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Reading the relational local economy: Regional governance and the rescaling of local dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The local is a critical scale in the organisation of spatial economy, but is often interpreted within regional arrangements and situated as component rather than distinctive unit of production. Employing a relational reading, this analysis reframes the interpretation of local economies by positioning the local as a point of convergence for economic activities and actors rather than a bounded unit. Focused on localities considered marginally represented through evolving regional policies, the analysis applies a case study of southern Staffordshire, UK to examine how the local converges embedded spaces of economic governance and economic production. It argues rescaling in these spaces has extended the spatial integration of the local. This integration can be understood through the dynamic convergence of centralised policy mechanisms, regional resource management, market patronage, and firm-level practices.

1. Introduction

Local economy has seen renewed interest in recent academic and policy debates. Buoyed by a succession of disruptive political events reactionary to enduring themes of centralisation and metropolitanism, a growing interest has emerged in representation and understanding of localities, and particularly those considered as ordinary, interstitial, or simply that don't matter (Bryson et al., 2021; Harrison and Heley, 2015; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). As such, questions have been asked about the arrangement of state spatial strategy and regional modes of governance in effectively addressing the needs of the local; with ongoing dispersion of core economic components of such spaces, how do we understand and therefore plan for their management at the most localised of scales? This paper engages with these questions, examining local economy from a relational perspective. It positions the local as a point of convergence for spaces of economic production and economic governance in place of being a component part of a broader regional geography, and considering this through peripheral rather than integral localities within the region.

During the past 30 years, regionalism has become a prominent unit of spatial organisation (Jones, 2001). Incorporating discussions on both scale and efficacy – particularly around enduring challenges of uneven development - more prominent here has been questions of practice and articulation. This has in particular embraced ongoing spatial revision, adopting models such as city-regionalism or functional economic areas (Hoole and Hincks, 2020; Martin and Sunley, 2011; Pugalis and Bentley, 2013).

Despite such transformations, an underpinning issue of uneven development endures (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020; Martin, 2010). This issue has itself seen reconfiguration. The failure of regional practice for many localities has given rise to questions around intra-regional unevenness and increased recognition of the challenges facing places underrepresented by both governments and phases of economic restructuring (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

A prominent question arising here is how we conceptualise these local economies. Attention on regions has applied varying models of interpreting spatial economy, yet here the local is often reduced to a static segment within such arrangements (Harrison and Heley, 2015). As regional concepts have adapted to more relational modes of production, the local has been largely relegated to a component within this rescaling. A growing school has however sought to reposition the local as a location of more dispersed production processes and wider networked relations, functioning in and dependent on a much wider geography (Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2015; Mayer et al., 2016; Salder and Bryson, 2019).

This paper reframes this question of production in local economy, employing an approach rooted in relational readings of spatial economy. It argues ongoing processes of rescaling in spaces of both economic governance and economic production, rather than resituating influence at the regional scale, have instead embedded the local more prominently

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within a complex interweaving of networks with divergent spatial and scalar configurations. Understanding this process is therefore critical in the effective interpretation of and intervention at the local scale.

Commencing with a review of current debates on regional and local production, their interaction with the relational approach, and the challenges here presented in understanding the local, the paper progresses its analysis using a qualitative case study. Using localities in Staffordshire, non-metropolitan parts of both the English West Midlands region and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, the paper explores the formation of relationships between evolving spaces of economic governance and economic production through the interaction of key actors from state agencies and private enterprise. It concludes proposing a reconceptualization of the local as a point of convergence incorporating ongoing dynamics of centralised policy mechanisms, regional resource management, market patronage, and firm-level practices and preferences. Such framing emphasises the fluid relationship between spaces of economic governance and production and the importance of local context in both structural and institutional forms.

2. Positioning local economies in the relational: spatial integration and governance reform

Local economies perform a critical role in understanding relationships between governance and production. As points at which complex interwoven histories of place interact with dynamic networks of economic transaction, local economies are embedded simultaneously in traditions of regulation (Lefebvre, 1970), institution (Cooke and Morgan, 1998), and processes of social capital formation and path dependent adaptation (Granovetter, 1973; Martin and Sunley, 2006). Governance here, interpreted through the spatial determination of state-led policy programmes and interventions, sits distinct from production, defined as the interaction and transactional relationships occurring within industry. Localities are therefore complex and multi-layered spaces. Articulation of these complex spaces within economic governance arrangements are however often reduced to component parts of a broader spatial arrangement. As a result, both understanding and resultant interventions are often sub-optimal.

This question of optimisation has been integral in the regionalisation of spatial economy, cognisant of the evolving, networked nature of economic production (Oinas et al., 2018) and parallel processes of rescaling in economic governance (Jessop, 2008; Jones, 2001). The relationship between these two phenomena, and their changing spatial dynamics, illustrate the growing importance of the relational viewpoint as a means of problematising an economy constructed through networks as opposed to place or space (Goodwin, 2013; Jonas, 2012). With emphasis here placed on the regional scale, a growing critique has questioned the validity of such practice in terms of representing the local state, be this a result of growing centralisation practices in the UK (Harrison, 2012a, 2012b; Jones, 2001), changing jurisdictional dynamics within the US (Cox, 2010) or ongoing adjustments in intra-regional cooperation and entrepreneurial city-regionalism in Europe (Casula, 2020; Moisio and Rossi, 2020).

Within the UK, historical tendencies toward the erosion of autonomy in local government (McCann, 2016) have seen the question of local economy framed almost singularly within the regional agenda. The boundaries of regionalism, open to both spatial rearrangement and conceptual reconfiguration (Coombes, 2014; Brenner, 2004; Salder, 2020), have thus shifted in two distinctive ways. First, the networked concept has become embedded in the regional ethos through linking the effectiveness of regional-scale governance explicitly with networked-based phenomena. The outcome has been an ongoing reinvention of the region as optimal point for relational convergence, effectively accommodating local-level dynamics be these generative traded and untraded interdependencies (Storper, 1997) or progressive readings linking externalities with concentration-agglomeration (Bettencourt et al., 2007). Second, the spaces of regionalism – and thus networks and dynamics which constitute such arrangements – have seen ongoing transformation in pursuit of optimal spatial form (Pemberton and Morphet, 2014). Spaces of regionalism therefore become fluid, accommodating an ongoing reweaving (Brenner, 2009), phasing (Jones, 2009), or tidal heating (Salder, 2020).

