Smoke and Mirrors: the influence of cultural inertia on social and economic development in a polycentric urban region.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a case study of Tees Valley, a polycentric urban region in North East England, which has faced significant social and economic challenges over the last 30 years. The purpose of this article is to explore the potential of employing the idea of 'cultural inertia' to help explain why the area has been slow fully to recover from a period of industrial restructuring. Cultural inertia is defined as a shared mind-set (held by key stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors, by local politicians and by the population in general) which can help or hinder an area in its future development. Cultural inertia, it is argued, produces and reproduces tolerances and intolerances to change and informs people in the locality about what is possible and desirable. While cultural inertia is defined as a commonly accepted mind set about local potentiality, this does not mean that such ideas are necessarily grounded in empirical reality. Indeed, is it argued that many of the oft-quoted and taken-for-granted assumptions about what constrains progress in achieving recovery (in comparison with other areas) may actually be false.

It is not argued that once 'negative' cultural inertia has become embedded this cannot be reversed. On the contrary, there are many examples of successful former industrial core cities in northern England and elsewhere in Europe and North America whose champions have built more a confident sense of local culture and place, and reversed an apparently unstoppable cycle of decline. Instead, it concentrates on the particular problems faced by polycentric urban regions which have complex systems of governance and lack a clearly identifiable civic core which can act as a focus for transformation.

The area under scrutiny has a long distance yet to travel before it can claim to have established itself as a successful city region, but there have been signs of positive change. In early 2007 a City Region Business Case was published, based on many months of intensive strategic planning by key stakeholders across Tees Valley (Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit, 2007).[1] The purpose of the plan was to establish a new executive body, *Tees Valley Unlimited*, to lead economic development by integrating the efforts of the five unitary authorities which comprise the sub-region. It is not, though, the intention of this article directly to evaluate the prospects for success with this strategy - but to explore the efficacy of cultural inertia as an explanatory variable when studying those factors which promote or constrain positive change.

The article is divided into four sections. Section one develops the conceptual ideas upon which subsequent analysis is based beginning with a critical discussion of the concept of the polycentric urban region (PUR) and its application to Tees Valley. Following this, cultural inertia is defined. Section two details the research methods in this study. Section three outlines the key problems and challenges facing Tees Valley as defined by key stakeholders, and then explores four ways that slow development is accounted for. In so doing, the analysis demonstrates how cultural inertia limits potential for radical change. The concluding section summarises the commonly accepted explanations for social and economic retardation. I then challenge their accuracy and efficacy on the basis of the analytical work undertaken in the article.

POLYCENTRICITY AND CULTURAL INERTIA

What are polycentric urban regions?

There is much academic and policy debate in the UK at national, regional and local levels on the role of cities as economic drivers (see, for example, Core Cities Group, 2004; HM Treasury, 2006; Fothergill, 2005). Many of Britain's larger cities have experienced something of a rebirth over the last two decades. But what factors led to this success? HM Treasury's *State of the Cities Report* (Parkinson, *et al.* 2006) identifies a number of key factors which have helped provincial cities in the UK become more socially and economically dynamic. Firstly, such cities have reversed population decline through significant inward migration. This has been led by a renewed interest in city living especially amongst younger people and has resulted in a boom in city centre housing and apartment development (see also, Champion, 2001). Secondly, the quality of the employment offer in successful cities has improved with evidence of significant wage increases. Thirdly, cities have been the drivers of employment growth, often through discrete industrial sectoral development. Fourthly, quality of life (or liveability) in cities has been transformed by improving cultural, leisure and retailing opportunities and improving perceptions of community safety. While positive change has been identified, many northern English cities continue to suffer from significant problems of concentrated urban deprivation (Jones 2006b).

In northern England, the success of key cities, especially Manchester, Leeds and to a lesser extent, Sheffield, Liverpool and Newcastle upon Tyne has generated much political excitement. But there is an awareness that smaller cities and urban conurbations have not

developed at the same pace, especially so when they sit in the shadow of more successful urban areas.[2] This awareness has fuelled government interest in the promotion of integrated 'city region' strategies in less successful peripheral areas so that they may benefit from the emulation of, and closer interaction with more successful core areas. In the government's *Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration* (2007, see also, Fothergill, 2005), it was stated that:

> We also need to support sub-regions, including city-regions, to promote economic growth. We will work with sub-regions to allow economic development issues to be managed at this level. This will include exploring the potential for groups of local authorities to establish statutory sub-regional bodies for economic development policy areas beyond transport. (2007: 3)[3]

Implicit in much of the political argument for the city region is an assumption that if the component parts of a city region share a complimentary range of key characteristics, then the 'value' of the whole region will be greater than that of its constituent parts (Parkinson *et al.* 2006). The currency of debate on the benefits of defining urban conurbations as city regions is supported to some extent by a related stream of academic analysis of PURs (see Batty, 2001; Bontje, 2001; Kloosterman and Lambregts, 2001; Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001). Academic interest in PURs emerged in response to a critical evaluation of the salience of studying cities as monocentric entities. Crudely put, the monocentric model assumes that city centres control the economic, social and spatial relationships in the urban periphery. Adopting monocentric models have clear drawbacks as spatial interactions within cities have

become more complex; if, indeed, such models ever adequately described the structures, cultures and functions of modern cities.

The political attraction of defining proximate urban areas as PURs is explicable. As Bailey and Turok (2001) note, this appeal arises from the notion that if proximate towns and cities join forces they can become more competitive by taking advantage of (1) economies of scale, (2) industrial sectoral cooperation and integration, (3) sharing the benefits of a larger labour market, (4) pooling education, research and knowledge based services, (5) sharing business networks, (6) reduced transaction costs, (7) shared facilities such as seaports and airports, (7) knowledge sharing, and (8) exploiting complimentarity (that is, to focus on local strengths). While potential benefits can be identified, Bailey and Turok express some caution about over exaggerating such benefits.

