From Identity to the Economy: Analysing the Evolution of the Decentralisation Discourse

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From identity to the economy: analysing the evolution of the decentralisation discourse

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Abstract. Few global phenomena have been as pervasive over the lifetime of *Government and Policy* as the drive towards decentralisation. The number of countries transferring authority and resources to subnational tiers of government has multiplied over the last twenty-five years. Yet the motives behind this trend remain relatively unknown. We explore these motives by analysing changes in the decentralisation discourse across a number of countries. We find that, while arguments about democracy and good governance have been at the heart of the reasoning for decentralisation, identity has progressively been relegated in favour of the economy and the promise of an economic dividend as the other main motivating factor. However, this shift from identity to the economy is highly contingent on who is driving the process. Despite noticeable shifts towards economic arguments in the discourse of nationalist and secessionist movements, identity remains strong in bottom-up discourses. In contrast, it has almost disappeared—if it ever existed—when the process of decentralisation is undertaken by the state or is encouraged by international organisations.

1 Introduction
Few worldwide transformations during the twenty-five years of existence of *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* have had the relevance and impact of the global decentralisation drive. Whereas at the time of the birth of the journal in 1982 one could count the number of truly decentralised countries—not including those countries that were only decentralised on paper—with the fingers of both hands, nowadays, according to the World Bank (2000), 95% of the world's democracies have elected local governments, while many nondemocratic countries, such as China, have also decentralised to some degree. The process is still in full swing, with subnational movements, national governments, and international organisations alike often acclaiming the virtues and benefits of decentralised governments. Yet, despite the numerous theoretical and empirical contributions of *Government and Policy* in this realm—having featured at least fourteen times in special issues since the inception of the journal (Bennett, 2008)—the global trend towards decentralisation has remained overall relatively unnoticed and its motives have remained underanalysed.

This drive towards the decentralisation of power from national governments to regions has represented a reversal of the nation and empire-building projects which formed the dominant current in world history for at least a 400-year period before World War II (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). As a result, decentralisation has challenged constitutions, ideologies, and institutions which, in some cases, had remained relatively stable for centuries. It is not a process, therefore, which can be undertaken lightly, or on a political whim, even in the context of a strong government or with the support of a wide cross-section of society. As with all major political undertakings, it requires a narrative, or discourse, which can be used to justify or explain the process and to make it palatable to those opposed to change. In the case of decentralisation this is especially important because of the creation of new political and specifically territorial institutions which may depend for their survival on the feelings of ownership and legitimacy that they can engender.

Examining the narratives used by politicians, movements, and peoples to create the environment and momentum for decentralisation has many uses. We argue that an analysis of the history and nature of various discourses associated with the decentralisation project broadens our understanding of why it is that decentralisation has become such a startling trend at this moment in history, despite the significant variations in the political, economic, and cultural environments in which it has taken place. Second, the analysis provides us with insights into why different examples of the devolutionary process have taken the forms that they have. Third, on a much broader scale, the discourses of decentralisation provide an opportunity to reflect on the rise, fall, and interaction of global political ideologies of the left and right that have competed for dominance in the postwar world.

In order to achieve these aims, the paper is structured along the following lines. In the first section we establish the nature and importance of the three main forms of discourse that have been associated with decentralisation: identity, good governance, and economic efficiency. In the second section we explore the link between theory and empirical evidence, looking at how discourses of decentralisation, both bottom up and top down, have changed across the world, with particular attention paid to the cases of China, India, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and international organisations. In the third section we then consider some of the generalisations that can be drawn from this analysis, and attempt to meet the objectives of the paper as set above. In this section we also suggest factors that have recently allowed the discourse of decentralisation to become established.

2 The elements of devolutionary discourse

The size of the discursive challenge faced by the prodecentralisation groups around the world is put into perspective through a comparison with the narrative heights attained by nation builders. Since at least as far back as the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 the dominant constitutional trend has been towards the formation of independent states, exercising absolute power within clearly demarcated borders (Brenner, 2004). Efforts to overcome ethnic and religious divides, or indifference and antipathy to a central government, have been a feature of history from Louis XIV, Bismarck, and Bolivar to modern African and Indian postcolonialist leaders. National identities around the world have been built and shaped through flags, ideology, stories, religion, and song. This process has often been accelerated and strengthened through the medium of war and conflict, which, intentionally or not, has provided nation builders with a powerful means of generating national feeling amongst populations. The mobilisation of entire populations on behalf of their nations during the global wars of the first half of the 20th century serves as a demonstration of the depth and breadth that this discourse had attained.

In this context, then, it seems surprising that Europe at the beginning of the millennium can be described, as it is by Hooghe and Marks (2001, page 69), as increasingly resembling the feudal Europe of a thousand years before, in terms of the explosion in the variety of community, local, regional, and supranational sources of power. How have the territorial identities of both European and global populations shifted sufficiently to allow such significant adjustments to the conceptual and practical apparatus of the nation state? In part, of course, it can be argued that no such mental adjustment has been necessary because the economic and political forces of the late 20th century have taken matters out of the hands of the manufacturers of discourse. Indeed, even having identified the types of discourse that have accompanied decentralisation, it is important to remember that they may be ex post justifications for processes which are beyond the control of political 'leaders'. However, as the following

analysis shows, discourse has certainly not been absent from the process and also seems not to have been without its influence. In particular, it is possible to identify three distinct, albeit overlapping, forms of decentralising discourse, which have helped to undermine the default hegemonic loyalty towards the nation state over the course of the 20th century. These are the identity discourse, the good governance discourse, and the economic efficiency discourse, which are examined in turn below.

