Home truths about care-less competitiveness

Abstract
The literature on city-regionalism can be criticised for neglecting the mundane ways that cities and regions are socially reproduced (and contested) through processes of household decision-making and routine co-ordination. Moreover, dominant debates on macro-scale governance and economic competitiveness rarely question the way strategic city-regional partnerships equate notions of ‘liveability’ with marketability. However ‘smart’, these initiatives persistently fetishise growth, allowing little scope for collective endeavour or an ethic of care – values which Linda McDowell (2004) points out are fundamentally undermined by neoliberalism. This paper challenges the ‘top-down’ discourse of city-regionalism both on grounds of what it examines (economic efficiency and governance) and how this is viewed (partially and globally). The case is made for raising awareness of the structural inequalities which restrict the ‘choice of choices’ actually available to households competing for public services on the basis of uneven resource entitlement. This calls for an understanding of a ‘whole’ economy, recognising the full value of unpaid care-giving, volunteering and ‘free’ environmental resources.

1. Introduction
Household level research offers a powerful lens through which to highlight the co-constitutive links between social reproduction and city-regionalism. While questions of

Revised August 05
metropolitan ‘liveability’ and principles of ‘new urbanism’ currently make headline news, the spheres of agency which shape neighbourhoods on a continuing basis (transport behaviour, parental choice of schools) are typically undermined by more ‘macho’ discourses of competitiveness and cohesion. This paper calls for greater collaboration in the future between city-regionalism and feminist household level research. The two-fold benefits of this would be to expose the role of social reproduction in problems of metropolitan fragmentation and to improve the flow of ideas between social and environmental disciplines as well as local to global scales of analysis. Pressing this point home is an understanding that most mismatches between where people live and work result from the complex ‘juggling’ of paid employment and unpaid social reproductive work, especially in households comprising two or more wage earners. The privatisation (or state abandonment) of once public or collective responsibilities also gives rise to socially disruptive and environmentally damaging dislocations across the city-region. A mundane example is the school run in the UK which is exacerbated by the parents right (or moral responsibility) to choose (compete for) the best school for their offspring to attend, whether or not this is the closest to their home. In situations where fewer children attend the same school as others in their immediate neighbourhood it is easy to see how communities can disintegrate. Neighbours are unable to participate in car-share arrangements and children have limited scope to play independently at each others homes.

Neither are the private and social costs of market competition limited to an Anglo-American context. In June 2005, mayors representing cities from around the globe gathered in San Francisco to sign a Green Cities Declaration to address the common urban environmental challenges of traffic congestion, jobs-housing mismatch, sprawl, pollution, inadequate water supplies and uneven development (Fecht 2005). Rapid globalization and modernization in the case of Indian city-regions, for instance, provide the catalyst for a newly emerging, increasingly mobile, middle class. This trend is associated with a status-oriented lifestyle predicated on rapid adoption of private motorised transport. In turn this exacerbates problems of congestion, pollution, inequality and sprawl. Former Columbian mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa, for instance, credits his successful instigation of ‘car free’ days and a shift to mass transit and soft modes of travel (cycling and walking) to a newfound sense of community (Ives 2002). Crucial to his project of ‘civilizing’ the city, for instance,
was the need to persuade affluent inner city dwellers to invest in neighbourhood amenities (such as schools) rather than to journey elsewhere to consume private goods and public services. These everyday life issues illustrate the close integration of social and environmental issues. Yet we rarely find much appreciation of this social-environmental local-to-global integration in the literature on city-regionalism. This is not to say that household and neighbourhood scales have never before been used as a lens to understand choice and struggle in urban politics. A literature already exists which offers a bottom up perspective on neighbourhood struggles over schooling in the American city, for instance, as well as over transport infrastructure and strategies to combat poverty (see for instance Cox and Jonas 1993; Gilbert 1997). Yet arguably what remains underdeveloped is adequate iteration, and inclusive conceptualisation, of the messy realities of urban daily life, as subjects of strategic policy and planning.

This short paper seeks to challenge the dominant discourse of competitiveness in city-regionalism on grounds of what it examines (economic efficiency and governance) and how this is viewed (partially and globally). These challenges constitute two sides of the same coin whereby the aim is to critically examine city-regional issues through the lens of household practice, using this as a periscope, while at the same time shifting the sights to account holistically, through feminist theory and method, for multiple economies and competing identifications. Asking the question from whose point of view ‘liveability’ is understood, for instance, shifts attention away from narrow definitions of urban competitiveness to moral conceptions of social wellbeing and environmental stewardship. This points to the need for city-regionalism in the future to focus on the ground truth (or home truths) of human welfare, in order to make a clear distinction between the ‘good’ city for everyday life and ‘the good life’; between what Linda McDowell (2004) calls an ethic of care and the current aesthetic of flagship competitiveness. At present this distinction is not possible where urban quality of life is ranked on the basis of economic indicators alone, using such measures as GDP per capita, unemployment or employment rates, or stocks of vacant or derelict land (Begg 2002: 312). Economic growth does not necessarily represent ‘progress’ with respect to human development. This point is stressed in the burgeoning ‘happiness research’ literature, which confirms the Easterlin hypothesis – that growth does not raise wellbeing (Hamilton 2003: 2; Blanchflower and Oswald 2004: Layard 2005).
**Tilting the household lens at city-regionalism**

