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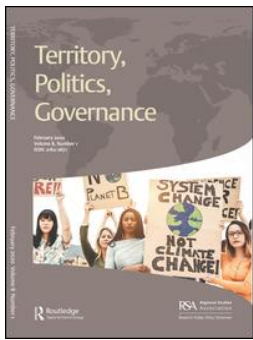
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## Rural regionalism in the 21st century: a tale of no cities

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# Rural regionalism in the 21st century: a tale of no cities

Marc Welsh <sup>a</sup> and Jesse Heley <sup>b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Regions remain in flux. Their status as primary sites of governance and government is an ongoing negotiation between multiple endogenous and exogenous actors. The role of regions as drivers of economic activity and containers of socio-political identities and processes has waxed and waned in academic and policy discourse, most recently hybridized in neologistic categories such as city-regions, creative regions, resilient regions and mega-regions. There is, however, a need to find ways of foregrounding the region, of distinguishing the concept and object of analysis from its surroundings. Using mid Wales as an example, we highlight the complexities of the region and regional: as a 'problem region', as a changing array of administrative units, and as a 'left behind' territory subject to contemporary attempts to fix and fit it to the rationale of city-regional modes of governance. Framed by this analysis we reflect upon the implications of a proposed regional 'growth deal' and argue for a regions-first approach.

## KEYWORDS

regional development; rural; city-region; devolution; historical imaginaries; regions

**HISTORY** Received 29 March 2019; in revised form 17 March 2021

## INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE RURAL INTO REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

The governance of regions, and the relation between 'the rural' and 'the urban' within regions, has long been a central concern of government, and particularly in Europe (Davoudi & Stead, 2002; Ros-Tonen et al., 2015). During the early 20th century academic and policy communities came to direct their governmental gaze on the construct and construction of 'the region' as an object and scale of intervention to achieve political goals of 'development' (Wannop & Cherry, 1994). The role and significance of regions as drivers of economic activity and containers of socio-political identities and processes has waxed and waned in academic and policy discourse, but has most recently been hybridized in neologistic categories such as city-regions, creative regions, resilient regions and mega-regions where the place of 'the rural' is ambivalent.

In this paper we respond to Paasi and Metzger's (2017) argument for the need to find ways of foregrounding the region, of distinguishing the concept and object of analysis from its surroundings. We attempt to do this through an attentiveness to deep history and problematized (rural)

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spaces, and to the role of imaginaries and institutions in shaping and framing the options and ideas of what regions ‘are’, what they ‘do’ and what they can ‘be’. By deploying a deeper historical analysis of one such ‘rural region’ (Mid Wales) we explore the legacy effects of previous rounds of state intervention and their effect upon current debates about regional development.

The region was often classified as being predominantly urban or rural in character, but always a hybridization of both, with the peri-urban occupying a liminal space between urban nodes and agricultural or semi-wild peripheries. Come the 1970s, rural regions and middle-to-small metropolitan areas gained heightened concern in Anglo-American policy discourse (Marsden et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2015). These spaces, which had often been comparatively prosperous, were subject to significant change and instability as capital sought a new spatial fix. They were now broadly ‘characterised by a combination of job loss, declining labour-force participation or declining per-capita income relative to the national average’ (Iammarino et al., 2018, p. 4). Mid Wales (our study site) is one such region; it is frequently portrayed in this light, and subject to a prescribed set of political interventions on this basis.

Government has concerned itself with fixing these problems by adopting different narratives and philosophical framings that reflect the nature of the problems it has identified. As Foucault (1988) would characterize it, the ways in which regions have been ‘problematized’ have also framed and determined the spaces and practices of intervention that the state has engaged in. The characteristics of rural and urban localities have been identified and brought under the gaze of state apparatus in different ways and at particular times, with the enrolment of components (e.g., land use, occupational profiles, income distribution) compelling particular courses of action. These courses of action in turn shape these localities, reinforcing some tendencies and excluding others, making certain effects possible and other outcomes less so (Jones & Jessop, 2010). The rural region is thus conceived as a naturalized space; clientalist in servicing the environmental and biological needs of neighbouring metropolises (‘ecosystem services’, in modern parlance), or as functional economic spaces to be managed for the resources they contribute to the national economy (Gebre & Gebremedhin, 2019; Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020). Here the challenge of rural demographic change has – since the late 1800s at least (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011) – periodically featured as a ‘new crisis’ in Europe and America, currently reflected in the European Union (EU) narrative of ‘shrinking rural regions’ (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON), 2017, p. 1).

## POLYCENTRIC ABSENCES

Central to European regional policy interventions over the past two decades has been theoretical hegemony of the ‘polycentric region’ as a method of categorizing, correcting and capitalizing upon the properties and relations of urban and rural areas (Hall & Pain, 2006). Corresponding to this conceptual framing of regions as network-driven polycentric spaces has been the emergence of ‘city-regions’ as a primary narrative around which to structure policy and analysis, and to manage urban–rural interaction (Hoggart, 2005; Lang & Török, 2017). Reflecting national and EU policies for creating regional ‘champions’ through ‘city-first’ strategies (Harrison, 2012), ambitions to equalize growth and success across territories have given way to policy spaces which prioritize nodes and corridors of connectivity and ‘thick’ relations, an approach which has been subject to considerable and sustained critique (Sýkora et al., 2009).

Herrschel (2009), for example, is among a growing number of observers who have raised reservations regarding the practical and democratic consequences of the city-region paradigm:

Instead of contiguous economic territories as spatial ‘containers’, these are now becoming increasingly subdivided into bundles of separate linear territories, leaving ‘in between’ much less well connected, effectively marginalized spaces and actors, whose access to power and policymaking capacity is much more

limited. The result is a reinforced, perpetuated inequality in opportunities, with regionalization in danger of creating more divisions and boundaries, rather than less. (p. 240)

Harrison and Heley (2015) have also voiced concerns about the capacity of dominant city-regional models to realize potential outside of urban contexts. This, they argue, stems from an established geo-economic logic which asserts the propensity for wealth creation and socio-economic activity to coalesce in metropolitan clusters.

This logic bolsters the discourse of cities and their region, with the consequence that – depending on their proximity to an urban centre of note – ‘some rural areas are included, some are located on the fringes, and some are clearly excluded from the political project of city-regionalism altogether’ (p. 1121). Elsewhere, Coombes (2014) has also singled out an implicit and unhelpful marginalization of rural areas within the dominant ‘city-first’ paradigm of city-regionalism. He goes on to note, crucially, that there is an alternative, ‘region-first’ model which does not ‘presume such a dominant role for the city’ (p. 2430). Although he finds that in England there are no realistically ‘non-city-regions’ (p. 2440) in Wales, we argue, there are. Here, for example, Beel et al. (2020) identify another recently consolidated Welsh region (the ‘North Wales Growth Deal’) as being within a ‘majorly rural spatial context’, and where there are conceptual and practical problems in attempting ‘to transfer (urban) economic policy into the region’ (p. 720).

