

Regional Futures

Welcome to this special issue of the *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies*. Over the past year, the Journal has published a diverse range of articles on various aspects of regional studies, reflecting different approaches and parts of Australia and New Zealand.

The concluding issue for 2017 is more focused. This issue focuses on regional futures, and particularly as possibilities for regional futures are played out in one particular region, the Latrobe Valley in Victoria. This topic has been of growing concern as the prospects for a transition from coal and energy came into sharp relief with the decision by a French company, Engie, to close the Hazelwood site.

Researchers at RMIT University have been engaged with various aspects of the transition and possible futures for the region for several years. Dr Lauren Rickards, the Convenor of the RMIT Regional Futures Network offered to bring together members of the Network to produce a special issue. Several members of the Network were joined by other Valley researchers to contribute the seven articles which make up the special issue. Dr Rickards has written an introduction and Professor Lars Coenen from the University of Melbourne has provided some concluding thoughts.

We hope that it contributes to discussion about regional futures in Australia and New Zealand and look forward to further contributions to the Journal on this topic. Our thanks to all those whom have contributed.

From the Convenor of the Special Issue

Problematizing Regional Futures

‘Regional futures’ is now a recognisable phrase. Networks, centres, institutes, conferences, summits, projects and policies are all adorned with it, signaling a degree of agreement on its salience if not meaning. What, though, are these ‘regional futures’ initiatives a response to? To the extent that regional futures work seems to be meeting a need and can thus be seen as a partial ‘solution’, what problem(s) is a focus on ‘regional futures’ a solution to? While there are many possible answers, interest in regional futures suggests that such *futures* cannot be taken for granted. They are instead a problem requiring attention, as the future in general has been lifted out of the realm of the assumed to become an object of governance. Not limited to work on regions, efforts to interrogate, understand, (re)claim and (re)shape ‘the future’ are now widespread. Projections, scenario planning, visioning, and analyses of risks, vulnerabilities, adaptive

capacity and resilience are now standard organizational processes (Rickards *et al.*, 2014). Driving such work are perceptions of the future as characterized by both threats and exciting possibilities.

Despite widespread interest in exploring futures at scales from the organisational to planetary, there is a discernible focus on *regional* futures. One reason for this is that, as an imagined intermediate level in a hierarchical notion of scale, the region offers a useful, workable level of generality, more particular and tangible than the global or national scale and more connected and comprehensive than the local. An alternative reading is less sanguine; it suggests that the region, like the future, is itself a problem in need of policy and academic attention. There are at least four factors contributing to this revitalisation of ‘the regional problematic’ (Agnew, 2013, p.8).

First, regional areas seem to be facing a growing array of intensifying challenges. One is the long-standing but continually shifting effects of economic globalisation as markets and economies revalue and remake regions in keeping with what counts as a feasible resource (e.g. brown coal or windy coastlines) (Jakob and Hilaire, 2015; Huber and McCarthy, 2017). The Australian Productivity Commission, for example, is currently examining the potential impacts of the end of the ‘resources boom’ on Australian regions’ economies (Productivity Commission, 2017). Although the report overlooks it, climate change is inseparable from such economic processes. For this and many other social and environmental reasons, climate change is another of the intensive challenges facing regions and problematising their futures. From a climatic perspective, many regional areas are considered to be ‘on the frontline’ when it comes to exposure and sensitivity to climate change impacts (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). From a mitigation policy perspective, regions currently reliant on carbon-intensive industries are also especially vulnerable to structural decline (Wesseling *et al.*, 2017), as some of the papers in this special issue discuss.

Second, the use of ‘the region’ as a governance tool remains contested. The reason the Productivity Commission report on *Transitioning Regional Economies* is focused on regions is not just that ‘regional space’ in general is (or was) the predominant site of the resource extraction industry, but that regions are an established administrative unit in Australia, albeit with few formal powers. As a subnational (and often sub-state) level of governance, regions fall outside Australia’s primary three-level government structure (local, state and national). However, they have proven to be a *useful* level to work with for reasons that speak to the limitations of alternative scales as much as the inherent qualities of the regional scale. For example, many

