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Re-thinking non-core regions: planning strategies and practices beyond growth

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ABSTRACT

Periods of ongoing growth in the economy and demographics have come to a halt for many European regions for various reasons, challenging their economic development prospects. Despite the heterogeneous nature of stagnation, decline, peripheralization or even stigmatization to be found there, these configurations 'beyond growth' have in common that short-term 'fire-fighting' policy approaches aiming to foster regional economic growth face some important limitations. We argue that this has to do, among other things, with the overall direction of established and orthodox planning approaches that are predominantly based on growth-oriented paradigms and implicitly or explicitly work with dichotomous categories such as core-periphery and metropolitan versus non-metropolitan spaces; these do, however, not capture local realities in these cases. Using the notion of non-core regions, we plead for conceptualizing non-core regions and their regional economic development trajectories in different ways: thinking 'beyond growth'. Such alternative ideas should be informed by alternative understandings of growth, development and sustainability in order to influence theories and concepts, but also to support new approaches to planning practice. To this aim, we discuss non-core regions from a social constructivist perspective, elaborating some points of departure for conceptualizing and practising regional planning 'beyond growth'.

KEYWORDS

Regional planning; non-core regions; growth paradigm; rural–peripheral regions; regional economic development

Introduction: conceptualizing non-core regions

In the past years, many regions throughout Europe have been experiencing stages of decline in various dimensions. In Southern Europe (Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal), economic downturn, high unemployment rates and low investment activity characterized economic development in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (Faruqee, Scott, & Tamirisa, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2016; Uxó & Álvarez, 2017; see also Ballas, Dorling, & Hennig, 2017), which has been, and is still being, exacerbated through neoliberal austerity policies (Hadjimichalis, 2011). In this context, economic growth associated with improved local employment opportunities, and the goal of emigration of young, well-educated

people coming to a halt, are targets that seemingly came out of reach. Examples of long-lasting, and strongly intertwined, phenomena of economic, social and demographic decline can be found in Central Europe, for example across rural areas in Eastern Germany and Central Eastern European (CEE) countries such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, and also in the Baltic States (Lang, Henn, Ehrlich, & Sgibnev, 2015; Martinez-Fernandez, Kubo, Noya, & Weyman, 2012; Steinführer, Küpper, & Tautz, 2014). In Central Eastern Europe, regions and whole countries face severe demographic challenges such as population decline, ageing and youth migration, along with the post-socialist transformation of the economic landscape including heavy de-industrialization. Also, many rural and old industrial regions in Germany, France and the UK have been facing issues of decline and urban decay for the past decades (Danson & De Souza, 2012; Lagendijk, 2000).

These European examples have in common that they represent different configurations of economic stagnation and decline that go beyond short-term economic recession, a condition which cannot be solved only through quick fixes such as financial stimuli or exogenous growth impulses (see Albrechts, 2004). Instead, complex economic-social-demographic dilemmas shape the future of regional economic development in these cases, implying persistent, and mutually self-reinforcing, processes of social and economic marginalization, spatial, political and discursive peripheralization (Copus, 2001; Kühn, 2013; Kühn & Bernt, 2013; Lang, 2015), and even stigmatization (Meyer, Miggelbrink, & Schwarzenberg, 2016).

In this paper, we associate such configurations with the notion of ‘non-core regions’ by considering them as spaces outside of the major agglomerations with contexts often described with terms such as rurality (Freshwater, 2015; Somerville, Halfacree, & Bosworth, 2014) and peripherality (Copus, Skuras, & Tsegenidi, 2008; Danson & De Souza, 2012; Gatrell, 1999; Lang, 2015) or as structurally weak with a need to mobilize resources for learning and ‘upgrading’ (Lagendijk, 1999, 2000).