2.1. The shifting spaces of local economy

Such adaptation has implications for localities. Shifting relational dynamics have a material effect in terms of privileging specific regional components; in essence, reframing sub-system dynamics (Jessop, 2008). This reconceptualising is however confined by regional demarcations; how network and its dynamics are interpreted here is shoehorned into an orthodox convention of bounded spaces of economic governance (Agnew, 2013). This forms a bounded relationality; as a result, localities are understood principally in the context of their centrally-determined regional designation (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

Presumptions of regional arrangements capacity to accommodate the evolving spatial dynamics of local economies has recalibrated debates on uneven development. Events since 2016 across the West have further complicated the regional question to include intra-regional alongside inter-regional equity, emphasising failures of regulation and distribution regarding local needs (Artelaris and Petrakos, 2016; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018). This intra-regional question manifests in multiple forms. For Meijers and Burger (2015) ongoing servicification of Western European economies favours places more urbanised, reinforcing certain centripetal dependencies which form agglomeration shadow limiting adaptation in outlier localities. For Harrison and Heley (2015), this phenomenon creates spatial selectivities, where specifically UK governance arrangements are incapable of effectively representing the broader field of localities within the region. Through these selectivities, localised industries develop practice and survival strategies through wider networks within more dispersed spaces of economic production (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; Rupasingha and Marré, 2020; Salder and Bryson, 2019).

Here, three networks of practice are particularly important; factored, founded on embedded industrial amenity, transactional, based on direct supply chains, and transitional, providing access to critical knowledge inputs (Salder, 2021). In the context of regional production systems, some aggregation toward centripetal tendencies may be observed (Bettencourt et al., 2007; Fontagné and Santoni, 2019); more localised inquiry however illustrates looser boundaries and more fragmented production patterns; Grillitsch and Nilsson (2015) for example found a positive correlation between low local knowledge spillovers and tendencies for collaboration amongst innovative Swedish firms. Salder and Bryson (2019) illustrate the increased dispersal of production patterns in traditional firms in the UK's West Midlands.

This point is particularly relevant outside of major cities, in the context of smaller cities, secondary centres, and rural areas. In the absence of, or one step removed from, the externality benefits of larger regional centres, the organisational practices for firms' development and survival strategies are a more contingent phenomenon. In some contexts this has led to adaptation benefits, limitation in the negative externalities of large metropoles and ecosystem advantages underpinning growth performance (Camagni et al., 2015; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Pose and Griffiths, 2021). Beyond such examples however sit a further set of less dynamic centres, where limitations to structural adaptation caused by influences such as agglomeration shadow affect the diversity of local economies. With greater reliance on more traditional sectors (Hamdouch and Depret, 2013; Kourtit et al., 2012; Mayer and Knox, 2010), the linking of fading industry with resource-limited locality demands firms evolve in the absence of localised clusters and dependencies (Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2017; Salder and Bryson, 2019). As a result, wider adaptive networks and dependencies are created

responding to broader market changes (Bailey and De Propris, 2014; Vanchan et al., 2018) and regulatory arrangements (Clark, 2014; Plank and Staritz, 2015). In contrast to the bounded relationality of spaces of economic governance, these emerging spaces of economic production are formed via a networked relationality involving spatially dispersed processes of transaction, regulation, and clustering.

Spaces of economic governance and economic production thus represent two separate but interacting entities, bifurcating conventional spatial arrangements. These spaces are intertwined via the dynamics of a bounded relationality, situating the mechanisms of economic governance through distinct state spatial arrangements, and networked relationality, defined through firm's dispersed production practices and relations. Integrating these separate spaces has seen debate focused on regions as renewed optimal scale for the interaction of production and governance. Issues of uneven development have however endured despite these regional reconfigurations. As a result, greater focus on the distinctive dynamics of local economies is required.

2.2. Local economy as convergence

The functioning of local economies remains highly dependent on effective utilisation of local infrastructure assets, both firm- and industry-level in terms of sunk costs (Conroy et al., 2017) and broader public goods (Capello, 1999; Pereira and Andraz, 2013). Understanding and interpretating how to apply such assets depends upon two key influences. First is accumulation of the requisite knowledge regarding local economic structure and the important generative assets of productive capacity (Gasparro and Monk, 2020). Second is the institutional practices and embedded relationships of public bodies, determined by levels of accumulated knowledge and organisational strategy, intervention, and – important in an era of austerity – institutional survival (Jones et al., 2004; Salder, 2020).

Local economies therefore illustrate a set of mutual dependencies between policy and economic actors. This dependence however fluctuates, networks and state patronage evolving in selectivities within governance arrangements. The configuration of key components for progressing regional priorities will through this selectivity valorise certain actors within a locality; outside of these, support and patronage manifest through other forms of spatial relation. Local economy, rather than a singular or inter-system unit, can therefore be better conceptualised as a point of convergence linking the networked relationality of spaces of economic production with the bounded relationality of spaces of economic governance (Fig. 1).

Escalating challenges of network-based production and economically forsaken places have stimulated a need to reconsider questions of intervention around local economies. Alongside this however runs the need to reframe how local economy, as a critical scale of spatial economy, is constructed considering relational modes of both production and governance. This analysis conceptualises local economy as a point of convergence rather than a bounded component of a region. The convergence of spaces of economic governance and of economic production is explored considering their fluid dynamics to establish key components in the local economy formation process, thereby reading the relational local economy.

