus, as Strom (2008) describes, at the urban level, the boosters that remain are mainly financial institutions with much local exposure, real estate developers, and, importantly, those firms in the entertainment and leisure industries marketing the city now as a place of consumption. I will not discuss the implications of this change much here except to underscore that this new “growth machine” has much weaker and fewer place-specific ties. Moreover, the focus on consumption is creating urban economies of both low wage jobs and serial urban developments in which every city must have its aquaria, sports stadia, festival marketplace, arts museum, etc., whether truly economically viable or not.

What I do want to focus on is the contemporary ‘new regionalist’ movement. This U.S. version is reenergizing the notion that, because of the myriad local governments in any metropolitan region, a more “efficient” construction of political space would be the metropolitan region. In the U.S. context this generally connotes city-county political consolidation, an idea
that has a long history but which is here recast. Traditionally, the idea of regional political consolidation was presented as a means to simplify and harmonize subnational governance, provide economies of scale for necessary public services, and in general raise the economic profile of the entire region by evening out development among richer and poorer localities. This traditional approach to city-county consolidation put the most emphasis on the efficiencies garnered by the centralization and harmonization of public authority over wider territorial swaths of resources and people. Such a centralization of authority would lower the myriad number of internecine political conflicts among proximal jurisdictions at the same time as it would eliminate unnecessary duplication of public services. Interestingly, though, no matter the apparent logic of this traditional argument there actually have been very few large scale city-county consolidations over the last 40 years. Before the city of Louisville, Kentucky consolidated with surrounding Jefferson County 2003, only Indianapolis, Indiana (1970), Jacksonville, Florida (1968), and Nashville, Tennessee (1963) had so consolidated (Savitch and Vogel, 2009). That this is the case suggests something about the cultural space-time imagined and constructed by the voting population, to my mind, as a form of resistance to more rapidly evolving economic and political spatial imaginaries and constructing space-times.

But this has come into view clearly only most recently. The Louisville case is important, in this respect, because it has caused quite a stir among subnational politicians. Much like the idea of “creative cities” (with its obvious linkage to the emerging metropolis of consumption), Louisville’s city-county consolidation is increasingly considered a successful model for many other aspiring ‘new regionalist’ policy makers to emulate. As Savitch and Vogel (2009, 2; see also Savitch and Vogel, 2004) describe, other cities like Fresno, San Antonio, Milwaukee, Memphis, Buffalo and “many other localities showed an interest in following Louisville’s lead.”
Of importance, this new regionalist energizing of the traditional city-county consolidation argument has come with a concerted, almost singular emphasis on the likely *economic* effects of regionalization. That is, the regionalization of metropolitan government is clearly portrayed as a means by which metropolitan regions can be made more competitive in the face of increasingly felt global economic pressures. To meet this competition, the argument goes, new consolidated governments would be better able to harmonize regional economic regulation, make regulatory decisions much more efficiently, and otherwise serve as both a united voice and a one-stop shopping site for migratory capital interested in lighting down territorially. In short, much like the national state level emphasis on Executive and Judicial versus Congressional prerogative, the idea is that local governments need to be consolidated at the regional level in order to render policy decisions more efficiently and from a singular source in the face of global competitive demands. As Savitch et.al. (2009, 3) put it, new regionalists believe that:

…casting metropolitan-wide policy nets is a way to both enlarge economic development and redistribute its rewards. This logic rests on the postulate that “big box” governments could control more territory, harness additional resources, and produce greater economic efficiencies. So far as the theory is concerned, larger, more centralized systems were also expected to better coordinate and steer development through the global economy, enabling localities to compete more successfully.

The goal is to create a “tighter, executive-led, larger government” (ibid., 8)

This attempt to reconstruct the space-time of subnational political space clearly seeks to model such on the perceived needs of global capitalist accumulation; that is, it is an attempt to bring the space-time of politics more in sync with that of globalizing capital. But, importantly, this is a highly contested attempt, as others have well documented (Imbrosic, 2006; see also Bullard, 2007). There is indeed opposition to this political move by subnational glocal actors
that belies the otherwise hegemonic spatial imaginary of the necessity of regionalizing governance. This opposition considers questions of equity and democratic accountability involved in scaling subnational governance up to a larger, more centralized power structure ultimately more attuned to suburban and dominantly White interests and thus involving a loss of institutional power on the part of more inner city actors and people of color. Stronger executive power, in this context, essentially renders the economic, political, and cultural interests of these latter ever of minority status and therefore ever lacking political voice and clout (Goetz, 2003; Bollens 2003; Kantor 2000).

After thoroughly evaluating the outcome to-date of the Louisville consolidation, for example, Savitch and Vogel (2004) conclude that the push for regional consolidation, while couched in terms of policy efficiency, was actually more about pushing what they call private—or what I call glocal—agendas of advantage and power in the reconstruction of political space-time. Not only that, but these authors found that none of the so-called “efficiencies” of policy actually materialized nor was promised economic development (let alone greater spatial economic equity) achieved. As a result, according to their prognosis:

The major consequence of city-county consolidation in Louisville is likely to be a more internally cohesive regime, coupled to weakened city neighborhoods that are less able to influence the development agenda and more rather than less urban sprawl” (Savitch and Vogel, 2004, 782).