Wales, like many of the constituent parts that make up the UK, is in the midst of a new round of restructuring and reconfiguration of government and governance relations (Beel et al., 2018, 2020; Clelland, 2020). This mirrors the wider rearranging of structures of power and capacity observed in other European regions and states, albeit reflective of the particularities of UK history and politics (Zimmermann & Getimis, 2017).<sup>1</sup> A UK consensus takes polycentric city-regional forms of development and organization as the appropriate spatial imaginary and scale of politico-economic organization (Schneider & Cottineau, 2019). Yet much of the territory of Wales (being defined as ‘rural’) overtly sits outside the assumptions and norms built into the city-regional discourse, lacking both ‘cities’ and urban degrees of connectivity.

This paper puts forward a historical account of one particular rural region, mid Wales, setting out the ways in this space has been constructed and sedimented in policy discourse, inclusive of its material, social, economic and political character. Focusing on the interplay between these factors and upon those key political institutions at work which have looked to shape this space from within and beyond, we draw attention to longstanding narratives which concern (and create) this arena, as well as key actors directing change or maintaining fixity over many decades. Following Meric Gertler, this approach is rooted in the premise that institutions are influential on the ‘character and evolutionary trajectory of national, regional, and local economies that is often subtle, sometimes dominant, but undeniably pervasive’ (Gertler, 2010, p. 11). He subsequently identifies this process as either under-appreciated or misunderstood within the context of regional analyses undertaken by economic geographers in particular; a stance to which we are sympathetic. In response, Gertler advocates a comparative approach to research which traces out the distinctive evolutionary paths charted by different regions, and which provides a useful foundation for conceptual work.

This paper does not adopt a comparative approach but does offer a basis for future comparative analysis. We make clear the relational geography of mid Wales which calls attention to the vital role ‘other’ places have had in shaping the material and political character of the region. This tack is, however, very much in keeping with Gertler’s call for a ‘process of rigorous a posteriori analysis in which those institutions and actors at a range of different spatial scales that have played an important role in producing local economic outcomes are identified’ (p. 12). It is also the case that research into regional forms inherently looks to compare material, socio-cultural and political characteristics of these spaces at different points in time, inclusive of their emergence, reproduction and, potentially, transformation into something else. In this way, the question of ‘when was a region’ becomes as important as ‘where’.

This paper is structured as follows. At the outset we situate the ‘problem of mid Wales’ in historical context, as an acute product of economic restructuring at the turn of the 20th century. We then consider the shifting functions and forms of regional development policy in the UK and its relation to rural regions such as mid Wales. From here we focus on the form of rural region and regional development model that emerged specifically in a mid Wales context in the 1970s, through to the effective displacement of this regional imaginary in 1998 in the wake of ‘Devolution’. We then describe the subsequent absence and slow re-emergence of mid Wales as a rural region – left behind in a patchwork of ‘city-regional’ imaginaries, national/devolved state contestations and shifting power dynamics across multiple scales. Finally, we consider the implications of this for rural regional development policy.

Throughout we call attention to a range of institutions and actors that have actively ‘problematized’ and created the region of mid Wales as a site of intervention, including those within and beyond this arena. In so doing, we put forward a deeply historical account of mid Wales as it has been – both imagined and in reality – but in the context of a wider set of scales and relations.