> 'The process of interaction between centres leading to the reallocation of activities between them is portrayed as beneficial for the region and hence an argument in favour of PURs. In practice, the outcome is likely to be uneven with winners and losers. Some centres will lose particular types of employment and some may experience an overall decline in employment, with potentially severe impacts on particular social groups. Such impacts generate political tensions which undermine regional coherence and consensus so they cannot be ignored.' (2001:701)

It is tempting to shoe-horn areas together because they are spatially proximate, but as Musterd and van Zelm argue, it is necessary to identify an 'intensive set of social and economic interactions' not just an

'image on the map' (2001: 680). As Bailey and Turok (2001) show in their study of interactions between Edinburgh and Glasgow in the Central Lowlands of Scotland, for example, there appears on the surface to be some scope to define the area as a PUR, In reality, however, the cultural, economic, social and political differences between the two cities are so pronounced that the project soon falls apart.

Much of the academic debate on interactions in PURs has tended to focus on core cities or larger-scale city regions rather than or smaller cities. Such a focus is explicable. It would be odd, after all, for UK academics to devote more attention to the development of, say, Plymouth, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland or Dundee than to its major metropolitan areas. As Parr notes, the presumed advantages of PURs need to be qualified when applied to smaller urban areas:

'…its distinctive spatial structure may in certain instances represent an overall liability. Problems such as dispersed urban population, small-scale infrastructure facilities, the lack of high-order business services and the division of effort among competing centres may all combine to form an unfavourable investment environment' (2004: 236).

This case study follows Bailey and Turok's, and Parr's critical understanding of the concept of the PUR to help explore the potential for the development of a 'city region' in Tees Valley. Their approach is extended, however, by introducing to the analysis the concept of 'cultural

inertia' to show what factors may enhance or constrain development in such areas.

Cultural inertia in polycentric urban regions

Cultural inertia is defined here as the process by which individuals and organisations absorb, adopt, adapt and reinforce taken-for-granted assumptions about an area's potentiality. The term cultural inertia is rarely used in the context of spatial studies (see Castanega, 2006; van Houston and Lagendijk, 2001) and even in the field of organisational studies, where the term is employed more frequently, the idea remains relatively under-developed (for a recent analysis, see Carrillo and Gromb, 2007). While I do not want to over-theorise the idea, it is useful to acknowledge the value of three interrelated theoretical strands which inform the term. Firstly, path dependency theory and the associated concept of lock-ins; secondly, structuration theory which helps to explain how patterned interactions are reproduced in social systems; and thirdly, symbolic interactionist notions of identity to show how 'places' position themselves in relation to proximate or other significant areas.

Cultural inertia may usefully be conceptualised along side path dependency theory and incorporate aspects of the complimentary concept of lock-ins. Path dependency theory is appealing to many economic geographers, historians and sociologists interested in development and in spatial-historical analyses. Mahoney (2000) shows that this approach encourages analysts to plot sequences of key historical events, identify 'critical junctures' where strings of events collide, and in so doing explain what factors contribute to change (whether they were intended or

'contingent'). Path dependency theory has several variants, including utilitarian, functionalist, power (or conflict theory) and social legitimation explanations. All four variants, as Mahoney demonstrates can help to account for the way that social institutions reproduce themselves over time, even if the initial purpose for them being there has changed or been eradicated. In this sense path dependency theory helps to describe processes and patterns of change.

The related idea of 'lock-ins' helps to inform the development of an understanding of cultural inertia in a more immediate way. Grabher (1993) recognised that the future success of regions (which had developed strong industrial clusters and integrated infrastructures to support them in the past, but had experienced significant industrial restructuring) could be inhibited by vested interests. '…their industrial atmosphere, highly developed and specialized infrastructure, the close interfirm linkages, and strong political support by regional institutions - turned into stubborn obstacles to innovation.' (1993: 256). Grabher identified three inter-related elements of lock-in: *functional* lock-in (co-dependent relationships between businesses); *cognitive* lock-in (accepted discourses surrounding economic cycles); and, *political* lock-in (the maintenance of allegiance and commitment to existing industrial clusters). The argument, essentially, is that these factors collectively limit the scope for economic and political investment in new areas of development and innovation because key stakeholders are unable to 'unlearn' old tricks (Maskell and Malmberg, 1999). This in turn, can lead to political conservatism, as Hassink and Shin (2005), in reviewing the literature on lock-ins, observe:

…large companies do not want to give up sites for the attraction of inward investment, as they are afraid to lose qualified employees to competitors. Local authorities do not see the point in attracting inward investment or in promoting restructuring in another way, as large tax incomes are paid by traditional industries. In some regional production clusters, the spirit of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur might dwindle because of an increasing industrial concentration and the domination of large companies. (2005: 573)

Hassink and Shin argue that while there is a strong focus on path dependency and lock-ins in the learning-region literature 'little has been said about how lock-ins emerge, what factors affect their strength and what exactly distinguishes lock-ins favourable to regional economies from unfavourable ones' (2005: 574). I cannot claim to answer these questions fully through 'cultural inertia', but the concept may help demonstrate how myths and rituals about local economy, identity, society and place are socially reproduced.

The appeal of Giddens' conceptualisation of structuration lies in his emphasis on the interdependent relationship between structural factors and individual agency. Giddens argues that structure forms and shapes personality, but avoids the pitfalls of structural functionalist thinking by recognising that individual agency is always a force for social change - even if the actions of individuals often have unintended consequences. In short, structure does not act as an impediment of social action, but does play an integral role in the production of social action. Structuration is a dynamic concept, therefore, which accounts for social change as structural

circumstances alter or as actors' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours precipitate social change. Structuration explains how the interaction between agency and structure occurs in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Giddens briefly draws upon interactionist theory to help to explain why actors come to accept that their social system has a particular set of attributes which may, or may not, have a foundation in empirical reality. Drawing upon primary and more recent interactionist analysis, it is possible to explain how such cultural continuities are reproduced.

As is suggested in this article's title, by 'smoke and mirrors' I allude to two interrelated issues. First, that complete clarity of vision and understanding about the characteristics and potentiality of a particular area is impossible to achieve because interpretations are obfuscated by deeply embedded cultural conditions. Myths which are internalised locally and the rituals which reinforce them, for example, help to make sense of a place, but are not necessarily grounded in empirical reality. The second, is that actors make sense of place by making more or less positive comparisons with other areas. It is useful to draw a parallel between the way that 'individuals' and 'places' may position themselves in identity terms in the wider social world. Interactionist sociology, which draws upon Charles Cooley's development of the Jamesian notion of the 'looking glass self' (Coser 1977: 355) informs us that people achieve a sense of selfhood by positioning themselves in relation to significant others. Studying places is more complex because they are composites of thousands of individual actors with diverse backgrounds, values, capabilities and interests. That said, people in places do seem to construct a sense of local self identity

11

(Parker, 2000; Massey, 1995; van der Graaf, 2009). The fact that some places assume social superiority over others derives from the process of comparison. A sense of social superiority, once established, tends to reproduce itself; providing that enough evidence, prejudicial or otherwise, can be garnered (or ignored) to demonstrate that the assumption is true.

