Abstract

The devolution and regionalisation of political and administrative structures following the election of New Labour in 1997 have changed the nature of the state and territorial development and governance in the UK. A regional and sub-national tier has opened up within the existing multi-layered governance system operating at the supra-national, national and local scales. This ‘new institutional space’ is increasingly open to the participation of social institutions — including trade unions — in economic and social governance. Drawing upon empirical analysis of the experience of the Northern Trade Union Congress (NTUC) in the North East region of England, the paper argues that the NTUC — in contrast to its national organisation — is beginning to engage with the emergent institutional structures but its role is inhibited by the centralised strategy and structure of the TUC nationally, its own need for upgrading, capacity building and greater financial resources and the interaction between the North East’s particular legacy of tripartite corporatism and the more pluralist modes of regional development governance emerging in the English regions. Unless such issues are addressed regional trade union centres — such as the NTUC — risk remaining relatively junior partners in the emergent regional governance structures.
Keywords: Trade Unions  Regional Development and Governance  Devolution  North East England

Introduction

Our country is changing. The institutions of the 19th Century will not serve us in the 21st. Ours is a union that is evolving. We see it in our relations with Europe. We see it in the creation of a Welsh Assembly. We see it in the popular will yearning for devolved government in Northern Ireland. We see it in the strengthening of local identity in the regions of England. And perhaps most of all, we see and feel it here in this Scottish Parliament (Tony Blair, Prime Minister, Speech to the Scottish Parliament, 2000).

The decentralisation of political and administrative structures – devolution and regionalisation – following the election of New Labour in 1997 has profoundly changed the nature of the state and territorial development and governance in the UK (Bogdanor, 1999). Through the establishment of the Scottish Parliament (McCarthy and Newlands, 1999), the National Assembly for Wales (Morgan and Mungham, 2000), the Northern Ireland Assembly (Wilford and Wilson, 2000) and the more tentative changes in the English regions (Tomaney, 2002), the ongoing devolution process has opened up a regional and sub-national tier within the existing multi-layered governance system – operating at the supranational (EU), national and local scales – in which the UK is integrated (Jeffery and Mawson, 2002). The involvement of social partners has been sought to enhance the effectiveness of governance and public policy (DETR, 1998). Such changes have generated significant pressures for reorganisation and opportunities for
participation amongst the social institutions – including trade unions – working at the national and regional levels within the economy, society and polity of the UK.

Trade union engagement in the new governance structures has mirrored the uneven and asymmetrical nature of constitutional change in the respective nations and regions. Regional trade union centres have played important co-ordinating roles. In Scotland, under the umbrella of the Scottish TUC, unions contributed to the Constitutional Convention’s plans for the parliament (Brown, 2000). In Wales, supported by the Wales TUC, unions played an active role in the ‘Yes’ Campaign for the National Assembly (Morgan and Mungham, 2000). Similarly, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Northern Ireland Committee) engaged in the broad-based civic grouping advocating a new politics for Northern Ireland. In the English regions and London, the regional TUCs have been active in building relations with the newly devolved and decentralised institutions (Pike, O’Brien and Tomaney, 2002).

This paper focuses upon the geographical challenge of trade union engagement with regional development governance in the emergent context of devolution and regionalisation in the UK. Drawing upon empirical analysis of the experiences of a regional trade union centre in an English region — the NTUC in the North East of England, the paper argues that the NTUC – in contrast to its national organisation – is beginning to recognise and realise some of the opportunities created by the emergent ‘institutional space’ opening up at the regional and sub-national levels within the existing multi—layered governance structures operating at the supra—national, national and local scales. However, the NTUC is inhibited by the centralised strategy and structure of the TUC nationally, its own need for
upgrading, capacity building and greater financial resources and the interaction between the North East’s particular historical legacy of tripartite corporatism and the more pluralist modes of regional development governance emerging in the English regions. Unless such issues are addressed regional trade union centres — such as the NTUC — risk remaining relatively junior partners in the emergent regional governance structures.

