

REGIONAL SPECIAL PURPOSE BODIES AND REGIONAL TRADE REGIMES:
REGIME THEORY AND THE ‘MYTH OF THE NORTH AMERICAN CITY’
DEBATE

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Urban regime theory has been central to the study of urban politics in North America. It arose from an American context and has come to be widely applied both in Canada and abroad. As such, it is a fitting subject for a renewed exploration of the “Myth of the North American City” debate. To what extent is urban regime theory usefully applied in the Canadian context and how does this decades old framework fit with contemporary forms of governance. This paper considers these questions by applying them to an emerging governance trend: the adoption of regional special purpose bodies (RSPBs). Specifically, it considers the application of regime theory to RSPBs in the area of transportation and transit governance in two Canadian regions. It is argued that regime theory does have pertinence at this scale and that the central role of trade for many of these bodies gives cause for more North American comparisons. Some application of balanced ‘continentalism’ would illuminate these governance forms.

...[S]cale is not a neutral background. Rather, it is a discursive frame used by competing interests to define or redefine the appropriate location of political power and the territorial extent of specific policies and regulation. (McCann 2003: 160)q

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous second order theories in the study of urban politics, but far fewer overarching ones. Urban regime theory, which is concerned with the coalescence of actors that influence decision making in a metropolis, could be considered a higher order theory; it has been referred to as the dominant theory in the study of local politics (Imbroscio, 1998 in Davies, 2002: 1). Regime theory arose from an American context through the seminal works of Dahl (1961) and Stone (1980, 1989, 1993), Stoker (1995) and Castells (1983) and has been widely applied in the Canadian context (e.g., Donald 2002)—as such, it is a fitting subject to engage with the “Myth of the North American City” debate. To what extent is urban regime theory usefully applied in the Canadian context and how does this decades old framework fit with contemporary forms of governance. This paper considers these questions and applies them to an emerging governance trend: the adoption of regional special purpose bodies (RSPBs). Specifically, it considers regime theory applied to RSPBs in the area of transportation and transit governance in two Canadian cities.

As cities continue to grow beyond current jurisdictional boundaries they increasingly require some kind of administrative body to operate across jurisdictions in

order to provide programs, services and/or planning (Miller in Atkins & Hamilton eds. 2008; Boddy & Parkinson 2004; Kemp ed. 2003; Lorinc 2006; Schechter 1996). RSPBs have arisen as flexible institutions to address this issue without requiring the formal reorganization of local government. They are a form of regional governance and can be structured as agencies, boards, commissions, crown corporations, or more informally, as networks. RSPBs have task specific jurisdictions, intersecting memberships, multiple governance levels and flexible institutional design (Hooghe & Marks 2003: 236). While there is a growing body of literature on the potential benefits and uses of RSPBs in city-regions, there are far fewer studies that combine an empirical analysis of how they have in fact been adopted and implemented in different contexts. This is particularly true in the case of Canada, where RSPBs are less common and a newer phenomenon. As urbanization continues and coordination and service delivery across city regions becomes increasingly important, undoubtedly these types of entities will continue to be adopted, meriting an examination of a governance approach that will be subjected to increasing public and political scrutiny.

The adoption of RSPBs in the Canadian context is prudently framed with by the “continentalism” debate because of how much these institutions have been influenced by American developments (where RSPBs are far more established and common). In the United States, regional special purpose bodies have now become the most common type of local government body, far surpassing the total number of municipalities.¹ Of the many types of RSPBs in the United States, three stand out: i) federally mandated Metropolitan Planning Organizations; ii) special purpose districts for transportation and iii) regional transportation authorities. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) were created through federal mandate in 1962. They require urbanized areas with a population greater than 50,000 to coordinate on transportation issues (e.g., to create strategic plans).² The second type of RSPB is classed as special-purpose districts or special district governments. These bodies exist as separate administrative and fiscal units from general-purpose local governments.³ The third type are regional transportation authorities. This final type most closely resembles the Canadian agencies of Metrolinx and Translink.

The cases of Metrolinx and Translink were chosen because they are the two most similar RSPBs in this area in Canada and because narrowing the policy focus to transportation and transit enhances the comparability of these institutions. Because RSPBs are so very different across jurisdictions, a focus on two ‘like’ case studies has been pursued over large ‘n’ analysis. In focusing on these two RSPBs, I want to provide

¹ Figures from 1992 show 31,555 special districts or regional governance authorities in the United States. This figure surpasses the second most common government type—municipalities—by over 12,000 units (data from U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, cited in Foster 1997: 2). These are also commonly referred to as special purpose districts in the United States.