A sense of comparable inferiority also requires explanation. Few places would wish to account for a perceived failure to thrive as their own fault and as a consequence draw on other explanations to account for their situation. An alternative approach is to blame something or somebody else, as anthropologist Katherine Newman (1988) has shown in her study of downward social mobility. Newman uses the concept of 'categorical fate' to show how redundant senior executives accounted for their plight by externalising responsibility. Many claimed that their 'best attributes' had not been appreciated and believed that they had been fired because their value system was 'too ethical' or their ideas 'too good' for the corporation to recognise. By stating that a mistake had been made by someone else, the awkward problem of realising their own potential by harnessing their other positive attributes became conveniently hidden from view.

It is possible that places, like people, also construct arguments to account for failure by incorporating elements of categorical fate. This is not to argue, of course, that externally driven problems are not hugely important, such as the closure of a major industry, as has recently been the case in Tees Valley. Such events *do* have a massive impact on the local economy – it is not just an attitude of mind. But in terms of planning for recovery, arguments that rely on aspects of categorical fate could

result in key stakeholders (and people in general) relying on arguments that limit the scope for positive action. As indicated in Grabher's concept of lock-in, stakeholders may continue to promulgate ideas about the kinds of economic activity that the area *should* be involved in, to the detriment of other potentialities that *could* be realised.

Analysing cultural inertia, in summary, involves the process of making sense of the stories that places tell about themselves and the assessment of how these accounts impact on the way that opportunities are identified, are rejected, are ignored or go unseen. By defining cultural inertia in this way, it is not assumed necessarily to be a negative phenomenon. Indeed, it can be argued that the economic, cultural and social vibrancy of the most successful cities is sustained precisely because people who live there (or migrate to that area) expect the best outcomes for themselves; and as a consequence, they adopt practices to ensure that they perpetuate it. Neither is it assumed that any area could be entirely positive or entirely negative about its potentiality. Local circumstances are never that clear cut, as Hassink and Shin argue, 'The line… between successful and open regions and old industrialised, insular, inward-looking areas can be very thin' (2005: 573). Instead, the term is adopted to capture a sense of the social, political and cultural 'mood' and to assess its impact on how places plan for the future.

Polycentricity in Tees Valley

When an area suffers economic decline, the area has to tell itself a story about why that situation came about and to accommodate in cultural terms to its prospects for the future. This process may be more complex in PURs

because they lack a distinct urban core. It is useful now to define different ways PURs may develop in order to categorise the Tees Valley more clearly. Champion (2001) identifies three ways in which urban areas can become PURs. First, he describes the 'centrifugal mode', where urban rents or other inner-city problems such as accessibility from outlying areas force businesses onto the periphery. Second, the *incorporation mode*, where other formerly quasi-autonomous urban centres in the vicinity of core cities are drawn into a seamless conurbation. Outlying areas can ultimately challenge the supremacy of the city centre, as is the case of the development of the so-called 'edge cities' (Garreau, 1991). Finally, Champion defines the *fusion mode,* where separate and distinct centres of similar size are drawn together through, for example, improved transport and suburban growth into *de facto* conurbations. The Tees Valley city region (like North Staffordshire, see Parker 2000) most closely resembles the third mode, although the extent to which fusion has yet occurred remains contentious and will be explored further in this article.

Map one about here

As shown on Map 1, Tees Valley is formed from five unitary local authorities: Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton-on-Tees. Each borough has a principal town, but there are also several sizeable but smaller towns and townships which have distinctive identities (including, amongst others: Billingham, Guisborough, Saltburn, South Bank, Thornaby and Yarm).

Table 1 provides data on the key spatial, demographic, social and economic characteristics of Tees Valley which indicates the extent of polycentricity. It is clear that none of the boroughs are dominant in population or spatial terms. Similarly, the size of the labour markets across the boroughs are broadly similar and show extensive commuting, suggesting significant economic interdependence (see Townsend 2005). These data also provide clues about the economic and social vibrancy of the area. Entrepreneurship is very low by national standards, with VAT registrations standing at almost half of the national average. Social deprivation is a pernicious problem, as shown by the high proportion of low income households, incapacity benefit claimants and the number of people suffering limiting long-term illnesses. In fact these data mask the depth of localised deprivation: a total of 42 per cent of wards in Tees Valley are amongst the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. In sum, these data indicate that Tees Valley as a whole faces a challenging future.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws upon evidence gained from a study of social and economic change in Tees Valley.[4] The research proceeded with a wide-ranging brief to examine the interaction between industrial sectoral, labour market, and social, political and economic change across the five boroughs. The project drew upon evidence from three sources: an exploration of statistical data on demographic and labour market change:

15

an intensive literature search on national, regional and sub-regional research and policy documentation; and thirdly, qualitative research with key stakeholders. This article reports on previously unpublished data drawn from two hour in-depth interviews undertaken with 28 key stakeholders in the summer of 2006. Respondents included senior officers in local authorities and government agencies with a brief to tackle social and economic development, together with senior representatives from the private and third sector.

Following the analysis of interview data, three focus groups were arranged to debate findings in September/October 2006. In total, 42 stakeholders joined one or more of these three-hour policy seminars. The seminars' purpose was to develop a working model on the opportunities and constraints for sub-regional social and economic development over the next twenty years in Tees Valley. While this article reports primarily upon the qualitative work undertaken in this project, it should be recognised that its findings are underpinned by the statistical and literature analyses which are reported elsewhere (Chapman *et al.*, 2007).