2.3. The case study

The analysis focuses on the Local Authority (LA) areas of Cannock Chase, East Staffordshire, Lichfield, South Staffordshire and Tamworth - collectively southern Staffordshire - in the English West Midlands. The analysis documents processes and relationships constructing local economy during a period of spatial and structural reform to sub-national governance arrangements, specifically the redrawing of regional arrangements in England following the 2010 General Election. This point represents a significant shift in the regional governance process in England, with the dissolution of the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) and their replacement with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP). Important here are the spatial implications, redrawing the regional map through application of a more fluid functional economic area ethos over that of fixed regional demarcation, the governance process, offering a wider set of non-state actors greater involvement and responsibility, and the policy objectives, specifically employing rhetoric of spatial and sectoral rebalancing.

Data for the analysis was collected through face-to-face or telephone interviews with 20 policy makers involved in regional governance and 48 firms trading in the case study area. Policy makers were identified through their involvement in the restructuring of regional governance arrangements shifting from the Regional Development Agencies to the Local Enterprise Partnerships, specifically as either serving Board Members on the new LEPs or contributing policy officers within economic development or related services (Appendix 1). Firms were selected on the basis of sector, sampling firms involved in production processes and therefore in line with both structural form of the Southern Staffordshire area and policy aspirations of the new governance period

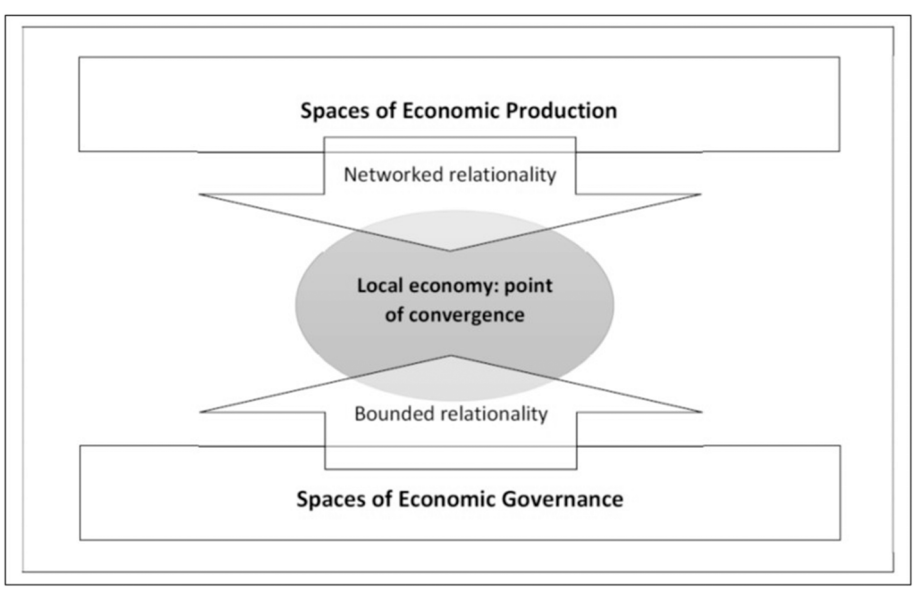


Fig. 1. Local economy as a point of convergence.

(Appendix 2). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, were recorded and transcribed, and analysed following coding; for the firms this focused on factored, transactional and transitional production relationships and their spatial form, whilst for the policy makers this followed discussion around structure of the local economy, key policies and objectives, forms of intervention, and key partnerships.

Three factors make southern Staffordshire an insightful case study. First is its distinctive repositioning in the UK's regional arrangements following the 2010 General Election, specifically in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) offering an example of a region reconceptualised. Second is its dependence on traditional industries, representing an example of agglomeration shadow, with regional structural transition not equitably represented. With lower levels of transition away from industries such as manufacturing alongside lower presence of key public service employers, dependence within southern Staffordshire has been high on traditional sectors and internal start-ups for employment (Table 1). Whilst the profile for these sectors illustrates the area has to some extent bypassed national trends, decline in both employment numbers and sectoral productivity has occurred. Finally is its positioning as part of a core area of insurgency in light of the 2016 EU referendum and subsequent recognition as amongst the UK's 'places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

3. Rescaling local economies within regional spatial reforms

With changes to the regional map of England following 2010′s General Election, the localities of southern Staffordshire were part of a spatial reform resituating them within the GBSLEP region (Map 1). Driven by motivations of integration with localised travel-to-work dynamics and strategic positioning for regional investment, the structural dynamics of southern Staffordshire and seeming dependence on traditional industry (principally manufacturing) aligned well with central policy objectives of 'rebalancing the economy' (HMG, 2010). Presumptions of the GBSLEP region effectively representing an integrated production network however failed to accommodate the shifting practices of local firms. Whereas the legacy of the West Midlands production system played well with politically-motivated regional 'imagineering' amongst policy-makers (Hoole and Hincks, 2020), for local industry their integration in wider networks proved essential to survive the hollowing out of local demand – "much of our work traditionally would have been (local), but with the decline of this industry we're looking…at a worldwide market" (Manufacturing Firm, Cannock Chase: 7-2-13) - or offshoring of production – "Our biggest customer base…none of them are in the UK. Which might sound a bit strange but it's historic…none of those companies exist in the UK anymore" (Manufacturing Firm, Lichfield: 1-3-13).

Such industrial fragmentation is to some extent mitigated through a critical set of public goods (Capello, 1999; Pereira and Andraz, 2013) embedded locally. Key inputs into transactional and, in particular, transitional relationships here occur through specialism - "the skillsets and experience of our staff at all levels, from manufacturing upwards to design and commercial awareness" (Manufacturing Firm, Tamworth: 18-10-12) – its underwriting of adaptive practices – "we've invested money in equipment for testing… but mainly it's the very labour intensive process we've had to invest in" (Manufacturing Firm, Tamworth: 15-2-13) – and more prosaic provisions of access - "from a travel motorway network and capability of transport it's fine. I can't think of where you'd move it to that would improve that. It's got nothing to do with (the place), it's got to do with the transport links" (Manufacturing Firm, Cannock Chase: 16-4-13). With a wider distribution of client base, dependence on historic aptitudes, growing reliance on specialist investments to refresh localised skillsets, and transport link requirements, such firms are bound into broader national and supranational regulatory networks than those satisfied by localised policy actors and agencies (Clark, 2014; Plank and Staritz, 2015).

