**The Northern Powerhouse In Comparative Perspective**

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1. **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom the concept of shifting power away from Whitehall as a means to foster growth in outlying urban areas has deep roots (Vigar, 2013), with every generation of modern planners bearing witness to some attempt to untangle urban development’s Gordian knot.

Sub-national English governance is, traditionally, a messy affair with arrangements that reflect both the varying nature of the country’s urban and rural landscape, but also the whims and wants of government where decades of relentless reorganisation has left the English cities with a morass of arrangements with which to engage (Downe and Martin, 2006, Leach, 2009, 2010). From the pre-war Barlow Commission (1940) which advocated for a planned decentralisation as a means to remediate what was viewed as a growing state of urban malaise, to the Redcliffe-Maude Review which first advanced the concept of regions (Wise, 1969), the latest policy initiative attempting to respond to the still-growing North-South divide (Parkinson et al., 2016, McCann, 2016) is the Northern Powerhouse which, broadly put, aims to use a series of devolution deals as a means to foster a joined-up-region of the England’s northern cities as a means to create a viable economic counterpoint to London (HM Treasury, 2014).

The emergence of the Northern Powerhouse proposals comes at the end of a concentrated period of sub-national governance reform that began with the election of the Coalition Government in 2010. Beginning with city region-focused Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), which would replace the Government Offices for the Regions (Sykes and Lord, 2011), the major English cities then negotiated a series of ‘City Deals’, which included a modest increase in the ability to plan for economic and transport issues (DCLG, 2011) in return for holding referenda on the installation of a directly-elected mayor model: something which was, broadly, rejected (Sandford, 2015b). The next stage in this flurry of reforms was the acceleration of the city-region-focused Combined Authorities, essentially a committee of the leaders of the local authorities within a city region designed to add a political impetus to the economically-centred LEPs (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013). Expanding upon the powers conferred through the earlier city deals, Combined Authorities took on further control over economic and transport planning for their regions, although perhaps hinting at the difficulties of working across different constituent areas as opposed to one coherent city-based authority, in some areas their genesis was politically fraught (Nurse, 2015a).

It was upon this governance framework that the government laid its vision for the Northern Powerhouse – consolidating the Combined Authority model through the use of devolution deals which went much further than before, granting greater control over strategic planning for housing need, local transport, policing and, in some areas, health spending (Sandford, 2015a). The principle trade-off for these powers would be the installation of a directly-elected mayor for the city region – this time there would be no referenda. Reflecting long-standing perceptions of stable governance, in late 2014 Manchester was the first to sign off its devo-deal (DCLG, 2014). Concerns that this Northern Powerhouse would merely be a Manchester-centric development (Haughton et al., 2016) were allayed when, in late 2015, a number of other city regions, namely Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield signed off their Devolution deals (DCLG, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). In an indication that this local government reorganisation would not be the sole domain of Northern England, Birmingham also signed off a similar deal (DCLG, 2015d) as part of what would be termed the ‘Midlands Engine’. In doing so, the new raft of deals provided a flavour of what the real prospects of a northern ‘mega-region’ might be and, more specifically, the challenges it might face.

Crucially, following a politically tumultuous summer of 2016, which saw the combination of Britain voting to leave the European Union, the subsequent change in administration which saw Theresa May installed as Prime Minister, and the removal of George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer, widespread expectations that the Northern Powerhouse would be fatally undermined proved ill-founded. Though Theresa May’s inaugural speech spoke of a more geographically balanced industrial strategy (Mance and Bounds, 2016), with the genie out of the lamp (Cox, 2016), and elections slated for May 2017, much of the rhetoric and policy framework remains in place. The key difference now is that the May government appears less accepting of the political divisiveness which has riddled the city region agenda thus far (Nurse, 2015a), with the North East seeing their devolution deal taken off the table following a failure to reach an adequate comprise (Halliday, 2016).