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEES VALLEY

My interest in the idea of cultural inertia emerged when it became clear from in-depth interviews and focus groups that key decision makers in the area were often aware of positive actions that needed to be taken to serve the interests of the area as a whole, but that something held them back from pushing such ideas forward. Often, the area settled for less imaginative compromises which could result in the reintroduction of previous or repackaging of existing initiatives, or favoured inaction

because of an expectation that local factors would scupper radical action. The principal factor which dampened ambition was the polycentric urban characteristics of Tees Valley which militates against effective sub-region wide cooperation.

Participants in focus groups also agreed that change was difficult to achieve, but this did not deter them from debating what needed, in an 'ideal world', to be done.[5] In three successive focus groups, it became apparent that participants shared a similar understanding of the challenges that Tees Valley faces. Debate led to the identification of three key factors which needed simultaneously to be addressed to improve economic prospects. First, the development of *positive aspirations* across all interest groups to ensure that the sub-region does not accept second best solutions. Second, the improvement of *liveability* to attract and retain economically active people and to create a positive environment for social and economic investment. And third, the improvement of the *employment offer* so that people have a reasonable prospect of achieving aspirations and to invest in the area.

Identifying what needed to be done in an ideal world is one thing, but asking stakeholders to identify mechanisms to achieve positive change is another. Indeed, evidence from in-depth interviews had produced 'so many' issues which had to be tackled that effecting change appeared to be an insurmountable problem. Consequently, policy interventions operated on the principle of 'keeping the ship afloat' rather than attempting radical change. One respondent described this as a 'sticking plaster mind set', where public, private and third sector organisations unwittingly contributed

to the reproduction of a cycle of underachievement relative to other areas, so depressing aspirations for the future.

In focus groups, stakeholders agreed four principal explanations for Tees Valley's limited progress as shown in Figure 1. In the inner circle, factors that reproduce retarded development relative to other areas are positioned as if locked in a 'vicious circle'. On the outer circle of the diagram, explanations for underperformance are highlighted: politics and governance, externalities, liveability and migration. This diagram encapsulates the 'story' that the area tells itself to explain its situation. In the remainder of this section of the article, each of these explanations are analysed critically to show how cultural inertia is reproduced.

Figure 1 about here

Politics and governance

Adopting Newman's (1988) concept of 'categorical fate', discussed above, it has been argued that areas which suffer economic decline construct palatable stories to account for their situation. In a PUR this is a particularly complex process because explanations emanate from local, regional, national and global circumstances.

Parochialism and rivalry across the PUR inhibited attempts to tackle sub-region wide priorities. Rivalry was rooted in ancient cultural associations with place[6] and has been compounded by recurrent change in governance arrangements. Up to the early 1970s the area was divided by the boundary between the North Riding of Yorkshire and County Durham. Following county reorganisation, Cleveland County Council was

18

established in 1974, so providing area-wide focus for strategic planning (apart from Darlington which remained in County Durham). In 1996, Cleveland County Council was abolished, and four unitary local authorities were established, so breaking up much of the established political and infrastructural capacity for integrated planning in the area. Darlington also gained unitary status in 1997 and the term Tees Valley was progressively adopted to define the sub-region. Finally, following the establishment of the Regional Development Agency, and incentivised by the prospect of European Regional Development Funds, Tees Valley became a sub-regional strategic partnership.

Some nostalgic association with Cleveland County Council was felt by interviewees from the four eastern unitary authorities, particularly in terms of county-wide economic development and infrastructure planning. However, few thought of them as halcyon days, but rather as a period of political complexity as the County Council attempted to broker agreements between competing local interests. This process was not helped, arguably, by the operation of the largely autonomous government funded Teesside Development Corporation between 1988 and 1997 which operated a policy of 'brinkmanship, often involving playing one authority off against another' (Robinson, et al., 1999: 162).

Having established that competition over resources was endemic across Tees Valley, focus groups discussed the prospects for a closer confederation between the five unitary authorities in a newly proposed city region.[7] While the majority claimed personally to favour the idea, *in principle*, most doubted whether there was sufficient political will at local level to make it work. Responsibility was deflected to elected Members,

whose parochialism was presumed to result in a very strong focus on borough level needs (or in the case of some boroughs, different towns within the authority).

Inter-authority competition was regarded as explicable as councillors had to work to local agendas in order to preserve political support. That said, participants agreed that most elected Members failed fully to appreciate the level of inter-dependence between boroughs, especially so in terms of labour market integration. As one respondent stated: 'It's like five cats in a bag. Basically it's five separate agendas moving forward in more or less the same direction – it's not ideal.' This led to, for example, focusing on job creation for 'their town' under the misapprehension that local residents would be the only, or even the most likely, recipients of opportunities. As indicated in Table 1, there is significant commuting between the five boroughs of Tees Valley. As Townsend (2005) has demonstrated, there is also significant inward and outward commuting from Tees Valley into North Yorkshire and the Humber, County Durham and Tyne and Wear.[8] Townsend (2005) demonstrates that professionals and senior managers are the *most* likely to commute between boroughs or beyond the sub-region, but also shows that there is very significant commuting amongst lower-skilled occupational groups. In spite of extensive commuting, local authorities tended to plan at borough level and often failed to recognise the incongruity between patterns of labour market activity of the resident population compared with the local labour market itself. This may be one of the most limiting aspects of policy development in the area – especially

so given that serious skill shortages in the east of the region are not being met by integrated sub-regional planning.[9]

Parochialism was also thought to limit the scope for shared economic investment in major projects. It was generally agreed that the area attracts few big private sector projects mainly because it does not have an identifiable urban core. Instead, the area is generally reliant on public sector funded regeneration projects. These are fought for competitively and have resulted in, according to focus group participants, either a multitude of lower-quality outcomes, or result in shared projects with compromised outcomes. In the mirror of bigger and better city-scale projects in other areas (such as Leeds and Newcastle), the achievements of Tees Valley seemed to be 'second best' by comparison. It was agreed that polycentricity reinforced parochialism and weakened the sub-region's response to collectively owned challenges.