To some extent governance relations have sought to accommodate such dispersal of interests through adopting more multi-scalar approaches, linking local with supra-national levels. Integrating the local as a critical scale within these new networks had been limited; whilst reconfigured regional apparatus within the UK filled in certain meso-level gaps (Pemberton and Morphet, 2014), regional scales replaced rather than supplemented the local (McCann, 2016). This tendency was in principle reversed through regional reform in 2010, a primary role on the LEPs offered to LAs in negotiating new economic units and resourcing governance vehicles following dissolution of the RDAs. Local government here responded, merging within a revised spatial and functional architecture of economic governance including a set of new organisational challenges and demands alongside new relational dynamics in both scale and partnership (Brenner, 2009; Jones, 2009; Salder, 2020).

Interpreting these relational dynamics, a process applied in understanding firm-based networked relationality can be adopted. Areas such as southern Staffordshire, with more traditional structures, see firms increasingly reliant on adaptive relationships compensating localised resource limitations (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; Rupasingha and Marré, 2020; Salder and Bryson, 2019). These relationships are developed through functional, transactional, and transitional networks of practice (Salder, 2021).

Such networks can similarly be applied to the evolving governance relations of local agencies, redrawing the local through extended horizontal and vertical interactions of a more entrepreneurial practice (Harrison, 2012b; Moisio and Rossi, 2020). Thus, factored networks adapt through spaces formed by administrative designation and statutory duty, transaction through a shifting space of core clients, and transitional through strategic relations sponsoring and evidencing localised intervention (Fig. 2).

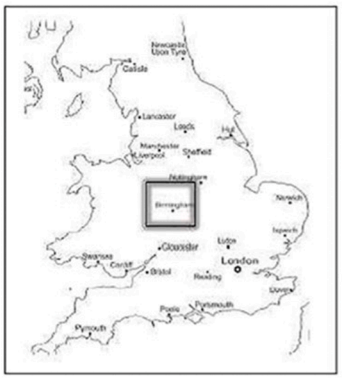
Factored networks illustrate shifting spatial understandings in the practice of local governance through evolving policy rhetoric, strategic objectives, and their interpretation considering organisational interest. Administrative boundaries for LAs define an enduring space. Beyond this, the fluid spaces of regionalism rewrite certain relationships. The regional move for southern Staffordshire disrupts enduring historic relations within Staffordshire, involving a two-tier local government structure. The localities therefore "recognise we're within the…boundary of Staffordshire (County Council) and absolutely we'll work with (them) on any local government issues. In terms of economic development, we're working with the GBS LEP" (Cllr, LA: 4-6-13). This plurality and partial overlap of governance arrangements is extended with a statutory Duty-to-Cooperate for LAs (CLG, 2011), requiring additional relationships with bordering localities beyond local and regional boundaries, specifically Derbyshire and the Black Country.

Such collaboration extends the range of core clients for LAs. Facing increased income pressures in an era of austerity (Salder, 2020), part of

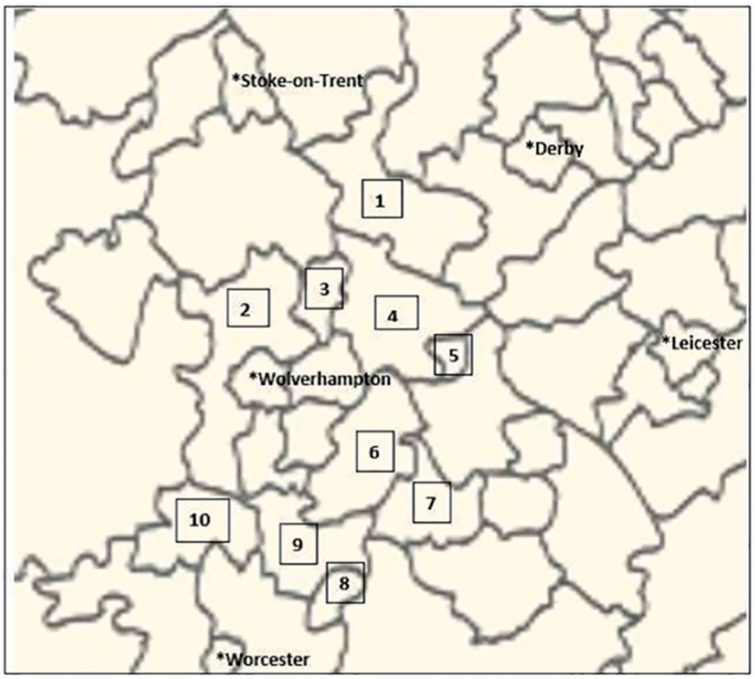
Table 1
Southern Staffordshire economic profile.

	Southern Staffordshire	West Midlands	Great Britain
Manufacturing jobs (%) (SIC Group 3)	12	10.4	7.6
Service sector jobs (%) (SIC Groups 10–14)	18.7	23.4	27.6
Public sector jobs (%) (SIC Groups 15–17)	21.7	27.1	26.9
Lower skilled occupations (%) (SOC Groups 7–9)	26	26.3	21.5
Self-employment (%)	10	8.4	9.2
Business start-up rate (% active enterprises)	13.7	14.2	12.4

Source: Office for National Statistics (Business Register and Employment Survey/Annual Population Survey/Business Demography).



Key	Locality
1	East Staffordshire
2	South Staffordshire
3	Cannock Chase
4	Lichfield
5	Tamworth
6	Birmingham
7	Solihull
8	Redditch
9	Bromsgrove
10	Wyre Forest



Map 1. Southern Staffordshire/Greater Birmingham and Solihull. Source: Ordnance Survey OpenDataNational Geospatial-Intelligence Agency / d-maps.com https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=11705&lang=en.

