Regional studies are at a vibrant conjuncture. ‘Regions’ continue to provide a conceptual and analytical focus for often overlapping concerns with economic, social, political, cultural and ecological change. In the context of increased interest in inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, ‘regions’ remain an arena in which synthesis across disciplines – economics, geography, planning, politics and sociology – can take place. Indeed, this cross-disciplinary ethos has long been integral to the Regional Studies Association and its journal *Regional Studies* (Pike et al. 2007).

Yet recent work has raised fundamental questions about how we think about and research ‘regions’ and regional change, ‘development’, governance and regulation. First, emergent conceptual ideas have introduced new thinking about space, place and scale that interprets ‘regions’ as ‘unbounded’, relational spaces. This work has disturbed notions of ‘regions’ as bounded territories. Hierarchical systems of scale have been questioned by more complex, multi-scalar approaches that seek to reflect the nested inter-relationships between the international, national, regional, local and community. Second, research methodology has grown in sophistication and sensitivity but remains
somewhat polarised between the binaries of positivist, often quantitative, and more theoretically diverse, typically qualitative, approaches. Genuine synthesis and mixed methods are evident but perhaps still too elusive. Last, regional governance, policy and politics are wrestling with the conceptual, methodological and political complexities of new modes and geographies of governance and emergent multi-agent and multi-level institutional architectures. As one of numerous possible sub-national tiers, ‘regions’ appear to have no necessary place in more polycentric systems of power and regulation. Their status and agency as collective actors is not innate and pre-given in any specific geographical context (Lagendijk 2007, this issue). These concerns evident in contemporary regional studies mix new challenges with some thorny issues that have long been the subject of analysis and discussion (see, for example, Martin et al. 2003). While we are at an early stage in beginning to think through what such conceptual, theoretical, methodological, governance, policy and political innovations and developments mean for regional studies, the magnitude and resonance of such issues underpin the vitality of research on the region.

This special issue, then, seeks to contribute to and reflect upon the current issues and debates in regional studies. The editorial that follows does not attempt comprehensively to document the depth and nuance of current work. This challenge is taken up by our contributors. Instead, this editorial seeks only to highlight and outline some of the main issues animating research and practice in regional studies in relation to conceptualisation, methodology, governance, policy and politics. To close, it touches upon possible concerns that may shape the evolution of regional studies. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Regional Studies* in 2007, this collection represents a forward look into the futures for regional studies and complements the special supplement of influential papers from the journal’s first forty years (see Pike et al. 2007).
Defining the region

Determining what it is we mean when we think about the ‘region’ is a longstanding, recurrent and fundamental issue in regional studies (Jones 2005; Lagendijk 2006; Massey 1979; Storper, 1997). Amidst the recent resurgence of interest in the region in spatial disciplines and social science more broadly, views have differed on how best to understand and practice a regional approach (Hudson 2007, this issue). Arnoud Lagendijk (2007, this issue) characterises this as a historical and ongoing struggle between structuralism and functionalism, interpreting ‘regions’ as by-products of broader changes, and voluntarism, seeing ‘regions’ as endowed with varying degrees and kinds of agency.

Currently, a centrally important issue for regional studies concerns the ways in which contemporary debates in thinking about space, place and scale have destabilised and questioned the traditional and long-established notion of the ‘region’ as a ‘closed’, ‘bounded’ and territorial entity (see Hudson 2007; Jones and MacLeod 2007; Lagendijk 2007, this issue). Understanding ‘regions’ as fixed and demarcated units in the context of globalisation has been questioned alongside challenges to hierarchical notions of spatial scales, running from the global to the community in clearly demarcated levels. This recent re-thinking of space, place and scale is based upon a relational approach that sees geographical entities – such as regions – as constituted by spatialised social relations stretched over space and manifest in material, discursive and symbolic forms (see Allen and Cochrane 2007, Lagendijk 2007, this issue; Amin 2004). In an inter-connected and inter-dependent context, ‘regions’ are defined by their linkages and relations within and without any predefined territorial boundary. In this sense, regions are seen as open, porous and ‘unbounded’. The topographical space of absolute distance is
displaced by topological understandings of relative and discontinuous space, emphasising connections and nodes in networks.

While both strong and weak versions are evident in the literature, such ideas are profoundly challenging to regional studies. Where contributors to this special issue might make a distinctive advance in the debate is by arguing and demonstrating how it might be more productive to view these relational and territorial approaches not as competing ‘either/or’ choices but to see them from a ‘both/and’ perspective shaped by theoretical, methodological and political context (see Hudson 2007, this issue). Indeed, several of our contributors reveal the value of such an approach in tackling the challenge of developing genuinely multi-scalar understandings of regions, including Jones and Macleod’s (2007, this issue) engagement with ‘networked topologies’ and Lagendijk’s (2007, this issue) development of a strategic relational approach. Such work is perhaps only a beginning, however. Difficulties will no doubt arise from the disjuncture of such research, primarily situated within geography, with other constituencies and disciplines involved in regional studies. The debates resonate with concerns about the integrity and quality of concepts and theory (Markusen 2003) and the need for analytical consistency and definition (McCann 2007, this issue), especially if the context is concerned with quantification, measurement, evaluation and engagement with policy.