**Trade unions and the governance of regional development**

Differentiation of organised interests by sub-national territories is almost an omnipresent phenomenon. Nevertheless, it has remained under-studied, due probably to the traditional preoccupation of interest group research with the national (and, incidentally, the sectoral) level (Streeck, 1992: 107). Yet, despite some notable recent exceptions (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996; CEC, 1996), the role of trade unions beyond the workplace and, often national, industrial relations structures in the governance of regional development has been a neglected area within and beyond economic geography. National level corporatist and social partnership arrangements (Crouch, 1992; O’Donnell and Thomas, 2000), particularly in Europe, and the ‘regionalisation’ of industrial relations (Perulli, 1993; Teague, 1995) have received some attention but “In general, little or no significance has been given to the role of ‘horizontal’ relationships shaping trade unionism, to the role of the regional and local spheres in the capital/labour relationship” (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996: 14).
Building upon the legacies of labour geography (Cooke, 1985; Walker and Storper, 1981) and trade union geography (Massey and Painter, 1989; Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996), a canon of recent work has begun to develop focused upon how geography shapes and is shaped by the agency of labour — individually and collectively through social institutions such as trade unions — at the workplace (Wills and Cumbers, 2000), community (Tufts, 1998), local (Herod, 1994), regional (Pike, O’Brien and Tomaney, 2002; Sadler and Thompson, 2001) and supranational scales (Herod, 2001; Wills, 1998). Significant too are the ‘new regionalism’ debates about the significance or otherwise of the (re)emergence of the region as an economic, social and political arena for individual and collective social agency (Amin, 1999; Lovering, 1999; Keating, 1998) and the related discussion around institutionalist approaches that has renewed interest in the socio-institutional infrastructure and context – including trade unions – in which processes of regional development and governance are embedded in and through multi—layered scales of activity (Martin, 1999).

Central to these ongoing strands of research is the recognition that geography is integral to the historical evolution and development of trade unionism across a range of scales. Labourist traditions, industrial relations customs, workplace cultures, degrees of political influence and other facets of labour’s individual and collective agency differ locally and regionally, they are embodied in spatially embedded socio-institutional structures and they often persist over time, imparting a degree of path dependency upon future development. In common with other spatially embedded social institutions, trade unions are centrally important to understanding geographically uneven regional development and governance.
Martin, Sunley and Wills’ (1996) conception of ‘institutional spaces’ — the spatialised frameworks or contexts within which the agency and autonomy of social institutions is circumscribed — is instructive in moving beyond these abstract insights. Contributing to the broader context of the so-called ‘institutional turn’ in urban and regional development studies (Martin, 1999; Wood and Valler, 2001), the notion of ‘institutional spaces’ provides a conceptual and analytical framework that can be used to explore how geography is shaped and is shaping the uneven organisation and practice of trade unionism in the governance of regional development. First, it “allows us to visualise [this] nested, multi-layered and multi-scaled system” (16) of ‘institutionalised’ local and regional variations in trade union structures and practices and their inter-relation with national regulatory structures and forces. Second, the local and regional context of such ‘institutional spaces’ shapes the economic, social and political resources that enable and/or inhibit institutional capacity and action. Trade union engagement at the regional scale is determined by a multitude of internal and external conditions – operating at the local, regional, sub-national, national and supranational scales – which can vary in the level and character of their intensity and influence across space and time.

‘Institutional spaces’ are said to cohere and change over time in particular places as ‘sub-systems’ or ‘regimes’ (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996) of trade unionism and industrial relations at the regional and local scale — manifest in institutional structures and practices — that mediate more general level processes of structural change:

This is not to imply that local trade unionism and capital/labour relations can be simply ‘read off’ deterministically from the uneven development of
the economy and society, nor that ‘local repertoires’ of collective organisation and employer/employee relations are fixed or mechanistically reproduced over time. Specific outcomes are always in some sense contingent and uncertain, even sometimes counterintuitive (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996: 16).