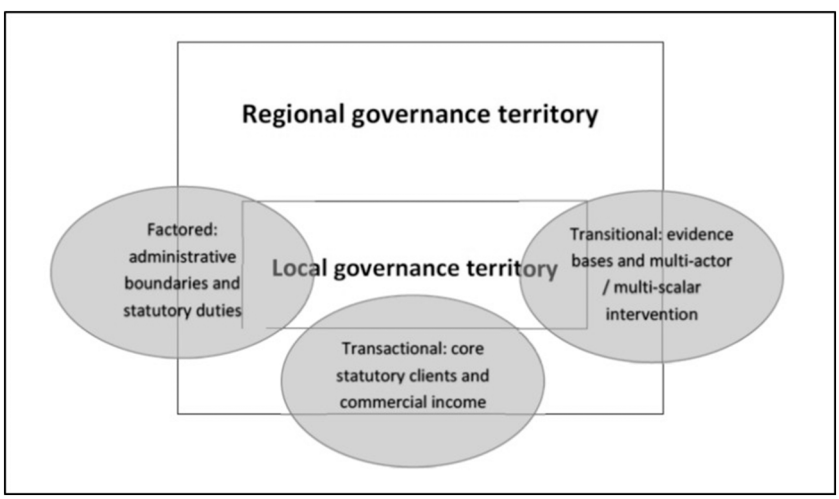


Fig. 2. Extending spaces of economic governance: the factored-transactional-transitional model.

the solution for LAs is delivering more commercial services or facilitating private investment and development (Harrison, 2012b). Strategies such as shared services and adopting agglomeration-based investment logics both rationalise costs and refine interpretations of local economy. The latter here shifts localised objectives from developing southern Staffordshire as a "diverse, dynamic and sustainable economy" (SSP, 2006, p.1) built upon "niche specialisms…electric vehicle technology…specialist automotive technology" (Officer, LA: 21-9-12) and "based around brains and the application of highly skilled residents and workforce" (Officer, LA: 4-10-12) to a more conventional city-periphery role building on assets of "ancient cathedral cities, the leisure offer…the National Memorial Arboretum and St. George's Park" (Cllr, LA: 21-3-13). Core clients here move from the business community (back) to consumers, visitors, and principally central government via financial instruments such as Enterprise Zones and the New Homes Bonus.

As a result, localities are bound into extended transitional networks. Removing the regional tier of governance has seen, via GBSLEP, closer interaction with central government and thus dialogue around finance and devolution deals. Critical here was a need to both "line yourselves up with the right authorities that are going to bring the biggest payback" (Cllr, LA: 21-3-13) and increase "connectivity to businesses outside of the LEP area" (Cllr, LA: 4-6-13), forming new networks which offer "vast ranges of knowledge and experience of areas of work which we've never

traditionally got involved with" (Officer, LA: 21-9-12).

To this extent, the shifting relations of local governance illustrate an ongoing process of transition and extension (Brenner, 2009; Jones, 2009; Salder, 2020). Emerging multi-scalar and multi-stakeholder networks become a critical component in response to contradictory challenges of eroding local autonomy (McCann, 2016) and entrepreneurial local governance (Moisio and Rossi, 2020). As a result, the bounded space of local economy and its regional demarcation is finely balanced, reliant on growing integration with a wider network of practices, partners, and thus spaces.

4. New spaces of actor integration

Progression toward widening multi-scalar and multi-actor governance has extended the network of partners and stakeholders converging within local economies. Integrating increased institutional interests, the local economy thus becomes increasingly congested as defined administrative units are intertwined with those of partners' operations or networks (Harrison, 2012a). As a result, embedded versions of demarcated local economy and bounded regionalism are challenged via the overlapping tendencies of partner agencies (Brenner, 2004) or dispersed production practices of local market actors (Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2015; Salder and Bryson, 2019). This reconfiguration of relationships, of practice, and ultimately of space outlines three distinct blocks moving beyond the formal spaces of economic governance: spaces of cross-administrative relations, spaces of enhanced state architecture, and spaces of market interests (Fig. 3).

Spaces of cross-administrative relations illustrate emerging governance practices which destabilise established administrative boundaries, recognising such borders as porous - rather than impermeable - with horizontal and vertical implications. Horizontal see the integration of an embedded model of local designation - upper and lower tier LAs - into a formalised regional architecture, creating relationships and collaborations previously limited by formal boundaries.

From this, the enhanced regional architecture vertically integrates local governance into national and supra-national scales (Pemberton and Morphet, 2014). Changing local governance arrangements from 2010 had two distinct effects here. First, the LEP ethos offered LAs and their localities some element of self-determination in redrawing the regions (HMG, 2010), so "the government told us…think outside the box, don't think in terms of traditional local government boundaries" (Cllr, LA: 4-6-13). Second, statutory guidance on a 'duty-to-cooperate' created new responsibilities amongst localities with contiguous borders outside inherited or designated geographies.

In the absence of an established meso-level – the RDAs – a significant support architecture utilised in regional governance was removed. Ongoing practice in local economic governance however encouraged more effective use of the remaining agencies and organisations, extending cross-administrative spaces by integrating them with spaces

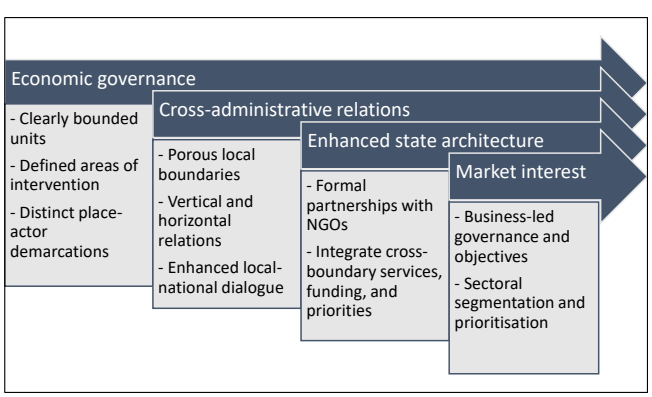


Fig. 3. The extending spaces of local economy.

of an enhanced state architecture. To maximise public resource employed locally, increased pressure emerged to coordinate and where possible consolidate capacity through formal localised partnerships; here, vehicles like established Local Strategic Partnerships and Multi-Area Agreements, alongside the new LEPs, have sought to institutionalise cross-agency working.