² There are currently 342 MPOs across the United States. Florida has the greatest number of MPOs (26) followed by Texas (25). Source: Data compiled from the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, <http://www.ampo.org>

³ The 2002 US Census of Government lists 948 single purpose special district governments for transportation³, of which the specialization of highways constituted the largest majority (78.2 per cent out of the total) (U.S. Census Bureau 2002: 13). Unfortunately, the Census of Governments does not provide very detailed information on the nature of such districts, making it difficult to quantify the number of entities that pursue transportation and transit planning functions of the type relevant to our analysis.

some detail on how they work and the logics under which they operate. In doing this, I argue a case for more comparative North American research on these phenomenon which, despite their different contexts, have similar institutional forms and logics. Such a project was beyond the scope of my own work, but I think it is both necessary and important. In other words, we could use a bit more ‘continentalism’ in this area—albeit a hopefully more balanced one than that described by Golberg and Mercer in the 1980s.

This paper draws on my dissertation research with evidence stemming from 30 semi-structured interviews with public officials, politicians and interested parties for both case studies⁴ as well as a detailed document analysis.⁵ This research is grounded in historical institutionalism and has traced developments from the mid 20th century to today. I first discuss the ‘regimes’ concept and its application the regional scale followed by a brief analysis of the two case studies. The third section applies urban regime theory to RSPBs and considers this within the challenge of ‘continentalism’. The final section offers some conclusions and areas for future study.

REGIMES: COALITIONS, POWER DYNAMICS, IDEAS AND POLICY

Golberg and Mercer’s preface to *The Myth of the North American City* raise their “intellectual concerns with constructs that blithely lump Canada and the United States into the same laundry basket without proper appreciation of the diversity of the wardrobe to be laundered” (Goldberg & Mercer 1986: xv). This phenomenon they termed ‘continentalism’—“the homogeni[zation] of Canada and the United States into an American dominated conception of North America” (1986:1). Within this, Mexico is all but ignored. Writing four decades ago, they urged urbanists to recognize the distinctiveness of culture within and between the two countries (they were focusing on Canada-US comparisons) and to draw out “a more sensitive appreciation of context and of Canadian and American urban differences” (ibid. 4). Their call was well heeded.⁶ In the decades that followed, much of the urban literature would do just this. In fact, context would become so important that a great deal of urban literature would come to concentrate on in depth case analysis. Urban regime theory—with its focus on the role of informal coalitions and non-governmental actors in policy formation in an urban-regional context where the strength and longevity of a governance regime becomes an explanatory factor in institutional stability (as well as the opposite case)—falls into category. The type of detail involved in such an analysis often necessitates it. As an overall approach, it highlights the relationship between power, ideas and regime formation and policy development.

⁴ The distribution of the interviews is as follows: five academics; three federal officials; six provincial officials; three local government political representatives; six local government officials; five regional special purpose body officials; and five other stakeholders.

⁵ This includes both primary documents (e.g., Government Acts, policy documents, planning documents, public records of board and council meetings, and Hansard debates) and secondary documents such as government and practitioner studies/reports, academic literature, public histories and a review of media content (including social media blogs) as well as an analysis of Translink’s and Metrolinx’s Annual Reports for indicators such as capital expenditures, government transfers and transit performance.

⁶ Despite this statement, the urban literature on Mexico and in Quebec continues to be marginalised. In this, the critique of ‘continentalism’ remains very pertinent today.

Regime theory arose from this urban-regional political economy tradition. Mossenberger and Stoker summarize the four major properties of urban regimes as follows:

- partners [are] drawn from government and non-governmental sources, requiring but not limited to business participation;
- collaboration [is] based on social production—the need to bring together fragmented resources for the power to accomplish tasks;
- [there are] identifiable policy agendas that can be related to the composition of the participants in the coalition and;
- [there is] a longstanding pattern of cooperation rather than a temporary coalition. (2001: 829)

It is a framework that is useful in analyses of phenomena that fall under the catch-all term ‘governance’ and has facilitated the analysis of politics beyond that of formal institutions. (Gissendanner 2003: 663). This is particularly relevant given the changing context for urban policy where urban issues are not domestically bound (e.g., financial and population flows), there is a prevalence of new social movements and interest formation, and there is a phenomenon of shifting responsibilities for urban governance towards a wider array of actors involved in the governance process (Graham, Phillips & Maslove 2002: 8-9). The complexity of urban issues and the resources necessary to produce and implement effective policy requires a coalition of institutional actors who control core resources. This is particularly the case with RSPBs because they are part of a trend towards complex and informal governance (Stoker, 2006, in Rhodes et al.: 498). This informality, where one can often see a divergence between formal structure and informal practices, can present a difficulty in the conduct of comparative research.⁷ Regime theory offers a framework through which to analyse both sets of practices.