2.1 Identity: the discourse of minorities

Historically, calls for the decentralisation of power and the granting of subnational autonomy have been centred on cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious arguments (Knight, 1982). This discourse has held up the value of preserving and promoting cultural and ethnic identity, reflected in subnational differences in lifestyle and modes of interaction (Bishai, 2004). Devolutionary discourses based on the issue of identity, then, are likely to be similar in form and meaning to the nation-building projects described above, in that they rest on the ideology of the right of a people to self-determination. Crucially, however, they are based on the assumption that the nation-building process as it took shape around their territory was imperfect, and that political opportunism or expedience had resulted in national borders being mis-aligned. Territory contested on the grounds of identity is likely to be the site of political struggle and violence (Toft, 2003), or, where minorities lack the capacity to fight, such groups are likely to suffer from human-rights abuse or simply from a lack of voice. Demands for full independence are more likely than those for mere autonomy over aspects of local policy. Examples of these views have been expressed with varying degrees of intensity and hope in virtually every country in the world, from tiny Cornish minorities in the southwest of England, to more fraught cases such as the Tibetan, Acehnese, Tamil, or Basque separatists in China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Spain, respectively. Research concerning the relationships between separatism, ethnic and territorial identities, power, and space continues to be a rich and high-profile field (Bishai, 2004; Castells, 2003; Hague and Jenkins, 2005).

Devolutionists motivated by this discourse are concerned that building identities from a national or an international dimension and the transfer of powers upwards to the nation-state and to supranational and international organisations, undermine the legitimacy of national and regional movements and the identity of subnational spaces. Regions and localities thus become vulnerable and at risk of losing their uniqueness, as a result of the influence of homogenising forces from above (Massey, 1999). The 'solution' against these trends becomes emphasising the identity of the region vis-à-vis that of the nation state, by resisting homogenising trends from above. Hence, separatist and regionalist forces have

"tended to reject aspects of national control, first, and globalisation in general, later, that attempted to integrate localities and regions into the culturally, politically, and socially homogenous emerging world order that they often perceived" (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2005, page 407).

Such movements are numerous; the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organization (UNPO, 2007), an umbrella group, represents sixty-nine identity-based decentralisation or secession movements around the world. Indeed, self-determination, on the basis of the links between cultural and territorial identity, has clearly been an important factor in the shaping of the postwar world (Knight, 1982). Yet, while some UNPO members have seen progress in their causes, notably East Timor, the Baltic Republics, and Georgia, the vast majority have been unable to take advantage of the recent devolutionary trends and have seen little change in their situation.

2.2 Good governance: the democratic discourse

The nature of the value of the good governance discourse for the protagonists of decentralisation is perhaps epitomised in the choice of the word 'governance'. The word itself is in subtle contrast to what superficially would have been an equally suitable word: 'government'. The difference lies in the perceptions of didactic 'government' leaders and participatory 'governance' processes (Mohan and Stokke, 2008). It implies, in general, a distinction between representative democracy and government, on the one hand, and participatory democracy and 'networked governance', on the other hand (Buček and Smith, 2000, page 3; Everingham et al, 2006). The discourse of 'good governance' has long been a staple of analysis and polemic within the field of development studies (Romeo, 2003). It has shaped the language and arguments of those donor countries and agencies which have sought to use their influence over the recipients of their aid, trade concessions, and loans. The breadth, strength, and longevity of the discourse are partly accounted for by the fact that both neoliberal theorists and the post-Marxist left have adopted it (Mohan and Stokke, 2008) in their otherwise contrasting development agendas. For neoliberals the conjoining of decentralisation and good governance is due to the perception of central government control as a blockage within and distorter of the market. On the left, it is the result of the perceived connection between the empowerment of the poor and the self-government that results from decentralisation. By projecting the value of governance close to the people, an attack is implied on the concept of power wielded at a distance, which neoliberals consider unfeeling and unresponsive in terms of the market, while those on the left consider it unfeeling and unresponsive in regard to citizens.

The power of the discourse lies in the fact that it is self-evidently almost impossible to challenge the value of 'good' governance. Contained within the concept are a number of other elements against which it would be equally fruitless to argue. The value in 'strengthening civil society', 'building social capital', or 'improving participation', all frequently associated with the decentralisation project (Mohan and Stokke, 2008), cannot easily be disputed by the postulation of either absence or alternative. Added to this has been the perception that decentralisation is 'anticorruption' and represents improved 'accountability' for citizens (Shah, 2000; see also Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2005). As a result of its appeal to left and right, this discourse has achieved hegemonic status within the field of international development, and is put forward by local and international nongovernmental organisations, multilateral institutions, donor governments, and national recipient governments themselves.

The use of a democratic agenda is also prominently associated with the devolutionary discourse in most developed nations, although it is more likely to be linked with national governments themselves than anticorruption movements. For example, as Paddison (1999) observes:

"Britain mirrors a world-wide trend; decentralisation in one form or another is variously considered to be the means by which local power can address the disarticulations created by globalisation, the establishment of partnership structures enlisting community support or the fostering of community or individual empowerment" (page 107).

Paddison goes on to analyse the language of two local councils in Scotland aiming to generate enthusiasm for various decentralising activities (page 114). The list of eleven values and concepts which he identifies within the literature and speeches produced by the councils are almost entirely based on the idea of improving democracy and governance: closeness, openness, accessibility, rights, active citizenship, access to information, choice, influence, dialogue, togetherness, and involvement partnership.

Such nebulous but attractive ideals do indeed seem to mean that decentralisation "is being couched in terms with which few ... could disagree" (page 118).