Therefore, and despite these wobbles, this agenda can be viewed as the culmination of the most recent localism movement which, argue O'Brien and Matthews (2015), seeks not to regenerate these urban areas, but rather seeks to cement, and capitalise upon progress that has been made over previous decades. For those advocating this approach, the need for large-scale urban regeneration has largely been completed, in part thanks to EU money (Meegan, 2003) and the comparative success of a litany of schemes including (but not limited to) Urban Development Corporations, City Challenge, and the Single Regeneration Budget (Robson, 1988, Ying Ho, 2003, Brownill, 2007). Yet the success of this proposal to create a Northern Powerhouse is far from assured, and it remains to be seen whether these developments can put to bed the age-old issue of competitor cities competing, most recently in entrepreneurial terms, for economic viability in a crowded market (Peck and Tickell, 1994). Indeed, in attempting to deliver this programme the northern English cities must face a series of grand policy challenges, most notably instigating another round of governance reforms which work locally whilst fostering wider collaboration, producing strategic plans for the city regions and perhaps, across the wider north, and connecting the cities through transport reforms. Now, as a means of prompting later discussion which can highlight comparative examples from places where planners have attempted to address similar policy problems, this paper will discuss these grand challenges in turn, considering some of the key issues at play.

* 1. **The Grand Policy Challenges**

*Governance*

In order to access the reforms delivered through the devo-deals, each city region will be expected to install a directly elected executive mayor (DEEM), commonly known as ‘metro mayors’. Once in office, the new DEEM would assume control of the functioning of the city region, directing economic and strategic planning, as well as taking control over police and fire services (Nurse, 2015b).

Yet, ahead of mayoral elections in 2017 an array of questions remain, from how the results of a closed-primary process within politically homogenous areas can engage with the wider populace, to how the imposition of these new DEEMs in light of previous and consistent rejection (Sandford, 2015b) squares with the broader principles of localism (Nurse, 2015b). The former question is, perhaps, difficult to service through comparative examples given that many of the great metropolitan mayoralties (e.g. London, New York) are fiercely and closely contested affairs. Yet the question of whether a model of governance works for the people it governs can be explored in order to consider how officials can meaningfully engage with those they represent.

Given the heavily re-organised governance landscape, of which DEEMs are (probably, for now) the last reform, there remain questions as to how DEEMs fit into this environment and, in particular, how oversight is managed. There is already evidence that the abolition of regional governance has created complications at the local level with, for example, the allocation of EU funds leaving LEPs to act in an *ultra vires* manner (Sykes and Lord, 2011). Now, with the new DEEMs set to form the highest governance structure before central government, it remains unclear as to how the centre-local relationship will be managed. Evidence from the northern cities is mixed, with Manchester serving as a paragon of stable governance (Haughton et al, 2016), whilst other areas show evidence of political infighting (Nurse, 2015a) that in some cases has fatally undermined their devolution deals (Halliday, 2016). In this, we can explore the lessons from other mayorally-governed cities. What is their relationship with their respective state and how are issues where central and local needs come into conflict remedied?

Similarly, in light of the Labour Party candidate for Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham’s, intervention into consultation on the Greater Manchester Spatial Strategy consultation with respect to green belt allocation (Williams, 2017), there is scope to learn from other mayoralties with regards to how the mayor considers, and acts towards the needs of the various sub-authorities within their city. Given the English city regions predominantly involve a number of smaller authorities clustered around a regional economic centre, there is a specific need to explore how other major cities have ensured that their economic cores do not override other authorities, or otherwise.

Beyond the governance challenges, which must be addressed by all cities signing a devo-deal in England, within this premise of a resurgent ‘North’ there is common cause amongst the cities that have signed up so far, and common challenges, most notably: housing and transport.

*Housing*

Reflecting recent national calls for the building of 10,000 homes per year, the latest response to a long trend of the failure of housing supply to keep track of demand (Pan and Goodier, 2012), some city regions have managed to negotiate extra mechanisms through their devo-deal in order to tackle this issue. Most notably, Manchester will have access to a Housing Investment Fund worth £300m over 10 years. However, for most city regions, the key to overcoming this challenge will come through proposed reforms to the planning system which will allow the new DEEMs to designate housing sites as part of new Statutory Spatial Plan (SSS) (Sandford, 2015a).

This SSS will be produced for, and with, the districts of each city region and is expected to include the designation of housing sites as a core activity. Yet this work will produce its own set of challenges, each of which may take a number of forms. Much like London, the balancing of housing allocation across the districts will present a substantial test (Thornley et al., 2003, Morphet, 2011), and the ways in which existing or long-developed local authority-focused core strategies/local development frameworks are both assessed, acknowledged and subsumed in to the larger SSS will be a key barometer of how representative such plans are.