Despite their multiple facets and trajectories of growth and non-growth, many conceptualizations rest on dichotomous categorizations of metropolitan versus non-metropolitan areas (Lagendijk, 2000; Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007), the urban-rural divide (Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, & Skuras, 2004; Terluin, 2003) or core-periphery configurations (Copus, 2001; Ottaviano & Thisse, 2004). As a result of the prevalent dichotomies, ‘non-core regions’ are typically juxtaposed to ‘core regions’ and associated with negative connotations such as unfavourable economic conditions (Copus et al., 2008; Labrianidis, 2006; Virkkala, 2006), inflexible social network architectures (Terluin, 2003) and insufficiencies in infrastructures and accessibility due to remoteness (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010; Combes & Overman, 2004; Vickerman, Spiekermann, & Wegener, 1999). This predominantly negative image of non-core regions is also reflected in the mainstream planning approaches (Danson, 2009; Lagendijk, 1999; Tödtling & Tripll, 2005).

A social constructivist approach to planning in non-core regions

Based upon these observations, we argue in this paper that the ‘toolbox’ for local and regional development under conditions ‘beyond growth’ should be enlarged, incorporating heterodox approaches and concepts such as social economy approaches or vicarious

habitation. Within this special issue, we give space to such ideas from non-core regions which drastically differ from orthodox planning approaches. This is not to say that growth-based strategies for regional economic development are generally misleading but to acknowledge there are more and more places where such strategies are prone to failure (Bernt et al., 2014; Haase, Athanasopoulou, & Rink, 2016; Wirth, Elis, Müller, & Yamamoto, 2016), in particular if they are based upon unrealistic ideas of population growth or strong external investments as a lever for policy-making. Further, we argue that all too often, development strategies for non-core regions are based upon classic ideas around agro-food industries or tourism although alternative development paths would be possible, which might take into account a more differentiated conception of local economies outside the traditional functions (Reidolf, 2016).

Traditional, orthodox planning concepts have recently been criticized in the wake of local-regional transformations towards more sustainable conditions of development (Ferguson, 2015; Rydin, 2013). In this respect, the global financial crisis also marked a turning point for urban and regional planning, as has been acknowledged by Siemiatycki and Siemiatycki (2016) or Ponzini (2016). Planning philosophies, which do not adopt the idea of generating growth, are beyond the scope of the established planning practice that is considered to be 'ill-prepared for managing shrinkage' (Bernt et al., 2014, p. 1750). Hence, this special issue is particularly addressing heterodox, alternative approaches of development beyond the classical growth-based strategies focussed towards smart specialization and inward investment (European Commission [EC], 2010; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2015).

Against this backdrop, it is our aim to give an alternative development perspective on planning strategies and practices for non-core regions, which claims that polarization and heterogenization of the economic-social landscape are both a result of and precondition for contemporary capitalism in Europe. Indeed, it is often said that regional development in Europe becomes more and more polarized with fewer attractive and flourishing core regions and a rising number of regions with development challenges or characterized by processes of decline (Dubois et al., 2007; Lang, 2015). As a result, both economic and population growth are very unevenly distributed across Europe, which can be seen as a typical feature of contemporary capitalism. However, this regional pattern of polarization and heterogenization has also been supported by long-standing, established planning approaches, for instance, the growth-pole strategy (Barr, 1999) or industrial cluster policies (Hospers & Beugelsdijk, 2002). Moreover, polarization and heterogenization are reflected in the dynamics of economic development and its spatial manifestations (for example, Ezcurra, Pascual, & Rapún, 2007; Hoggart, 2005).

Consequently, we acknowledge a growing heterogeneity among non-core regions in Europe, both from a static and dynamic perspective on regional development. This challenges the mainstream understandings of and approaches to development of non-core regions in the contemporary post-growth era, both from a conceptual and practical viewpoint. Most noteworthy, Pike, Rodriguez-Pose, and Tomaney (2016) stress that these regions grow, but that their development path should be approached from a different perspective than the one with a purely quantitative interpretation of economic growth; they plead for both broader and more variegated categories including social, cultural and political ones (for example, well-being) in order to understand the contemporary challenges for local and regional development. In addition, it is necessary to explore in-depth the local level, which is often considered as a magnifying class for the multi-scalar and complex

problems many regions are facing, yet neglected as a conceptual level of modelling and understanding economic development. These endeavours are, however, still in their infancy and need to be informed by alternative conceptualizations of the underlying paradigms (Haapanen & Tapio, 2016; Matuszewski, Leick, & Demuth, 2017).