2.3 Efficiency: the economic discourse

The economic discourse, as a complement for the discourses on identity and good governance, has emerged in recent years as a weapon of choice by devolutionists. Indeed, good governance is often defined as an economic as well as a democratic goal and the two are closely linked, although the exact nature of the linkage and the direction of causality "remains subject to conjecture" (Pike and Tomaney, 2004, page 2093). The language of efficiency is a relatively recent addition to the decentralisation argument, at least in terms of its ubiquity, but higher economic dynamism, adaptability to change, innovation are becoming the driving arguments of the 'new regionalism' (Keating, 1997; 1998; MacLeod and Jones, 2001; Morgan, 2002). Decentralisation is thus increasingly becoming synonymous with allowing territories to adapt to changes in the economic environment and fulfilling their full economic potential (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). Although related to other discourses, there are clear distinctions. For example, whereas both the democratic and identity discourses present decentralisation as an end in itself, in the economic discourse decentralisation is simply the means to an end, a technical solution to the problem of economic organisation. Second,

"instead of a rejection of economic globalisation, the tendency recently has been to accept the new economic environment in order to firmly establish the role of the locality within it" (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2005, page 407).

The language used to present these arguments is heavily dependent on the concepts of flexibility, competitiveness, and innovation, and, in so doing, tends to present central governments as inefficient and unchanging. As a result, the economic discourse, and the decentralisation projects it supports, are often associated with the neoliberal economic project (Johnson, 2003, page 5). Indeed, as Walker (2002) warns, the advocates of the democratic or identity discourses may need to be careful, as

"the market is a dream mechanism for proponents of diversity. Left to its own devices it spreads income and wealth differentially. Advocates of the new localism should beware of becoming a fifth column for economic [neo] liberalism" (page 6).

The reasons behind the emergence and acceptance of the economic discourse are twofold. In the first place, globalisation and the diffusion of territorial competition means that regions can no longer rely on the nation-state to provide an answer to their needs and must engage in competition in order to find their place in a more integrated world. Hence, there has been a shift towards a more relaxed attitude regarding discourses that emphasise institutionally led competition (Agnew, 2001). Second, the fact that numerous authors have identified regions, city regions, and localities as the most suitable spaces to achieve economic dynamism in a globalised world—via the creation of networks, clusters, and the genesis and assimilation of innovation (Jones, 2001; Scott and Storper, 2003). Through this economic discourse, proponents of decentralisation are capable of establishing a nexus between the local and the global, leading to a radical shift in orientation in the traditional inward-looking and identity preservation discourse of early proponents of decentralisation. As Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2005) underline

"Put simply, twenty years ago, devolution was seen as a way to avoid homogenization and economic change—with all the socio-cultural disruption this implied—and today it is seen as a method to achieve it" (pages 407–408).

The importance of economic discourses as a justification for decentralisation is increasing, and this has inevitably contributed to reinforce the salience of decentralised

economic governance and to an increasing homogenisation of subnational movements and institutions (Wollmann, 2000). Producing the governance systems that will help regions and other subnational entities realise the potential benefits highlighted by the economic discourse on globalisation has become of paramount importance. But the importance of these governance systems goes beyond the economic realm, as they ultimately become embedded in functional networks that empower local societies and individuals to have a greater say in the running of their own affairs, thus, in turn, reinforcing the very process of decentralisation by other means (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2005; Storper, 1997).

3 From theory to empirical evidence: the shift in the decentralisation discourse across the world

In the previous pages we have presented the identity, good governance, and economic discourses of decentralisation on an even playing field. However, the weight and significance of these three types of discourses have varied across time and space. While the good governance discourse has remained a constant feature, most analysts have identified a recent change in the balance between the identity and the economic discourse. Indeed, the perceived shift of the decentralisation discourse across the world over the lifetime of *Government and Policy* from one where identity seemed to be the main driver to one where economic issues prevail is at the heart of the New Regionalist theory (eg Keating, 1998). However, in reality the transition from an identity to an economic discourse has neither been smooth nor as universal as could be expected in a globalised world. It has also been influenced by which actors—whether national governments, international organisations, or subnational movements—have had the upper hand in driving the decentralisation process (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003). In this section we present a quick overview of decentralisation discourses by bottom-up and top-down actors across the world, paying particular attention to the cases of China, India, Spain, the UK, the US, and international organisations, in order to identify where shifts have taken place.

3.1 Decentralisation discourses by bottom-up actors

Traditionally, identity has been at the heart of the demands for self-rule by bottom-up actors. The preservation of culture, language, and historical traditions has always figured prominently in nationalist and regionalist movements' discourses. In many areas across the world this is still the norm, especially in territories where grievances against perceived oppressors are the main driver of separatist or regionalist movements. Identity politics is particularly sensitive and has been associated with independence movements in places like China, where the central government has sought to stifle separatist movements by ethnic minorities. A joint declaration from Tibetan, Inner Mongolian, and Uyghur separatist movements in 1999 in response to the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Communist Party, demonstrates a straightforward vehement protest against human rights abuses and the suppression of their cultures, language, and history:

> "Let us resolve here today that ... in the near future, the memory of the Chinese government's oppression will be overshadowed by these groups' enjoyment of freedom, human rights, and democracy" (IMPP, 1999).

Similarly, in the case of India, identity discourses are at the base of independence pressures in Kashmir, Khalistan, and northeastern areas such as Nagaland. The hugely complex pressures for secession in these areas, running throughout the period of India's independence, are clearly founded on ethnic, linguistic, and religious grounds (Baruha, 1999; Bhaumik, 2004; Kumar, 2005). For the larger groups, such as the Nagas, the conflict is representative of demands for independence from the Indian state,

while for other, smaller groups, there is also violent agitation for other forms of autonomy (Bhaumik, 2004). Internal divisions exist even within broad ethnic groups—the Nagas are divided into at least three separate tribal groups, occasionally united against a the common Indian enemy, but just as often fighting for local supremacy amongst themselves (Bhaumik, 2004, page 223). As a result, the separatist discourses are based strongly, if not almost exclusively, on identity. A statement by a Naga leader is typical:

> "The question whether Nagaland's sovereignty is negotiable or not doesn't arise. The destiny of Nagas should be left to Nagas themselves. Sovereignty of Nagaland belongs to the people of Nagaland" (Muivah, 2003).