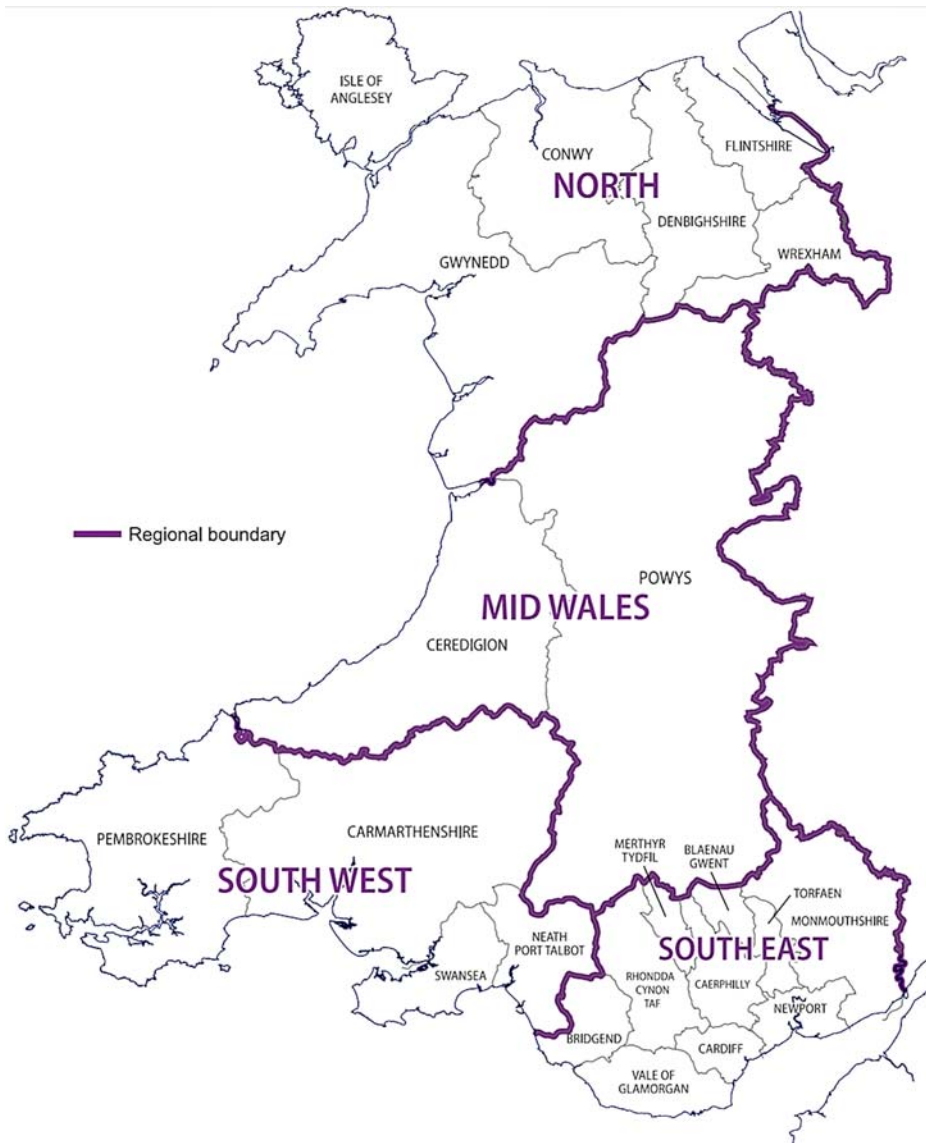
## PLACING MID WALES

Mid Wales is an under-defined but well-established rural region occupying between a third and a half of the land area of the Welsh nation. As we discuss below, recent attempts to politically construct ‘mid Wales’ have tended to confine its borders to the current counties of Powys and Ceredigion (established in 1996 by virtue of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994) (Figure 1). Historically, however, mid Wales has been composed of the ‘historic’ counties of Merionethshire (now incorporated into Gwynedd), Montgomeryshire, Cardiganshire, Radnorshire and Brecknockshire (roughly contiguous with Ceredigion and Powys).

Despite this recent consolidation around two counties the boundaries of mid Wales remain fluid and porous. Bordered to the north by the mountains of Snowdonia, the south by those of the Brecon Beacons, to the east by the liminal spaces of the ‘Welsh Marches’ and the English border, and to the south west by the Preseli Hills, the transition from one to the other is far from clear. Sparsely populated, mid Wales is dotted with small ‘market towns’, the largest being the university town of Aberystwyth (static population 16,500), and the historic market towns of Newtown (population 11,500) and Brecon (population 8250). Many were recast as significant industrial centres during the Industrial Revolution, and as light manufacturing or tourist towns in the later 20th century. Its topography is dominated by uplands principally devoted to sheep farming and timber production. Transport and other infrastructure reflect the constraints of the physical geography of the region and historic patterns of settlement, development policy and economic function; in others words they are poorly provisioned.

The main population centres of Wales are, in contrast, located along the south coast, including Newport, Swansea and Cardiff, the latter being the seat of the Welsh government and home to the Welsh Parliament or Senedd Cymru. This devolved administration has been dominated by the Welsh Labour Party since its inauguration in 1998, which has done much to shape the planning and development ambitions and strategies for Wales. However, the influence of Westminster continues to be keenly felt. In particular, post the 2008 financial crash, Conservative government austerity policies impacted significantly funding of the policies and priorities of the Welsh government.

While the block grant system allows the Welsh Government freedom to allocate funds between devolved policy areas as they wish, substantial year-on-year cuts in the total sum has necessitated difficult decisions (Deaner & Phillips, 2013). These include reduced real-term budget reductions for local authorities in Wales (estimated at a net revenue cut of £577 million in 2017–18, relative to 2009–10; Ifan & Sion, 2019), undermining their capacity to deliver community services and undertake projects outside of the context of providing statutory requirements.



**Figure 1.** Welsh regional boundaries identified for spatial and strategic planning purposes in the 'Future Wales National Plan 2040', encompassing 22 local authorities. Source: Welsh Government (2021).

In urban south Wales, this has reduced the capacity for the state to meaningfully address evident and concentrated forms of post-industrial decline, poverty and inequalities of opportunity. In rural Wales generally, and mid Wales specifically, there are challenges of a different nature; not least of which is the potential impact of Brexit on the agricultural 'backbone' of the region. Low population density, peripherality and the geographical extent of mid Wales mark it a less urgent 'problem region' in comparison with other parts of Wales. Historically, however, mid Wales has been viewed as a central problem region by the apparatus of government. We ask here: What is there to be done for this space, and what alternate futures are there on offer?

This is a question that needs to be addressed now, but it is also one which is far from new and an important lens for considering other rural ‘problem’ regions more generally.

As we discuss below for much of the 20th century mid Wales was ‘the problem region’, a focal point for both Welsh and national government intervention. This was manifest most visibly in the creation of the Development Board for Rural Wales (DBRW) in the mid-1970s. Absorbed by the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) in 1998, in the period since mid Wales has been rendered an intangible and ‘fuzzy’ object of concern in the political panopticon. From 2000 this intangibility and ‘unsolvability’ has been amplified by the emergent discourse of the ‘city-region’.

In the UK city-regional planning primarily emerged as a Labour government initiative in the 2000s, but taken forward and repurposed by later Conservative administrations. A constant, however, has been the notion that successful rural growth is intrinsically tied to the fortunes of urban hubs. As such, the paradigm of city-regions as a primary spatial scale of economic and technocratic governance is now at the heart of regional development planning in Wales, and it is in this new regional policy context that the mid Wales rural region has become visible for reconstruction in the left-behind terrains of Wales’ heartland.

## THE PROBLEM OF MID WALES

In terms of population, self-sufficiency and political significance, mid Wales hit its peak in the mid-to-late 1800s. Agriculture dominated land use, as it had done for centuries, but profitable (woollen) textile and other craft industries provided an impetus for migration within and to the region. At the time of the 1871 census the population had peaked at 316,000, spread across a large number of villages and market towns. By 1971 this figure had fallen to 190,000 with many settlements losing people, industry and services. Explaining and correcting this decline was to come to define state interventions in this region from the 1890s onwards.

A Royal Commission on the ‘agricultural depression’ was initiated in 1893, and in this context land ownership, tenancy and issues of productivity in rural Wales were exceptionalized and politicized around issues of property rights, urbanization, management of economic affairs and a resurgent Welsh nationalism. In 1914, the Welsh Land Enquiry Committee (WLEC) report described a changing suite of agricultural practices which served to reduce labour demand. These included the conversion of arable land to pasture, increased mechanization and the ‘pull of town life’. The report also highlighted issues of infrastructure and services, with very poor living conditions, low-quality housing, and with comparatively limited electric provision and pumped water nearly non-existent.

While depopulation was not unique to mid Wales, the WLEC was at pains to note that the scale of the problem was of a different nature. Where rural counties in England reported population declines between 1881 and 1891 of around 4%, the figures for mid Wales counties were circa 7.5%. In Montgomeryshire the problem was even more acute, with a population decline of 12% over the same period (WLEC, 1914, p. 63). Speculating on the reasons behind this phenomenon, the WLEC posited that many younger rural residents were emigrating to England and North America, reporting that, for example, the figure of Welsh-born living in England in 1891 was 228,616.