Acknowledging these challenges, our perspective on non-core regions and their development 'beyond growth' is a social constructivist stance, which focuses on the processes how core or non-core regions are produced and re-produced. In this respect, we take up the acknowledgement by Capello and Nijkamp (2009, p. 1) that 'changing regional welfare positions are often hard to measure'. Therefore, we deem an alternative, social constructivist perspective as fruitful because it explicitly considers that social and economic factors are mutually self-reinforcing and inter-related and that this inter-relationship cannot be captured as simply as purely quantitative statistical indicators, for example, with GDP growth and employment rates or convergence efforts over time suggest (Capello & Nijkamp, 2009).

The emerging pattern of spatially uneven development and coexisting convergence and divergence processes across European regions (Martin, 1998; Puga, 2002) is also represented in the contemporary planning policies and practices at various levels (Galland, 2012). Yet, policy approaches do not account for the needs and idiosyncrasies of non-core regions, partly because 'role models' prevail (Lagendijk, 2000), which favour central, non-peripheral or core locations (Danson, 2009), and partly because many of these regions are 'locked in' their configuration of being outside the core, i.e. peripherality and remoteness, rurality, or persistent economic weaknesses (Lagendijk, 2000). In fact, the empirical observations about non-core regions highlight the need to re-consider both theoretical understandings of 'growth' and 'development' (Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Martin, 2015; Pike et al., 2016) and regional policies or policy-making in practice. We observe that a change in emphasis has taken place, resulting in an emerging debate on questions of that kind, in both regional studies/regional policy (Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Martin, 2015; Pike et al., 2016) and economics (Fadda & Tridico, 2014; Faruque et al., 2010).

Turning instead to the typical development challenges of non-core regions from a social constructivist perspective, a key finding of this engagement is that we wonder how little alternative is often seen in development approaches beyond growth and how seldom mainstream understandings of growth are challenged.

Imaginations of space: understanding core and non-core regions

Recent research on current forms of metropolization related to increasing tendencies of socio-spatial peripheralization across Europe indicates that these processes are also associated with the dominant normative interpretations of 'core' and 'periphery' (Copus, 2001). Core and periphery are not constituted structurally, but emerge discursively (Lang, 2015). Due to the negotiation of spatial categories, spatial structures and land use, space becomes normatively charged (and in part negatively or positively labelled). High rates of emigration do not constitute negative images of shrinking areas alone but rather reflect the stigmatization in public discourse and in relation to other spaces (Meyer et al., 2016). Beetz (2008) depicts the order of centre and periphery in the context of the dominance of the centres in societal discourse where the centres are constantly portrayed as 'core' spaces

of progress. Consequently, it is symbolically of highest importance for urban or regional actors to actively shape the perception of ‘their’ city, town or region towards a positive and widely acknowledged basis for development – or, as Beetz puts it, to become part of the corporate mainstream (2008, p. 14).

It is in this context that questions of power as well as internal and external regional images become central features for the development of non-core regions. The focus is not so much on the power of individual actors but rather on a sort of collective power in the overall societal discourse within which places are or become meaningless or stigmatized. Often, actors representing such places are not involved in the overall (regional) policy discourse or do not get access to relevant decision-taking processes (Eriksson, 2008). When it comes to location decisions of firms, administrative functions and infrastructures, other regions are preferred because actors from non-core regions are not proactively participating in the underlying formal and informal processes of decision-making. In addition, (collective) self-images in peripheralized regions often lead to mental ‘lock-ins’ promoting and re-producing negative regional imaginations (Grabher, 2003; Lang, 2012; Meyer et al., 2016). Picking up these arguments for non-core regions, we establish four propositions to better understand core versus non-core regions based on the proposed social constructivist perspective.