Neither in the case of the movements in the People's Republic of China nor of those in India do economic arguments play a role in the secessionist discourse, while good governance is subordinate to identity as the main driver of the discourse.

However, the shift from a more identity-based to an economic discourse is increasingly evident in other parts of the world. That is the case of the Basque nationalist movement in Spain. At its origins in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Basque nationalist discourse did not differ from the identity discourse presented above. Indeed, the discourse employed by Sabino Arana, the founder and spiritual leader of the movement, rarely strays from identity. In one of his writings he indicates that

> "we, the Basques, must avoid mortal contagion, maintain firm our faith in our ancestors and the serious religiosity that distinguishes us, and purify our customs, before so healthy and exemplary, now so infected and at the point of corruption by the influence of those who have come from outside" (Arana, 1902 [1980, page 2198]).

Arana thus attempts to portray the necessity of conservative resistance to the perceived modernity and socialism of the Spanish state (Ben-Ami, 1991; Sullivan, 1988). In the case of the Basques, the use of the identity discourse appears to have been in spite of the social and economic origins of their complaints. It has been argued that the relatively sudden interest in Basque identity in the late 19th century was a reaction to an industrialisation process that was probably the most rapid within the contemporary European experience (Ben-Ami, 1991, page 494).

In the last two decades, however, the tone of the Basque nationalist discourse has radically changed. After a brief period in which Basque demands for greater autonomy were based on better governance and the belief of a complementarity between internal devolution and European integration (Hebbert, 1987), an examination of the focus of the contemporary Basque government shows how their representatives have now embraced an economic discourse in order to justify their claims for more autonomy and even self-determination. While a more moderate identity discourse is still clearly of major importance to Basque parliamentary parties, the economic discourse is now seen as a more modern and appropriate way to appeal for changes in their institutions and relationship with the central government. A recent example is a major policy document from the Basque government, entitled *Economic Reasons for a New Institutional Framework* (Eusko Jaurlaritza, 2004). It argues that economic growth has been limited by the restrictive form of autonomy granted by the Spanish 1978 Constitution, positing that the central government strategy has 'tied down' the Basque Country, rendering it unable to adapt to modern economic challenges (Eusko Jaurlaritza, 2004, page 120). It also draws on highly technical arguments based on the suitability of local decision making for a range of policy areas, such as transport (pages 122 – 123) and education (pages 120 – 121).

Even in cases where identity may be at the roots of nationalist movements, little trace of identity remains in their demands. This is, for example the nature of the

regionalist and devolutionary discourse in the UK. Despite the occurrence of identity issues in regional demands in certain parts of the UK, such as Shetland, Orkney, the Western Isles, Cornwall and, to a lesser extent, the North and Wales (Bennett, 1985), identity has rarely featured in the Scottish drive towards devolution. Whereas the origins of Scottish identity are well documented, demands for self-rule have almost exclusively been based, from the 1960s, on economic issues. The rise of Scottish nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s is often attributed to the sense of grievance associated with the perceived misappropriation of oil from 'Scottish' North Sea waters, whose profits were pumped south to the national government in Westminster (Maclean, 1976; Pilkington, 2002). The 1974 election campaign of the Scottish National Party was partly based on its simple slogan, 'It's Scotland's oil'. In this case it can be seen how economic phenomena can shape or strengthen an identity, and may partly explain why Scottish identity, at least in terms measured by parliamentary seats, seemed to strengthen so much more in this period than that of the Welsh, where language still played a pivotal role in shaping the nationalist discourse (Williams, 1985).

It may thus be plausible to distinguish between hard-line separatists in India, China, or early-20th-century Spain—who see little point or prospect in compromise—and the arguably more 'mature' disputes in Scotland, Catalonia, or the 21st-century Basque Country. While the former see their dispute entirely in terms of identity, the latter are more likely to use the economic discourse to achieve not just more moderate aims, but also to demand self-determination. One advantage of the economic discourse in this respect is the fact that it is something of a face saver for centralist or secessionist politicians, who can justify concessions to separatists on the less contentious grounds of economic efficiency rather than on the more politically volatile grounds of identity.

3.2 Decentralisation discourses by top-down actors
In contrast to what we have seen in bottom-up discourses, in the cases of top-down actors being in the driving seat of decentralisation, identity discourses hardly feature at all. Good governance has always been the main justification to decentralise, although, as we will see, even good governance is starting to give way to economic justifications.

One such case is the United Kingdom, where the 'peak' of decentralising pressure in the 1990s can be compared with and contrasted to a similar peak in the 1970s. In the 1970s, the arguments put forward by supporters of decentralisation within the governing Labour Party focused largely on the democratic discourse. Two white papers on the issue in 1974 and 1975 depend most strongly for their argumentation on the issue of improving democratic governance. The 1974 paper concludes "the main objective [is] to make a reality of the principle of democratic accountability" (HMSO, 1974, page 10), while the 1975 paper focuses on the advantages of "powers and functions that could be exercised at a level closer to the people" (HMSO, 1975, page 1). In contrast, acceptance of the identities of the Scots and the Welsh appears to be relatively grudging and tends to be referred to as mere 'difference'. Interestingly, the economic perspective is used to limit, rather than to promote, decentralisation, on Keynesian distribution and efficiency grounds:

"Any major change ... has to be reconciled with the maintenance of a general uniformity of approach in the Kingdom as a whole to the allocation of resources, to taxation arrangements and to the overall management of the economy" (HMSO, 1974, pages 6 – 7),

while decentralisation of trade, industry, and employment powers would not be "without prejudice to the essential economic unity of the United Kingdom" (pages 6 – 7). The traditionally Keynesian role of the state in regional policy is even more clearly

emphasised elsewhere: "resources are distributed not according to where they come from but according to where they are needed" (HMSO, 1975, page 7).