This work, however, has been attempted on this scale before, with efforts to co-ordinate this activity within the former the Metropolitan Boroughs taking place until their abolition in 1986 (Savage, 1990). Yet a perhaps more interesting, and thus far unanswered, question is how housing needs and wider planning issues will be dealt with across the wider Northern region. Are such challenges analogous to those faced by the structures of regional governance under New Labour (Downe and Martin, 2006)? Some organisations, including the RTPI[[1]](#footnote-1), have attempted to formulate their own responses within the Northern Powerhouse framework, yet we can ask where other mega-regions have taken on this task and use it as a means to explore how they have ensured an equitable allocation and distribution of development.

*Transport*

Whilst issues of strategic planning are still being clarified at a city-region and pan-northern level, this work is already under way with regards to transport. This activity is co-ordinated through ‘Transport for the North’, a collective of local transport authorities, LEPs and combined authorities from Northern England, and will result in the production of a Transport Strategy for the North in due course.

Much like with housing, there have been attempts to work at this scale before, particularly through the Northern Way (The Northern Way, 2004). Yet with transport connectively viewed as a bedrock of the Northern Powerhouse’s economic success, the challenge of linking up a mega region containing major cities, airports and sea ports will be sizable and should achieve what the Northern Way could not.

To this end, much of the early work has focused on three distinct elements of transport policy, each with the end-goal of making it easier to travel between the northern cities. The first is a programme of road widening, with plans to widen sections of the oft-congested M62 Motorway which links Liverpool and Hull, on England’s West/East coast, via Manchester and Leeds. The second element will be a period of rail modification, with electrification of the Victorian-era rail lines between Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds in the first instance, with other extensions expected to follow. In the longer term, this is expected to be supplemented by ‘HS3’ the third extension to the UK’s high speed rail network, running west-east. This development, however, is not certain and, given that the HS2 extension is not yet underway, some have questioned whether it will happen at all. Thirdly, facilitated by options taken forward within every devolution deal signed to date, smart-ticketing that will allow the ease of transport both across and within the northern cities will be developed. This will be similar in nature to London’s ‘Oyster’ card which allows travel on multiple modes across the city without having to purchase a ticket.

There are also developments at the individual city region level which will have a significant effect on transport infrastructure. As part of its devolution deal, the Liverpool City Region stands to take over control of the tolling of its road infrastructure, covering the Mersey Tunnels and the new Mersey Gateway bridge in Halton which is scheduled for completion in late 2017 (DCLG, 2015a). This localised control over road pricing has obvious mirrors with London’s congestion charge albeit with differing motivations as, in the case of Liverpool, fiscal management rather than reducing congestion can be seen as the primary motivator behind the changes. In doing so, this sets a precedent for other regions to, potentially, take control over road pricing as part of efforts to combat climate change.

Both the size of the area being linked through this infrastructure development, and the nature of some of the policy innovations raises a number of questions, and presents opportunities to draw upon lessons from other contexts. At its heart, much of the developments remain centred on what is known as ‘the M62 Corridor’: a narrow band across Northern England that includes Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and many of their peripheral regions, with a spur up towards Newcastle (Nurse, 2015b). As such the implications for transport across the wider region remain unclear. For example much of the North West remains uncovered by these developments, with Preston, Lancaster and Blackpool all omitted. Will these areas feel the benefit of any transport initiatives, or will business opportunities pass them by as they become less connected? Similarly, what are the prospects for the peripheries of the core city (e.g. Warrington, Blackburn, Bury, Burnley, Bradford and Hull) who, whilst within the M62 corridor, are not covered by the devolution deals, and as such might not benefit from the transport concessions other areas may enjoy. In asking these questions, we can consider the lessons from other mega-regions. How have international cities incorporated their peripheries and, what are the socio-economic impacts for those places? Similarly, can border-cities be brought into the fold? For example how are places just on the fringes of a metropolitan transport area connected to economic success?

* 1. **The Need for a Comparative Perspective**

Now, and ahead of mayoral elections in 2017 which will see the functional element of the Northern Powerhouse proposals take shape, there is scope to consider at this issue through comparative perspective. Although the concept of creating a mega-region by means of central government policy can be considered novel, many of the issues faced by the northern English cities through this neo-metropolitanisation are not intrinsically new, and there is much that can be learned from other major metropolitan areas. Issues of governance, the delivery of strategic planning and transport infrastructure have been addressed in these contexts before. As such, the policy lessons, both good and ill, will be immediate relevance to those planners and policy makers tasked with turning these reforms into a workable reality. Similarly, we can explore how, if at all, the Northern Powerhouse attempts to address these policy challenges in ways that have not been attempted before.