This spatial indeterminacy lies at the root of the geography of uneven regional development and governance and requires empirical research.

Devolution and regionalisation processes have opened up the ‘institutional space’ around the governance of regional development at the regional and sub-national level in the UK. Trade unions now have a more pronounced and emergent level at which to act – and be acted upon – within the multi-layered governance system and a local, regional, sub-national, national and supranational context that will shape the economic, social and political resources at their disposal. The extent to which this emergent regional and/or sub-national institutional space coheres into a cohesive and meaningful ‘sub-system’ or ‘regime’ is contingent upon the particular local and regional context through and within which the generalised processes of devolution and regionalisation are mediated. Different outcomes for different trade union interests could be expected in different regional and sub-national territories.

Our empirical analysis examines the engagement of a particular regional trade union centre in the governance of regional development through the case study of the NTUC in the North East region of England. NTUC was amongst the first regional trade union centres established by national TUC. The North East is a trade union heartland with a strong regional identity and is at the centre of
national devolution debates (Tomaney, 2000). The research was undertaken as part of a collaborative project between the authors and the NTUC. The case study sought to draw out both the general and contingent, distinctive character of the processes at work in the region. It comprised, first, analysis of secondary information sources (e.g. strategy and policy documents, press releases) and, second, analysis of over 70 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with relevant key agents (e.g. industrial, national and regional trade union officials, civil servants and local, regional and national politicians) between 1999-2001.

**Devolution, regional development and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the UK**

As part of its state modernisation project, New Labour has embarked upon an uncertain and incomplete path of devolution and regionalisation of the political and administrative structures in the UK (Jeffery and Mawson, 2002). While reflecting generalised territorialised concerns about economic and democratic deficits and growing mobilisation around distinct regional identities, the UK’s programme of constitutional change has been shaped by its particular imperial legacy as a highly centralised union state (Tomaney and Mawson, 2002). While previously hardly featuring in formal governance arrangements, the regional and sub-national level of governance – evident in the majority of other EU Member States (Cooke and Morgan, 1998) – has now been established in the UK.

In tandem, New Labour’s ‘new regional economic policy’ has a vision of “balanced growth and full employment in every region” to be achieved by a ‘bottom—up’ approach “where central government backs regional and local
enterprise and initiative by exploiting indigenous strengths in each region and city” (Balls, 2000). This approach is founded upon the improvement of productivity and its predominantly supply—side determinants (skills, investment, innovation, enterprise, competition) (HM Treasury/DTI, 2001). The governance of this new regional development agenda is based upon a plural and inclusive notion of partnership between new and existing regional and sub—regional institutions — Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Regional Chambers, Government Offices for the Regions, Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) and local government — as well as economic and social partners including trade unions, business and the voluntary sector (DETR, 1998). For the English regions, these arrangements currently lack accountability, scrutiny and transparency (Tomaney and Mawson, 2002), although this is being addressed by moves toward elected regional government (Cabinet Office/DTLR, 2002).

For trade unions, this new governance of regional development is of a markedly different character from both their historical role as corporatist partners at the national and, to a lesser degree, regional levels from the 1960s and their explicit marginalisation during the 1980s (Taylor, 1994). Following New Labour’s election in 1997, trades unions have been ‘coming in from the cold’ (CLES, 1999; Heselden, 2001). Their support for Labour has been rewarded by a slightly heightened degree of inclusion, prompted by models of constructive dialogue with employers, and the promotion of social partnership policy and legislation confined to the workplace and the labour market (e.g. EU social legislation, National Minimum Wage, employment rights and recognition) (McIlroy, 2000; TUC, 2000) rather than beyond (CEC, 1996; O’Donnell and Thomas, 2000). Despite tangible signs of engagement at the national and regional levels, such as statutory
board membership on the RDAs, the New Labour administration has been keen to
develop an ‘arms length’ relationship with trade unions — wary of the
confrontational history of the 1970s — as one social partner amongst many while
the roles of business and the voluntary sector have been relatively enhanced. This
context of shifting ‘institutional spaces’ across a range of inter-related scales has
framed the engagement of trade unions in the governance of regional
development. A further dimension conditioning this process are the relationships
between the national TUC, regional TUCs and their affiliated trade unions.