There are two main components to urban regime theory. The first concerns *how regimes come into being*. Here, regime theory is used to focus in on such questions as: “how an agenda came to be framed in a particular way, what brought coalition partners together (or after a period of time, what caused a break), [and] why coalition partners devised the scheme of cooperation they did” (Stone 2005: 331). The aim of regime theory in this respect is not to be predictive, but to provide an analytical framework with which to pursue historical and descriptive research grounded in in-depth understandings of local political economies. A key concept here is ‘power bargaining’, which refers to how various authorities and individuals seek support for their own ideas and agendas over that of others. Within this process, regime theory highlights the power differences between various actors by using such concepts as systemic power, command power and coalition power. In doing so, particular attention is paid to the different positions, resources, knowledge and reputation of those within a coalition and how these factors are used to forward a particular agenda.

The second major focus of regime theory is to provide *models of how governing arrangements operate* in practice (Stoker 2001). This had led to the development of various regime typologies. For example, Elkin (1987) has described pluralist, federalist

⁷ For example, Stoker comments that while local government in the UK is weak in structure, in practice many local governments have been able to seize an agenda and accomplish a great deal (2006: 498). A classification system that attempts to unite these informal and formal components has been developed by Hesse and Sharpe (1991).

and entrepreneurial or corporatist regimes, Stone (1993) delineates between maintenance, developmental, middle class progressive and lower class opportunity expansion regimes, while Imbroscio (2010) identifies community-based, local bourgeois and local-statist regimes. This is to name just a few.⁸ There are common elements between these various typologies – e.g., their attention to issues of class, power and capital. While these typologies guide the framework of my analysis here, they are not rigorously applied to the cases. Rather, regime identification is based on the nature of the agenda, the commitment or availability of resources and alignment of key actors as key elements that can be used to ascertain the strength of a regime as well as its durability and stability over time. In this, regime theory aims to be predictive of coalition outcomes (Stone 2005: 331). This highlights the elements critical to the success of certain governing coalitions, as well as the failure of others.

According to Mossenburger and Stoker's definition of regimes (2001), some RSPBs could themselves be considered the institutional centrepiece of a governance regime. For others, the adoption of a RSPB could be considered a continuation of an existing one. Understanding how a RSPB is adopted speaks a great deal to the aims, purpose, composition and membership of the body and those who support its aims. This then in turn impacts the resulting structure of the governance model. Are they solidifying the presence of an existing regime, or does their emergence indicate the coalescing of a new one? How did key actors frame collaboration on the issues of transportation and transit before the creation of these bodies and how has this changed after their adoption (if at all)? The power bargaining of groups through these processes can be seen as critical to both institutional formation and, potentially, regime formation. This approach places a focus on the resources (and influence) that members bring to a governing coalition and how patterns of interaction are mediated despite the inclusion of sometimes very diverse members within a regime.

Much of the literature in this area has stressed the role of business interests in local politics and their influence on urban form (e.g., community power debate, urban growth machine) (Sandercock 1975, 1979; Sclar 2000; Davis 1992). For example, urban regime analysis has been applied to explanations of why and how cities pursue outward dominated growth.⁹ This perspective emphasizes how different contexts produce different types of urban governance and the consequences of those arrangements (Pierre 2005: 451). This directly ties into the question of how the adoption of RSPBs has impacted decision-making and policy development. For example, does their adoption signify a shift in the types of actors at the regional level and, if so, what are the consequences of this changed governance configuration?

Keil summarizes the urban regime theory approach as providing “an excellent toolbox for understanding the complexities of urban political decision making and social struggles” (1998: 633). However, it is not without its detractors. For example, Sartori (1991) observes that urban regime literature can fall into the trap of parochialism, misclassification, ‘degreeism’ and concept stretching. There are criticisms that the idea of

⁸ E.g., Kantor, Savitch and Haddock (1997) present a typology of eight regime types constrained by different bargaining contexts with the private sector.