By the early 1900s, then, depopulation had been defined as *the* problem facing mid Wales. Indeed, the problem of depopulation came to define the region itself, in tandem with narratives on the broader restructuring of the industrial landscape. Previously lucrative slate quarrying and textile manufacturing industries of the area declined as technology advanced and international competition grew. Here the impact of global transformations in the capitalist economy were keenly felt, particularly the series of deep recessions in the 1920s and 1930s. As Britain entered a period of deflation and mass unemployment in the post-war era, this resulted in significant civil



unrest, in turn prompting the emergence of a more regional approach to government interventions. Mirroring critiques of the current era, these policies were tailored to the industrial urban heartlands and largely overlooked the needs of rural localities (Hatton & Thomas, 2013).

## MID WALES AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF REGIONAL POLICY

In the words of Kevin Morgan, the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s represented a ‘golden age’ for British regional policy, and one which broadly operated according to a donor-recipient model of development (Morgan, 2017). The Special Areas Act 1934 was the first of a series of government interventions seeking to balance and regulate development at a national level. Intended to address soaring unemployment in communities previously dependent on coal, steel, iron, cotton and shipbuilding (including south Wales), financial incentives were offered to businesses willing to relocate their operations. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there remained strong cross-party appetite for planning levers which could influence the location of industrial (re)development. The Distribution of Industry Act 1945 gave the state powers to schedule ‘Development Areas’, granting government powers to build and manage industrial estates, as well as influence through incentives the location of new factories. The footprint of the Development Areas was similar to that of the previous Special Areas, but expanded to include declining metropolitan regions such as Liverpool, most of south Wales and Wrexham.

Post-war reconstruction saw a national planning strategy emerge underpinned by an ethos of decentralization in which integrated industrial and employment policy was framed within a regional discourse. This new regime co-opted municipal actors as agents for the delivery of national government strategy, with regional planning one of the tools for regulating local/regional economic activity. Very much driven by urban concerns, the solution offered focused on arranging growth around – and channelling urban overspill into – a series of poles. Central to this strategy was the New Towns Act 1946, which gave the government the ability to designate suitable areas for development, remove them from local authority control and place them under the supervision of ‘development corporations’. This effectively placed urban development within a fully national planning context. Similarly, the 1947 Agriculture Act, and 1947 Town and Country Planning Act provided national strategic oversight of rural development. Intended as a means of consolidating growth in specified rural localities and protecting agricultural land, the ‘twin pillars’ of rural policy were established as ‘the rational planning of settlements and the rationalisation of agriculture’ (Murdoch, 1996, p. 143).

The emphasis of regional policy interventions changed again, and significantly, in the 1960s. Regional state aid increased tenfold between 1964 and 1970, as did the number of areas eligible for government assistance. With all parts of Wales now earmarked for some level of government support within this ‘intensive phase’ of economic regionalism (Green & Clough, 1982, p. 75), mid Wales in its entirety was classified as an ‘Intermediate Area’. There was also a concerted drive to devolve the apparatus of regional governance to semi-autonomous institutions, including the National Enterprise Board (NEB), and the Scottish Development Agency (SDA). Simultaneously, but with distinct territorial limits, the WDA and DBRW were established by the UK Government in 1976, tasked with regenerating the economy of Wales through a range of functions, including the provision of factories, financing investment and land reclamation.

Significantly the DBRW was given a wider range of responsibilities for the purpose of ‘promoting the social and economic well-being of the people of Mid Wales’ (Alden et al., 1983, p. 34). Along with powers common to other Development Agencies, it also had the capacity to commission housing, provide capital for social development and environmental projects, and to market the mid Wales region. This two-pronged approach, emphasizing economic *and* social development, was unique in a UK context, reflecting a concerted focus on the ‘problem

of depopulation'. So, from where did this specific rural regional development institution with all its properties and functions emanate?

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A RURAL CONTEXT

Mid Wales was defined as a 'classic peripheral region' (Williams, 1985, p. 4), naturalized as deprived and economically marginal. Government criteria for regional intervention on industrial grounds was based principally on metrics of unemployment, hence extensive interventions in the English Midlands and North. Paradoxically, depopulation meant unemployment rates in mid Wales were low, yet the problem was becoming more acute, for example, the mid Wales population declined nearly 5% between 1951 and 1961 (Thomas, 1966).

The Second World War had provided a suggestion of fixes to the problem of mid Wales. New factories had been built in the region to service the war effort and centres of population expanded temporarily to accommodate military training camps. For example, a 'shadow works' (a secret munitions factory that made aircraft components and machine gun barrels) was built in Newtown, Powys, in 1940 and employed several thousand workers, most of them women. The impact of such activities did not go unnoticed.

The Welsh Reconstruction Advisory Council (1944, cited in Thomas, 1995, p. 413) highlighted the important role war time industrialization had played in rural Wales: driving up wages, increasing the purchasing power of communities, lowering unemployment and diversifying the local economy in terms of skills and jobs. They consequently recommended the establishment of small factories in rural locations, while also promoting tourist and crafts industries, to be implemented by an Economic Planning Authority for Wales (Thomas, 1995, p. 416). This proposal was rejected by a UK government fearful of decentralization in an era of nascent Welsh nationalist politics.

The Council for Wales and Monmouthshire, established in 1949 to advise the Labour government and counter growth of nationalist politics, argued that the region could not be 'saved' via endogenous resources, that it needed external aid. It recommended the formation of a 'Welsh Rural Development Corporation' (with £60 million finance – equivalent to £1.5 billion today) to oversee reconstruction of rural Wales (Cmd. 9014). The idea was again rejected, this time by a distinctly 'one-nation' Conservative government (HC Deb 08 Dec 1953 vol. 521).

This tension, between centralized government control of regional economic activity (to achieve national objectives, including of balanced development) and decentralization of the sort exemplified by devolution in 1999, sits at the heart of both the forms and failures of action to address the problem of mid Wales since 1945. Equally so does the relationship between public local economic development agencies, such as the county councils, and other tiers of formal and informal government. For whilst local governments concurred with the diagnosis (depopulation and decline) and the prescription (attracting small industries would halt decline of population, absorb labour leaving agriculture, and attract new labour and communities from over the border in England) powerful regional farming interests opposed competition for (farm) labour, and the influx of non-native migrants into the rural 'heartlands'. As a result, county council development strategy emphasized creating local jobs, and bringing new labour to work in agriculture, forestry and ancillary industries – either making goods from agricultural products or equipment and services that support agricultural activities. Spatial imaginaries were centred on 'growth towns' as sites for these industries, with planning processes used to preclude new operations outside of these sites.

In the absence of active central government support the county councils of mid Wales established a new institution of their own in 1957, the Mid Wales Industrial Development Association (MWIDA). This institution provided an anchor and key personnel around which this clear narrative was pursued at various sites and scales of governance. It compiled data and reports

that reiterated the ‘problem of mid Wales’ and its solutions, and it was peopled by individuals who could both present these and enact policies to demonstrate their putative efficacy.