Throughout the UK decentralisation process of the 1990s the economic discourse started becoming more and more relevant, but the democratic discourse remained dominant. Naturally, national and cultural identities also played a role in the devolutionary pressures in Scotland and Wales, but some have expressed surprise at the relatively minor role they had. In his analysis of the 1997 Scottish referendum, for example, Bradbury (2003) notes that:

"whilst politicians did appeal to national identity, they placed a greater emphasis on how effective interests would be served by decentralisation through improvements in the economy, public services and representation in Europe. Analysis of voters suggests that this made the difference in turning affective feelings of Scottish national identity into a yes vote" (page 562).

A similar account is given of the Welsh decentralisation process in which the relevant Labour Party white paper "made virtually no mention of Welsh identity at all" (page 562). However, the limits of the economic and democratic discourses in the UK were made clear by the failure to convince the North East of England to accept its own elected assembly in 2004 (Morgan, 2002; Tomaney, 2002; Tomaney and Ward, 2000). With little strong 'identity' to appeal to, the democratic and economic discourses became more important:

"England's regions [were] being presented as part of a package capable of learning and innovating, in the hope of establishing a competitive advantage for economic growth in the global arena" (Jones, 2001, page 1187).

In "A voice for London", a policy paper published by the Labour Party in 1996, detailing plans for an elected mayor and London-wide government, their arguments gave economics an even more prominent role than democracy. The proposed authority would address technical rather than political problems as there was "no London wide body to pull things together" (Labour Party, 1996, page 1). An appropriate spatial scale of economic governance was seen as vital to London's interests—bigger than inefficient small boroughs who could not make London-wide policies or exploit economies of scale, but smaller than the national government represented by various London-focused quangos. The document also suggests (page 7) that a representative council with one member from each borough would be time wasting, inefficient, and would lack the motive to push through what was good for London as a whole. The overall message is clearly that London was a single economic unit and required appropriately scaled polices and governance.

Similarly, in the US case, successive presidents since Nixon and Reagan have tended to push forward decentralisation from above based on a mixture of good governance and economic efficiency discourse, neglecting identity completely. Rather than formal devolution to particular territories and new institutions as in the UK, decentralisation in the US is normally couched in terms of 'big government' against 'New Federalism', measured in practice by attitudes and policies regarding the size and the scope of the federal budget.

The periods of 'top-down' decentralising rhetoric associated with Nixon, Reagan, and the Clinton years provide the clearest framework for understanding how the discourse has changed over the last few decades. Nixon used the democratic discourse to contrast elected officials with unelected civil servants, in his attempts to decentralise power away from federal mandarins to locally elected politicians, and to put "power in the hands of people the voter knows, and not in the hands of a blind bureaucracy" (Nixon, quoted by Rung, 1999, page 427 from his speech drafts). Reagan was able to match Nixon for rhetoric, but, unlike him, was also actually able to implement some

real change by cutting domestic federal spending in real terms. Reagan's rhetoric reflected Nixon's discourse of the inefficiency of federal spending. In his first inaugural address he argued "It is time to check and reverse the growth of government which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed" (Reagan, 1981).

After a lull in the decentralisation process associated with the presidency of George Bush Senior, decentralisation trends in the Clinton years were marked by the so-called 'Gore Report', otherwise known as *From Red-tape to Results: Creating a Government that Works Better and Costs Less* (Gore, 1993). The document and the discourse it utilises are significant for two main reasons. First, it represents the joining together of both main US political parties in their attitudes towards decentralisation. Second, it saw a significant development of the economic discourse; as well as using the traditional concepts of fiscal control and efficiency, the document also sees the introduction of the technical spatial economic-governance rhetoric, similar to that concurrently developed in the UK. The report borrowed heavily from the terminology now associated with decentralisation in describing the need

"to shift from top-down bureaucracy to entrepreneurial government that empowers citizens and communities to change our country from the bottom up" (Gore, 1993)

and in claiming that

"Effective, entrepreneurial governments transform their cultures by decentralizing authority. They empower those who work on the front lines... they hold organizations accountable for producing results" (Gore, 1993).

Overall, the US case contains clear differences to the UK case, especially in terms of the strong presence in the US of the moralistic 'antidependency' message, and its focus on the failures of central government, rather than the potential for local government. A further difference is that there is even less of significance in the US top-down discourse with regard to identity; this is hardly surprising given the fact that the United States has no region of equivalence to Scotland or Wales. There are also more obvious similarities. First, the democratic discourse has been consistent throughout the period analysed in both countries. Second, the Democrats' intervention in the debate appears to mirror that of the Labour Party: by the early 1990s the traditionally more left-wing parties, having apparently reduced their dependence on centralised Keynesian distributional philosophy, started to accept the more technical economic discourse, referring to spatially relevant theories of economic governance. In both cases this presaged actual decentralisation, in contrast to previous, failed, attempts.

The minimal role of identity in top-down decentralisation discourses is even more striking in countries, such as India or China, characterised by strong internal heterogeneity and the presence of numerous ethnic and religious minorities. In India, as with the UK, there are two periods of 'peak' devolutionary discourse, the first of which, in the 1950s, was accompanied by little action despite the rhetoric, while the second, in the 1990s, provides evidence of a more genuine decentralisation of power. In the first period, the decentralisation discourse was articulated around the Gandhian concept of 'swaraj'. It is the principle of self-governance and self-reliance, relevant as a protest against the British Empire, as a call for village independence, and, ultimately, as a personal moral philosophy (Dalton, 1969; Gandhi, 1997). The ubiquity of this concept, and the respect in India for it at the time of independence, was reflected in the government commission of the *Report for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension* (Mehta, 1957), also known as the 'Mehta Commission'. The main aim expressed by this document is invariably 'development', but the report repeatedly claims this is not possible or 'genuine' without local democracy. Democratic decentralisation is seen as a practical necessity for economic growth:

"The backward community has to develop on so many different lines and its felt needs are so numerous and so fast growing that with the limitations of the available resources, it has to prescribe for itself certain priorities" (Mehta, 1957, page 3).