Reportage of 'other peoples' parochialism by focus group participants should not, of course, be taken at face value. Elected members do not have a free hand to do what they want as they are constrained by a plethora rules on local taxation, planning and spending. Similarly, dedicated government funds to tackle particular priorities (such as Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders, Local Economic Growth Initiatives, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, New Deal for Communities, and so on) were offered on a competitive basis, effectively forcing competition between boroughs.[10]

Neither can it be assumed that public sector officers rise above parochialism when they have to manage and sustain resource hungry organisations. Indeed, as the public sector is the dominant employer in all

five boroughs, such boundary maintenance is a very strong imperative. In areas with a dominant private sector, the public sector is more likely to enter a *responsive mode* of operation to facilitate of continued economic growth through for example infrastructure projects to ease traffic congestion or plan for new housing. In areas with a weak private sector, the public sector is likely to enter a *reactive mode* which is led by, for example, government regeneration initiatives (see also, Robinson, 2002; Le Gales, 2002). In a PUR, such as Tees Valley, reactions to government regeneration initiatives are competitive and are inevitably made on the basis of local assessments of the severity of need. This can produce a political climate wherein areas compete to show how *bad* things are in their area rather than considering its potential.

During in-depth interviews and in focus groups, local authority officers[11] routinely commented that *their* borough was disadvantaged relative to others (for example, by being: too small, suffering population decline, spatially fractured or isolated, suffering multiple deprivation, and so on). Moreover, if one area was comparably better off than their neighbours, arguments were constructed to show how *difficult* the situation was there too. This aptly demonstrates how in a PUR, public sector officers *have* to persuade government to award their borough funding at the expense of another – so reproducing negative cultural inertia.[12]

At regional level, the political environment was also thought to weaken Tees Valley. The dominance of the regional capital in political decision making was generally accepted as a principal explanation for the apparent success of Newcastle upon Tyne (in partnership with Gateshead) in rebuilding its reputation as a vibrant city region with a

dominant city core in comparison with Tees Valley. While there is no space here to make detailed comparisons between the two areas, it is important to recognise how key stakeholders constructed a discourse about the potentiality of Tees Valley in this context. Essentially, four key lines of argument emerged. First, that most resources from key government spending agencies in the region are sucked in by the Tyneside region at the expense of Tees Valley. Second, that all the major decision making agencies in the region (particularly the Regional Development Agency, Government Office and the now abolished Regional Assembly) were based in Newcastle - consequently, Tees Valley was identified as a 'peripheral', or even an 'alien' place. Third, that the dominance of Tyneside was increasing as other government agencies were restructured and relocated.[13] And fourth, that national government failed to recognise Tees Valley as a significant urban conurbation in its own right but instead regarded its significance only in terms of its relationship to Tyneside.[14]

It is evident that key stakeholders garnered and circulated stories (which were more or less grounded in evidence or prejudice) to support the notion that Tees Valley is undermined and under-resourced compared with Tyneside. This, in turn, appeared to support the notion that Tees Valley 'could be' as successful as Tyneside if only it had the same level of political sponsorship and economic investment. Such presumptions led to more or less spurious arguments about the potentiality of the area to transform itself into a metropolitan city-region.[15] This was reinforced, at the time of study, by a spate of observations emanating from well-meaning commentators in the regional capital to master-plan the Tees riverside to

become a vibrant core (as had been achieved in Newcastle/Gateshead and, perversely, in Barcelona).

The assumption that Tees Valley's future is shaped largely by external forces was particularly pronounced when focus groups discussed the impact of globalisation. While most bemoaned loss or diminution of employment in 'home-grown' heavy industries from the 1970s, it was also recognised that the area continued to remain heavily dependent on the global market (particularly in chemicals and steel making). However, apart from officers with an economic development brief in the boroughs within which the industries were located, levels of understanding about these markets was very limited. For example, few recognised that much of the output from the steel and process industries were dependent upon the buoyancy, at that time, of economic activity in India, China and South East Asia. Consequently, these economies were wrongly considered mainly as a direct threat to the local economy. As will be explained in the conclusion, subsequent economic change, will again reshape attitudes about the impact of globalisation on Tees Valley.

What kind of place is Tees Valley?

Liveability, in policy circles, is a commonly adopted term to measure the quality of life in an area. As the *State of the Cities Report* stated:

> 'The liveability agenda is essentially about creating places where people choose to live and work. In this sense liveability can be understood as a key competitive element between cities in terms of attracting both people and businesses to a city.' (Parkinson *et al.*, 2006: 156).

In this study, no attempt was made to constrain the fluidity in the usage of the concept, instead, respondents were invited to tell us what *they* understood by the idea and how they felt liveability factors affected the future of Tees Valley. Debates about what kind of place Tees Valley is now and what it *needed to become* tended to be constructed in the mirror of other 'more successful' places. Debates were, then, framed by a 'problem centred' sense of place identity which focused on its industrial heritage, the prevalence of deprivation, and the impact of a polycentric urban form on its potential to become a 'city-like' city region.

Tees Valley perceives its industrial heritage in contradictory ways. On one hand there is much local pride and nostalgia for the days when major industrial companies (such as Dorman Long, ICI. British Steel and Cleveland Bridge, see also Beynon, *et al.* 1994; Hudson, 1989) dominated the area socially and economically. On the other, environmental impact was thought negatively to affect the reputation of the area, (even though air quality and the condition of principal watercourses have been tackled successfully).[16]

The impact of industrial restructuring hit hard in many communities, producing deep social deprivation. The negative impact of deprivation upon poorer communities (in terms of health, crime, education, skill, worklessness, housing quality and neighbourhood decline) was remarked upon by all respondents at length - this was widely regarded as a threat to positive perceptions of liveability. Housing market failure was precipitated, it was often claimed, by residential mobility. The development of a major satellite suburb in Ingleby Barwick, in the borough of Stockton-on-Tees (boasted locally to be the fastest growing private housing development in

25

Europe), was presumed to draw in buyers from areas adjacent to the poorest wards,[17] – so producing further socio-economic polarisation, cyclical neighbourhood decline and housing market failure in the poorest areas.

In Tees Valley, liveability is cited as a strength and weakness. Its proximity to beautiful countryside in Teesdale, the North York Moors and the Yorkshire Dales is often highlighted in promotional material about the area to attract new businesses and tourists. The historical and cultural uniqueness of town life is also emphasised strongly, particularly in the more spatially separate towns of Hartlepool, Yarm and Darlington. Localism is a key element in the area's liveability offer, but strategists seemed to be uncomfortable with this – especially so if the area were to attract and retain young professionals. Several respondents remarked upon the lack of city-scale residential and leisure opportunities compared with the city centres of Newcastle and Leeds and the smaller cathedral cities of York and Durham. In sum, Tees Valley's most positive liveability characteristics were measured negatively in the mirror of other areas.