⁹ Regime theory has been applied to the greatest extent to American examples and often as single case study analysis (Dahl 2005; Hunter 1953; Stone 1989; DeLeon 1992; Swanstrom 1985; Ferman 1996).

urban regimes is overly fluid, where urban regimes are seen everywhere—diluting its original meaning. This has led to various efforts to categorize regime types. Such efforts aim to enhance the comparability between cases and thus, theory construction.

Regime theory is used here to examine how the creation of a regional body for transit and land use impacts the coalition of institutional actors who control core resources in this policy sphere. Because of their regional focus, RSPBs redraw the boundaries around a policy area and, related to this, the actors involved. Of note is how this impacts the nature of coalitions in urban regions and any new players that may rise to the forefront through this reconfiguration. For example, within the context of competitive regions, coalitions or regimes take on a distinct role to promote industry and trade. Here we see a strong role for upper level governments and distinct state spatial strategies. The role of private sector interests has often been central in urban regime analysis; how such interests are expressed at the regional level has obvious relevance as well. Finally, the presence of a regime is as important as the lack of one. The comparison of the two cases helps draw out key variables related to the success of regional politics and its capacity to act on issues of regional transportation and transit.

As a final point, transportation and transit investments are major areas of government planning/policy direction and funding. While private sector partners are of course common in various aspects of designing, building, operation and maintenance, governments provide the impetus for most projects and are typically the major funder. Such investments require a long-term frame, particularly when it comes to transit (which requires behavioural change and modal shift). The scale and scope of many of these investments can mean that decisions made today will financially impact taxpayers and users well into the future. Because of this, the decision to fund different types of transportation investments is extremely contentious. Further, because they are fixed physical assets, their allocation benefits some more than others, both in terms of access to resources and in the case of transit investments, increases in property/real estate values. Transportation and transit decisions are intensely political, with a large array of vested interests such as community/neighborhood groups and business interests. Urban regime theory has been used as a framework to analyze how diverse groups come together to assert their policy priorities in such areas as transportation and transit provision and, related to this, land use. The outward expansion of North America's cities and the influence of developers (who often directly fund the campaigns of municipal politicians) are a well-known phenomenon. In every city there are battles being fought over these issues. A major point here is to stress the political nature of these decisions and their long-term impacts as a major area of policy intervention. Of particular interest is how these politics are manifested at a regional level through the involvement of RSPBs. Conceivably, the types of business interests influencing regional level politics will be different from those at the urban level, but how?

A TALE OF TWO RSPBS: METROLINX AND TRANSLINK

Policy development at the regional scale leads to specific configurations of co-operation and conflict between actors. RSPBs find themselves in a contest among the different visions, logics and needs of the urban region where the aims of inclusivity, environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness and livability converge and often compete. There is an imbalance among these aims as they are played out through these regional

institutions. In Canada, state strategies (and funding) and provincial political imperatives can strongly influence policy development through RSPBs. While they are a new institutional phenomenon in the Canadian context, they remain, like local governments, creatures of the provinces. Where RSPBs have been given agency, it has been tentative. Canada's major urban regions are the locus of substantial economic activity and, as such, are an important scale of policy intervention for provincial and federal governments. Scale and institutional choice matter. Their adoption adds another layer of complexity to regional governance and raises issues concerning: the allocation of resources in a city-region; the appropriate political and administrative units for the provision of such services and policy development; and the structure of decision-making and accountability.

Translink and Metrolinx are relatively new institutional phenomena in the Canadian context, just thirteen years and seven years old respectively at the time of this writing. Metrolinx, established in 2006, is a Crown Agency with a corporate board and no local government representation.¹⁰ It is accountable to the Government of Ontario through its Minister of Transportation. Metrolinx partners with local governments, but it retains sole ownership and control of any transit assets throughout their life. In 2009 Metrolinx was merged with Go Transit, the interregional transit provider.¹¹ Metrolinx is responsible for creating an integrated, multi-modal transportation system, delivering transportation services (e.g., GO Transit and Presto card) and for creating regional planning and infrastructure investment strategies (which must be prepared and approved under the *Places to Grow Act* 2005).

Translink, established in 1998 by the Government of British Columbia, is a regional transportation authority but “not an agent of government”; it has a corporate board and, above that, a council of mayors of the region responsible for budgetary approvals.¹² Translink's purpose is twofold: i) to move people and goods and ii) to support the regional growth strategy, and the air quality objectives and economic development of the transportation service region (SCBCTA Act 2007). Prior to the creation of Translink, transit in the GVRD was provided by the provincial crown agency BC Transit.