Recent years have seen growing interest in the concept of liveability (emphasising ‘quality of life’) and a ‘new urbanism’ (a ‘renaissance’ of compact mixed use traditional urban neighbourhood design). Together these underpin ‘Smart Growth’ initiatives in the USA and the UK ‘Core Cities’ partnerships. The time is ripe for quintessential expressions of city-regionalism to be scrutinised from a feminist micro-sociological perspective.

Smart Growth is defined by the American Urban Land Institute (1996) as incorporating both sustainability and neo-traditional architectural arguments, articulated by a broad coalition of interests intent on strengthening strategic planning and encouraging efficient use of urban transport systems (Thorns 2002: 224). The San Francisco Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) is one of the most influential of the new coalitions but, at present, the only example of an elected ‘Metro’ tier of planning is that of Portland, Oregon. Here, urban issues are not about the ‘city’ but instead a sprawling megalopolis encompassing dozens of once separate towns (Marshall 2000: 176) where consideration has been given to a combination of neighbourhood density, the adoption of a strong Urban Growth Boundary and satellite new town development. A similar endorsement of a more strategic vision underpins London’s new Greater London Authority (GLA) as well as the reorganisation of English planning authorities more generally, including the instigation of unitary authorities and strengthening of regional assemblies such as the Government Office for the South East (ODPM 2002).

While it is important that public and private sector partners co-operate at an overarching city-regional scale, especially where huge financial investments are required in fixed transport, sewerage provision and flood defences, these initiatives rarely take account of the social reproduction of everyday life. Instead, the ‘quality of life’ pursued within city-regionalism corresponds with the language of neoliberalism where market competition pursues the efficient allocation of resources. But as Linda McDowell (2004: 146) observes: ‘what (competitiveness) cannot do is allocate those resources that are outside the market –
goods and services and labour exchanged voluntarily or for love, in the household and in the locality’.

The ‘smart’ ambition is to ‘grow gracefully’ by avoiding the worst excesses of sprawl. Yet the language of liveability elides with that of marketability, where issues of location and aesthetics are bound up with the capacity to attract and retain key workers and skilled migrants. City-regional coalitions consequently promulgate a watered-down interpretation of sustainability whereby ‘environmental considerations can be incorporated into economic decision-making without any fundamental change in social values and structures, and without questioning the vision of ‘endless growth’ (Hayden 1999: 17). Consequently, sustainable development debates tend to weigh up the merits of one scheme of regeneration over another, instead of asking more fundamental questions such as how much in the way of resources is sufficient to allow a good quality of life for all (Hayden 1999: 8). Thus a ‘growth fetish’ is manifest both in the attention paid to headline economic indicators, rather than non-financial wellbeing (Hamilton 2003; Layard 2003), as well as spatial policies which emphasise the number and distribution of dwellings, jobs and infrastructure.

Indeed, a strong case can be made for household level engagement in city-regional research on the grounds that housing and labour markets (key to spatial policy) already function at this scale. The decision to buy a particular house or commute long distance transcends local authority boundaries (Jarvis 2003: 593). Moreover, a household approach to urban growth tells us that routine travel behaviour (journeys from home to work, school and shop) can be more strongly influenced by strategic instruments, (growth boundaries such as green belt restrictions to hinterland development and congestion charging), than by local design codes, (such as the current vogue of compact mixed use neighbourhoods). This observation appears to be counter-intuitive simply because it is assumed that household research lends itself to neighbourhood ethnography but not to strategic planning. David Ley (2004) notes similar neglect of human agency in the widespread privileging of headline trends and discourses on global political economy and city leadership. This draws attention away from competing evidence ‘on the street’, suggesting that ‘globalization is insidious and beyond resistance’ (Ley 2004: 154). Yet, viewed from the street (or indeed the breakfast table), evidence of local cultures of resistance and alternatives to the ‘earn to spend’ cycle (Schor
1995) can be found in household strategies to ‘balance’ home and work. Elsewhere it is suggested, for instance, that a small but significant minority of working families (some 10 per cent) ‘resist the treadmill’ of conspicuous consumption and intensive parenting as a way of taking control of their lives. They do this by voluntarily consuming less housing (reducing their mortgage liability), cutting back on ‘wasteful’ journeys and valuing leisure time and community participation (Jarvis 2005: 122-4).