Stakeholders, when contemplating the possibility of Tees Valley becoming city-like referred to the area's relatively large population, which is of comparable size to other cities with a much more clearly identifiable core. Parr (2004) has warned against the temptation to define PURs with large populations as being more similar to metropolitan areas than they actually are. This is not to say residents of Tees Valley towns do not want to enjoy city-scale facilities. It seems likely, however, that they travel outside the sub-region to do so (see also, Meijers, 2007).

Stakeholders considered out-migration of graduates as a significant problem and, perhaps mistakenly, highlighted liveability factors as the principal explanation.[18] One respondent recognised, however, that this may not be the real problem: 'It's not a question of bringing them back or keeping them, it's a question of making the place attractive and having the right kinds of jobs to keep or bring them here in the first place.' The general emphasis on *retaining* graduates rather than *attracting* them suggests a fundamental lack of confidence in the area. This may be grounded in reality as employers are relatively under ambitious about developing graduate level jobs. Stakeholders were reticent, by contrast, about the advantages to be gained from in-migration of younger people from new EU accession states.[19] Although the extent of migration to Tees Valley was unknown, in-migrants were viewed as a problem (taking jobs from local people), and reflecting an existing problem (that local people, especially from workless households, will not work). The focus on migrant workers, rightly, drew attention to the take up of relatively low-paid work, and indeed, there was a recognition that many employers were recruiting through agencies to increase employee flexibility and possibly suppress pay levels. The consequence of this was that local people were unable to take jobs offered on flexible contracts because of restrictions imposed by state benefit system. Concern about migration were explicable, therefore, but stakeholders' comments reveal questions about the 'legitimacy' of in–migration *per se* when a more positive focus could be to emphasis the potential of migrants to increase skill levels and entrepreneurship (Pillai, 2006).

The idea of negative cultural inertia encapsulates, in summary, an 'insurmountable problems' mind set which encourages stakeholders to adopt a 'sticking plaster' approach to policy interventions. This tendency is strengthened by polycentricity which increases parochialism and waters down the impact of investment in the area. Cultural inertia appears, therefore to be self-reproducing because stakeholders strengthen convictions about what is and what is not achievable by drawing upon more or less robust local and comparative evidence to support their case.

Prevalent explanatory accounts for continued social, cultural, economic and spatial problems are summarised in the left-hand column of Figure 2; alongside which, more positive alternative interpretations are offered. Taking just one example to illustrate this point, there was a prevalent but implicitly held view that 'small-town culture' is a bad thing for Tees Valley. The corollary being if the area could transform itself to emulate metropolitan areas, then city culture would follow and the area's prospects would improve. This limiting view was a powerful force in *reproducing* cultural inertia rather than tackling it. PURs cannot easily transform themselves physically to resemble metropolitan areas for several very obvious reasons including, particularly, the prohibitive cost and fierce political resistance (see, for example, Parker's (2000) account of political resistance to change in governance arrangements in North Staffordshire), unless the economic imperative is so strong that resistance is overcome.

Figure 2 about here

Making detrimental comparisons with dissimilar cities which have transformed their centres with glitzy shops, fancy apartment and office blocks, and café and club cultures (which were, until relatively recently, the preserve only of the capital) can be counterproductive. Indeed, the visible trappings of success at the centre may not ripple that far into the periphery and can deepen the sense of malaise in those districts which have been left behind (Robinson, 2002). It is not surprising, though, that small-town life is felt as second best to metropolitan culture.[20] Cities are complex, intense, busy and imposing places which, as Simmel (1995) pointed out, encourage people to adopt a 'blasé' persona. Consequently, suburbanites and small-town dwellers may feel, in comparative terms, risk averse, parochial and conservative. But, of course, many people who besport themselves in metropolitan ways by day, transform back to surburbanites, small-town or countryside dwellers by night to enjoy the proximate facility, lower property prices, neighbourhood safety and stronger community bonds.

Perceptions can change from within when the local situation improves, or, from without when attitudes about other areas, for some reason, change. For example, following the credit crunch of 2007-9 and the accompanying collapse of metropolitan commercial rents and property prices (especially in the buy-to-let market) the 'shop windows' of more successful cities may have lost their shine. This may lead places like Tees Valley to think again about what kind of place it wants to be. In economic terms the outlook for smaller cities or PURs like Tees Valley may be as, or more, bleak as elsewhere. But when looking in the mirror at larger cities which are suddenly exhibiting signs of failure, some of their

'insurmountable problems' may be re-thought and allow for the development of a more positive way of planning for the future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

When this research was being undertaken on Tees Valley's social and economic circumstances in 2007, the economy was growing rapidly and there appeared to be much room for optimism in building a more positive economic future for the area. Recession then struck, emanating from an international banking crisis which, ironically took its first victim from the NE region of England: after a run on Northern Rock Bank. At the time of completing this article in December 2009, Tees Valley was dealt another social and economic body blow with the announcement of the closure of Teesside Cast Products, the direct loss of 1,700 jobs and an associated loss of up to 2,300 more jobs further down the supply chain. These calamitous events were not the responsibility of the people of Tees Valley and so, cannot be explained away, as if it was in some sense the area's own fault due to lack of foresight, enterprise or ambition. The cause of Tees Valley's woes is economic, not cultural.

The purpose of developing the concept of cultural inertia is to help analysts make sense, in sociological terms, of an area's response to social and economic upheavals; and, to help understand why an area makes the choices it does, rightly or wrongly, to achieve a positive future. The concept of cultural inertia cannot, of course, explain everything we need to know about how places position themselves in relation to others in social, political and economic terms and subsequently plan for the future. Instead,

30

the concept of cultural inertia should be considered as a useful additional analytical tool to compliment other theories which attempt to explain the origins of local conditions and the consequences of these conditions. It has been shown that path dependency theory, for example, provides much scope to account, in historical context, for the patterned web of social, spatial and economic interactions which contribute to an area's current situation. Similarly, Grabher's related concept of 'lock-in' helps to explain the consequences of anachronistic commitment to particular industrial sectoral foundation stones which may limit the prospects for successful economic transformation. What both of these accounts seem to lack, however, is a dynamic explanation of the social processes which underpin decision makers' tendency to link ideas surrounding economy, place and people when constructing ideas on how to effect change.