**Researching the region**

How we research the region is a similarly longstanding concern marked most recently by debates about methodological plurality and standards of analysis and evidence (see, for example, the contributions around Markusen 2003 in *Regional Studies*). While the sophistication and sensitivity of research methods in the social sciences has grown in
recent years, in regional research Phillip McCann (2007, this issue) sees a continuing mismatch between the ‘stylised’ constructs utilised in regional policy frameworks and their inability to support empirical evaluation through hypothesis formulation and testing. He situates his argument in a contrast drawn between the much broader disciplinary base of ‘regional studies’, typically deploying non-quantitative and non-mathematical forms of analysis, and the much narrower, more economics focused ‘regional science’, utilising more mathematical and empirical approaches. The critical problem is one of ‘observational equivalence’ (Overman 2004). That is, how to infer causality and determine the most appropriate explanation from empirical observations for which alternative and competing interpretations exist. For Phillip McCann (2007, this issue), ‘regional studies’ is good at developing multiple conceptualisations, although they are not always founded on strong theoretical and empirical bases. But it is poor at empirically verifying and testing its ideas.

Even if we accept the broad characterisation of ‘regional studies’ and ‘regional science’, such approaches may remain characterised as different – in purpose, focus, the kinds of questions they can ask and answer, method, research design, analytical capability and so on. Strong readings of their ontological and epistemological differences may render a continuing divide. Others see a more complementary relationship. Indeed, Phillip McCann (2007, this issue) sees ‘regional studies’ as useful in raising topical questions since it is more open and engaged in more widely based disciplinary dialogue and issues but ‘regional science’ is always required empirically to evaluate their usefulness and use in public policy. Otherwise major difficulties for public policy design and evaluation will follow. A closer dialogue and relationship may raise the possibility of synthesis and mixing in the context of appropriate and rigorously handled research designs. Indeed, innovation may become more pressing because the emergent and unsettling debates about space, place and scale present formidable issues for both broad categories of
research strategy in terms of data specification, collection and analysis in the context of more open, unbounded and discontinuous spatial units.

**Governance, policy, politics and the region**

Governance, policy and politics are other critical dimensions of regional studies that have recently been subject to thorough going change and reflection. Emergent kinds of networked and partnership governance involving multiple actors and forms of participatory and democratic engagement (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2006; Tomaney and Pike 2006), processes and new geographies of devolution and multi-layering amongst the institutions of government and governance (Jones Special Issue; Pike and Tomaney 2004; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill 2005) and the emergence and articulation of new policy responsibilities such as science and technology at the sub-national level (Perry and May 2007) - to name but a few developments - have underpinned a more fluid and complex backdrop for considering regional governance, policy and politics. Fundamental is the extent to which regions are objects of policy and/or subjects endowed with the agency to shape, develop and deliver policy (Hudson 2007, this issue). Power relations are critical in defining the ‘region’, its interests and ‘development’, for instance in contesting the politics of collective provision and consumption at the sub-national scale (Jonas and Ward 2004), challenging the narrow mainstream economic focus on ‘regional economic development’ (Hudson 2007, Pike et al. 2007, this issue) and interpreting the governance of regional firm networks (Christopherson and Clark 2007, this issue).

Such is the depth and rapidity of recent change that discerning what current developments mean for regional studies is difficult. Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue)
captures the essence of such uneven changes in regional governance, policy and politics by reflecting upon the emergence of increasingly polycentric states wherein multiple centres of deliberation and decision-making are at least challenging and disturbing the certainties of formerly centralised, national and hierarchical structures. Yet, within this shifting context, it remains an empirical question whether recent changes are creating ‘new spaces of empowerment and engagement’ and finding more sustainable balances between democracy and equity (Morgan 2007, this issue). Significantly for those interested in the ‘region’, in this more complex and changing context the ‘region’ appears to have no guaranteed place in contexts within which the national central level retains a pivotal and often decisive role. Indeed, as Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue) demonstrates, in the UK the very scale of the ‘region’ is being contested in the context of the promotion of emergent spatial imaginaries at the ‘city-region’ and ‘local’ levels.