Increased dependency on such practice to compensate parallel challenges of funding reduction and agency erosion similarly distort scale of interaction and embedded administrative boundaries. Removal of meso-level arrangements shifts the location of dialogue as LAs engaged directly with central government departments, linking localised and national objectives; "without the RDAs…civil servants and ministers want to come to talk to us directly" (Board Member, LEP: 14-12-12). At the same time, reliance on support from more localised partners such as colleges, universities, and job centres influence key relations, priorities, and services, and redraw localities in line with tangential partner catchments; "we serve communities in South Derbyshire…and then into Southern Staffordshire…we would have always been dual-funded for East and West Midlands…so we've always been kind of split" (Director, FE College, 7-6-13) and "often the difficulty (is) … a lot of the partnerships are Staffordshire based but…the agencies that do the delivery are not" (Officer, LA, 2-10-12).

Where capabilities of an enhanced state architecture are absent, alternative solutions are necessary. Here, the LEP objective of working closely with private business through business-led Boards creates new spaces of market interest. A competitive turn in state subsidy of LEP strategies (Harrison, 2012b), and the need for credibility to aid local areas' engagement with central government (Salder, 2020) shape expectations around business involvement. This aforementioned "connectivity to businesses outside the LEP area" illustrates preference for firms perhaps locally based but not locally embedded; one subject noted "a lot of heavy hitting businesses who sit on the (LEP) board…but when you talk within the small business community…there's very little understanding" (Officer, LA, 21-9-12). This gap between awareness of the LEP amongst smaller businesses and of local needs and interests observed amongst LEP Board members directly impacts both framing of the term 'local economy' around certain city-led orthodoxies – "the main focus is Birmingham and it will stay Birmingham" (Cllr, LA: 4-12-12) – and prioritising certain industrial segments and their relevant spaces on the basis of regional aggregation over local specificities (Harrison and Heley, 2015; Jessop, 2008).

It is through this broader actor integration that local economies face ongoing tensions. Questions of physical spatial articulation, an issue augmented by the LEP formation process, are prominent here. Similarly is a continued negotiation within local–regional dynamics regarding interpretation of spatial economy (Jessop, 2008; Jones, 2001). Extended spaces formed by the involvement of an enlarged set of actors within the governance process congest this negotiation (Harrison, 2012a); the outcome is a convergence of multiple interpretations of local economy reconfiguring it an intersection between spaces of networked and bounded relationality. So, whilst spatial demarcation of the local is clearly articulated, the practice through which its role as a point of convergence - linking spaces of economic production and governance - manifests and the requirements of governance actors is less clearly defined. In addition therefore to the bifurcation between spaces of economic governance and economic production, a similar bifurcation occurs between demands on local economic governance and the resource and capability it holds to progress these demands in an environment of fragmented actors and institutions (Gasparro and Monk, 2020; Jones et al., 2005; Meijers and Burger, 2015). Such limitations have a further effect on conceptualising the local as in response certain priorities and practices are themselves rescaled.

5. Reconceptualising local economies

The emergence of more networked spaces of economic production

within local economies (Oinas et al., 2018) has been similarly replicated by a rescaling of economic governance involving multiple actors at multiple scales (Jones et al., 2004). Whilst positioning the regional as a prominent scale for regulation, regional approaches have illustrated limited capacity to respond to localised needs, specifically in certain contexts (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Responding to these challenges, local economy has itself adopted multi-actor practices, extending its interactions – and thus dependencies – into broader spaces shaped by cross-administrative relations, enhanced state architecture, and market interests.

Through such spaces, local economy can be conceptualised as a point of convergence. How this convergence manifest at the local scale however fundamentally depends upon the integration of specific interests, requiring forms of embedded relations bound into an effective governance process. Within the case study, four forms of relation are of particular prominence here: centrally-determined policy mechanisms, regional-level resource allocation, market patronage, and firm-level practices.

With only limited investment and regulatory authority situated locally, largely in the embedded but eroding role of LAs (McCann, 2016), a significant limitation is how localities support indigenous firms. This question is further compounded with the erosion of support infrastructure post-RDAs - "I think the area generally suffers from less of the Business Link … that is very noticeable as there isn't the help out there" (Engineering Firm, Cannock Chase: 19-11-12) – the absence of specific forms of investment - "There's been plenty of times when I could have done with a bit of help or a bit of guidance, but there's never anything there…you never actually get access to anything" (Manufacturing Firm, Lichfield: 6-2-13) – and limited flexibility in provision, "we've gone down the route of trying to get some (apprenticeship) funding (but) the schemes are one year. You can't become (qualified) in 12 months" (Manufacturing Firm, Lichfield: 6-2-13). The outcome is notable impacts on local dependencies across certain key sectors, where "human skills are a complete premium. Everyone I come into contact with has difficulties obtaining the right skillset" (Manufacturing Firm, Tamworth: 18-10-12) with operational consequences; "It can't continue that we keep poaching each other's staff and ratcheting up salaries locally" (Manufacturing Firm, South Staffordshire: 12-2-13).

To counteract such issues, LEPs sought additional autonomy through a culture of 'asks', their Strategic Economic Plan arguing for intervention in terms of expected returns and outcomes; "It's very much government keen to hear what ideas you've got at a local level to be able to do things differently" (CEx, LA: 11-3-13). In principle providing a negotiation through which to address localised structural conditions, and therefore needs, here a key negotiation point is less about local needs and more about valorisation of intervention through compliance with centralised regional policy mechanisms, access to available regional resources, and the need for market patronage.

In terms of centralised regional policy compliance, the culture of 'asks' is here subject to 'core cities' urban accumulation policies (Harrison, 2012a), creating uneven systems with *a priori* interpretations of intra-system hierarchies (Jessop, 2008). Patronage of the GBSLEP for southern Staffordshire's localities is subject to its core-periphery association with Birmingham, where "within GBS we have a very strong travel-to-work pattern" (Board Member, LEP: 14-12-12) and "Birmingham is the centre…(we've) got huge numbers who travel into Birmingham every day" (Cllr, LA: 4-12-12). This dynamic is critical for access to regional resources; during a period of dramatic LA settlement reductions (LGA, 2014), compliance with and exploitation of the centralised regional agenda to supplement funding gaps has become integral in delivering local support and protecting organisations from progressive financial shortfalls. The Birmingham link is here pivotal in offering southern Staffordshire localities, as one stakeholder put it, "crumbs from a bigger cake" (Director, Further Education Institute: 21-3-13). To access these resources, the need for market patronage through support of higher profile business leaders is critical, underwriting credibility for LEPs and associated organisations.