Now, we will hear from two international perspectives on these issues. The first considers the city regional experience of China, looking at how governance for strategic mega-city regional development has emerged in the post-Mao period. The second encompasses a view from France, reflecting on how the United Kingdom’s devolution and city-regional agenda can draw upon the lessons of recent development across the Channel.

1. **The Emergence and Governance of Strategic Mega-City Regional Development: Experiences from Post-Mao China**

Since the introduction of economic reform in 1978, urban China has seen a rapid development which, by most accounts, is extraordinary not only for its dominant economic role as the world’s factory during the period of rapid global modernization, but also that this growth has encompassed the wide spectrum of variations in China’s vast territory. Much of this success could also be attributed to China’s underlying administrative mechanism where, within a strong state-party system, economic growth has been pursued actively by local government leaders as their performances are directly linked with career prospects (Chien and Gordon, 2008). However, under widespread globalization and intensive territorial competition, attracting proper mobile investment (Agnew, 2000, Dunning, 2000) seems to be a common formula for territorial change on a national and a global scale.

In this environment, mega city-regional strategies have emerged. Examining the emergence of these strategies through the lens of devolution measures, an argument can be made which suggests that Chinese state-led non-statutory planning for its mega city regions represents an up-scaling of state power. This serves as a means to regulate a fragmented local development created through the early period of reform, promoting inter-mega city-regional competition in the national and global landscape. In doing so, and in dealing with the challenges and experiments created through delivering urban or regional governance in an enlarging territory, the regional policy that concerns inter- and intra- regional imbalance is neglected.

Traditionally, Chinese regions were loosely connected in a state of effective self-reliance (Skinner, 1977, cited in Friedmann, 2005). After the creation of New China in 1949, Mao’s regional policy, in line with an “egalitarian and spartan utopia” ideology, attempted to constrain regional inequality by relocating industries in the traditional heart land away from the former treaty ports along the coast (ibid.:33). However, although absolute regional balance was not achieved, territorial competition was not severe as regions did not have the motivation to compete as autonomous agencies (Wu, 2015).

In the post-Mao era, a developmental state approach was appropriated from neighbouring East Asian countries (Logan and Fainstein, 2008, Wu, 2015) and implemented across the state-party apparatus. The result was an intense territorial competition, and a widening, regional imbalance. This economic transition was fostered through three major reform policies. This began with a ladder-step doctrine i.e. Deng’s famous instruction “let some people (& regions) get rich first” that classified three types of regions (coastal, central, and western). The immediate impact of this approach was that millions of rural immigrants from the interior flocked to pursue their fortune in coastal regions (Friedmann, 2005:34). Secondly, a growth pole ideology was adopted which attempted to create a “city-leading-county” administrative system to strengthen the core city using administrative restructuring and annexation measures i.e. “turning prefectures into cities, turning counties into cities, and turning cities and counties into urban districts” (Ma, 2005). This is, in fact, a process of metropolitanisation driven by administrative measures which promote “inflated urbanization” (Chung and Lam, 2004: 945). In 1978, there were 98 prefecture-level cites and 92 county-level cities (citied in ibid., 947). In 2010, the number of prefecture-level cities and county-level cities had respectively grown to 283 and 370 (Chien, 2013:103). Thirdly, the administrative restructuring measures were accompanied with fiscal reform. A new fiscal contract system was first introduced in 1980. Separate types of taxes or revenues were designated and participating provinces and municipalities were allocated a share of revenue (Wu and Gaubtz, 2013). Later, the introduction of tax reform in 1994 saw a shift from a negotiated tax system to a hybrid version which combined tax assignment and tax sharing. In doing so, therefore, local government is given significant revenue generation capacity, including urban land use tax, real estate tax, and urban maintenance and construction tax. Moreover, local government is allowed to keep all extra-budgetary revenue and land revenue from selling state land (ibid).

However, given the overarching political-economic power structure that is firmly in place, the aforementioned newly introduced local powers can vary with the political-economic rank in the sub-national administrative system. Prefecture-level cities are empowered to maximise fiscal extractions from the counties, county-level cities and counties-turned-districts and establish districts under their jurisdiction, whereas county-turned-cities do not enjoy the same power. Going further, county-turned districts and city-turned districts also do not enjoy the same independent fiscal and land-related decision-making power (Chung and Lam, 2004). Therefore, it is expected that cities will seek those higher ranking arrangements in order to have gain more administrative and economic power (Cartier, 2016).