First, socio-spatial polarization should be seen as a dominant multi-level, multi-dimensional process, which is an intrinsic part of current capitalism and market-logics. However, there is an increasing strand of empirically based research claiming that a socially and spatially more even society would also produce more growth (OECD, 2014, 2015; Piketty, 2013), which adds an economic rationale to the primarily social argument for state intervention and regulation of market forces and to advocate approaches to regional policy that maintain the distributive goal. Nevertheless, problematizing particular forms and impacts of socio-spatial polarization and defining urban and regional development keeps being a social process (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2007) and depends on what is seen as normal, acceptable or achievable in a societal discourse. However, novel interpretations of the taken-for-granted discourses (see Wiest, 2016) and innovative problem-solving are hard to include in existing formal rationales (such as programme requirements) and informal social logics (Küpper, Kundolf, Mettenberger, & Tuitjer, 2017, in this special issue).

Second, peripheries are made through material and immaterial processes and practices of peripheralization and centralization. Similarly, rurality is constructed through materialization, but representation and consumption as well (Somerville et al., 2014). It is these processes and practices which should be given more focus in social-science-based spatial research. As all sorts of actors have their (implicit and explicit) shares in these processes, peripheralized regions cannot be seen as victims of some overarching processes beyond their control without any agency to them. Hence, bottom-up approaches to describe local-regional development for non-core regions are an important implication. Neither peripheries nor centres can be considered as static concepts with naturally given features and boundaries. Peripheralization and centralization are dynamic processes instead, which can be reversed, rejected or redirected in the long run.

Third, urban and regional policy is always normative (even if its arguments are based upon empirical data) and framed by individual and collective values linked to specific understandings and conceptualizations of development, desired policy outcomes and

funding priorities. Such understandings, conceptualizations and priorities can be seen as the results of discourses linked to particular governance arrangements, which are only partly state-led. The perceptions of acceptable and achievable forms of socio-spatial development are socially constructed and can only to a small extent be considered as the outcome of a rational process. Exactly for this reason, decision-making and governance are constrained and shaped through specific institutional environments privileging and devaluing certain forms of action, whilst certainly limiting the local and regional room for manoeuvre.

Fourth, there are similar, and often overlooked, constraints in economic development and with regard to activities of economic agents: the economy is a social construct (Beckert, 2011; Granovetter, 1985) and can only partially be explained in terms of rational decision-making. Instead, economic decisions are social decisions and reflect wider institutional and discursive constraints (Rodriguez-Pose, 2013) as well as expectations of individual agents, collectives and groups. Thus, explaining the differences between agglomeration economies in core regions versus rural–peripheral conditions by characterizing non-core regions through economic models only (Capello & Nijkamp, 2009; Gray, 2014) fails to capture the socially constructive dimension inherent in the mechanisms that make and shape these differences.

Alternative approaches to development in non-core regions

Although often receiving only marginal attention in national development strategies, non-core, rural and peripheral areas are home to almost half of the European population, bear major spatial functions and in many cases play a decisive role in political, social and economic processes (McCann, 2004; McCarthy, 2005). Questioning current paradigms which regard the city (and in particular the metropolis) as the major centre for social, economic and political innovation, non-metropolitan areas should also be considered as arenas within which future development perspectives arise (Shearmur, 2012). As non-core regions are often conceptualized as powerless and passive victims of some superordinate processes beyond their control, this position often makes us overlook the variegated dimensions of agency and strategic action linked to ‘non-core’ actors. These forms of agency can range from social interaction re-producing existing core–periphery relations to specific forms of transformation, adaptation or even resistance to dominant representations.

Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) re-working of hegemony explores how the ‘powerless’ can propagate alternative forms of knowledge through networks and cooperation, challenging dominant representations. When applied to regional development, this indicates that the ‘knowledge’ within representations of place has particular effects, and that this knowledge undergoes processes of change and re-articulation. Instead of perceiving uneven power relationships as something fixed, a more satisfactory analysis would explore the multi-dimensional aspects of power through mechanisms such as hegemony. Here, peripheries are not passive recipients of damaging ‘backward’ and ‘stagnant’ types of representation, but play an active role in the discursive process. This leads to questions about ‘peripheral’ strategies of re-working or resisting dominant representations (Eriksson, 2008) and opens up possibilities for a multi-scale conception of centrality and peripherality (Hudson, 2005; McCann, 2004; Sellers, 2002a, 2002b).