Elsewhere, the imprint of new thinking about discontinuous and unbounded space marks interpretations of emergent regional governance and politics. Drawing upon their empirical work in England’s South East, John Allen and Allan Cochrane (2007, this issue) deploy a relational approach to characterise the complex, multi-agent and multi-scalar ‘regional assemblage’ that constitutes the governance of the region. For them, a more diffuse and to a degree networked form of governance has underpinned the emergence of a spatially discontinuous region. In this relatively strong relational view, such change is not best captured by the territorial approach, despite its more flexible spatial vocabulary and conceptualisations of ‘regionalisation’ and state re-scaling (see Jones and McLeod 2007, this issue). As argued above, however, rather than constructing unhelpful binaries, thinking of relational and territorial approaches as complementary may be more productive. For Kevin Morgan (2007, this issue), for example, political space is bounded in administrative and electoral territories and porous through people’s multiple identities, mobilities and relations across space and place.
Such changes and reflections raise the question of the place of regional studies in regional politics and policy. Regional studies have long grappled with their relationships and relevance to the politics and public policy of government and governance (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2007; Markusen 2003). The Regional Studies Association and *Regional Studies* journal have historically had policy engagement at their heart, marking out a distinct and to a degree separate trajectory from regional science from the 1960s (Pike *et al.* 2007). Regional studies are not alone in this regard. Geography, for example, has constantly struggled with questions of relevancy, influence and policy practicality (e.g. Martin 2001). A recurrent issue is the degree of incorporation into and distance from the political and policy process. Conceptually and theoretically robust and empirically grounded research in regional studies should have much to offer, although engagement is not without its difficulties and frustrations due to different priorities, rhythms, timescales and languages (Peck 1999). Critical research may not always be well received in the context of more narrowly defined and limited research needs. Examples of independent views articulated in this special issue include the fundamental questioning of what is meant by ‘development’ and its distributional implications in localities and regions (Pike *et al.* 2007, this issue) and Christopherson and Clark’s (2007, this issue) challenge of the policy support for TNC and SME network co-operation given TNC’s tendencies to dominate the resources critical to innovation including university R&D and skilled labour markets. The context of more complex governance structures within which regional studies is practised and, perhaps, seeks to engage makes the relationship with regional policy and politics no less problematic.
Conclusions

This editorial has sought to sketch out several of the critical issues for regional studies relating to concepts and theory, research methodology, and governance, policy and politics. The contributors to the special issue that follows each connect with the critical issues outlined above and, in so doing, provide thoughts and reflections of value to the contemporary debates in regional studies. It remains to reflect upon potential issues shaping the possible futures for regional studies. First, current research contains plentiful reasons to prompt reflection upon the fundamental questions concerning the purpose and aims of regional studies. What is regional studies for and what is it trying to achieve? But one response suggests that, as researchers in regional studies, we need to become more explicit in recognizing and, where appropriate, articulating the normative content and intent of our work in regional studies (Markusen 2006). Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney (2007, this issue), for example, have argued this much in their version of more holistic, progressive and sustainable forms of ‘development’ at the local and regional levels. Clearly, this is more of an issue for debate and challenge to those approaching regional studies from a positivist stance. Second, we might consider where regional studies sits and what it might have to contribute to the ‘spatial turn’ in social sciences more broadly (Grabher 2006) and even to the emergent notion of ‘postdisciplinary studies’ (Sayer 2000). Breaking down disciplinary (and sub-disciplinary) boundaries may be fruitful within and without regional studies. One example might be rediscovering and reworking the internationalism evident at the founding of regional studies in the late 1960s in working between domains hitherto considered ‘Development Studies’ in ‘developing’ and ‘transition’ contexts and ‘Regional and Local Development’ in ‘developed’ countries (e.g. Pike et al. 2006; Scott and Storper 2003; Zhang and Wu 2006). At the very least, perhaps opening up dialogue with other disciplines and sub-disciplines about what regional studies is, where it is heading and what it can contribute
may be fruitful (see Pike et al. 2007). Shared research concerns provide a common
ground upon which to work involving longstanding concerns about growth, innovation,
agglomeration, spatial inequalities, welfare and equity and disparities alongside
emergent topics such as the evaluation of competitiveness and growth-oriented spatial
policy, especially at the national and supra-national levels (Bachtler and Wren 2006),
living, working and mobility (Bramley et al. 2006; Jones et al. 2006), creativity and
entrepreneurship (McGranahan and Wojan 2007; Fritsch and Falck 2006), social and
spatial justice (Johnston et al. 2006); sustainability and the post-carbon economy
(Morgan 2004; Zuindeau 2006) and wellbeing and quality of life (Brown and Rees 2006;
Marchante and Ortega 2006). New methodologies, techniques and applications too have
their place in encouraging such cross-disciplinary dialogue (e.g. Baussola 2007;
Lundberg 2006). A productive future for regional studies may then be characterised as
one of multiple pathways and trajectories, providing strength in and through a diversity of
approaches and ideas rather than conceptual, theoretical and methodological singularity.

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