environmental problems cut across the artificial boundaries of local governments or private property titles. Water issues, for instance, benefit from a catchments scale view. This is one reason for Australia's 'experiment' with regional organisation in natural resource management in the form of what is called in Victoria Catchment Management Authorities. Critics of the outcomes of that experiment (e.g. Wallington *et al.*, 2007) suggest that while it has a certain physical logic, the region has been used as a strategic level of governance by those wanting to devolve responsibility 'down' from the national level, by-pass the state level, and increase efficiencies by chunking 'up' from the local level. Such criticism illustrates the fact that constructions and uses of scale are political (e.g. (Agnew, 2013, Jones *et al.* 2016). Such politics is manifest in strategic re-scaling efforts (moves to expand or shrink the boundaries of a region). Combined with the questionable basic assumption that levels such as national and regional are mutually exclusive rather than messily entwined, the question of 'why regional?' and—if regional—how efforts to make or secure regional futures are resourced or influenced by those 'above', 'below' or generally elsewhere are adding to the problematisation of regional *futures*.

The third factor encouraging a focus on *regional* futures is how ambiguous, consequential and contested any definition of a particular region is. Regions can be framed as economies or catchments. They can also be framed as communities, populations, land types, species assemblages, historical artefacts or in their relationship to features such as coasts, estuaries or cities. They can be measurable, comparable and mappable, or experiential, discursive and intangible. They can be envisaged as fixed spatial containers or the momentary outcome of oscillating relations (Simon, 2016). Usually they are understood to some extent as a mixture of all of these. This ambiguity can allow 'region' to serve as a productive 'boundary object' (see Star, 1989), but it also means that the term 'region' risks "succumbing to opacity and hollowness" (Simon, 2016, p.198) and never-ending contestation. Struggles over definition reflect awareness of how generative a given regional designation can be of some futures and not others. If, for example, a region is defined on the outset on the basis of a single resource—as broadly is the case in the Latrobe Valley—then the future of that region will necessarily be shaped around that resource and the assumed continuation of the region based upon it. If, on the other hand, the region is defined on the basis of another one or more characteristics—as it may come to be if the asset value of the previously dominant resource is called into question—other possibilities come into view. The point is that assumptions about a given region can

predetermine visions of the future that, in guiding action, can become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Major challenges such as the intersection of climate change and globalization mean that not only is any given region likely to ‘experience change’, but its actual existence may be called into question. And as it recedes from view, new regions may emerge. For, as historians know well, regions have always come and gone as the sociomaterial relationships that demarcate any one or more regions evolve and are overlaid with new spatialities. Too many present day performances of region are blind to the layered regions that lie below. As Erik Eklund has noted, analysis of the futures of places like Latrobe Valley requires awareness of the deeper submerged patterns and forces that have shaped the present and its possibilities. Attention to such longer term patterns of change and continuity can demystify current challenges, exposing them as just the latest in a long line of trials and opportunities and helping us escape “reified notions of regional fixity” (Simon, 2016).

The fourth factor contributing to the current interest in regional futures is the idea that regions are somehow timeless or trapped in the past relative to their implicit other, the City, which is taken as a symbol of the future. Particularly relevant to the Australian context where regions are defined as non-urban (Eversole, 2016), this is not simply about urban actors appropriating non-urban spaces or the expanding boundaries of city limits that mark peri-urban regions as pre-urban. It is also about the deeper narrative of Western culture in which non-urban (rural, wild, regional) spaces are conceived as less developed, less civilised and less human than the City (Merchant, 2003). While these characteristics may be valued positively as they are in the rural idyll, the idea that the City is some kind of *telos* towards which the nonurban is progressing, for better or worse, associates regional areas with the past (Little, 1999). ‘Regional futures’ thus emerge as a problem because the successful passage of regions to the future is imagined as an inherently precarious and ongoing challenge. While this may seem like woolly post-structural theorizing, the geographical imaginary involved has powerful effects. As Robyn Eversole discusses in this special issue, the Australian definition of regions as ‘nonurban’ ushers in problematic ‘deficit thinking’ that—as Sally Weller also describes in her essay on the Latrobe Valley—encourages city-based elites to intervene in and ‘fix’ regions. The Latrobe Valley case suggests that such interventions may be far from successful, with resultant problems further incentivising a policy focus on the future rather than present or past. A more sympathetic reading of efforts to rank regions highlights the importance of such comparison in identifying and trying to ameliorate regional inequalities. As Tomaney (2012) has noted in this journal,

