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# THE REGION IN A PERSPECTIVE OF CHANGE

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss some issues connected with changes in the character and role of the region that are a part of contemporary socio-economic transformations.

Recently there has been a livening up of the discussion on this subject. In the article opening this conference, Kukliński (1993: 1) writes: *"I do not know yet how to define the concept of region as a tool to analyse the reality of the turn of the XX and XXI century. However, I would like to propose a framework of a discussion which may lead to new theoretical and pragmatic approaches as a background of a revised definition of this concept. It is important to see not only the formal shape of the region, but also the contents of the region as a political, social, economic and cultural phenomenon"*.

Let us therefore consider, first, what changes have been taking place in the forms of socio-economic organisation, or where they lead; and secondly, what transformations spatial and regional structures have been undergoing, and let us try to find out whether these changes justify the

formulation of a new concept of a region different from the traditional one. In our discussion we shall rely on the concept of postmodernisation, whose core is the transition from the Fordist to a post-Fordist organisation of production.

## 1. Changes in the forms of socio-economic organisation

The opinion that has been gaining ground recently is that advanced countries have been going through postmodern transformations which begin to shape new forms of socio-economic organisation and structures. It is assumed that these processes tend to change the present, crisis-generating forms of organisation and structures. This assumption follows from the observation that the economies of advanced countries seem to show a number of symptoms of a structural crisis which requires precisely such transformations in the forms of socio-economic organisation to be overcome. Thus, the hypothesis is put forward that these transformations consist in a shift from the Fordist to a post-Fordist organisation, identified with a flexible organisation. Naturally, this is not an exclusive view, because there are others seeking the roots of the slackening or crisis of the economy in excessive state interventionism and a departure from a purely liberal moneyed-market economy on the one hand, and in the global crisis of the capitalist economy as a social formation on the other.

The Fordist forms of organisation are responsible for the loss of development dynamics and several other negative socio-economic phenomena. The shift from the Fordist to a post-Fordist organisation is considered in two approaches: a narrower one, focusing on the abandonment of the Fordist organisation of work and production, and a broader one, regarding the transformation of the whole system of capitalist economy, and especially its Fordist regime of accumulation and regulation. These changes are interpreted in terms of a modern-postmodern turn (cf. Harvey 1990, Chojnicki 1993).

A fundamental question is the definition of the nature of the emerging post-Fordist forms of organisation termed flexible organisation, or flexible accumulation and regulation. According to Harvey (1990: 147), "*Flexible accumulation (...) is marked by a direct confrontation with rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour mar-*

*kets, products and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organisation innovation. It has entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors and between geographical regions, giving rise, for example, to a vast surge in so-called »service-sector« employment as well as to entirely new industrial ensembles in hitherto underdeveloped regions».*

Apart from the view represented, among others, by Harvey (1990), that the emergence of the new flexible regime of accumulation and regulation is a new form of organisation of the socio-economic system and a successor to Fordism, there is also the opinion, expressed by Amin and Robins (1990), that it is too soon yet to proclaim the appearance of such a form of organisation. Therefore, while the question of whether the ongoing changes will eventually produce a new, mature form of the organisation of the economic system is still open, it might be useful to watch out for the symptoms of such an organisation being formed.

Without going into details of the nature of flexible organisation, let us pass on to the subject of how it takes shape in the sphere of spatial structure.

## **2. Changes in the nature and role of spatial and regional structures**

From the point of view that is of interest to us here, a crucial issue is the impact of postmodern processes, especially a flexible organisation of the economy, on spatial and regional structures considered both in terms of a variety of socio-economic, political and cultural activities and in terms of different spatial scales. The discussion on this subject, however, does not yield a homogeneous picture of change, but only partial hypotheses requiring verification and elaboration. Therefore, I shall restrict myself to remarks on only two issues: 1) changes in the regional organisation of production, and 2) changes in the state-region relation.

## 2.1. Changes in the regional organisation of production

The conception of the postmodernisation of the economy holds that postindustrialisation, small business and a flexible manufacturing are the main components, and also factors, of change. The last has the greatest importance. Flexibility is an attribute of three elements of the production process: 1) an adaptable, reprogrammable technology, 2) a dispersal of organisational authority and responsibility, so that differentiated organisational segments are free to stay in contact with and respond to market developments, and 3) workers with an expanded capacity and freedom to acquire skills and knowledge and to apply them in decisive ways in order to enhance productive capacity (Crook et al. 1992: 181). Thus, the principal components of flexible manufacturing are: flexible technology, flexible organisation, and flexible labour.

Although expressed sporadically, the view that a new regional organisation of production has already been formed in consequence of the operation of flexible manufacturing (cf. Sunlay 1992: 66) is not justified. What has taken shape, though, are new tendencies changing various components of the regional organisation of the economy. The more important among them include:

a) A shift from internal economies (vertical integration) to external economies (vertical disintegration). According to Scott (1988), the search for external economies has been fundamental to flexible accumulation. It has led to the rise of new localisation of high technology and craft industries, often away from older centres of Fordist industry.

b) An increase in the spatial concentration of flexible manufacturing industries resulting from heightened intensity of external linkages and reinforced by labour turnover and the adaptability of local labour markets with a higher level of labour flexibility (Domański 1992).

c) The development of new agglomerations and industrial districts in advanced countries based on localisation economies and urbanisation economies connected with the vertical disintegration of production (Domański 1992).

d) The development of a so-called 'technopolis' within an urban centre which are clusters of research organisations and universities, enterprises, and financial and economic institutions that generate technological innovations initiating the processes of a region's economic growth (Benko 1991).