The regional dimension in the TUC

With devolution comes the opportunity for the trade union
movement to reaffirm our role as influential and positive partners in
the economic and social regeneration of all the regions and nations
of the UK (John Monks, TUC General Secretary, in O’Brien,
2001a).

While not enjoying the authority and legitimacy with government and its affiliated
trade unions evident in other European national centres (Van Ruysseveldt and
Visser, 1996), the British TUC successfully relaunched itself in 1994 and sought
to renew its position as a credible social partner in relations with government and
employers and an attractive institution for new affiliates and interest groups
involved in economic, social, political and environmental campaigns (Heery,
1998). Although this is changing, as we document below, historically the regional
level has held limited importance for the TUC and, in the context of financial
constraints generated by dwindling trade union membership (Bache and George,
1999), regional organisation has been a low priority that has evolved slowly. As part of its corporatist past in the 1970s: “centralisation at a national scale has often allowed unions to have a much greater influence on the strategies of capital, especially large firms, and on national government’s decision-making” (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996: 38). Indeed, this legacy appears to have fostered an innate suspicion of decentralisation and its implications for undermining or diminishing trade union power that mirrors many unions resistance to the break—up and decentralisation of national collective bargaining. As such, regional TUCs often perceive that national TUC remains an overly-centralised organisation that has underestimated the implications of regionalism, including the dramatically increased workload and opportunities (Bache and George, 1999).

The TUC first established a formal regional presence in 1973 as part of the TUC’s reforms of trades councils structures to fit in with local government reorganisation. Significantly, further pressure also emanated from a Welsh trade union campaign for the creation of a distinctive collective trade union body in Wales. At the outset, however, several individual unions were reluctant to finance the new regional structures. TUC Regional Secretaries therefore functioned on either a voluntary or part-time basis, largely without secretarial support, with acknowledged success (Taylor, 1980). This tentative regionalisation enabled the TUC to engage with the institutions then governing regional development, including economic planning councils, local government, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and other regional bodies. However, despite the relatively functional and unimportant nature of the regional ‘institutional space’ in the UK at this time, it became apparent that the sheer volume of work being generated in the regions was making the job too much to be dealt with by a part-time or voluntary
regional secretary. Furthermore, the absence of any back-up or research facilities hampered the ability of regional TUC officials to deepen the substance of union engagement.

Since the 1970s, the TUC’s regional presence has slowly developed. By 2002, there were seven full-time Regional TUC Secretaries in the England and Wales TUC ‘regions’ (Figure 1). Half of which employ full-time Regional Policy and Campaigns Officers or Researchers. The Scottish TUC is an independent body, established in the late 1890s, and leads the industrial and political agendas on behalf of Scottish-based trade unions. National TUC activity in Scotland is limited to an Education Officer responsible for co-ordinating TUC officer and shop steward education and training. Recent changes in late 2000 established integrated regional teams comprising TUC Regional Education and Training Officers, TUC Regional Secretariats and TUC Learning Services Departments. This reorganisation signalled the acknowledgement by national TUC — tacit or otherwise — of the growing importance of the regional level. For Frances O’Grady, then Head of TUC Organisation and Services, the department at Congress House responsible for TUC regions, and now the national TUC’s first woman Deputy General Secretary, reorganisation signified an acceptance of the:

Growing importance of the regional arm of the TUC; in political terms, in terms of steps being taken towards devolution; financially, in terms of resources, some of which can only be accessed through the regions, and also industrial and economically in terms of generating strategies for jobs and strategies for membership development (Authors’ Interview, 2001).
The challenges of heightened engagement in economic and social governance caused by devolution have meant the Wales TUC has secured additional national resources to develop its capacity to engage with the National Assembly and other institutions (Shaw et al., 2002).