“Generally, large cities have been growing at the expense of smaller cities and rural areas”, not only in Australia but beyond (p.150). He advocates strongly for *regional* policies, in counter-distinction to the conventional economic focus on individuals of the sort exemplified in the Productivity Commission’s *Transitioning Regional Economies* report. Referring to the OECD’s new regional paradigm, Tomaney calls for an “all-region focus” that harnesses “underutilised regional potential”, including social as well as human and physical capital. Of relevance to this special issue, he notes that such “place-based thinking” is likely to be of particular pertinence to “mining regions and regional cities” (p.154).

The Special Issue Papers

This special issue adds to discussions about regional futures by bringing together a diverse collection of reflective essays. Its broad aim is to juxtapose different scholarly perspectives on regional futures in order to illustrate and explore the plural ways both regions and their futures can be thought about. Some of the differences between the essays stem from the different disciplinary backgrounds of the authors. While all have some sort of interdisciplinary base, and come from a broadly interpretivist or constructivist (as opposed to purely quantitative) epistemological perspective, their academic training ranges across regional studies, economic geography, cultural geography, sociology, policy studies and natural resource management. Combined with their diverse professional and empirical research experiences, this means that the special issue offers a cross-disciplinary conversation.

The more specific aim of the special issue is to contribute insights to discussions about the complex real world ‘region’ of the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia, currently the focus of much active policy making. The status and basis of the area as an actual region is one of the things that is contested, a dynamic that is familiar to the Valley given similar levels of policy attention in prior decades. Yet, whereas in the past that energy focus and status has been largely unquestioned, the carbon-intensive character of that coal means the idea of the region as an energy powerhouse has now been destabilised. With the Victorian (if not Australian) Government putting in place ambitious targets to decarbonise the state’s economy and an energy multinational in the Valley already closing one mine and power plant in the name of its transitioning towards greener power, the coal-based identity of the region is increasingly viewed as highly problematic.

The Latrobe Valley is unique but it is also an instructive case. Being on the frontier of a new post-carbon and possibly post-coal economy, it is

illustrative of other places around the world facing similar ‘post-industrial’ futures (see Beer 2012). Moreover, its settler colonial history, agricultural and forestry economies, experiences of neoliberal policy including industry privatisation and, more recently, the sociotechnical disaster of a devastating fire in one of its coal mines, means that it holds lessons for many regions elsewhere.

The papers by Eversole, Doyon *et al.* and Bosomworth *et al.* focus primarily on the concept of regional futures. Robyn Eversole begins the collection with an elegant overview of regional development theory. Highlighting the empirical and conceptual particularities of Australian regions, she argues for the importance of regional economic prosperity and the value of regional development theory to help achieve it. Such economic prosperity, she emphasizes, is reliant upon the social sphere. What emerges is a sense of regions as not resources *or* people but the relation between them, an outcome of what people make out of what they perceive to be available.

Andreanne Doyon *et al.* present insights from a second theoretical lens: Transitions Management (TM). Like regional development theory, TM is normative, but the focus is environmental futures and the transition to a lower carbon society. Building on efforts to spatialise TM policy to make it more policy-relevant (see Coenen *et al.* 2012), Doyon *et al.* describe how the region is emerging as a privileged scale in sustainability transition efforts. As TM is applied to the Australian context, the different material, conceptual and administrative basis of Australian regions promises to open up new futures not just for the regions involved, but for TM theory itself.

Karyn Bosomworth *et al.* focus on the regional natural resource management governance context of Victoria and the potential unsettling of presumed regional futures by climate change. Drawing on empirical insights from interviews with Catchment Management Authorities planners, they discuss the physical and social complexities that current and anticipated climate change is generating, including the painful emotional, philosophical and moral challenge of ‘confronting potential losses’. They conclude that while basing regional units on water catchments poses the problem of their misalignment with problem-sheds or policy-sheds (Cohen and Davidson, 2011), in the current (changing) climate such forums are a more important opportunity than ever for diverse stakeholders to come together and work through possible futures.