For example, the Chair was Professor Arthur Beacham of Aberystwyth University who would soon oversee the preparation of ‘the Beacham Report’ (see below). The Secretary (in effect Chief Operating Officer) was D. Peter Garbett-Edwards OBE, who later served as Chief Executive of the Mid Wales Development Corporation (MWDC) and as Director of Development and Finance for the DBRW. Well connected to local elite actors and the Liberal Party (which dominated politics in mid Wales at the time), Garbett-Edwards is an under-recognized lynchpin in the development of mid Wales as a region. Under their leadership the MWIDA established a template for rural development that would be reflected in the operation of the DBRW 20 years later. This involved approaching industry directly in the Midlands and North of England, and promoting newly built factory premises in mid Wales (MWIDA 1959, 1967). Spatial theories of settlement were deployed to identify where to expand and how many people to sustain. Some advocated ideal town sizes of 10,000 distributed evenly across a county, while others tended to focus attention on specific ‘key villages’. All emphasized a diversification of rural economic activity.

For the national government, however, ‘rural’ meant farming and forestry, not industry. Anticipating a narrative that would support this view, the government commissioned a report in 1955 to identify how best to make use of the agricultural resources of mid Wales. Somewhat unhelpfully the resultant findings of the Welsh Agricultural Land Sub-Commission concluded; most farms were too small to be viable, the pace of depopulation sat at the heart of the problem (described in existential terms as ‘this massive exodus’; HC Deb 4 July 1956 vol. 555 cc 1334), and that (repeating the findings of the WLEC Report of 1914) economic infrastructure (electrification, water systems, telephones) were woefully behind other regions – this narrative and reality remains central to discussions about the problem of mid Wales today. Instead, the Sub-commission recommended an approach which resonated strongly with that of the MWIDA, pointing to alternative, non-agricultural growth as the only solution to the primary problem of depopulation. The Sub-commission also advocated a ‘development corporation’ for mid Wales. Again, the proposal was rejected by the UK government.

While depopulation characterized the problem of mid Wales, over-population was seen as the challenge facing urban England. Birmingham, for example, wanted to move people and industry out of the over-burdened city – but people and industry did not want to move in isolation. Sites for industry and homes for people were two sides of the same coin, but both entailed significant costs for local authorities (particularly land purchase). It was here that an alternative imaginary for the development of mid Wales crystallised around two specific options: state intervention to develop a select few key towns across the five counties, or the construction of a large new settlement in mid Wales.

## MID WALES IN THE POLITICAL GAZE: A TALE OF NO CITIES

Set in this context, the influential Beacham Report (Beacham, 1964) was commissioned by the newly formed Welsh Office. From the introduction of this paper – which identified the ‘settlement pattern, combined with the low level of population, [as the] ... basic cause of many of the problems of mid Wales’ (p. 5) – this report provided a justification and trajectory for the region’s later development strategy. In practical terms it argued development policy in rural Wales should be orientated around regional growth and not to tackling rural decline. Here ‘nucleated’ settlement patterns (centred on 12 growth towns) were deemed the basis of a viable, long-term regional economy and, in turn, arrest further depopulation.

Although this multi-modal approach was presented as one possible development option the report itself advocated a rather different approach, influenced by spatial science and gravity

modelling. Investment would be sunk into one large hub – a new city – (p. 30), as a necessary counterbalance to magnetic pull of the West Midlands and the Cardiff/Swansea cities to the south. This persuasive argument had been long rehearsed within the MWIDA, and soon gained support. ‘The Heartland: A plan for mid-Wales’, co-authored by Emlyn Hooson MP (for whom Garbett-Edwards’ mother was election agent), and published by the Liberal Party in 1965, also promoted a Rural Development Corporation and a regional plan for mid Wales, centred on a New Town of 60,000 people at Aberystwyth (Hooson & Jenkins, 1965). A subsequent study avoided specifying locations but similarly concluded that a new town ‘with a population of some 50,000’ had merit (Thomas, 1966, p. 10).

Therefore, a consensus had been formed around the problem and the solutions for mid Wales. The UK Labour government diverged from this consensus by rejecting a Rural Development Corporation, but they were agreeable to the idea of a new town, commissioning Economic Associates Ltd (including a young Sir Peter Hall) to identify a suitable location. They recommended a development of 70,000 people, stretching over 12 miles along the Severn Valley, centred on the village of Caersws (Welsh Office, 1966).

Baulking at the ambition, this strategy was also not taken forward, but the Labour government pursued the more limited expansion of existing towns, including the (appropriately named) Newtown. This was designated a ‘New Town’ to be expanded to 11,000 people by 1980. The MWDC (with Garbett-Edwards as its Chief Executive) was established in 1968 to marshal this process (Williams, 1985). The Newtown project would prove significant for imaginaries about what development of this region would mean for two reasons.

First, the Corporation had extensive powers, a large budget, capacity to borrow and a holistic approach to planning (centred on communities) that would serve as a template (and staff for) the soon to be formed new rural development agency, the DBRW.

Second, as Alden et al. (1983) note, it presented an ‘unusual case of using the new towns machinery as a means of providing a viable urban centre to build up employment in an area which for many decades had suffered severe depopulation’ (p. 61). Moreover, it is the only time the New Towns Act has been used explicitly as an instrument of rural regeneration (Williams, 1985, p. 7).

The MWDC was folded into the new DBRW in 1977 where its legacies of holistic regional development would inform and typify the new institution. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the DBRW was criticized for its top-down approach, an overreliance on inward investment and an overemphasis on manufacturing at a time of national deindustrialization. It was also perceived as failing to adequately address the shrinking of the agricultural workforce in the face of mechanization and intensification, or sufficiently grasp ‘diversification’ as a defining growth strategy for rural Wales. Such critiques were not unique to the DBRW, or even the UK (Keeble & Tyler, 1995), or beyond (Arcangeli et al., 1980; Hastaoglu et al., 1987).

This holism was seen by some as at the expense of community integrity, with the institution emphasizing *incoming* employers, *inward* investment and *relocation* for key workers. Reflecting wider counter-urbanization trends mid Wales now ‘suffered’ from a net influx of people (from other parts of Wales and from outside the country), while younger educated members of the community continued to migrate outwards, resulting in demographic shifts to a relatively older and aging population. The problems of mid Wales today are now defined as much by meeting the needs of an older population as it is by creating economic incentives for sustaining a working-age population.