Alternative development perspectives for non-core regions should also be based on a re-working of dominant representations of the geography of innovation. The more recent literature on knowledge and innovation (Bathelt & Glückler, 2011), on different types of knowledge transfer (Boschma, 2005) as well as on critical network theory perspectives (Glückler, 2013) opens up perspectives on non-core regions as places of innovation. The inclusion in global networks of information flows and production chains as well as the various ways to generate innovations are completely under-researched when it comes to entrepreneurial activities in peripheral regions (as exceptions: Huggins & Johnston, 2009; Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007; Virkkala, 2006), but these aspects bear the potential to challenge dominant perceptions of the relation between the economy and space. This is all the more important since innovation can contribute to both an increased regional polarization and a balance between core and peripheral regions. With a less normative perspective on the relation between innovation and space, policy-makers will be better able to identify and utilize the economic potentials and opportunities of their regions and to promote change from an entrepreneurial bottom-up perspective. The notion of 'hidden champions' among firms (Simon, 2009) or 'local heroes' in the business community (Stocker, 2013) represents such a potential, which can be considered as an important resource for the competitiveness and economic development perspectives of non-core regions (see also De Noronha Vaz, Morgan, & Nijkamp, 2006; Meng, 2013). In a network economy, it is, however, the social capital and trust (Maskell & Malmberg, 1999), not the stand-alone entrepreneur or, more generally, local agent shaping regional economic development. Matanle and Sato (2010) find such scale-crossing and collective effects in depopulated, shrinking rural regions of Japan where they are being taken 'at varying scales of intervention by official bodies, business leaders, volunteers and social and environmental entrepreneurs' (Matanle & Sato, 2010, p. 205). As a matter-of-fact, enhancing shared trust and promoting innovation based upon common actions and learning are two essential elements of planning practice which supports sustainable economic development in non-core regions.

Promoting alternative economies is another important element of a revisited regional development approach for non-core regions. For regions with severe social problems, the social economy has often been seen as a normative solution. However, empirical research has concluded that the economic impact of social economy activities has mainly been symbolic (Amin, Cameron, & Hudson, 2002, pp. 116, 125). In particular, when it comes to newer forms of social innovation and more recent attempts to reinvent the social economy, there is scope for more research on the role of social economy initiatives in non-metropolitan regions (Christmann, 2011; Ehrlich & Lang, 2012).

Planning approaches and practices in non-core regions: rethinking the established approaches, deriving new ones

Which lessons do these propositions provide for urban and regional planning in non-core regions? How would planning practice have to change if conceptualizations of development would focus on alternative forms and understandings? How could planners support alternative futures beyond mainstream understandings of growth? The special issue addresses at least some of these questions by discussing both conceptual points of

references for new, alternative planning approaches and highlighting empirical evidence of innovative planning practice in non-core regions. To this aim, the special issue first discusses planning strategies for non-core regions by juxtaposing the status quo of 'mainstream' or orthodox planning strategies with local realities. The aim of the first papers in this issue is thus to broaden the theoretical perspectives on non-core regions and help establish alternative conceptualizations to economic growth in a spatial context or with regard to specific types of non-core regions.

Küpper et al. (2017) investigate contemporary planning practice in Germany for demographically declining regions, which they find to be trapped between innovativeness and practicability. Raising the question how local regeneration partnerships in declining regions are influenced by innovation and practicability requirements, the authors explore the factors that determine whether a concept is more innovative or practicable. Their results highlight that planning practice privileges conservative strategies to counteract decline, which is, again, facilitated by an underlying rational-analytic planning model. Whilst this approach to regional planning clearly improves practicability, Küpper et al. (2017) call for not neglecting the innovation dimension of planning. Accordingly, instruments should be included along with the planning strategies to help particularly declining regions develop both innovative and practicable development strategies. With regard to the role and capacities of agency within the framework of the mainstream planning programmes, the authors identify a lack of resources in non-core regions as an important burden and limitation for innovative problem-solving concepts. Therefore, the article not only pleads for the integration of external expertise to local networks in order to expanding access to external resources, but also proposes long-term support schemes for non-core regions, instead of the usually short-term and competitive projects associated with national and EU funding programmes.

