Chapter 5
The Subnational Region:
A Utopia? The Challenge of Governing Through Soft Power

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ABSTRACT

Most states worldwide possess two or three levels of government, from national to provincial and localities. Subnational governing arrangements are emerging in response to widespread decentralization, globalization, and urbanization, with this level increasingly considered the ideal spatial scale for effectively harnessing governing capacity. Yet regional governing arrangements often lack the traditional statutory and administrative governing tools of the state. Instead, they tend to rely on voluntary co-ordination and co-operation. Emboldened with more traditional governing tools, provincial and local states can work against these networks to protect their own power. This case study of Sydney, Australia, examines the dimensions of hard and soft power in a regional governing network and the role of provincial and local actors in determining the prospects for regional governance. In the absence of state-like mechanisms of hard power, the soft power on which regional governing networks rely will likely remain inferior for the governing task.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional theories of the state identify three spatial scales of governing: national, provincial, and local (Bardhan, 2002). Each of these has emerged in different places at different points in history, waxing and waning in their dominance as spatial scales of governance (Fukuyama, 2011; Hersschel, 2014; Kissinger, 2014). Over the last few centuries new scales have emerged.

First witnessed in the Hanseatic League of the 14th–18th centuries, supranational governance has grown in prominence. Today it is seen through the proliferation of bodies such as the European Union, United Nations, Arab League, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Group of Eight (G8), and Group of Twenty (G20) (Kissinger, 2014).

At the subnational level, the 1684 Treaty of Westphalia laid the groundwork for modern-day city-states such as Monaco and Singapore (Kissinger, 2014). Alongside the provincial and local state, the neighborhood, precinct, district, and region are now common spatial scales for subnational governance. However, these new scalar realities for governance are not countenanced in traditional theories of the state and have had somewhat limited success in achieving legitimacy (Herrschel, 2014).

Over the last century, regions have risen to particular prominence as a spatial scale for subnational governance (Maxey, 1922; Savitch & Vogel, 2009). This scale is positioned as a utopia – one at which governing capacity can be most effectively harnessed in an increasingly globalized, urbanized, and decentralized world (Heinelt & Haus, 2005; Herrschel & Newman, 2002; Kubler & Heinelt, 2005; Lefevre, 1998). This chapter explores the rise, fall, and re-emergence of the region as a spatial scale for governing Sydney, Australia, to understand the prospects for regions as new scalar realities for subnational governance.

THE GOVERNING TASK

At its broadest level, governance involves the provision of services, when and where needed, to realize collective goals (Gleeson & Low, 2000). Representative, welfare, technocratic, collaborative, integrative, and resilient are all examples of different types of governance (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). Some, such as representative, welfare, and technocratic, rely on the statutory and administrative tools of the state to compel service provision (Healey, 1997). Others, such as collaborative, integrative, and resilient, rely on voluntary co-ordination and co-operation for service provision (Healey, 1997).

In most parts of the world, governments define, and are defined by, systems of taxation, service provision, and representation which, together, enable the governing tasks (Hambleton, 2007; Kubler, 2005; Mulgan, 2007). The first of these tasks is to make decisions on collective goals (such as wellbeing or economic growth) and the services needed to realize these. The second is to co-ordinate resources to provide services which realize collective goals.

These governing tasks are legitimized by political parties committing to particular collective goals and offering different service and resourcing packages to realize these. Once elected through spatially bound political competitions, a party forms government charged with delivering the service and resource package. This task typically relies on the hard power statutory and administrative tools possessed by the state. Through these tools, governments coerce collective action to deliver services and secure resources for these (Kubler, 2005). However, calls of government failure – a crisis – in these tasks have grown over the last few decades (Fukuyama, 2014; Keane, 2009; Norris, 2011).

Whilst governments have responded successfully to prior governing crises, the Great Depression being a prominent example, a new wave has emerged. Glacial action on climate change and rising wealth yet growing income inequality are more commonly cited contemporary examples (Fukuyama, 2014; Gore, 2013; Keane, 2009; Norris, 2011). It is often argued decentralization, urbanization, and globalization lie at the roots of these crises and necessitate a response through new modes of governing (Fukuyama, 2014; Gore, 2013; Heinelt & Haus, 2005; Innes & Booher, 2010; Keane, 2009; Lefevre, 1998; Mossberger, 2009; Norris, 2011).

Decentralization has shifted responsibility for delivering collective goals across and between governments. Globalization has raised material living standards and public service expectations, and mobilized economic resources, making it harder for governments to corral and deploy them within territorial

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