Interestingly, the report uses language and ideas that are normally associated with only the most modern of treatises on sustainable development. In contrast to local people, outside appointees to village councils would not, for example, provide

"durable strength nor the leadership necessary to provide the motive force for continuing the improvement of economic and social conditions ... [without adequate democratic institutions] we will never be able to evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development" (page 5).

Unfortunately for the proponents of decentralisation, the government did not act on these recommendations, paying only lip service to the principle in their economic planning documents, while subtly changing the emphasis to project local authorities as mere agents of the centre (Government of India, 1952, page 18; 1956, page 141).

The 1990s mark a radical change in the decentralisation process in India. The fundamental change with respect to the 1950s is in the positioning of the central government in the planning hierarchy. It is now argued that

"the Central sector bears the *residual* responsibility from meeting the plan objectives to the extent that these could not be realised through the State plans or through private sector initiatives" (Government of India, 1999, page 176).

The economic efficiency of local government—known as *panchayati*—decision making is seen to be related to genuine autonomy, rather than merely an attempt to extend state targets. Even decentralisation to the states, previously based on cutting transfers while blaming states for profligacy, starts to take on a more positive note:

"An important conceptual and ethical basis of the Ninth Plan is the concept of cooperative federalism, whereby considerable freedom is to be granted to the States in determining their plan outlays in order to suit their specific needs and aspirations" (Government of India, 1999, page 175).

As with the United States and the UK, devolutionary pressures, which had existed for decades, only began to have real influence on policy in the 1990s, during a time when the discourse had begun to evolve towards a more explicitly economic theme. As in the US, within the economic discourse, a further change can be noted as traditional arguments regarding fiscal control are joined by a more positive understanding of the economic opportunities that decentralisation might offer. Meanwhile, a strong emotional and ideological appeal is still provided throughout the period by the everlasting presence of the Gandhian concept of swaraj.

In China, at first glance none of the three main arguments in favour of decentralisation that we have identified seems to have obvious attractions to the Communist Party. Capitalist economics and democracy have, for obvious reasons, been treated with great care by the Chinese regime. Identity politics has been a particularly sensitive topic, because, as mentioned earlier, it has been associated with independence movements that the Communist Party has attempted to crush. But, despite this lack of attraction, all three types of discourses have been used at varying times and with varying significance to promote the idea of decentralisation. This is reflected in the decentralisation discourse adopted by the central authorities since the beginning of the 1990s. In this period the Communist Party has not been afraid to use decentralisation as a way to introduce democracy and economic prosperity, without the need of a thorough reform of the regime. Decentralisation has been first associated with participatory democracy, while the lack of representative democracy at national level was justified as a mere efficiency measure (Deng, 1989). Indeed, decentralisation itself represents the Communist Party's most convincing option of presenting themselves

as democrats, becoming most significant at times when democracy was perceived to be under particular threat. Even more surprising is the Chinese central government's claim to accept the role of regional autonomy in areas populated by groups other than ethnic Han Chinese, an attitude of greater generosity towards identity politics than that of central governments in either India or the UK. The respect given to the identity and democratic discourses, however, does not preclude the unwavering insistence on centralised political authority. Last but not least, the economic discourse has appeared to become increasingly important, a process also concurrent with the changes to actual policy. There is in Deng XiaoPing's final speeches a strong suggestion that the advantages of decentralisation lie in the economic potential to be unlocked through local knowledge. In this, the Chinese case shares a key feature with our other cases and the unusual Chinese political context does not seem to have resulted in a particularly unusual discourse on decentralisation.

3.3 Decentralisation in international organisations

International institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation, and the EU have tended to mainly reflect economic arguments in their treaties and stated principles regarding decentralisation. In spite of some early forays into governance issues—the EU initially stimulated regions across Europe to play a more active role through a mixture of underformalised 'good governance' practices and the carrot of the Structural Funds (Tömmel, 1997)—it has been the economic realm which has guided the involvement of international organisations at subnational level. For example, the ILO's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples emphasises the importance of 'self-management' as the key to economic and social progress (ILO, 1989). Similarly, the work of both the EU and the UN's working group on indigenous rights has demonstrated their acceptance of the argument that economic development is most likely through self-determination (EU, 1998, Article 5; UN, 1994). The World Bank, as might be expected, focuses strongly on the economic dividends of decentralisation, both directly and through the linkage with good governance (World Bank, 2007). Its representatives have argued that, while decentralisation may happen for any number of political reasons, it should also lead to

"better decisions about the use of public resources and increased willingness to pay for local services" [World Bank, no date(a)].

The homepage of the Bank's 'Decentralization and Subnational Thematic Group', for example, introduces the topic with reference only to the economic discourse [World Bank, no date(b)], although many other documents and publications present other arguments, in particular those relating to good governance. Their approach to decentralisation is often associated with the neoliberal economic project of cutting back the state in order to allow the market to allocate resources (Miraftab, 2004), a perspective which is especially important, given the Bank's key role in decentralisation initiatives around the world. The United Nations Development Programme's support for decentralisation, meanwhile, also places emphasis on an economic perspective that is focused particularly on poverty reduction:

"Decentralising democratic governance to sub-national levels can accelerate and deepen improvements in access to basic services by the poor and in their capacities to make choices and contribute to decision-making processes directly affecting their lives" (UNDP, 2004, page 3).