The concept of cultural inertia, this article has shown, provides analysts with a powerful tool to help explain how, firstly, areas reflect upon their potential in the mirror of other 'more' or 'less' successful places. It has been shown in Tees Valley, for example, that the tendency of decision makers to compare their local area with more successful cities produces a 'deficit' model of place – so producing an 'insurmoutable problems mindset'. It is likely that this process is replicated in other areas that have suffered significantly from economic restructuring. Secondly, the concept of cultural inertia helps to show why perceptions of what needs to be done to un-lock an area's potential for social and economic development can become clouded. This can, in turn, lead to a 'sticking plaster mentality' when devising responses to overwhelming local need. Explanations for the relatively un-ambitious response of an area to such problems can be

accounted for by employing 'categorical fate'. The result is that much of the blame for local circumstances is externalised which results in local strengths being undervalued or going completely unrecognised.

Finally, it has been shown that negative cultural inertia can be exacerbated in PURs because localities compare themselves with other places internally as well as externally, further obfuscating an area's real strengths, increasing parochialism and rivalry, and reducing the prospects for collective strategic responses to local needs. In a PUR which lacks a vibrant city centre, such as Tees Valley, it should not be assumed that the scope for success is fundamentally limited. On the contrary, the area may not *need* a vibrant city-like core to be successful on its own terms. Catalytic change can and does come about in areas which have suffered from significant industrial restructuring as a result of the actions of highly motivated, imaginative and committed stakeholders – but only if they look in a positive way at the raw material they have at hand and build on that – rather than attempting to emulate other very different places.

Figure 1   **Commonly accepted explanations to account for restricted development in Tees Valley**
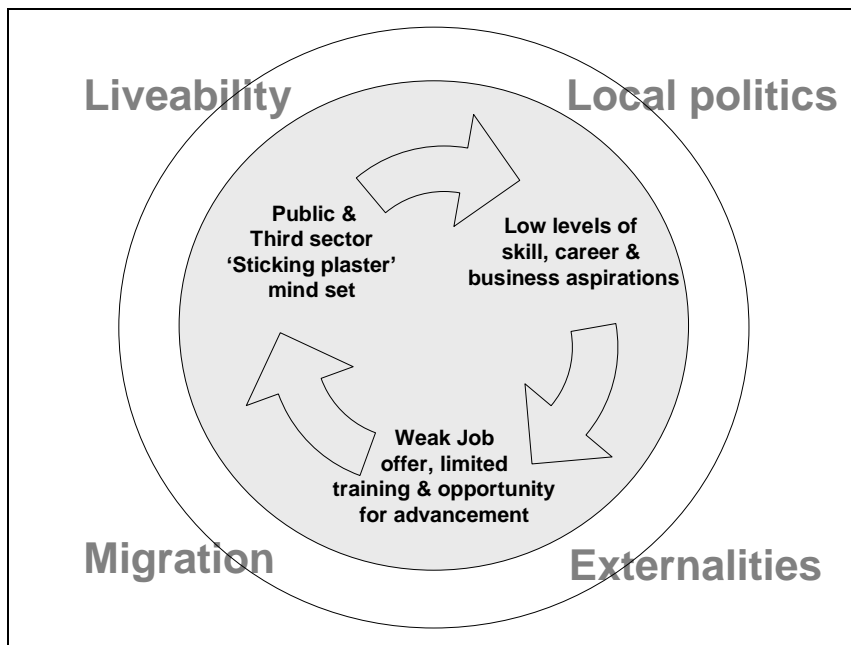

Liveability

Local politics

Public &
Third sector
'Sticking plaster'
mind set

Low levels of
skill, career &
business aspirations

Weak Job
offer, limited
training & opportunity
for advancement

Migration

Externalities

Figure 2   **Tackling cultural inertia**

	Prevalent explanatory accounts for social, economic and cultural failure	**Positive / alternative interpretations**
Politics	Parochialism, competition and mistrust within and between public, private and third sectors militate against sub-regional strategic cooperation.	Recognise that local allegiance to a sense of place as a strength, but, invest for the benefit of the area as a whole.
	There is a tendency to water down the quality of developments because all the boroughs attempt to deliver the full range of amenity.	Strengthen commitment to the development of flagship developments which serve the whole area and raise local and sub-regional sense of pride in place.
Externalities	Assumption that the dominant Tyneside city region is unfairly advantaged in social, cultural political and economic terms and that it acts as a drain on regional resource.	Accept that polycentric urban form militates against the development of a core metropolitan urban environment and build on individual strengths of localities and small town culture.
	Dependence upon and mistrust of large transnational employers' motivations and assumption that global markets make the area unduly vulnerable.	Recognise that the global economy is likely to benefit the area and develop links so that the whole sub-region serves and benefits from such development.
Liveability	Area cannot attract or retain people because the social, leisure, housing and cultural environment is not good enough.	Small town culture is a positive asset which should be recognised and built upon in order to attract people who value such assets.
	Industrial restructuring, fractured urban spatial configuration, poor environmental reputation, poor transport and social deprivation has a negative reputational impact.	Cross-boundary strategy through City Region planning could more effectively employ resources and challenge this tendency.
Migration	Out-migration of higher skilled/ graduate workers undermines economic performance. Assumption that in-migrants undermine the local labour market.	Recognise that graduate in-migration is primarily led by the quality of the job offer rather than liveability. Seek to constrain employer exploitation of low-wage migrants at the expense of the local labour market.
	Intra sub-regional housing migration undermines community cohesion and deepens pockets of deprivation.	Continue to tackle housing market failure in innovative ways, but recognise that inter-borough housing migration is neither controllable nor necessarily detrimental.