These ‘legacies’, the layering and folding in of past institutions, personnel and imaginaries of the future, retain potency 40 years on, not least because the region remains ‘a problem’ – at least by some measures (demography, Gross Value Added [GVA], peripherality, service provision, investment). Solutions to these problems similarly remain informed by experience and imaginaries of the past – not least circulating discourses relating to halcyon memories of ‘the Board

days' and the period when the DBRW operated a wide-ranging programme of rural social and economic investment. These activities corresponded to a growing appreciation within the UK planning establishment that clustering, labour market pooling and agglomeration was better secured through multiple socioeconomic levers (cf. Phelps, 2009).

The DBRW was merged with the WDA and the Land Authority Wales in 1998, and then, alongside the Wales Tourist Board and Education and Learning Wales (ELW<sub>a</sub>), was itself abolished in 2006. These functions were absorbed into a nascent Welsh Government with centralizing tendencies. The year 1998, in effect, marked the erasure of a territorial imaginary of 'mid Wales' from the political map. Whilst it would resurface in fuzzy functionalist form, as government innovated with forms of spatial planning (Heley, 2013), the conception of a governmental body with the breadth of powers to act strategically and intervene in a place-based manner in rural localities has, until recently, been absent from Welsh political debate.

## DECENTRALIZATION, DEVOLUTION AND DRAGONS

The political structures of Wales have evolved significantly since political devolution was secured for the nation in 1997. There have been elements of centralization (e.g., bringing arm's-length agencies such as its economic development bodies 'in house') and elements of subnational decentralization (with various partnership boards, and forms of multilevel governance). The result is a patchwork quilt of legislative, functional and consultative entities operating at multiple spatial and territorial scales, but primarily organized in different configurations around the twin political units of the local authority and the Welsh Government. The emergence of a 'left behind' mid Wales region, left behind because it fills in untidy gaps in UK and Welsh Government attempts to assert territorial control, forms the substance of the remainder of this paper.

Prior to devolution, a regional tier of government within Wales was effectively non-existent, whilst entities such as the DBRW and ELW<sub>a</sub>, arguably, functioned as forms of regional governance. The constituent localities of Wales were far from clear, largely tied to local authorities constituted following 1995 local government reform. Some subnational tiers of government have been erased (e.g., the DBRW), yet simultaneously the Welsh governance terrain has been overlaid with a plethora of new bodies. These include: seven Local Health Boards, four Police Authorities, three Fire and Rescue Authorities, four Regional Transport Consortia and three Regional Skills Partnerships, amongst a range of other jurisdictions.

Legislative innovation has also constructed new forums and sites of local and regional governance. For example, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, widely hailed as trail-blazing for embedding principles of sustainability and intergenerational equity into operations of public sector organizations, includes a requirement to establish a Public Services Board in each local authority area. These bring an array of public, elected, private and third-sector organizations into a statutory body with responsibilities to plan for and improve local well-being. In this way that patchwork is knitted together, with representatives from entities operating across country boundaries working with those confined by them. In this context, then, where sits mid Wales?

To some extent the region resurfaced via the Wales Spatial Plan (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008) (WSP). This was an attempt to 'produce a more nuanced and process-led representation of Wales's internal geography' (Beel et al., 2018, p. 6), one that entailed the invention of six fuzzy bounded regions that had no past precedent in planning strategy. As a vehicle for policy integration at supra-local scale it met with some success in coordinating action beyond established territorial boundaries, but was subject to a number of criticisms. Consultation by DTZ (2008) highlighted the sense that the principal impact of the WSP was felt at a national (as opposed to local) level, and that the strategy's success was far from uniform across the six spatial plan areas. This assessment, note Haughton et al. (2010), was levelled in particular at the 'Central

Wales' spatial plan area, which incorporated the Mid Wales heartland and much of west Wales. For some commentators, this category lacked a genuinely functional remit and coherent identity of its own. Central Wales was implicitly a 'problem' once again by nature of its rural context. Indeed, the 2008 update emphasized a 'hub and cluster strategy' (invested in to provide key functions and services) for Central Wales, rehearsing the 'key settlements' arguments of the 1960s and 1970s (Heley, 2013, p. 10).

The WSP was insufficiently directive: a guide and vision rather than a plan. It was to be displaced in 2020 by a statutory National Development Framework (NDF) that sits above Local Development Plans and 'Strategic Development Plans' (and to which they must have conformity) (Welsh Government, 2021). Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) are to be a new middle tier of spatial plan based upon a regional imaginary of Wales – affirming the centrality of regional planning in Welsh central government objectives for multi-scalar policy coordination. Debate and statements (see Webb et al., 2017) indicted a three city-regions model was likely – North Wales (including Wrexham and looking east to Merseyside), Mid and South West Wales (including the city of Swansea), and South East Wales (including the cities of Cardiff and Newport). Future Wales established four regions, three city-centric, with mid Wales (consisting of the rural counties of Powys and Ceredigion) remaining the rural outlier.

This overt move towards a more a territorially defined, metro-centric planning policy mirrors the wider political adoption of a distinctly hierarchal city-regional model in Wales, and well-documented trends in England and Europe covered extensively as part of the academic terrains of 'New Economic Geography' and the 'New Regionalism'. It is not our intention to cover those associated debates in detail as they have been ably and extensively covered elsewhere (e.g., Harrison, 2006; Jones & Woods, 2013). What we intend to show is the lacuna at the heart of this dominant paradigm, namely the place of the rural region in a model premised on the properties of urban development, and the implications of 'filling in' this space to fit the model.

## HERE BE DRAGONS: MIDDLE WALES IN THE SHADOW OF THE CITY-REGIONS

Through the long history, construction and operation of a regional development policy for rural mid Wales we can observe a number of features common to many rural regions. First, the persistence of problems, and the processes of problematization. Second, the significance of individuals and networks of 'elite' actors in constructing and defining such problems and their associated solutions. Third, the relational nature of those problems – mid Wales as a site of outflow and influx of migrating people to neighbouring regions, economically peripheral except in relation to markets mediated via neighbouring regions. Fourth, the fluid and constructed nature of the region itself. Fifth, the material effects of that construction in reconfiguring activities, inhabitation and political interventions over time.

In this section we turn to more recent imaginaries of (city-regional) development, their adoption and enactment at a regional scale within Wales, and the relation between these and 'left-behind' rural spaces.