The second article challenges the growth-oriented models, approaching their critique from a macro-level and comparative perspective. Smętkowski (2017) compares regional growth factors in pre- and post-financial crisis Central Eastern European regions for core versus non-core regions in this macro-region. The study confirms the great importance of traditional neoclassical growth factors such as exogenous foreign direct investment, which particularly supported economic recovery of the CEE core regions during the crisis. By contrast, local development which is driven by small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) was an important growth factor in the pre-crisis time period, but not for non-core regions. The author finds that intra-regional migration due to regional differences in training and educational infrastructures tends to favour core regions, whilst providing comparative disadvantages for non-core regions. Economic recovery and the long-term economic development of CEE regions after the global economic and financial crisis are conceptualized as a problematic goal for CEE non-core regions because they have neither benefitted from exogenous growth factor during the financial crisis nor profited from SME-led local growth, which could make them become more resilient and less dependent from global corporations. From a broader perspective, the study presented by Smętkowski (2017) emphasizes that EU-funded growth policies are well suited for urban agglomerations in Eastern Europe, whilst the peripheral and rural regions clearly need a different approach to local planning and practice.

Based upon these insights, which emphasize the limitations and even the, to some extent, dysfunctional character of the mainstream policy programmes and concepts

underlying them, applied to non-core regions, the next contributions in this special issue highlight various points of departure for alternative conceptualizations of practised planning which better adapts to the local realities and paves the way for both more sustainable and realistic development perspectives. The ideas and concepts proposed in the following articles have in common that they add important insights to the more positivist understanding of non-core regions and show elements of new approaches for policy-making and planning.

Knudsen (2017) conceptualizes and illustrates the concept of peripheral living in a Nordic context as a counter-approach to centralization, which for example characterizes the contemporary Danish planning approaches, and metropolization. The author's argument is based upon the phenomenon of vicariousness, which is introduced as a perspective to understand rural–peripheral living in Norway and give more meaning to non-core regions despite their economic and demographic marginalization. The positive imaginations of practised rural and peripheral lifestyles form a basis of bottom-up approaches to local policy-making, which can be used by local policy-making in order to build more positive images of remoteness and consider these lifestyles as a resource or amenity, instead of a strain on the economy or society.

Quite in a similar vein, Dax and Fischer (2017) describe how social innovation and amenity-based understandings of rural–peripheral regions facing demographic challenges have recently enlarged the mainstream view on such regions and influenced local policy-making in Austria. Social innovation is proposed as a key element of regional development strategies, which aim to break the negative downward spiral of depopulation and economic limitations for Austrian rural regions. By aligning new policy approaches with concepts that encompass social innovation, the authors claim that stereotypes or stigmata in the mind of local residents and non-locals in the national context about the rural–peripheral, demographically declining regions can be reversed. From a governance viewpoint, the two articles outline the different levers for policy intervention, which range from bottom-up initiatives that work to change the mentality of residents and politicians over time to national, top-down programmes, which might incorporate social enterprises, or, more generally, the commitment of individuals of all kind in non-core regions.

Pro-activeness and commitment of local agents which is manifested as the local engagement of firm owners and entrepreneurs is in the focus in the study presented by Bürcher and Mayer (2017). The authors highlight the role of inclusive social capital, which enables cross-industrial regional collaboration to facilitate joint learning and knowledge spillovers, based upon trustful inter-actor relationships, thereby benefitting the peripheral region that hosts such entrepreneurs. The results of this study shed light on the quality of entrepreneurial social capital as an important resource for economic development in non-core regions, an understanding that overlaps with the idea of social entrepreneurship and social innovation (Christmann, 2011). The engagement that is manifested in the initiatives of local entrepreneurs can be seen as a valuable resource for policy-making and planning.