This failure to deliver on its promises, leads Feiock (2004, 49) to wonder why there has been a broad resurgence of interest of late in such regionalism in the United States. But there is really no mystery here. Glocal interests at the subnational state level are simply mimicking the activities of those at the national state level by attempting to render subnational governance more conducive to the perceived needs of global capitalist accumulation. The bottom line is that the
discourse of the ontic community of “new regionalist” scholars and policy makers both in Europe and the United States actually provides the ideological legitimation for this resurgence of attempts to reconstruct political space-time at the subnational level in order to meet the global needs of ever expanding capital.

Globalized Spatial Imaginaries and the Reality of U.S. City-Regions

In this paper, I have sought to sort through the apparently substantive changes taking place in the global political economy which have, in turn, resulted in changing international relations. Much emphasis has been placed on the role of new regionalist ontic communities and the materially productive role of such path-dependent discourses or, in this specific case, spatial imaginaries. The inspiration for this study is articulated quite well by Jonas and Ward (2001, 21):

Perhaps the key analytical question for urban and regional development theory these days is not “Who rules cities?” but rather “At what spatial scale is territorial governance crystallising?”

Or, indeed, in Allen’s terms (2004, 29), the present work is an attempt to find the “whereabouts of government” in these times of the apparent “hollowing out” of national state power.

To accomplish this task required coming to grips with what the ever-expanding new regionalist literature describes as a growing regionalization of political-economic activity as a result of globalization. Making use of Harvey’s (2006; 1985) linked notions of “spatial fix” and the social construction of spatially “structured coherences” of production and consumption, I develop an alternative spatial imaginary of the relative space-times of capitalist accumulation, politics, and, to a lesser degree here, culture.
On the basis of this new spatial imaginary, the present account suggests that studying the reality of the formation of city-regions in the United States is important for understanding apparent changes in international relations in general. This argument rests ultimately on a twofold foundation. First, the national state of the United States always has been relatively hollow with state power highly decentralized in the new regionalist sense. This is not a new phenomena brought on by the pressures of globalization. Determining better the characteristics and trends within this political context thus might suggest the direction of trends taking place in more centralized national states. The most important such trend seems to be the new regionalist movement that has emerged most recently, but, even more important, as Kantor (2007, 52) suggests, the already devolved state government structure makes it easier to detect the ultimately contested, political nature of state decision making at all levels. Most recently:

..an implicit national urban policy was forged that essentially mandated a radical devolution of decision making to the lowest governmental levels, forcing cities, suburbs and towns to compete for their economic well being by attracting jobs and dollars from increasingly footloose business investment markets. The rules of this game are simple: people and businesses are free to “vote with their feet” in choosing places to live and invest. National urban policy is a means of enforcing this by encouraging industrial dispersal and limiting higher governmental intervention in assisting cities that become losers in intergovernmental warfare for economic growth. Cities have little choice but to lean close to the market if they are to survive. In effect, the federal system of government has been re-designed to permit new market pressures to play a larger role than they might otherwise play in guiding postindustrial economic restructuring. It is not a result of globalization. It has always been a political choice.

Thus, it is not just because the already neoliberal, devolved nature of the U.S. political economy may suggest the future for currently neoliberalizing polities around world. The U.S. experience also renders clearer the ultimately contested political nature of trends like ‘fend for yourself federalism’ otherwise rendered in much of the new regionalist literature as largely
inevitable on the basis of globalizing flows and networks. It also suggests how to investigate (and perhaps promote) contestation between what have been called here “glocal” and more, if you like, local state actors and policy makers at both the national and subnational levels of analysis. In short, the trend toward greater Executive power and its use to facilitate the insertion of the U.S. economy into global flows is not uncontested, as the split even within the conservative movement suggests. Nor is the trend toward regional government certain, as is more than suggested by the fact that actual enactment of such a change in the local state has been quite slow, no matter how much has been written in its favor.

In the end, understanding “globalization” as a process involving the continuing emergence of unevenly distributed “spatial fixes” and “structured coherences” as a basis for regional class alliances makes it easier to determine the actual source of both regionalization and political contestation. The move toward the postindustrial, more footloose office and digital, as well as more consumption-based, serially constructed, urban economies arguably has meant more rapid, and looser, spatial “fixes” and “refixes” as well as important changes in the social make-up of spatially “structured coherences” and thus regional class alliances. Investigating these twin processes more thoroughly then is the way toward determining the source of political contestation within the state at all levels of analysis. Ultimately, if we are indeed moving toward scalar changes in international relations, it will be the currently unforeseeable end result of this political contestation and not some inevitable global drive toward a new city-regional world.
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