City-regions as a practical driver of UK policy rather than conceptual framework for academic analysis emerged during the latter part of New Labour's government in the 2000s. Labour had initially been concerned with regions as crucibles for growth and regeneration but the emphasis gradually 'swung back' towards localism – or, rather, urban-localism – particularly evident in the Local Government Act 2000. By the times of the subsequent Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government the received wisdom was that the city-region was the 'natural' scale of economic governance (Harrison, 2012). This is not to suggest that the shift to city-regional planning has been either clear-cut or uncontested (Lord, 2009; Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017), but city-regions have – without doubt – been seen by many policymakers as the only viable option for

what Amin and Thrift (1994) refer to as ‘holding down’ global processes, and for exercising influence at a distance as part of international networks of economic actors (Sheppard, 2002).

Within Wales, the move towards city-regions is more recent, impacted by the uneven physical geography of Wales, demographic and economic concentration in two major cities in close proximity in the south, and often complex constitutional geography post-devolution.

The (at times) difficult relationship between the Welsh Government and local authorities over matters of local government organization – Labour have sought to reduce the number of local authorities from 22 to 8–10 (Jones et al., 2015) – has further coloured the perception of motivation for formalizing regional approaches to service delivery across multiple authorities. Some, such as those instituted through Welsh Government legislation as Public Services Boards, are focused on joint working within local authority boundaries (i.e., bringing organizations that operate above and below this spatial scale to coordinate delivery within the local authority area). Others are functionalist, corralling public and private actors into new Joint Committee agreements committing partners to working across jurisdictions in a regional setting (e.g., Joint Committees on schooling or health provision).

Privileged within this discourse are the regional development vehicles formulated to implement the Westminster initiated ‘city deals’ – ten local authorities comprise the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR), and four the Swansea Bay City Region (SBCR). Each leverage substantial UK Treasury, Welsh Government and local authority investment (CCR initially £1.2 billion, SBCR £630 million) and seek to implement the lessons of successful city-regions to regenerate the economy of Wales. The negotiations for these eye-watering levels of investment entailed horse trading between UK Treasury, Welsh Government and local authorities, but also represent a fascinating example of UK government seeking a toehold in devolved matters in devolved jurisdictions.

There have been voices of concern regarding the democratic credentials of the (Welsh) city-region paradigm (e.g., Beel et al., 2018), compounded by institutional and practical aspects of these governance arrangements. These arrangements do not include an elected mayor (as required for English city deals) and they also privilege business leaders, who take a prominent role in determining projects and investment priorities. It follows that economic goals take precedent and the terms of success overwhelmingly set out in analogous ways, including capital expenditure, inward investment and job growth, with business and political elites effectively licensing social and civic capital (Beel et al., 2018, p. 12).

To return more determinedly to the focus of our paper, where does this leave mid Wales? If Wales’ city-region approach has been critiqued as being democratically un-inclusive within its own territorial context, it has also been characterized as spatially selective. Shucksmith (2008), for example, sees UK city-region policy caricaturing the modern metropolis as the locomotive of economic competitiveness, with rural areas as the carriages being pulled in their wake (p. 63). No doubt aware of the political pitfalls of cultivating this caricature, and of ‘addressing rural localities solely in relation to the urban’ (Woods, 2009, p. 852), policymakers have been ‘aided and abetted’ by the new regionalist orthodoxy and the normative claim that city-region policy interventions can overcome the arbitrary divide between urban and rural (Harrison & Heley, 2015, p. 1114).

This rhetorical privileging of functionally networked space over territorially embedded administrative arrangements can only go so far, however. On this point, Neil Ward has called attention to the recasting and sublimation of ‘the rural’ in language of city-regions, determining it to be a retrograde step: ‘The city region approach reproduces a rural development problem. It establishes and reinforces out-of-date notions of geographical centrality and hierarchies, and it actively marginalises places, consigning them to the periphery, dividing and polarising’ (Ward, 2006, p. 52). Written over a decade ago, the concerns evident in this passage ring as true as ever, particularly in the political discourse surrounding mid Wales. Lacking a large urban centre,

and largely set apart from Swansea and Cardiff by nature of distance and a limited communications infrastructure, stakeholders in this region have been forced to think strategically about the socioeconomic future of this space. In an era of city-regionalism, how is growth possible without a city?

## DISCUSSION: A NEW MODEL FOR RURAL-REGIONAL GROWTH?

At present, the prospect of mid Wales emerging from out of the political and economic shadow of city-regions squarely rests on the formation and implementation of a 'Mid Wales Growth Deal'. Looking to 'underline' their support for the area's economy the UK Government announced it would welcome proposals for a 'growth deal for mid Wales' in the 2017 Autumn budget. At the time the Cardiff and Swansea city (region) deals had been agreed and a growth deal for north Wales outlined in broad terms. All entailed a mix of UK Treasury, Welsh Government and local authority funding.

The Mid Wales Growth Deal came long after those agreed for Cardiff and Swansea city-regions, but also a growth deal for North Wales (Off. Sec. St. Wls. 2018). Looking east, it was celebrated as an opportunity to 'transform our economic futures and integrate Mid Wales into the wider Midlands economic engine' (Russell George AM).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, the Leader of Ceredigion County Council, Ellen ap Gwynn, indicated that the Growth Deal was of vital importance and a matter of economic survival. She identified mid Wales' reliance on the public sector as an historic weakness, making the case that without substantial investment in business support the region would become little more than a 'playground' for tourists.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating significant support for the proposed Growth Deal, comments such as these are to be expected from the political establishment. What is more, they reproduce commonplace accounts about the character and shortcomings of the mid Wales economy, and a pervasive sense of being marginalized and left behind. Reverberating with political rhetoric employed in Scotland, as detailed by Clelland (2020), these narratives also talk to the political imperative to seek models for growth which are inclusive and further inter-regional equity.

This narrative is also central to a report commissioned by the Growing Mid Wales Partnership (AECOM Economics, 2018) albeit with less emotive language, where an executive summary includes reference to: the outward migration of young working-age people, the lack of physical and digital connectivity, a limited transport provision, low levels of employer training, underemployment, an ageing and declining population, as well as a lack of commercial and residential development in many parts of the region. The picture painted is all too familiar. Indeed, if one were to retrospectively substitute this text into the introduction of the 1959 MWIDA report on Development in Mid Wales, or the 1964 Beacham Report, the only likely give-away to the casual contemporary observer would be the reference to digital connectivity. This is not a reflection of the report, but rather a commentary on the evident failure of past policy and rounds of investment to address these issues fully or even partially.