These two RSPBs have attracted national attention. They are regularly mentioned in national media. Governments elsewhere in Canada are looking with interest at how these RSPBs develop and how they might be applied in other contexts. They are treated as distinctive entities by federal departments such as Transport Canada, who meet with them separately on issues of mutual interest.¹³ Despite their relative infancy, they are already very influential in the regions in which they operate. They command large resources (through capital contributions, taxes, levies and fares), have multi modal mandates,¹⁴ and

¹⁰ Metrolinx was formerly named the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority.

¹¹ Go Transit (est. 1967) was formerly operated under the Toronto Area Transit Operating Agency (199) and later the Greater Toronto Services Board (est. 1998).

¹² Translink was formerly named the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority. It is presently legally named the South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority.

¹³ Transport Canada, non-attributable personal interview, January 4 2011.

¹⁴ For Translink, ‘multi modal’ includes walking, cycling, transit, commuting, good movement and major roads (SCBCTA 2007). For Metrolinx, multi modal refers to “automobiles, walking, cycling, buses, rapid transit, including subways and transitways, rail, including commuter and freight rail, and trucks (Metrolinx 2006, c. 16, s. 5:2).

have strong supporting legislation and coordination with land use planning. Further, the broadness of their mandates means that they impact upon and influence the direction of economic development, urban form, environmental sustainability, quality of life and, in general, accessibility and affordability of movement across metropolitan regions for both goods and people.

Examining both case studies through the frame of historical institutionalism we see similar developments, despite very different contexts and histories. Leading up to the creation of these entities in both regions, the coordination of regional transportation was raised as an important issue through various reports and recommendations from provincial and local governments, business associations and think tanks. Through these debates, the ‘problems’ of the present systems were articulated and institutional solutions were proposed. Here, ‘problem definition’ in each case had multiple, sometimes overlapping, focuses as evident in content analysis of core documents leading up to their formation. Advocates presented functional arguments based on a need for reduced car congestion, more compact urban form, increased transit services, better infrastructure and transportation links to move goods and people. A second focus—strong economic rationales—were also prevalent in these debates; here, the need for policy action is centered on the competitive cities thesis and a need for world-class infrastructure to support economic development. A third focus—environmental rationales—put priority on environmental sustainability and its links to quality of life. A fourth focus—on articulation of a social equity perspective to address regional spatial inequalities—was the least prevalent in this discourse.

Common to all of these focuses is an understanding that metropolitan regions require mechanisms for coordination across boundaries. The importance of city regions has raised ‘regionalism’ and the construction of regional institutions to the fore of Canadian urban politics. This has changed both the scope of policy considerations. The final institutional structures that were adopted in both case studies were provincial creations and were given strong provincial support and funding in the early years of operations (significant capital contributions and strong operating legislation). In BC, Translink was created under the NDP provincial government of Glen Clark (in 1998) while in Ontario, Metrolinx was created under the Liberal provincial government of Dalton McGuinty (in 2006).

Upon creation, both entities were tasked with creating a strategic transportation plan for their respective regions and this was done with locally-elected representatives appointed to their board, and in consultation with key stakeholders. This period is important because it set a framework for future developments and, critically, cemented local support for the organization’s operations. Once these strategic plans were created, we see a shift towards a corporate board. This occurred through provincial legislative changes to Translink’s Act in 2007, and to Metrolinx’s Act in 2009. Amidst the debates that emerged around these governance shifts, some have expressed that the adoption of a corporate board is necessary for implementation. For others it has been interpreted as a way for provincial and business interests to dominate regional politics in this area. In both cases, the respective provincial governments express that that local politics ‘gets in the way’ of implementation and that the adoption of a corporate board is deemed more efficient and effective.

Finally, we see that it is under the corporate boards of the two RSPBs that the task now turns to expanding the existing set of revenue tools away from a reliance on government contributions and basic fare box revenue. This task, to be undertaken in the coming years, will be politically contentious and a true test of the organizations' ability to navigate divisive politics. It will raise the profile of these organizations and may bring into question the legitimacy of non-elected corporate boards for such decision-making.