Such barriers illustrate how transformations in governance practice are shifting notions of what constitutes the local, and how local economy is defined through its relational attachments with wider territories of production (Jessop, 2008; Jones, 2001; Salder, 2021). LEPs were established under a principle of contextual, locally-focused development. Prescriptive, centralised policies, the distribution of their associated financial resources, and the need for credibility through private sector representation conspire against this objective. Instead, local economy becomes strategically shaped, its form externally framed to compensate similarly centrally-determined local organisational shortfalls. This shaping occurs in two distinct forms.

First, it is spatially selective (Harrison and Heley, 2015). The consolidation of local spaces, and therefore economies, within a regional arrangement is unevenly constructed (Jessop, 2008). Localities are therefore unevenly placed as role, function, and objectives are influenced centrally (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). This effect can be observed in the positioning of southern Staffordshire within GBSLEP, expectations of its conformity with conventional core-periphery interpretations, and how these reshape localised objectives.

Second, this influencing of objectives manifests as a sectoral selectivity. Broad negotiation with market actors through the LEP process is progressed to establish some sense of local economy and its priorities. Such understanding is however refined by regional-level objectives, themselves framed by central policy. Thus, southern Staffordshire's objectives shift from those based around highly skilled residents to "tourism assets…being developed under the brand name of the Mercian Trail" (Officer, LA, 4-10-12). Association with Birmingham shapes both interpretations of local economy and the nature of stakeholders involved in the governance process; whilst for policy makers "GBS…we have key links to supply chains. We've got a shared common geography" (Board Member, LEP: 14-12-12) and "our businesses said you've got to go with Birmingham" (Cllr, LA: 4-6-13), for embedded, local industries considered critical at the outset of the LEP project, this geography is partial and historic. Spatial segmentation here emerges within the extending spaces of local economy, embedding links between local and regional spaces of economic governance, the spaces of economic production forged through privileged sectors, and the connecting set of multi-scalar actors integrated as part of an enhanced state architecture (Fig. 4).

Against this segmentation, certain local interests become further detached or excluded (Jessop, 2008) via a tripartite association of central government policy, regional resource allocation, and priority market interests. Locally embedded but spatially marginalised, certain industries considered locally important become increasingly detached as eroding local markets and resource bases (skills) are reinforced by disengaged state intervention (Salder, 2021) restricting processes of social capital formation and institutional adaptation (Granovetter, 1973; Martin and Sunley, 2006). Such erosion may not fully detach place-industry relations; the foundation of attachment however rescales, from commercial or industrial to more emotional forms of embedding (Salder and Bryson, 2019), its management requiring similarly rescaled relational networks (Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2017).

The nature of the convergence underwriting local economy thus emerges through a set of forces defined by oscillation of the bounded relationality of governance processes and interventions and the networked relationality of contemporary production. Emphasis here should be placed on four components in understanding this convergence. First is the role of the state, particularly the policy mechanisms which (centrally) frame interpretations of local economy (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009) and (locally) appropriate this in a localised operational - even survival - strategy (Jones et al., 2004; Salder, 2020). Second is an institutional form, situated around the use and utilisation of regionally-prioritised resources and from this the extraction of value (Gasparro and Monk, 2020). Third is markets and industry, and their role in both maintaining institutions, such as a localised skills base, and shaping governance processes, here via insight and credibility of the LEP Board

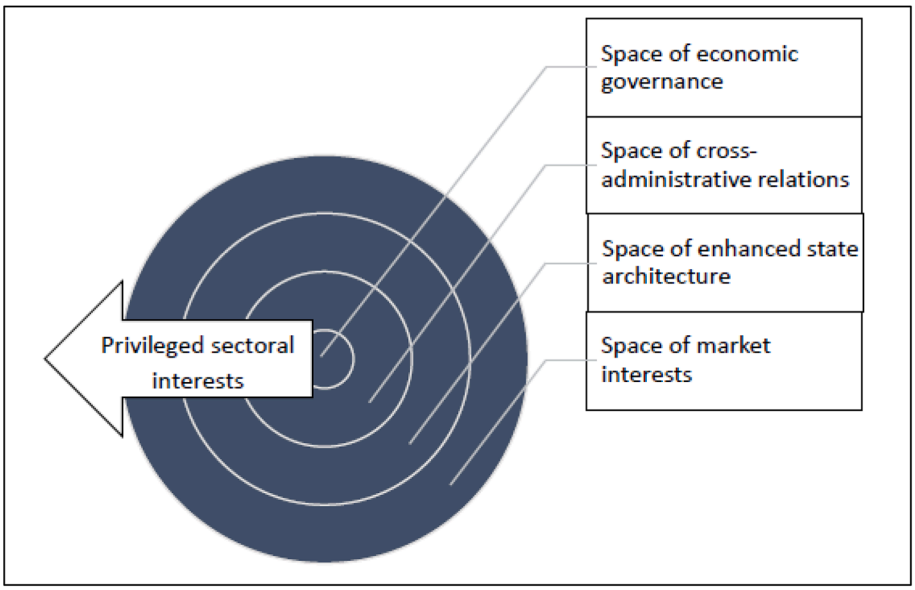


Fig. 4. Spatial segmentation and sectoral selectivity in economic governance.

(Conroy et al., 2017). Finally, there is the firm level, where the erosion of production benefits is replaced by a commitment to emotional investments and the adoption of more networked-based practices (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; Salder and Bryson, 2019), and thus new forms of social capital (Granovetter, 1973) (Fig. 5).