**Figure 1: The TUC regions**

![Map of the UK with TUC regions highlighted](image)

*Source: TUC (2002)*

The increased workloads and additional responsibilities resulting from participation in the emergent and existing regional bodies is asking difficult
questions of the existing capacity and resources available to regional TUCs. TUC Regional Secretariats are largely funded nationally for salaries and office expenses and little else. Some regions generate modest additional income through a voluntary levy of unions affiliated to the Regional TUC Council, although this is still insufficient to fund a broader programme of campaigns and projects. The uneven map of trade union density further differentiates the picture of potential contributors (Table 1). Some regional TUCs have sought external funding which, while welcome, tends to be ring-fenced for specific, long-term projects. The absence of financial flexibility to engage with and influence the regional agenda in strategic ways clearly hampers many Regional TUCs. Rather than limited voluntary contributions and the vagaries of external funding, developing regional TUC core funding from national TUC is critical to their engagement in regional development governance.

### Table 1: Trade Union density in the UK (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Office Region/Nation</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and the Humber</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Private Sector</td>
<td>Public Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are % of employees in the private sector, public sector and all employment.


Reliance upon its affiliates for resources, legitimacy and personnel has always been an issue for the national TUC, and this is heightened at the regional level. Indeed, with the concentration of ‘super unions’ at the national scale and the potential loss of sensitivity to local and regional variations, Regional TUCs are increasing their importance as an interlocutor at the regional level. Individual union participation and engagement within Regional TUCs remains crucial and has become more important in the context of financial constraints and the burgeoning new participation opportunities. The influence of increasingly large trade unions with resources and presence remains critical at the regional level, manifest in delegations to the policy—making TUC Regional Council (Table 2). However, according to the NTUC, average attendance at Regional Council meetings over the last 3 years has been 61 delegates, representing an attendance rate of only 59%, in a period where more active participation in the NTUC is required to support deeper and wider regional engagement. Non—attendants have cited problems including perceptions of rigid bureaucracy, limited
communications and negative external perception of the NTUC’s role and effectiveness.

Table 2: Delegations to the TUC Northern Regional Council, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Delegation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Name of Delegation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEEU</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>NGLMPs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Northumberland CATC</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair REAC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NUM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland CATC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NUT</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>PCS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumbria CATC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>REO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham CATC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>RMT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>SOR</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMB</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>TUC/TEC WDP</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPMU</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>TGWU</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPMS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>TSSA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>TUC</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSF</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tyne &amp; Wear CATC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>UCATT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASUWT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>UNIFI</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATFHE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>UNISON</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>USDAW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The engagement of affiliated trade unions is conditioned by the autonomy of their regional structures, attitudes toward decentralisation and financial flexibility. Given that trade unions represent different sorts of memberships and sectional interests through differentiated institutional geographies it is unsurprising that the picture of affiliate unions’ stances toward enhanced regional governance is complex. Relatively few formal positions have been articulated and mixtures of views within unions range from supportive, through ambivalence to hostility for a variety of often different reasons. Some unions have produced clear statements in favour of regional government in principle, such as UNISON North and PCS, and have convened working parties to discuss and develop policy. Others, such as GMB North and TGWU (Region 8), support the principle of regional government, but have yet to articulate a formal statement or present evidence that it is a major priority for their national structures. Public sector unions, such as NATFHE (North), support the idea but are still trying to generate interest both regionally and nationally. The remaining, significant, minority still need to be engaged in, or initially understand, the broader regional dimension and look toward NTUC for a lead (NTUC, 2003). The ‘institutional spaces’ of regional development governance opening up to regional TUCs is intertwined with that of their affiliated trade unions. How these more generalised pressures work out in a particular regional context are explored in the analysis of the Northern TUC in North East England.
The Northern Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in the North East region of England