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Table 1   Spatial, economic and social characteristics

	Darlington	Hartlepool	Middlesbrough	Redcar & Cleveland	Stockton-on- Tees
Spatial form and characteristics					
- population*	99,800	90,500	136,000	138,700	188,300
- area (sq km) ***	197	94	54	245	204
Economic characteristics*					
- in employment***	42,993	33,762	49,317	54,296	75,904
- % econ. Active***	77.7	72.4	71.8	75.0	78.1
- % out-commuters****	13,030 (30%)	9,593 (28%)	20,202 (41%)	21,745 (40%)	26,662 (35%)
- % in-commuters****	15,562 (34%)	7,920 (25%)	28,313 (49%)	13,106 (29%)	25,966 (35%)
- % VAT registrations***	8.9	9.7	8.5	7.4	9.9
- business stock***	2,170	1,240	1,820	1,825	3,130
- reg. per. 1,000 pop***	26	17	14	13	21
- Male weekly earnings*	366.0	422.6	415.4	484.5	461.3
- Female weekly earnings*	363.3	333.0	313.9	300.3	308.9
Social structure					
- % no qualifications*	32.0	39.2	36.8	35.8	31.4
- % low income households**.	28.0	39.0	43.0	33.0	30.0
- % claiming IB***	10.9	12.2	11.8	10.5	8.9
- long-term limiting illness***	20.4	24.4	22.3	23.3	19.9

* Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit/(October 2006)

** Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit.(October 2006)

*** Government Office for the North East Local Area Profiles (July 2006)

**** Townsend (2005)

[1] For a critical discussion of economic policy interventions over the last 30 years in Teesside see Green *et al.* (2004). The Tees Valley City Region Forerunner Proposal was ultimately rejected by Government, which instead favoured regions focusing on financial services clusters. A Multi Area Agreement has, however, been achieved, and a new business case for a Tees Valley City Region is currently under development.

[2] The government's *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* (2007: 42), listed in rank order the improvement in GVA of urban areas between 1995-2004. Five PURs featured in the bottom six places in the table, including Middlesbrough, Stoke, Telford, Bolton/Rochdale and Blackburn.

[3] It is interesting to note that of the five local authorities in Tees Valley only one, Hartlepool, chose to participate in the consultation together with the sub-regional regeneration company: Tees Valley Regeneration.

[4] The study was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council Tees Valley, funded by the European Social Fund under Objective 3 (Co-financing), Policy Field 4, Measure 2.

[5] It should be noted that the majority of participants of focus groups had not been involved as respondents in the in-depth interview stage of the research. Membership to focus groups was achieved through open calls to potential participants across Tees Valley and from region-wide policy making bodies. Just less than a third of focus group participants had also been involved in-depth interviews.

[6] Historical association with place has strong resonance in the area. Hartlepool has rich monastic associations with the development of early

Christianity, Darlington, Stockton and Yarm are all ancient market towns. Middlesbrough is a 19th century new town, so described by Gladstone as 'infant Hercules' (Briggs, 1968) . The historic division between Yorkshire and County Durham remain meaningful as descriptors of who people feel they are. For useful historical analyses of regional culture see Robinson (2002).

[7] For detailed information on city region strategic planning see Tees Valley Partnership (2007), for a critique of a previous planning under Teesside Development Corporation, see Robinson, *et al*. (1999).

[8] For example, the main destinations of commuters from Darlington are: Stockton-on-Tees (19 per cent), Sedgefield (18 per cent), Yorkshire and The Humber (17 per cent) and Middlesbrough (9 per cent). Commuting into Darlington is primarily from Sedgefield (25 per cent), Yorkshire and The Humber (17 per cent), Stockton-on-Tees (16 per cent) and Wear Valley (9 per cent).

[9] A study of Personal Advisors to young people in the Connexions service in Tees Valley (Iles *et al*., 2008) further demonstrates the impact of parochial attitudes within the sub-region. The study demonstrated that opportunities were not always offered to young people to study or train across borough boundaries on the assumptions that 'they won't travel' when actual travel flows to FE colleges demonstrated that this is not the case.

[10] This is not to say that boroughs never attempted to work together. In the case of LEGI, Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees made a joint bid, although this was unsuccessful..

[11] It is important to note that public sector officers with a sub-region wide brief were aware of such competition but tended to be more critical of this as it weakened their case when attempting to develop sub-region wide strategy.

[12] At the time of study, Government Office for the North East and RDA officers were regularly harangued by Councillors and officers in Darlington, for example, for just missing an allocation of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund as the 90th 'worst' area in the country for multiple deprivation. The cut off point for funding was 88.

[13] The loss of Tees Valley based head offices for agencies including Business Link Tees Valley, Tees Valley Learning and Skills Council, Job Centre Plus (amongst others) was identified as a particular threat to the sub-region's ability to control its own destiny.

[14] A commonly rehearsed (and probably erroneous) story to reflect this is the failure of Middlesbrough to gain city status on the grounds that a Whitehall mandarin assumed that both Middlesbrough and Sunderland were situated on the River Wear and that it was not appropriate to have two cities in such close proximity.

[15] It is increasingly being asserted in Tees Valley that a greater focus on the development of the Tees will have positive benefits for the area. Much work has already been done in this respect with the development of the Tees Barrage, the complete redevelopment of the riverside at Stockton and Thornaby and the prospects of further development on the north shore of the Tees. Middlehaven is also vaunted as a major strategic development of an integrated leisure, shopping, education and residential environment. These are all welcome and important initiatives, but

sometimes lead to the assertion that once they are complete, the cultural and economic environment along the riverside could 'be like' other cities which have successful riverside urban centres (most particularly Newcastle/Gateshead).

[16] In areas proximate to industrial concentrations, the local population were presumed to be culturally acclimatised to environmental and health risks associated particularly with process industries, and recognised their dependence upon them economically. People who lived and worked further afield perceived the industrial heart of the region as an alien place and sought to distance themselves from it.

[17] For a critical discussion of the reasons for housing mobility in the area, see Chapman (1999).

[18] Interestingly, most respondents provided anecdotal stories of migration and return-migration to the area amongst graduates who had reached the family-building stage of their lives to make the point that Tees Valley does have strong liveability attractions. It was only in this area of the analysis where it was clear that the small-town urban scale and culture in Tees Valley was identified as beneficial to the area.

[19] A contemporary government study suggested there were 40,765 migrant workers in the North East (Home Office figures, reported in The Guardian's Immigration Report, August 23rd 2006).

[20] There is a large literature on the suburban and small town 'state of mind', see for example Carey, 1992; Oliver, *et al.*, 1981; Chapman, 1999; Chapman, Hockey and Wood, 1999; Silverstone, 1997).