Thus spatial policies need to consider the question ‘how’ people manage their daily lives, where it is recognised that conflict occurs within the household collective in a climate of inequality in the distribution or resources between households (Jarvis 2001; 2005). There are, after all, huge structural inequalities within the UK sub-national areas of ‘north’ and ‘south’, such as the ‘superstar regions’ identified by Diane Perrons (2004), as well as between successful ‘new’ and moribund ‘old’-industrial cities and regions of the world. Consequently, otherwise strong economies can be hostile environments for those in poor health, those caring for dependents, or managing on a low income. It is in this respect crucial that city-regional research re-engages with micro-scale analysis while at the same time not parochialising the household by removing it from the wider institutional and regulatory context in which choices and decisions are made. From a household perspective, for instance, neoliberalism is particularly evident in the introduction of quasi-markets in public services (such as health and education).

It has already been suggested that the ‘transformation of citizens into consumers’ (McDowell 2004: 146) is notable with respect to school choice and a shift in emphasis to ‘open enrolment’ in the UK and USA. Today, the extent to which parents can ‘choose’ the best school for their offspring, irrespective of the traditional postcode lottery, depends on their social capital (networks of information used to penetrate complex admissions policies) and unequal access to important non-financial resources of time, personnel and transport. Elsewhere, Graham and Marvin (2001:5) highlight the paradox of cleaners in US hospitals who are unable to access the health services they maintain. The UK equivalent is very poor access to dental services under the National Health Service. The Citizens Advice Bureau (2005) cite cases of patients having to travel for hours to receive treatment, assuming they have the transport and money to do this, and of long queues forming outside new practices
with people who lack dental cover desperate to sign up. This demonstrates a highly uneven ‘choice of choices’ whereby those on a low income or without their own transport have greatly reduced access to basic life chances (Levett 2003). These examples show that market choice is far from ‘free’. Moreover, inequalities between households are inadequately explained by income and residential status alone. Competition for full citizenship functions through a web of resources, through multiple economies; of income, property, transport, ‘sweat equity’, gifts, inheritance, kin networks and unpaid personnel. This echoes what Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘the logic of the situation’ through which choices are exercised in relation to that which is possible (Bourdieu 1977: 73-74).

Multiple economies and competing identifications

It is widely accepted by feminist scholars that mainstream economics and conventional systems of economic accounting are partial and patriarchal. A recent Spooner cartoon published in The Age newspaper reflects this masculine capitalist bias by depicting the future growth of the Australian economy as occupying a sedan chair supported on the bent shoulders of women holding children and pushing elderly grandparents in wheelchairs (Edgar 2004). In effect, the formal capital economy would collapse without the contribution of care-givers, who are mostly women, many of them single mothers or elderly, whose (re)productive labours are unconditional and unpaid. Hazel Henderson graphically characterises what she sees as the ‘total productive system’ of an industrial economy as a ‘three-layer cake with icing’. In this, the GDP represents only one layer of the economy of which private market ‘production and consumption activities’ are merely the icing on top. The majority of the ‘economic cake’ is in fact made up of a non-monetised economy of unpaid labour (care of dependents, sweat equity, volunteering, home-based production) and freely used natural resources and waste sinks. Yet these vital assets go unrecorded in any government statistics (Henderson 1995: 47; see also Gibson-Graham 2005: 12).

Efforts have been made by feminist and green economists to put a price on ‘priceless’ care work and biodiversity. In 1995 women’s housework was estimated globally to be worth $US17 billion (Edgar 2005) while in 2000 Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson (2000: 129) estimated that non-market childcare, eldercare and domestic labour accounted for upward of 60 per cent of the total value of U.S. output. More recently it was estimated that
grandparents provide £1 billion of unpaid childcare to the UK economy (Land 2002). The ‘free’ environmental resources exploited in the process of production and consumption can similarly be calculated by the proxy of land-consumed, as represented by their ‘ecological footprint’ (Rees 1992). It is currently estimated, for example, that the average North American requires more than 12 hectares to support food, housing transportation and other consumer ‘needs’ while the average German requires half this (WWF 2000). As Beatley and Manning (1997: 8) point out, a lifestyle based on increasing consumption is supported in large part by appropriating the resources of less powerful, less developed regions of the world.