From its focal position as a heartland of international industrialism in the late 19th Century, the socio-economic position of the North East in the international division of labour has since experienced long run decline due to the structural changes generated by the contraction of its traditional industrial base, faltering waves of branch plant—led reindustrialisation and somewhat limited tertiarisation (Hudson, 2001; Robinson, 2002). The region has fallen into a relatively marginal position in the national political economy. Active state—management since the 1930s, embracing both public policy and market-led approaches, has largely failed to ameliorate its deep seated economic and social problems. The rapid industrialisation of the region in the late 19th Century produced a well paid and politically confident workforce organised into strong but accommodative trade unions that led the struggle for employment rights and enhanced social conditions (Byrne, 2002). Historically, dominant regional trade unions, such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), have been centrally important as political agents in the vanguard of the labour movement. Social upheavals in the aftermath of the First World War led eventually to the General Strike and the nine-month Miners’ Lockout of 1926. The defeat of the strike saw an end to insurrectionary politics in the North East and the region became a by-word for Labourism. That is, the close relationship between the Labour Party, trade unions and the local state. Despite its political domination of the Labour Party in the region since the early part of the 20th century, trade unions remained focused on the national solidarities of a social democratic political agenda.
The deepening of the North East’s regional problems, its position as a trade union heartland and its evolving corporatist relationships with the national state connected with the expansion of regional policy by successive central governments from 1960s. Trade unions were brought into the new, corporatist Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) by the Labour Government. These were weak institutions whose role was purely advisory but they brought together the social partners and experts to advise government on its regional plans. Individual trade unionists were afforded representation but the labour movement created few real mechanisms for reporting and accounting on the activities of its representatives on the REPC at the regional or national levels. As noted, these bodies overlapped and stimulated the creation of the NTUC but its initial capacity was limited and its policy engagement was *ad hoc*.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, the national political and legislative environment had turned hostile to trade unions with a shift toward ‘de—collectivisation’ (Williams, 1997), economic deregulation, membership loss as manufacturing contracted sharply and the often non—union character of re—industrialisation (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996). Such changes weakened trade unions’ organisational strength, negotiating power and standing in civic society (CEC, 1996) while leaving them with only a vestige of their former political influence. National and regional corporatist experiments were dismantled. In their place new economic development ‘quangos’ were established at the local and regional level — Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) in Tyne and Wear and Teesside and the Regional Development Organisation the Northern Development Company (NDC) – that did contain union ‘representation’, reflecting an acknowledgement of the region’s labourist traditions. However, these representatives from
individual trade unions and the NTUC were typically appointed by government ministers rather than nominated by constituent bodies. This small number of trade union ‘representatives’ were recruited into a network of the corporatist elite (Shaw, 1993) who, nominally, at least, played a key role in regional governance but lacked accountability to the trade union movement.

Unofficial engagement was based upon rank and file organisations, in particular the Trade Union Studies Information Unit (TUSIU), established with the support of local shop stewards in the 1970s. TUSIU connected with national debates about alternative economic strategies to combat closures, the power of multinational corporations and promote local employment (Tomaney, 1993). The early engagement of the NTUC and trade unions in the governance of regional development has been limited, eliciting some dismissive assessments even from a Labour local authority leader:

“Its time has passed in many respects. It is a carthorse going nowhere. At one time, the NTUC was an influential and vibrant regional body that held a revolutionary approach to things, but that no longer exists” (Tyneside Local Authority Leader, Authors’ Interview, 2000).

The failure of the NTUC and its leaders to produce a regionally—based distinctive union contribution to regional policy debates, ensured that it remained on the fringes of the regional decision-making process, taking its lead from other institutions (Tomaney, 1993).
Rebuilding capacity, credibility and influence in the new era of regional development governance

By the late 1990s, the North East region was still encumbered with manifest economic and social problems and entrenched feelings of political marginalisation, fuelling its historical sense of regional identity and claims for stronger, democratised regional institutions (Tomaney and Mawson, 2002).