The articles by Alexandra, Weller, Fairbrother, and Duffy and Whyte focus more closely on the Latrobe Valley, reflecting not just the authors’ scholarly expertise but their extended associations with the Valley. Like Bosomworth *et al.*, Jason Alexandra engages with natural resource

management questions, but uses assemblage theory to highlight “the social co-construction of resources and regions”. Through a wide-ranging history of the Latrobe Valley as an actual river valley, his paper responds to Erik Eklund’s call above to attend to what we could think of as ‘lost regions’: those socio-spatial arrangements that have been violently or silently overlaid with new patterns. He discerns in the current shifts in carbon-water dynamics in the Valley the emergence of possible new assemblages out of which may come functional and/or imagined new regions.

Sally Weller also demonstrates a strong awareness of history in her empirically-based analysis of the ‘regional transformation’ underway in the Latrobe Valley. Introducing a revealing geographical political economy perspective, she argues that current policy efforts to reinvigorate the Valley in the wake of the sudden but foreseeable Hazelwood closure are just the latest in a long line of wrong-handed top-down policy interventions. Her paper illustrates two dangers of a policy focus on regional futures. The first is spatial, with the malleability of the Valley’s regional boundaries being exploited to reframe the area as part of a larger ‘territorial construct’—the Greater Valley—that obscures and exacerbates the Valley’s problems. The second is temporal, with a focus on the future distracting from their politically and socially constructed nature. She concludes that “positive expectations of the future” will only flourish among the Valley’s residents if the harms done to them in the past are acknowledged, if new viable economic options are identified, and, in keeping with both of these goals, if the current rate of change is slowed not enflamed.

Peter Fairbrother situates the political economy of the Latrobe Valley as a sub-region of a larger Gippsland region. Resonant with calls to attend to the materiality of landscapes (e.g. Duineveld *et al.*, 2017), and drawing on extensive empirical experience, he emphasizes not just the contested sociopolitical character of the Valley and its future but the embedded, spatial bases of its economy: “those aspects that define the region in the long-term”. By this, he has in mind not just its natural resources, including but not limited to coal, but the households who live in the Valley and thus generate a basic demand for goods and services. This place-based, foundational approach to the regional economy contrasts with a narrow focus on the area’s competitiveness or economic turnover. Sensitive to the many power interests competing to shape the region’s future, Peter cautions that existing members of the Valley “must prepare for further displacement, closure and reflective economic reorganisation”.

Michelle Duffy and Sue Whyte draw upon a longitudinal study of the health impacts of the toxic 2014 fire in the Hazelwood coal mine, they

emphasise the importance of carefully attending to how “regional pasts are woven into present lives and places” in the Valley, particularly the ongoing legacy of the mass redundancies that the Valley experienced following the privatization of the state-owned power industry in the 1980s. Duffy and Whyte’s paper intensifies and expands upon the previous papers’ acknowledgement of “the emotional impacts of change”, adding into the story the crucial voices of residents about their anger, grief, loss, fears and hopes. Using the innovative method of poetic transcription, Duffy and Whyte powerfully represent the psychological and affective transition that the ‘low carbon transition’ demands of residents in regions such as Latrobe Valley that are not only currently based upon coal but have already suffered the violent physical and economic effects of its (mis)management.

Lars Coenen closes the collection with an essay that draws on his understanding of both the Australian and European contexts. He proposes that we may “need to shift imaginaries about regional futures from sustainable to resilient regions”. Such an idea “invites application of the concept of innovation truly capaciously on the ways our regional economies, political and institutional structures and, even, landscapes are organized and governed in a hotter, low-carbon future”. This includes continuing to push for inclusive, broad, democratic deliberation “in designing regional futures”.

Overall, this special issue combines theoretical and empirical insights about how the region and the future intersect in emerging concerns about ‘regional futures’. As a boundary making process, regions are useful and habitual, but also inherently political. As Simon puts it, they “do work” and this demands that we think hard about how we put them to work (Simon, 2016). Futures are now an object of governance and topic of debate, bringing to the surface underlying assumptions and contestation about the regions that may be involved. While present day assumptions about regions can embed path dependencies, climate change demands that we remember, as history demonstrates, that existing regions do not provide straight lines of sight into the future. Rather, regional futures need to be conceptualised and produced in a way that acknowledges their uncertainty, plurality and politics, as well as, perhaps most of all, the potential for positive outcomes, of a sort that are long overdue in the Latrobe Valley.

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