City-regionalism begins to look very different when adequate account is taken of the non-financial variables of social reproduction. All consumption and production activities effectively carry with them an ecological back-pack of external costs, the distribution of which reinforces both patterns of metropolitan fragmentation and globally uneven development. This makes a mockery of the idea of city-regional self-containment or isolation. As Guy Standing of the ILO puts it ‘only a fool believes in full independence. In society, individuals (and neighbourhoods) are interdependent. For the future we need institutions that enhance self-control in a context of mutual dependence, which some call fraternity and others conviviality’ (cited in Edgar 2005). Despite free market advocates railing against this notion of society, collective entities and global commons are grist for the mill of the capital economy. This highlights what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the ‘utopia of endless exploitation’, propagated by neo-liberal competition, where all collective structures ‘which may impede the pure market logic’ are destroyed, with little understanding that these collective structures are fundamental to the reproduction of capital (Bourdieu 1998).

According to Joan Tronto (2004) what is being lost is a sense of collective responsibility and shared endeavour. It is on this moral basis that neoliberalism is widely condemned by feminist critics as a bad model to roll out across the world.

The prohibitive costs of care-less competitiveness

Conventional wisdom suggests that economic growth is ‘good’ because it provides the means by which to improve living standards around the world. Yet evidence from a household perspective points to the failure of such a ‘trickle down’ effect. Joan Tronto
(2004: 2) explains this by observing that ‘when unequal citizens only care privately, they deepen the vast inequalities and the exclusion of some from the real prospects of being full citizens’. Another illustration is provided by the no-frills argument. The ‘pile it high, sell it cheap’ approach is about expanding opportunities for consumerist excess (Hayden: p.9). The illusion with the massive expansion of no-frills airline travel, for instance, is that this is the route by which opportunities for overseas travel percolate through to low income families. The reality is that the more affluent simply travel more frequently on short-breaks while not bearing the full environmental cost of this in terms of climate change - costs which fall disproportionately to low income groups in fragile economies (Whitelegg and Williams 2000).

Arguably, then, city-regionalism assigns unwarranted status to economic growth, as measured by increased gross production (and increased consumption) and pays too little attention to the disbenefits of empty consumption, wasteful journeys, pollution, growing inequality and social disharmony. One way of engaging with non-financial aspects of wellbeing would be to examine what constitutes a caring environment for dependents. Peñalosa suggests that an environment in which children and families can thrive might provide an alternative measure of success. At present many of the most economically ‘successful’ cities are hostile environments for families with young children. According to Peñalosa, if we can build a successful city for children, we would have a more successful and caring city for all (Ives 2002). Thus it has to be asked whether the current emphasis of regeneration on prestige development and cultural quarters, what Peter Hall claims to be the ‘magic substitute’ for lost factories and warehouses, can be justified with respect to non-financial measures of wellbeing (Hall 2000).

**Concluding remarks**

There are in short three ways that household research can contribute to future debates over city-regionalism. First, a household focus sheds light on the structural inequalities which restrict the ‘choice of choices’ actually available to individuals competing for public amenities. Developing this research agenda calls for an understanding of a ‘whole’ economy which recognises the full value of unpaid care-giving, volunteering, and freely available environmental resources. Second, micro-sociological research generates greater
understanding of the way households make decisions (and arrive at compromises) in particular situations of constraint. Future research must acknowledge the pressing need to ‘tame northern appetites for energy consuming and polluting movement and overconsumption (Schor 1995). In this respect there is much to be gained from combining an understanding of bottom up as well as top down transformations of production and consumption. Examples might include research which examines ‘voluntary simplicity’ social movements alongside ‘slow city’ metropolitan initiatives. Crucially though, a shift towards greater emphasis on household behaviour must not be confused with a retreat into voluntarism. Choice is invariably constrained, as much by what is possible within a given built environment (the location, opening hours and cost of transport and amenities) as by the material, institutional and emotional resources available to the household. Finally, greater emphasis on social reproduction makes explicit the (oftentimes exploitative) connections at work between households within and across regions. Households in one city or region of the world (whether or not these constitute transnational families) ultimately function as a part of a chain of labour market divisions and networks of reciprocity. This reflects the way political interventions take place at a range of scales, as local-through-global circuits of influence.

Renewed emphasis on the household scale in this paper serves to highlight both empirical gaps and political silences within city-regionalism. It calls for further research which examines the social and environmental costs not only of rising competition between households but also competing preferences within households, such as a home in the city and access to a ‘good’ (white, suburban) school. It also highlights the benefits to be gained of future collaboration between city-regionalism and feminist scholarship. Most important of all it calls for a radical shift in the discourse of city-regionalism from efficiency to equity.

Acknowledgements:
Many thanks to Andy Jonas and Kevin Ward for excellent editorial input and their continued enthusiasm for this project. Thanks to Peter Moss of the Thomas Coram Research Institute for sending me papers by Joan Tronto. This paper draws on arguments and ideas developed
over the course of a research fellowship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (R000271085) as well as a small grant funded by the British Council (SG-39344).
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