Although initially these reforms were expected to reduce urban-rural separation, several conflicts of spatial-economic development between different levels of government emerged. Firstly, the centre-local tax sharing system became viewed as distorted when neither revenue assignment nor intergovernmental transfer proved adequate in order to deliver all the expected services once social and public service provision was devolved from the central to the local level. The result was that as Wu and Gaubtz (2013) highlighted, local governments began to “ cope with funding shortfalls through a variety of off-budget mechanisms” (ibid., p.187). Secondly, at the regional level, there was a sharp rise in inter-regional variation in fiscal spending, accompanied by a gradual deterioration in public services provided in the less-developed inland provinces (Wong and Bird, 2004). Thirdly, in line with the party-state system and the aforementioned search for promotion from officials which accompanies it, local governments have behaved like a growth machine (Molotch, 1976) e.g. “Local State Corporatism” (Oli, 1992, 1995) or “Urban Development Corporations” (Chien, 2008). Territorial competition at the local levels is fierce. Among local governments with different ranks, tensions are created due to an enlarged but fixed administrative hierarchy and unequal economic and political power. On the one hand, a buoyant central city may tend to exploit resources at the expense of its sub-ordinated counties or districts, for example by unfairly allocating yearly quotas for land conversion from agricultural to non-agricultural use (Liu & Wang, 2000:134, cited in Ma, 2005:489), or unfairly retaining administrative funds (ibid). On the other hand, if the central city is economically weaker than its surrounding counties – a small horse pulling a large carriage - there will be hostility and conflict of interest over investment opportunities and competition (ibid). Yet, some Chinese cities demonstrate their innovation in avoiding these constraints. A county-level city, Kunshan in the Yangtze River Delta area, is widely recognised as a representative case (Cartier, 2016, Chien, 2013) which displays a “unique mismatch between the low administrative rank and great economic performance” (ibid.:103).

Intensive territorial competition and rampant/uncontrolled local development resulted in a polycentric urban entrepreneurialism (Xu, 2008) and serious social and environmental crises (Wu and Zhang, 2010). Consequently, a new wave of up-scaling national initiatives emerged. This included the National Urban System Plan (2005-2020) under the remit of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD), and the Main Functional Area Plan from the land management perspective of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Similarly, “New State Space” (Brenner, 2004) is created at the strategic regional level, where the state governs the region without inserting another level of regional government body into the existing hierarchy (Li and Wu, 2013). Illustrating this intervention, there are at least two regional plans in Yangtze River Delta Area, the most advanced and fast growing region in east coastal China. One example is the Yangtze River Delta Regional Plan, which was developed by NDRC and Yangtze River Delta Urban Cluster Plan Project by MOHURD (Wu, 2015). However, the plan is hindered by a lack of integration at the national level. The former plan, , approved in 2010, exerted state power over local governments through designating “reform experimental zones” and “national strategic areas” while the latter by MOHURD, literally a sector-based department of the central government, lacks the comprehensive power to make any such meaningful policy interventions. Ultimately, experiences from these non-statutory mega city regional planning practices suggest that Chinese state-led territorial competition has shifted its focus from intra- to inter- mega city-regional competition. Indeed, some proactive cities in Yangtze River Delta Area (e.g. Kunshan and Huaqiao) are increasingly recognising Shanghai as the centre of producer services, and positioning as business satellite districts to exploit their proximity to Shanghai. However, such examples may be an exception rather than the rule, and there is a likelihood of illusory collective actions. As Xu (2008) argued from the experience in the Pearl River Delta Area, “…[R]egional strategic planning might be little more than a cosmetic make-over that hides the intensifying competition within major city-regions in China” (ibid.,157).

Territorial governance on such an enlarged scale proves to be challenging. Firstly, when there is a general paradigm shift from government to governance in other democratic regimes, discussing governance in China needs to be interpreted with caution. As Friedmann (2005) argued that:

*“Although Confucians argued for the merits of a bureaucracy steeped in the classics, and the pre-Han legalists believed in exemplary laws and norms of conduct, statecraft in practice was considered to be merely a matter of administrative technique rather than of governance in a broader, more value-laden sense” (ibid., p.95).*

Further, Friedmann pointed out the paradox of norms and inadequate consideration.