This, of course, is not an exhaustive list of the new tendencies altering the spatial and regional structure of the economy. The discussion and research on the subject have only just started; this is a stage of posing problems rather than obtaining reliable results.

Closely related to this set of problems is the research on the structure and development of regions with a flexible organisation of production. Its results show that besides new factors brought about by postmodernisation tendencies, a big role is played by both traditional regional or local values and cultural elements, and new postmodernisation ones associated with the culture of entrepreneurship, the setting of fashion and the introduction of consumerism, ecological considerations, etc. They form specific 'regional syndromes', hardly yielding to typology. There are also opinions that these changes are multi-directional and chaotic, and unpredictable as to effects.

## **2.2. Changes in the state-region relations**

Apart from changes in the structure of the regional economy, another significant component of postmodernisation is the change in the mutual relations between the state and the region. They determine the position and role of the region.

When considering the state-region relations one should take into account an area which is a unit of the territorial organisation of the state. The territorial organisation of a country is a single- or multi-level system of territorial units into which it is divided, mostly to facilitate administrative performance and regional and local activities.

The postmodernisation conception assumes that the modern corporate state has been undergoing structural change caused by the system's crisis and disfunctionality. Its result is the process of devolution of state power. According to Crook et al. (1992: 80), four main aspects of the change can be distinguished:

- 1) a horizontal or functional redistribution of powers and responsibilities from central government to autonomous corporate bodies (trade unions, industrial federations, specialised agencies);

- 2) a vertical redistribution of powers and responsibilities by decentralisation 'downwards' to self-governing bodies, local groups and civic initiatives;

3) the marketisation and privatisation of previously state-run enterprises, and

4) the globalisation and externalisation of responsibilities and powers by shifting 'upwards' to supra-state bodies.

These processes converge, reinforce one another and become global trends which cut across political divisions and systems. The change they bring is labelled 'rolling back the state' or a change 'towards a minimum state'.

Although decentralisation processes that shift governmental powers from a centre to multiple territorial units are very important in altering the state-region relations, equally influential are the remaining aspects or trends of state devolution. It looks as follows.

(1) A horizontal or functional decentralisation strengthening the role of non-governmental organisations releases regional initiatives and action suited to local conditions and based on partnership and loose co-ordination.

(2) The role of vertical decentralisation in regional development is very well known. It is worth emphasising, however, that it not only involves the decentralisation of decision-making and implementing them in the conditions of better local information; it also facilitates the formation of regulatory mechanisms effectively rooted in specific regional or local conditions.

(3) The effectiveness of the processes of privatisation and marketisation is determined regionally; it can be the principal process changing a region's economic structure and its actual position in the inter-regional system. However, its effects must be balanced against high social costs. Positive results of privatisation do not change the nature of the state-region relations, but may be the basis for expanded independence of regions.

(4) At a regional scale, globalisation, which is usually associated with economic integration and an international division of labour, can result in a change in some aspects of a region's status, namely elevating it, owing to certain relations, to the level of international links and appropriate regulations, as in the case of Euroregions or so-called frontier regions.

Naturally, these problems do not exhaust issues connected with the change in the character and role of the region; I only want to draw attention to the emerging tendencies.

### **3. Conclusion**

The analysis of transformations of spatial socio-economic structures that are taking place as part of postmodernisation processes shows that a region is implicitly taken to be a spatial unit or an area which is either (1) a structure (system) or geographical formation determined socially and economically, or (2) an instrument for organising socio-political activity. Paraphrasing Gilbert's (1988: 209) words, one can say that in the first approach a region is a spatial and local response to capitalist processes, and in the other, a spatial medium for socio-political interaction. They correspond to the 'traditional' understanding of a region as (1) a social-territorial object or system, and (2) a tool for action (cf. Chojnicki, Czyż 1992). It should be noted, however, that the two concepts are compatible in a way, and one turns into the other. Their content and scope are subject to change owing to the operation of new socio-economic, political and cultural processes, and are deeply embedded in the fabric of society. The nature and role of these processes alter; for example, recently we can observe a surge in nationalist movements or the activity of groups explicitly engaged in struggle over the definition and extent of regions as political territories associated with those groups (Murphy 1991).

Both these concepts invite criticism because of their excessively high degree of indeterminacy and identity problems. Of course, researchers are free to make any attempts to formulate new concepts of a region, but they usually turn out to be modifications or more concrete restatements of those offered so far. What one should not do, however, is to give a region a purely formal character reducing its function to that of an umbrella for subsuming only spatial grouping aspects or spatial co-ordinates. What seems to be the key to a further development and elucidation of the concept of a region is the explanation of the influence of socio-economic, political and cultural processes on the shaping of a region's character.

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