4 Further analysis and conclusions

Discourse is a tool of professional politicians, and so the messages accompanying proposals may only rarely reflect the real motivation of their promoters and are even

less likely to describe the actual effects of any proposal's implementation. However, the changing discursive patterns and the established trend of decentralisation itself enable us to draw some important conclusions. The clearest trend from our brief analysis of case studies above is the increasing importance of the economic discourse. It gains even greater significance by virtue of the fact that it is generally when accompanied by an economic efficiency discourse that decentralisation pressures are successful. In the past, identity and democratic discourses have been insufficient by themselves to result in decentralisation, and are rarely sufficient to persuade central governments to cede power to regional ethnic groups. The identity discourse is further restricted by only being applicable in geographically limited regions that are culturally or ethnically distinct. By contrast, the language of efficiency and competitiveness has become the discourse of choice not only for the powerful, central, elites who enable decentralisation to take place, but also for a growing raft of groups who try to push greater transfers of authority and resources to regions and localities, bottom up. Furthermore, it is a discourse which can be applied to any geographical area.

However, this should not be taken to mean the identity discourse is no longer relevant. It has clearly played a role in determining the geography of the devolutionary settlement in cases such as that of Spain. Hooghe and Marks (2001, page xii) note that the only EU countries that have not decentralised since 1950, are those that are culturally homogenous. Neither is its influence necessarily going to continue to fade. Agnew (2001) observes that some have argued that a further strengthening of regional identities is likely, given the weakening protection offered by national governments to regions from globalisation. Further bottom-up regional identity formation is encouraged by the European Union, where the successes of regions associated with the 'Europe of the Regions' programme provokes a 'me too' attitude amongst other regions (Morgan, 2002). As Agnew (2001) observes, the establishment or strengthening of regional identities, or resentments bred by such things as 'Scotland's oil', do not necessarily need to have an identity base, and can be the result of an economic catalyst. In general, one can hypothesise, perhaps, that territorial identities are now themselves "influenced by perceptions of economic prospects" (Hooghe and Marks, 2001, page 63). Keating (2001, page 228), in noting the fact that Catalans consider themselves much more 'European' than Galicians, also suggests something similar by defending that it is the more fruitful economic partnership that the Catalans have enjoyed with Europe that is the basis of their stronger European identity. Such arguments are a good illustration of how our separately defined economic efficiency and identity can overlap, and can even converge.

The good governance discourse, while more or less significant in different case studies, seems to have had an almost ubiquitous presence in the process of decentralisation. Dominated either by the economic efficiency argument, or by the national identity arguments, democracy is rarely the leading message except in cases where preoccupation about the need to establish or sustain democracy are to the fore—Spain or Brazil, for example, after the end of dictatorships or Mexico under the PRI would make plausible additions to this argument. In other cases it is ubiquitous precisely because it is almost impossible to argue against it. Regardless of the actual motives of the proponents of decentralisation, the democratic discourse is a safe and effective tool against those who would protest against it.

In short, all three discourses have enjoyed influence and relevance over the decentralising period of the last thirty years, and it is their confluence, especially in the 1990s, which helps to demonstrate and explain the convergence of social-democrat, neoliberal, and minority sentiment around the topic of devolution. This begs the question of why these discourses have gained in strength at this point in history.

It can be argued that three fundamental historical changes have taken place over the last half century which have allowed regional discourse of whatever type to flourish: peace, territorial rescaling, and the neoliberal revolution. As mentioned above, war tends to be one of the most powerful creators and enforcers of exclusive national territorial identity and discourse. It seems likely that the relative absence of major wars, certainly in the developed world of the last fifty years, has helped to provide room for alternative discourses to be expressed. While war and defence both subsume internal minorities and focus on limited economic priorities, peace removes these constraints. Both India and China, for example, lost their initial devolutionary tendencies present during the establishment of their modern regimes, partly due to the increasing priorities of fermenting nationalism and driving industrialisation to deal with wars and external threats. Only when peace became more stable in the 1980s could decentralisation be countenanced. The end of the Cold War was also concurrent with the great acceleration in decentralisation, not just in the ex-Soviet republics, but also throughout the developed and developing worlds.

Second, the process of rescaling and reterritorialisation of economic spaces associated with globalisation and the new regionalism (Brenner, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2001) has provided a further catalyst for testing people's national identities. As Hooghe and Marks (2001) have it, we now live in a multiscalar world, with corresponding multiscalar identities, which has allowed identities to switch, change, or grow with a much greater degree of freedom. Such developments can be tracked by surveys such as the British Survey of Social Attitudes, for example, which shows a declining sense of Britishness and an increasing sense of English, Scottish, and Welsh identities between 1996 and 2006 (*The Guardian* 2007). Hooghe and Marks (2001) also see a similar increase in Catalan and Basque sense of identities between 1979 and 1991, although their most striking finding in a survey of European identity was that the sense of multiple identities, pertaining to 'Europeanness', nationality, and regions, within individuals had all increased (page 59). Interestingly, they find that identity is not a zero-sum game; those expressing greater degrees of affinity with Europe, for example, also expressed a greater affinity with their region (page 55). In this context then, the discourse of decentralisation is much more likely to be well received.

Third, it is also important to consider the evolution of the discourse of economic governance in general, in particular the shift from postwar Keynesianism to the neoliberal tradition in the late 1970s and 1980s, which has dominated global economic policy through leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan or through the multilateral development agencies. This change has represented a shift in the ultimate goal of economic governance from spatial equality to competitiveness (Brenner, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2004). The modern discourse of decentralisation reflects that change; the economic and democratic dividends of decentralisation are not sold, at least in developed nations, in terms of their ability to support either poor regions or the poor within a region. Instead, the advent of decentralisation has coincided with the advent of territorial competition (Cheshire and Gordon, 1996) and the global city concept (Sassen, 2001) which overlap with respect to their 'winner-takes-all' discourse. The language of the Keynesian state, of coordination and planning, is, by contrast, in retreat while top-down state-driven development has been discredited (Brenner, 2004). In shaking the conviction of both left-wing central planners and right-wing nationalists, neoliberalism has thus helped to reduce the two greatest discursive barriers to decentralisation.