*“…such notions are insufficient to ensure good governance. Nor will Confucian virtue and the principle of hierarchy alone solve problems of combining hyper-rapid urban expansion with widely accepted norms of efficiency, livability, and sustainability” (ibid., p.96).*

Secondly, in the absence of any enabling institutional structure at this strategic level, administrative division could hamper large-scale governance since the state space at this level is soft (Wu, 2015). What we can learn from the case of the Guangzhou-Zhuhai railway in the Pearl River Delta is that the implementation of regional planning strategies requires multi-level interjurisdictional cooperation and horizontal networking forces. In practice, “to make joint projects work, commitments for cooperation have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis through extensive bargaining” (Xu and Yeh, 2013:130). That said, to ensure overall stability, governance in China is evolving through constant experimentations and ad-hoc arrangements in response to a wide variety of local situations. Yet, the reaction could be insufficient. As Friedmann maintained”Chinese boxes is, for all of its ingenuity, an inadequate response” because it is apparent that “[t]he mixture of improvisation, experimentation, and pragmatic decision-making superimposed upon a rigid system” (Friedmann, 2005: 115).

Under a pervasive “planning for growth” paradigm (Wu, 2015), recent mega city regional planning strategies in China have moved away from a macroeconomic regional policy that concerns central-periphery imbalance among advanced coastal regions, the industrializing central region, and the underdeveloped western region. This motivation is fundamentally different from the emergence of Northern Powerhouse in the UK that was proposed based on arguments for social equity rather than national efficiency - a political ideology adopted in the socialist regime and post-war welfare state in West Europe (Cameron, 1974). Therefore, a comparison between post-Mao China and post-fordism UK needs to be undertaken with caution. Although the Northern Powerhouse is derived from a national solution to the persistent North-South Divide – regional and intra-regional inequality is commonly ignored in both contexts.

1. **The Northern Powerhouse as Seen from France.**

From a French perspective, the case of Northern Powerhouse nevertheless addresses three aspects: decentralization, the networking of cities and the expected role of transport.

Like the United Kingdom, France does not have a clear history of decentralization (Davezies, 2015). However, we can ask: what is really expected of decentralization? The agreed discourse is that decentralization restores power to the people by giving them more opportunity to influence local affairs. It is hoped that decisions will be taken on a more relevant and appropriate scale. Furthermore, it is also expected that decentralization will enable decision-makers to adopt economic development strategies more in tune with the local dynamics of firms or the training system.

So far so good, but there are also some contradictions when one analyzes what is happening in France and England. Elections by direct universal suffrage are effectively being imposed in England in the wake of so-called "devolution deals" even though the creation of new levels of supra-local government were previously rejected by the voters in the 2000s. In France, by contrast the introduction of election by direct universal suffrage of the presidents of metropolitan cooperation body is refused by the legislator, even though these *métropoles* have budgets that are often more substantial than the municipalities that compose them.

In both countries, decentralization is often organized according to the political imperatives of central governments. Moreover, it is rare that when a competence is transferred to a local level, the purpose of its action is not assigned to it at the same time – in other words much as in the UK, (Coulson, 2009, Nurse, 2012), there is little local control over decision making. It is also often hard in the two countries to move-on from centuries of centralization. Even if in reality central-local relations have fluctuated in more complex patterns, at least intellectually, the elites of both states have been and typically continue to be strongly imbued with a centralist mentality.

One of Northern Powerhouse's key issues is to strengthen cooperation between England’s northern cities. In France where the major cities are often smaller than their British counterparts, it quickly became apparent that there was a need to link-up different cities to make-up a metropolitan area: In other words – French cities are rather akin to the British city regions.

Similarly, in the context of decentralization, the French State has tried to launch new forms of metropolitan cooperation (Deboubt and Paris, 2016), the latest being the “pôle métropolitain” (Metropolitan Pole), which was brought into being in 2010. This initiative allows different not necessarily contiguous communities, to associate to carry out projects in the fields of university research, transport and economic development. There has been a clear interest in this opportunity and more than fifty pôles métropolitains have been created (Behar et al., 2011). However, with reference to the Northern Powerhouse, we can ask how the success of this cooperation can be ensured in the long term? The metropolitan poles are interesting but their political weight remains marginal. As with the Northern Powerhouse a central question is the better linking of different cities. Yet owing to their physical distance from one another, such a dialogue between "big cities" has never been attempted on such a scale in France. In comparison, the configuration of the North of England bears a closer resemblance to the Randstad, the Rhine-Ruhr metropolis, or the Swiss Plateau than any French context. But in comparison with these other European metropolitan regions, the configurations of forms of co-operation between cities seem rather ill-defined within the Northern Powerhouse - both in their forms (e.g. what exactly is the arena for dialogue between Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool?), and their content (i.e. what are the areas other than transport in which joint actions are to be carried out?). It is, perhaps, understandable that the British Government refuses to define the role they intend each city to play in the "northern metropolis", but it is to be feared that, without strong incentives for cooperation, the various cities will continue to play their own score, and remain economic competitors.