Positioning local economy as a point of convergence and interpreting it through such components provides a novel and adaptive framework through which researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can engage more effectively with the local both conceptually and functionally. The need for closer analysis of and integration in this important scale has been illustrated by the shifting challenges of regionalism (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Reinterpreting local economies as points of convergence allows for greater interaction with questions of context in this climate, more explicitly considering the local as an expression of its component parts – policies, resources, market relations, firm practices – as opposed to a component itself of a regional arrangement.

6. Conclusion

Local economy represents a critical scale in interpreting and understanding spatial economy. It is also a phenomenon under-utilised and under-conceptualised in this context, often reduced to a static role within defined regional arrangements. This analysis argues both the importance of the local in understanding processes of spatial production, particularly in an increasingly networked economy, and the need to identify new ways to read and conceptualise this scale.

Four main contributions to debates around spatial economy and economic governance are here made. First is to propose conceptualising local economy as a point of convergence over a bounded entity. Through this, a more effective reading of the relationship between fragmenting spaces of economic governance and economic production may be achieved. Second is to situate analysis within a relational reading of spatial economy, employing networks of practice to understand the rescaling and reforming of governance processes, and thus spaces. Third, is to

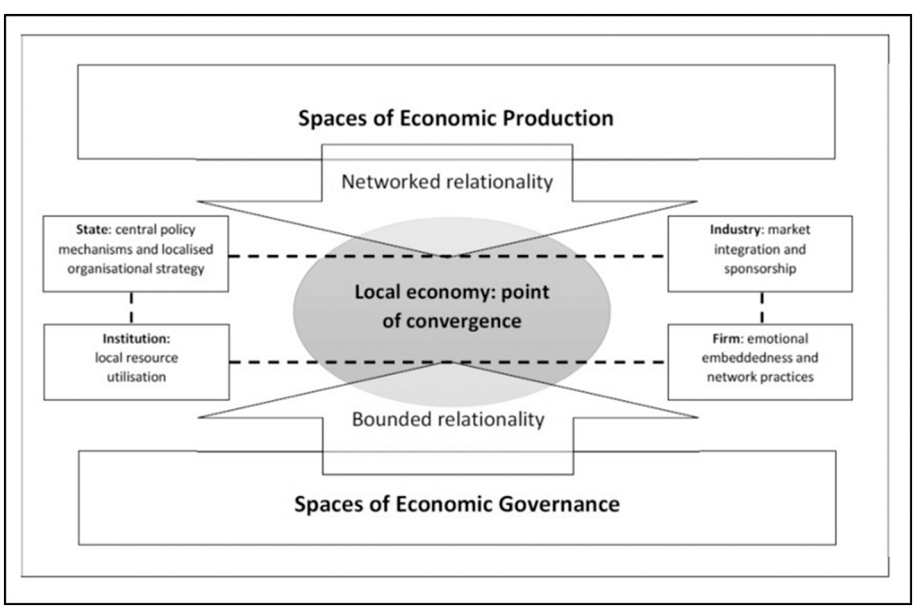


Fig. 5. Points of convergence – relational foundations.

position the analysis in a non-metropolitan setting, providing insight more attuned to needs for more context-based interpretation of the local (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; Rupasingha and Marré, 2020; Salder and Bryson, 2019) and growing concern over intra-regional uneven development (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Finally, is the proposition local points of convergence are sensitive to the dynamics of four key components of centralised policy mechanisms, regional resource management, industry and market patronage, and firm-level practice.

These contributions are particularly timely considering the challenges facing local economy in the UK, and farther afield, in the current policy climate. With yet another governmental commitment to 'levelling up' the places left behind by rounds of economic restructuring, the failings of regional approaches to address enduring issues of uneven development have gained renewed prominence. This question is as much one of local as of regional economies. Such questions require further progression and testing of the points of convergence approach, its application in different settings to understand both the forces and the foundations of its component dynamics, and greater interaction amongst policy makers with local actors and ecosystems to effectively interpret their localities in its varying spatial networks and contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jacob Salder: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The work was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant no. 1650742.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Appendix O. ne: Policy interview subjects

Position	Organisation
Officer. Local Authority	Tamworth District Council
Officer. Local Authority	South Staffordshire District Council
Officer. Local Authority	Staffordshire County Council
Officer. Local Authority	Lichfield District Council
Councillor, Local Authority	East Staffordshire District Council
Councillor, Local Authority	Lichfield District Council
Chief Executive, Local Authority	Staffordshire County Council
Councillor, Local Authority	South Staffordshire District Council
Councillor, Local Authority	Bromsgrove District Council
Councillor, Local Authority	Solihull Borough Council
Board Member, LEP	GBS LEP
Board Member, LEP	GBS LEP
Board Member, LEP	S&S LEP
Officer, Business Representation & Support Organisation	Birmingham Chamber
Chair, Business Representation and Support Organisation	Tamworth & Lichfield Business Economy Partnership
Officer, Business Representation & Support Organisation	UK Trade & Investment
Director, FE College	South Staffordshire College
Director, FE College	Burton College
Director, Business Representation and Support Organisation	EEF
Director, Local Authority	Birmingham City Council

Appendix 2:. Firm interview subject characteristics

Firm Size	Micro	7	15%
	Small	14	30%
	Medium	20	42%
	Large	6	13%
Firm Age*	0–10 yrs	2	4%
	11-20 yrs	14	31%
	21-30 yrs	11	24%
	31-40 yrs	7	15%
	41-50 yrs	4	9%
	51 yrs +	8	17%
Ownership	Owner-Manager	24	50%
	Group (UK)	9	19%
	Group (Overseas)	15	31%
Sector	Manufacturing	33	69%
	Water/Waste Management	1	2%
	Construction	1	2%
	Wholesale and Retail	6	13%
	Transportation and Storage	3	6%
	Professional, Scientific and Technical	3	6%
	Administrative and Support Services	1	2%

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Knowledge Intensive Businesses	High Technology Manufacturing	2	4%
	Medium-High Technology Manufacturing	22	47%
	Knowledge Intensive Services	3	6%
	None	20	43%

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