Territorial identity has always been constructed rather than pregiven (Brenner, 2004; Johnston, 1991), and such constructions are a response to processes of reterritorialisation of economies that characterise the waxing and waning of empires, the rise of

the nation-state, and the more recent changes to movement of capital and labour at local and global levels. The discourse of decentralisation has often come after the fact of these adjustments and allows people to readjust to new economic scalar realities. Indeed, it can be argued that decentralisation itself is something of an accident and its discourse an excuse:

> "multi-level governance, like state building, is largely a by product ... of political processes that, in most cases, do not have multi level governance as their objective" (Hooghe and Marks, 2001, page 75).

The motives of fiscal control, management of opposition, promotion of democracy, and the attractions of grants are all likely to have played greater roles in the process than the concept of decentralisation as an ideal polity. However, as mentioned earlier, power, once ceded and institutionalised, is not easy to reclaim. Neither is identity easy to reclaim once lost, as illustrated by the recent flurry of soul searching about the English identity (Bragg, 2006; Paxman, 1999) and the attempts of the then British Chancellor, Gordon Brown, to encourage a broader acceptance of Britishness (*The Guardian* 2007). The dominance of the discourse, supported by the language of participation, responsiveness, and competitiveness, will make such attempts at reversal all the more difficult. The competing rhetoric, based on Keynesian equality and planning on the left or on national unity on the right, may only return to prominence in the wake of severe economic crisis or military threats.

In individual countries, the precise identification of a particular discourse is difficult, due, perhaps, to the lack of much public comment, as in China, or to the use of all three major discourses depending on the audience and perceived reactions, as might be argued has been the case in the UK. In some countries, such as Spain or Mexico, the confusion extends to the ambiguity of the legal and constitutional documents themselves (Agranoff, 2004). Such phenomena would appear to support Hooghe and Marks's comments concerning the "primacy of policy making over institutional choices" (2001, page 39), which is to say that decentralisation occurs not as a result of a grand constitutional discussion of the ideal polity, but as a series of gradual bureaucratic adjustments in response to exogenous factors, such as globalisation. As a result, except where decentralisation is a strong and urgent reaction to a perceived problem, the discourse accompanying devolutionary developments is deliberately vague, couched in imprecise yet positive terms designed to ease the passage of laws which may not otherwise enjoy particular public support.

Overall, the story of decentralisation and its discourse fits well into the narratives of postwar economic development. Since the 1970s, top-down and state-driven development has been discredited, having failed to generate its two main goals: growth and equity (Agrawal and Ostrom, 1999; Rodríguez-Pose, 1996; Rodríguez-Pose and Bwire, 2004). In its place now stand the markets and the community—the former dealing with growth and the latter dealing with the pressures on equality resulting from the dismantling of centralised welfare states (Agrawal and Ostrom, 1999; Bennett, 1990; 1994). They represent the two sides of the coin of recent decentralisation processes: decentralisation to governments and decentralisation to market and 'quasi-market' solutions (Bennett, 1994). Both are often intertwined and reflect the similar dichotomy identified here between the economic and the democratic discourse. Their value in tandem explains much about the ways in which they have been used. The economic discourse urges governments to undertake the liberalisations and efficiencies associated with decentralisation. The role of the participatory and democratic discourse can be used to justify the otherwise unpleasant removal of safety nets, and to motivate local communities to be 'empowered' to mitigate the effects (Bennett, 1990). In effect, in terms of leftist politics, the democratic discourse and the community have replaced

the discourse of equality and the redistributive state. On the right, the interests of capital are now perceived to be better represented by spatial flexibility rather than by a strong nation-state.

What then, can be learned regarding the future prognosis of the devolutionary project from this analysis of discourse? On the one hand, it seems clear that the current economic and political trends associated with globalisation have not yet played themselves out, and continued decentralisation pressure will result. The reluctance of central government to release the reins of power often results in decentralisation in name only, or has involved the delegation of only responsibility for providing services rather than power of raising taxes. This means there remains a gap between the liberal economic discourse and political reality, which is likely to come under continued pressure to narrow. On the other hand, there are many warnings concerning the unthinking push for economic growth through decentralisation. Morgan (2002) refers to the economic dividend as "an often unreflected assumption" (page 797), while MacLeod and Jones (2001) regret devolutionists'

"crude economism exhibiting little imaginative understanding of local structure of feeling, place-based identities and 'cultures of hybridity'" (page 670).

The careless or arbitrary redrawing of administrative boundaries and responsibilities may yet be laying the foundations for future identity-based struggles, in much the same way as the nation-building project had done before it. However, if the social-democratic discourse of community, cooperation, and commitment to place (Gough, 2004) balances the neoliberal commitment to market and flexibility, decentralisation may continue to proceed on a smoother path.

In conclusion, this paper has reinforced the warnings of Agnew (2001) not to overstate the importance of identity-based antistate movements around the world in respect to the decentralisation trend. In the first place, such movements, while in no way declining over the past thirty years, have not enjoyed particular success. Even in the cases of devolving regions that appear to have clear ethnic or cultural identities, such as Scotland, Wales, the Basque Country, or Catalonia, an economic discourse appears to have been the clinching factor in enabling decentralisation to proceed. Even while it can be claimed that regional identities are strengthening, it is also becoming possible to argue that this may be due more to perceptions of economic priorities than heightened awareness of cultural or ethnic differences. In general, the rise of the economic discourse has been overwhelming and is reaching hegemonic proportions, aided by the development of a governance discourse which helps to bring the natural opposition to neoliberal economics in line with this particular policy choice. As a result, as the economic discourse of decentralisation has emerged as a central justification for the decentralisation of power, it has become more important to understand its logic, as well as its potential flaws.

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