REGIME THEORY APPLIED REGIONALLY

The application of regime concepts at the regional level is relatively new. As a framework that seeks to provide analytical clarity around the complexity of contemporary governance processes, its application at the regional levels makes sense. The responses of different regions within the context of wider macroeconomic forces remain the products of local “social struggle, conflict and negotiation, coalition building and visioning, involving a wide variety of stakeholders across the region” (Donald 2002: 191). In the words of Mossenburger and Stoker, the use of regime theory “at the regional level is promising... especially in examining cooperation in an evermore fragmented and tenuous environment” (2001: 827).

RSPBs may offer a counter-weight to planning decisions dominated by business-led regimes (Stone 1993). The inclusion of business interests is important to the mandates of Metrolinx and Translink, particularly through their goods movement strategies. However, in interviews with Metrolinx and Translink executives, both conceded that engagement with the business community was underdeveloped at present and an area that they would be focusing on much more in the future as they further develop their goods movement strategies. There is little evidence of the types of ‘business regimes’ that Stone describes (1993) in the activities of Translink and Metrolinx. Both organizations have transit-oriented mandates and support nodal development. This is a different logic than that of the urban growth machine paradigm described by Stone (1993). However, while the pressures may be different, RSPBs can certainly facilitate urban growth. Expanding service delivery and planning across a regional area could be said to facilitate suburban and rural growth by increasing mobility in those areas, and this expansion would be favoured by developers as it could open up lower cost land for development.

While there is little evidence to support claims of Metrolinx and Translink being engaged in “business regimes”, there is evidence of engagement in a larger scale regime, involving not just the business sector, but major industrial and trade actors. I will refer to this as a regional *trade* regime. The four major properties of regimes are that they involve partners from both governmental and non-governmental sources; that collaboration is based on social production (resources linked to policy capacity); that there are identifiable policy agendas and that there is a longstanding pattern of cooperation (Mossenberger and Stoker 2001: 829). We see such properties in our two case studies as they engage with regional trade imperatives. I will explain.

Metrolinx and Translink have partnered with provincial and federal economic development initiatives linked to international trade. These initiatives exhibit features of regional trade regime formation. Partnerships surrounding the development of gateways and corridors in both regions involve close relationships between governmental and non-governmental (specifically trade related industries) actors. This collaboration has significant resources attached to it and a high degree of policy capacity because of this. It

is part of a broader national strategy that aims to enhance Canada's position in international trade through multibillion-dollar investments, and this is being done through a regional lens. Investments are being focused in Greater Vancouver through the Asia Pacific Gateway, in the Greater Toronto and Montreal through the Ontario-Quebec Gateways and Corridor Initiatives and in Atlantic Canada through the Atlantic Gateway and Trade Corridor. These initiatives are further supported by what the federal government is calling 'foreign trade zones'. The zones refer to measures to make Canada a business friendly tax regime in order to attract new investment and to facilitate export trade. As part of these measures, the federal government's 2009 budget eliminated a wide range of machinery and equipment tariffs and created export friendly programs such as the duty deferral program, the export distribution program and the exporters of processing services program (Government of Canada 2011). Though the federal government refers to these programs and tariff reductions as "foreign trade zone" they are not in fact restricted to a zone, but apply to the whole of Canada. Those involved in this regional trade regime have an identifiable policy agenda, and it is one that is very much nationally driven.

While Metrolinx and Translink both engage with the 'competitive cities' frame, they are also increasingly being pulled into this emerging trade agenda. While Canada's major gateways and corridors have long been part of a national strategy and have been central to Canada's early development as a staples economy, there is something new about the present manifestations of these initiatives. Brenner and co-authors have described the potential of new state spaces emerging out of coalitions for regional growth.

Brenner hypothesizes on the emergence of new state spaces via the construction of new coalitions for regional growth. National economic systems would bring their most advanced economic regions into a more privileged and autonomous position in order to meet the highly competitive standards in the rivalry between national states (Brenner et al. 2003; Brenner 2004). In this way, regional development policies are made part of changing national and international policy coalitions. (Majoor and Salet 2008)

We see evidence of Canada engaging in these strategies not just through the Gateways and Corridors initiatives but also through the creation of a new regional economic development agency—the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario (FedDev Ontario, est. 2009). In the past, regional economic development agencies were created with the aim of helping struggling regions (e.g., Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, est. 1987) or promoting economic diversification (e.g., Western Economic Diversification Canada, est. 1987). FedDev Ontario is quite a different creation as it is focused on Canada's most advanced economic region, placing it in yet a more "privileged and autonomous position" (ibid.).