The following article by Stryjakiewicz, Kudłak, Ciesiółka, Kołsut and Motek (2017) describes the challenges and limitations for local policy-making, which are located in the inherent trade-offs between top-down programmes and their translation and adaptation to local conditions. The authors explore urban development strategies in Poland in the past (1999–2014), present (2014–2015) and future (2014–2020), describing the planning practice as being to some extent trapped between EU programme requirements

on the one hand and local planning needs on the other hand. They present the concepts of urban renewal and regeneration for non-core urban regions in Poland as a potential strategy to cope with the overarching programme requirements and reconcile their top-down goals with local realities. They, however, also highlight the limitations of top-down policies and specifically point to the role of local agents such as firms and NGOs in shaping development in urban non-core regions beyond growth. The message of these articles clearly points out that non-core regions should be approached with a multi-level governance, but it is necessary to find models and concepts that consider local agency and their capabilities, but also their limitations to a sufficiently high degree.

The concluding commentary by Kinossian (2017) picks up the aforementioned arguments and the new ideas for planning approaches and practice. By going back to the initial critique of the mainstream or 'orthodox' planning approaches, the author comments on the novel directions to think 'beyond growth' and highlights different starting points for development alternatives and new planning strategies, which value local resources and better respond to diverse local conditions, specific constraints and opportunities in non-core regions.

Conclusions

Nowadays, local and regional development is no longer marked automatically by the continuation and replication of economic and population growth; instead, regional polarization and heterogenization are ubiquitous phenomena that increasingly overlay political efforts for convergence between regions (Ezcurra et al., 2007; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014). Based upon this premise, we argue in this article that the economic development particularly of 'non-core regions' should be approached from a social constructivist perspective, which could amend traditional planning concepts, because it leaves ample space for thinking 'beyond growth'. Such a planning approach can incorporate new ideas about local assets and resources, the role of agency in contested top-down policy approaches, the functions of representations and manifestations of local challenges and the variegatedness of policy-making in the light of the persistence of dichotomous categories. More generally, the articles collected in this issue provide three insights into the avenues for planning that thinks of non-core regions beyond growth.

First, we acknowledge that the term 'non-core regions' constitutes and reflects an established representation in itself, rather than being neutral. By emphasizing the capacities of non-core regions such as the resourcefulness and pro-activeness of their actors, instead of showing their deficiencies relative to the other category, i.e. the central and core, or metropolitan area, the contributions collected in this special issue demonstrate the possibilities for shaping and changing these representations; these representations might work towards neutralizing the negative connotations, as opposed to the positivist view on the 'core' as the dominant powerhouses of economic activities. Thus, such alternative ideas which we emphasize in this issue pertain, for example, to the power of individual and collective action (social entrepreneurship and innovation, amenity-based concepts). Strongly embedded local actors from business communities and civic society can be important carriers of new representations, which can overcome the negative images of the 'rural', 'peripheral' or 'remote' area in relation to economically flourishing regions.

Second, we propose that the ideological fix on growth-based thinking (Haapanen & Tapio, 2016) should not dominate local policy-making, despite our acknowledgement that the global world of today is uncontestedly shaped by capitalist economics and politics. Nevertheless, on the local level, the capitalist paradigm and its limitations should be at least critically reflected upon or being amended by social and cultural values (see Pike et al., 2016). Social capital can per se be regarded as a resource that offers interfaces to and pipelines between different local and non-local communities (business community and firms, civic actors, politicians, non-governmental representatives). However, the social and cultural dimension of local resources can be less visibly materialized in the life-style preferences (see Knudsen, 2017, in this issue), the local or regional mentality and identity, or the speeches, discourses and narratives (see Meyer et al., 2016; Wiest, 2016).

Third, when it comes to mobilizing alternative ideas in local, regional as well as overarching national or supra-national policy schemes, planning practitioners and local policy-makers will face multiple challenges, which, at the same time, offer much scope for institutional learning. Sometimes building coalitions to support development ideas alternative to mainstream ones through the initiatives of local actors takes time and thus needs a long-term perspective; in other cases, it is rather the openness of regional, national or transnational frameworks and funding schemes that needs to be recognized as an opportunity which allows for new approaches to be tested and contested. In this context, the introduction of new governance approaches, sometimes with fuzzy boundaries and involving alternative coalitions crossing traditional sectoral as well as territorial boundaries, can help to put alternative ideas into practice and slowly change or supplement institutionalized planning cultures.

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