Devolution and regionalisation after 1997 ushered in a new regional development governance structure open to trade union participation. The RDA — ONE North East — has a statutory board seat for trade unions, currently held by the NTUC Regional Secretary, appointed by Secretary of State, and trade unions are included in ONE North East’s Sub—Regional Partnerships. The particular relations between ONE and the North East labour movement have evolved with mixed evidence of constructive engagement (e.g. ONE funded the Regional Policy Officer at NTUC), slightly grudging involvement (e.g. belated acceptance of trade union role in their industrial cluster strategy) and a broader acceptance of the trade union role (e.g. specific trade union mention in the Regional Economic Strategy; removing the website reference to opportunities for non—union inward investment). In addition, trade unions are members of the North East Assembly’s Economic and Social Partners group and are board members of the region’s four LSCs.

The relationship between trade unions and the new governance institutions is based upon inclusion and participation, only backed up in part by statutory requirements. The former Government Office North East Director commented:
“Unions are now not seen as someone to be kept outside the camp, and occasionally told what’s going on, but as organisations that should be brought into the new structures being developed” (Authors’ Interview, 2000).

Doors have been opened for trade unions into the new governance — whether as token participants or meaningful partners — and questions have been asked about the reality and substance of trade union engagement. The capacity of NTUC and trade unions to contribute has been stretched and managing the balance between NTUC and affiliated unions in such appointments has become an issue.

For the NTUC, the central challenge has been to build its capacity and credibility to deepen its engagement and influence in the existing and emerging regional institutions and debates (O’Brien, 2000a). Internally, NTUC has encouraged greater union participation within its structures and sought to counter the negative impression amongst some in the labour movement and other local and regional institutions concerning its effectiveness and influence. This has entailed the streamlining of its organisational structures to increase effectiveness, productivity and capacity, adoption of a more policy—oriented approach and improvements in internal and external communications. In particular, the NTUC has had to gear up to make meaningful and well informed interventions in the emergent governance structures. Participating institutions are expected to ‘bring something to the table’ — ‘add value’ in the jargon — in order to exert any influence or risk being marginalised by the often more experienced and better resourced organisations involved. The focus is on trade unions to prove their worth as independent institutions in delivering public policy (e.g. learning and skills), broadening
debate (e.g. equalities and diversity agendas) and providing a focus for progressive alternatives to current ‘globalisation/competitiveness’ (Lovering, 2001) orthodoxies.

NTUC has therefore had to bolster its administrative capacity for processing, research and interpretation of the mushrooming national and regional public policy documentation. Historically, such capacity has been ad hoc, piecemeal and sporadic, often based upon the already overburdened NTUC and affiliated unions’ Regional Secretaries and ongoing, bi—lateral work between trade unions and research institutions concerning regional development and governance issues including traditional industry contraction (Tomaney 1992; Pike and Dawley, 1998; Pike, Jones and Dawley, 1998), public service reorganisation (Newcastle City Council Trade Unions, 2001; Pike and O’Brien, 2001), equalities (Northern TUC, 2002), R&D (Pike and Tomaney (1994), the minimum wage (Stone, 1998), the accountability of regional quangos (Robinson and Shaw et al., 2000) and local authority regeneration strategies (Shaw, 2000).

A more strategic approach was underpinned by this joint project between NTUC and CURDS (O’Brien, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). In addition, NTUC established the Economic Working Group (EWG) – comprising regional trade unionists and interested researchers – as a focus for work on NTUC’s response to the RDA’s Regional Economic Strategy (Pike and O’Brien, 1999a), a joint conference with the Third Sector (Pike and O’Brien, 1999b) and the development of a regional manufacturing strategy (Pike and O’Brien, 2000). Under discussion is a regional trade union research network, mirroring developments in Scotland and the TUC’s South East region. NTUC has established a regional Education, Learning and
Skills Forum too, in recognition of the importance for trade unions of the regional learning and skills agenda. External funding from the Department for Education and Skills and the European Social Fund has supported a threefold increase in NTUC’s staff working on specific equalities, workplace learning and basic skills projects. NTUC has convened a series of workshops for the labour movement on the new regional development and governance agendas. Government Office North East has offered NTUC a secondment to learn more about European funding.