While the coalitions that are forming around the regional trade imperatives in Greater Vancouver and Southern Ontario-Quebec exhibit features of regime formation against the definition offered by Mossenberger and Stoker (2001: 829), one critical element is missing. These coalitions cannot yet be said to have longevity in their present manifestation. There is a newness to the approach that is being taken, with many of these initiatives being adopted as recently as 2009. Brenner's hypothesis that the emergence of

new state spaces for regional growth is centered on international competitiveness certainly has pertinence to the issues discussed here. Regional actors such as Translink and Metrolinx are very central to such an agenda where the frame of reference is no longer competitive cities, but rather that of strategically competitive regions. Applications of these concepts will be an important area for future research, particularly as they relate to the place of RSPBs within broader state strategies.

At the beginning of this paper I asked, to what extent is urban regime theory usefully applied in the Canadian context and how does this decades old framework fit with contemporary forms of governance? Urban regime theory can be described as a lens or framework of analysis in the way that it highlights certain variables. It also aims to be predictive and to facilitate comparative research for example through typology development. All of these features are usefully applied in the Canadian context. While urban regime theory arose from American urban studies, it has proven to have wide application in Canada and elsewhere. Also, I believe that it sits well with contemporary forms of governance and can be applied at the regional scale. Together, this might facilitate comparative research on evolving forms of governance such as RSPBs. In my own research in this area I have found there to be a major gap in the comparative literature, despite institutional similarities across countries. The increasing prevalence of such bodies at the regional scale—their size, scope and the resources they control—make this an important emerging area for comparative research. While the commonalities across North America may have been overstated in the urban research Golberg and Mercer were responding to in the 1980s, the importance cross boundary trade that characterize RSPBs (particularly in the areas of transportation, and economic development) that could be usefully studied from a North American (or continental) frame. Of course, rather than an imposition of American concepts on Canadian ones, such renewed ‘continentalism’ might offer a more balanced approach. Deep understanding of context (such as that pursued in regime theory) is important to understudying how RSPBs operate. Such a continental research program would need to carefully balance the ‘forest’ and the ‘trees’.

CONCLUSION

At the time of Goldberg and Mercer’s writing in the mid 1980s they were responding to an overstatement of continental linkages from an American perspective. While they acknowledged homogenizing factors such as Canada-US trade pacts and cross border flows, they called for a more nuanced view of Canadian experiences and identities:

A continentalist perspective is sensible if Canada is essentially similar to the United States. If, on the other hand, significant differences do exist between U.S. and Canadian institutions, then homogenizing Canada into “North America” is not especially instructive and may be quite misleading and, in the extreme, even dangerous. By extension this work challenges the broader concept of “continentalizing” Canada and the transfer of research and policy formulations from one country to another without a careful understanding of the context into which quintessentially American constructs are to be injected. (Goldberg & Mercer 1986: 3)

Since the time of their writing there has been a growth in Canadian urban studies, which sets Canada's urban systems as distinct and separate from American approaches and brought in cultural elements to analysis.

Goldberg and Mercer's writing took place before the type of regionalist developments that I have discussed in this paper. RSPBs operate in very distinct contexts where the role of the national government in supporting trade regimes is central. The role of these entities in cross border trade flows makes a North American perspective on these institutional forms increasingly important. It is one lens through which to analyze and understand them. A review of U.S. MPOs (one type of RSPB) by Goldman and Deakin (2000) finds that there has been a general reluctance by many states to expand the powers of regional agencies. They argue that, in the absence of political will by state governments, regional agencies will gain their power through "an incremental process of establishing legitimacy and building capacity" (ibid.: 52). How is this different than experiences in the rest of North America and how strong are economic and trade imperatives (versus environment and social ones) to this outcome? Finally, as Goldberg and Mercer pointed decades ago, the place of Mexico within this research remains deeply neglected. Megacities such as Mexico City are staggeringly large and complex.¹⁵ Future research on RSPBs could focus on if and how they are being adopted at this scale.¹⁶ The increasing prevalence of RSPBs across North America shifts the scale of analysis and raises cross border trade and economic relations in such a way that continental implications and trends are of increasing importance. While the "North American City" may be a myth, we do not yet know enough about a North American Regionalism.

¹⁵ Megacities are usually defined as metropolitan areas with a population excess of 10 million people.

¹⁶ My own literature searches on this question have proven fruitless.

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