It is clear that the evolution of northern cities is expected to spring from a combination of three factors: economic dynamics (heavily supported by the knowledge economy), linkages facilitated by new transport infrastructure, and competition between politically assertive metropolises. This triptych recalls a policy pursued in France without always being clearly expressed (Desjardins and Geneau, 2016): the favouring of the development of regional metropolises (Nantes, Lille, Strasbourg, Grenoble, Montpellier, Bordeaux, Lyon, Nice and Aix- Marseille). Indeed, the French state has been aiming for nearly 50 years to strengthen their political capacity, carrying out reforms ’from the top‘, through the transfer of State competences, and ’from the bottom‘ by gradually hollowing out the powers exercised by the municipalities. In this vein, the most recent reform in 2015 created a new intercommunal status for cities with more than 400,000 inhabitants: “’la métropole” (the metropole). The development of the largest French cities has also been supported by the considerable investments which have been made in the high-speed railway network since the 1980s. Finally, their intrinsic economic dynamism has been reinforced by State investments, in particular in universities, culture, and public transport. Since the mid-2000s, different reforms such as the reduction in the number of regions and promotion of major university hubs has strengthened these big cities.

This same cocktail - a mixture of Girondism (through decentralization), Saint-Simonism (through sustained attention to the effects of infrastructure), and neo-liberalism (through public action in the service of market dynamics) can be observed in the United Kingdom’s Northern Powerhouse. Drawing on French experience, we might ask if such parallels are a cause for optimism insofar as, thanks to these policies, most French metropolises have emerged from their longstanding difficulties in asserting themselves in the face of Paris. The answer, it seems could be positive, but is contingent on if the planned investments in transport are really implemented, if the English cities find levers of cooperation and, ultimately, if market dynamics prove more favorable to the North.

1. **Conclusion**

In developing the UK’s city region agenda there are rich lessons that can be drawn from other international perspectives. In considering the key outcomes we are, rightly, warned of the limitations of drawing too tightly from international comparators and of over-generalisation (Brenner, 2009). Nonetheless, as we have seen, the examples from China and France provide illuminating studies in how the UK might avoid several pitfalls, or indeed strengthen its own approaches.

One of the key distinguishing elements of the Chinese system is that city regions are afforded the ability to generate revenue through local taxation. Historically, the inability for meaningful revenue generation and an over-reliance on central funding streams has been a major limitation of the governance of UK cities. Although the Northern Powerhouse proposals do, in some instances, allow for the retention of business rates (Treasury, 2016) it is clear that there is some way to go if real fiscal autonomy is to be realised. Moreover, the examples from China draw clear parables about the dangers of ignoring intra-regional equality, whereby the areas within a city and its surrounds are masked by an intensifying competition between rival economic centres (Nurse, 2015b). It is not a stretch to apply this to the aftermath of Britain’s vote to leave the European Union – a result driven by those outside of the major metropolitan areas who, perhaps, had been a victim of a lack of this intra-regional equality.

Similarly, there is much we can learn from France, where attempts at metroplitanisation are, broadly, comparable with those in the United Kingdom. In particular, the absorbing of various municipalities into the French metropolis mirrors to rise of the UK city regions, while a reliance on high-end economic contributors such as the university sector similarly reflects the UKs current economic priorities (HM Treasury, 2016). The main difference between the French and UK model is that, whilst the major French metropolises are geographically separated, thereby preventing meaningful economic collaboration, the northern English cities are not bounded by such limitations. However, as we have seen, a lack of clarity persists with regards to the Northern Powerhouse plans as to how collaboration will occur, and on what terms.

Ultimately, it is clear that the Northern Powerhouse proposals are, in essence, neither new, nor unique to the United Kingdom. As the proposals continue to develop under the guise of the May Government’s new industrial strategy a number of key questions remain. At the heart of this, the central question remains: how do you get fierce economic competitors to both collaborate? Answers on a postcard.

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