Since 1997, and, in particular since the appointment of a new Regional Secretary in 1999, NTUC has made substantial progress in its bid to position itself as a significant institution participating in the governance of regional development in the North East. Credibility has been built and tangible results have been delivered, especially on the learning and skills agenda, but a medium to longer run analysis will be needed to reflect upon its enduring degree of influence. Significant challenges still lie ahead. The NTUC needs to increase its internal and external capacity to intervene at the regional level and develop ways of progressing a distinctive, regionally—based agenda in the more plural, multi—layered and multi—institutional policy context. The current lack of research, campaigns or policy-assessment capacity is a serious internal constraint. Externally, the shortage of suitable individuals to represent the NTUC on the wide range of local and regional bodies remains a major concern. Support is critical to enable officers and activists to receive education and training on wider issues related to governance, policy-making and civil society, particularly as the policy debate proceeds — with NTUC and some trade union support — about stronger, elected regional government in the North East.
Conclusions

This paper has sought to analyse the role of regional trade union centres in the governance of regional development in the context of devolution and regionalisation the UK. The argument is that an emergent strategic terrain of activity is opening up at the regional and sub-national levels amongst established and new institutions within the existing multi-layered governance structures operating at the supra-national, national and local scales. Using Martin, Sunley and Wills’ (1996) conceptualisation of ‘institutional spaces’ – that is, the spatialised frameworks or contexts within which the agency and autonomy of social institutions is circumscribed – has allowed us to recognise the integral importance of the changing geographical scales of governance, particularly the regional level, and their implications for multi-level trade union organisation in and beyond the workplace into the realm of regional economic and social governance.

While such regional ‘institutional spaces’ have opened up there is no necessary nor inevitable link to substantive trade union engagement and influence. Such potential might be misused, squandered or simply ignored. Our analysis concludes that in the particular case of the NTUC — in contrast to the national TUC — it is beginning to recognise and realise some of the opportunities created by this emergent ‘institutional space’ opening up at the regional level. However, the NTUC is inhibited by the centralised strategy and structure of the TUC nationally, its own need for upgrading, capacity building and greater financial resources and the interaction between the particular historical legacy of North East tripartite corporatism and the more pluralist modes of regional development governance.
emerging in the English regions. Unless such issues are confronted, regional trade union centres — such as the NTUC — risk remaining relatively junior partners in the emergent regional governance structures.

Deep seated historical trajectories of institutional evolution are in ferment around two central concerns. First, the particular trade union traditions in the North East are both long-standing and distinctive, forged by the region’s economic, social and political history. As the region is both a heartland of the trade union movement and the Labour Party, trade unions and the NTUC have traditionally possessed a residual degree of political influence in the region, almost irrespective of the specific character of the national political economy (Tomaney, 1993). The formerly entrenched, relatively privileged position of trade unions and the NTUC as part of the tripartite, corporatist structure at the regional level alongside business and the state is beginning to be challenged by the shift toward more open, inclusive and pluralist modes of regional development governance in which trade unions are seen as just one social partner amongst many (Pike, O’Brien and Tomaney, 2002). For some, this may represent the erosion of the NTUC’s historical regional power and influence and grates against its long history of organisation, internally democratic and accountable representative structures and its claim to legitimacy as a representative regional voice of its constituent trades unions. Second, some in the national and regional trade union movement see devolution and regionalisation as a threat to national collective solidarity and the social democratic objectives of national redistribution and equality, which have been the ideological lynchpin of Labourism. Within a region like the North East though, the support for regionalism by the NTUC and some trade unions, reflects a perception of the failure of traditional national social democratic policies to
reduce levels of regional inequality over the last 50 years. This tension between national and regional interests within a devolving, multi—layered governance system lies at the heart of debates about the ‘new’ regional governance and policy of the Labour government in the UK in particular and the renewal of national forms of social democracy in general.

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