This legacy of apparent underachievement informs readings of past policy interventions going back over 100 years and absolutely informs current judgements of what is possible going forward. Giving evidence to a National Assembly report on City Deals and the Regional Economies of Wales, for example, the North Wales Business Council has argued that Growth Deals cannot become a 'silver bullet for low GVA and deprivation' (National Assembly for Wales Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee, 2017, p. 16). Elsewhere, and in a press release for the Welsh Liberal Democrat party's proposals for a Mid Wales Growth Deal, there is evident criticism of past policy in their appeal to avoid '[a]nother half-baked strategy that does nothing to tackle the core challenges facing Mid Wales' (Welsh Liberal Democrats, 2018). In calling for a plan that 'transforms the region', the matter of resources and funding is central and problematic, and here ambition for and prioritization of this mid Wales region seems limited.



In 2019 the North Wales Growth Deal secured £240 million over a 15-year period from the UK and Welsh governments, anticipating significantly more contributions from partners and the private sector. Like the Cardiff and Swansea city-region plans these are based on infrastructure, connectivity (to the Merseyside metropolis and 'Northern Powerhouse', agglomeration economies, technical specialism and innovation centred on education institutions, new technologies and extant manufacturing sites). The amount agreed is appreciably less than sums allocated to the Cardiff and Swansea city-region partnerships. The deal for Mid Wales is less still, likely amounting to £55 million from both governments over 15 years. To put this in context the DBRW spent £31 million over the five-year period between 1977 and 1982 (Alden et al., 1983, p. 238), corresponding to a figure of around £35 million per year adjusted for inflation. Much of this was sunk in infrastructure costs – housing, factory space (between 1978 and 1996 the DBRW constructed and owned 380 factory units) – and, what came to define the uniquely holistic nature of the body, social grants (focusing on youth, community, sport, culture, promotion and events) which grew from circa £150,000 in 1978 to £1 million per annum by 1994.

Significantly the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales was identified by the UK Government as the vehicle for agreeing these city deals. After nearly two decades of invisibility the Welsh Office, the rump of UK Government still present in Wales, has manufactured a role in steering Welsh economic development policy. The final agreement by UK Treasury of a £55 million 'growth deal' for mid Wales filled in the gap on the Conservative government map of Wales. In October 2019, the Conservative Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales pronounced that 'every community in Wales will be able to come forward with new regeneration ideas to be funded by the UK Government and partners' (Welsh Conservatives, 2019). The political purpose in the run up to a UK election was overt: to reassert UK government relevance in a devolved context, using the occasion to contrast UK Government's prioritization of stimulus packages for Welsh local areas to the Labour administration in 'Cardiff Bay'. In effect these deals, as much as decisions to prevent or create a mid Wales development body in the 1950s and 1960s were, were crafted for political purpose, in this case to bypass the devolved institutions and present a case for the relevance of the Union to local people, businesses and voters.

Whilst the Mid Wales Growth Deal constitutes an important opportunity to bring investment to the region its capacity to underpin significant long-term growth and development – or even bring the region's infrastructure and foundational economy into parity with other areas – must be questioned. We do this on the basis of both the comparatively limited financial resources earmarked for the scheme, but also in respect to the limited success of past rounds of restructuring. This is not to belittle the work of the MWIDA, MWDC or DBRW etc., or underrepresent the significant political and material changes these institutions brought about in the region, but rather note that the 'problem' of mid Wales remains despite of these projects. It is also the case, then, that the Growth Deal is also an important opportunity to reflect on what kinds of futures are desirable for mid Wales, and how success will be measured. This surely must include inward investment, enhanced employment opportunities and an upsurge in business activities, but what other outcomes might be important, how might they be achieved and how might they be valued? Is GVA the most appropriate yardstick of success and how does its adoption determine the priorities and types of intervention such development plans seek to enact? It is not our intention to provide any answers here, but we are mindful that regional development does not take place in a vacuum, as our paper illustrates.

To reiterate arguments raised by Bristow (2005), the discourse of regional competitiveness is ubiquitous, ill-defined and narrowly focused on particular conceptions or imaginaries of what regions should be, and this rhetoric serves a political purpose in that it allows for particular, predictable policy actions to take place. Propelled by a neo-liberal consensus and a business elite, this device is often in reference to external threats and used to 'legitimate the decentralisation of economic governance, supply-side economic interventions and performance measurement

imperatives' (p. 304). In the case of mid Wales and the proposed growth deal this set of circumstances is very much in evidence. With concerns around Brexit and being left in the shadow of south Wales' city-regions looming large, the way forward is very much being centred on endogenous leadership and innovation in agri-tech, the creative economy and tourism. Should the Growth Deal fail to materialize transformative change, or fail to meet the weight of expectation, the narrative of marginalization and perpetuated inequality is bound to continue.

To return to recent critique of the formulation and implementation of the North Wales Growth Deal as offered by Beel et al. (2020), it is not the case that the city-region agenda as employed in Cardiff, Swansea and other parts of the UK has been dropped into mid Wales (Harrison & Heley, 2015; see also Davoudi & Brooks', 2021, attentiveness to imaginaries and the erasure of the 'environs' by 'cityness'; and Hoole & Hincks, 2020, for a spatial-governance-oriented analysis). Rather, we argue, it is apparent that the city-region agenda is very much shaping the possibility of what this rural region can 'become' when aligned with an urban-centred policy prescription (Beel et al., 2020, p. 728). For our part, we would also suggest that the portrayal of mid Wales as a lagging economy both narratively and materially, as well as the prescription for its salvation in the form of a materialist, agglomeration logic, is far from new and certainly far from assured (Schneider & Cottineau, 2019). While such observations have direct relevance to the UK where city-regional models have become hegemonic, there are obvious synergies in our analysis with the city-region/rural dynamic in other contexts outside the UK (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Lang & Török, 2017). As such this manner of deep-historical analyses of regional difference and inequalities helps expose how (often interrelated) political discourses of 'rural', 'lagging' or 'failing' regions are (re)produced, with such processes not being isolated to the UK. Taking the position that we need to understand the importance of past policy interventions as a basis for appreciating 'place-specific endowments' of people, industries and institutions, this resonates with Iammarino et al.'s (2018) call for approaches to regional development which are nuanced and not habitually fixated on neo-liberal measures of growth and competitiveness.

Through this paper we offer a flavour of the qualities, character, path dependencies and legacies of institutions, institutional and individual imaginaries centred upon a specific non-city-region located in a political and economic space that is increasingly constructed on metrics and policy notions that presume the city is the motor of the region. And that, then, is what we challenge. Referring back to Coombes (2014) we argue for a 'regions-first' approach to analysis as a corrective to the cities-first approach to policy.

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## NOTES

1. For an overview and cross-national examples, see the associated special issue of *Raumforschung und Raumordnung – Spatial Research and Planning* edited by Zimmermann and Getimis (2017).
2. Quoted in the *Shropshire Star* (24 October 2018).
3. Quoted in BBC News (31 January 2019).

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