

# INTERPRETING THE REGULATORY GEOGRAPHY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE RISE OF THE SUSTAINABLE CITY IN THE UK

**Mark Goodwin and Mark Whitehead**

*Lecturers, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK*

**Keywords:** regulation theory, sustainable city, scale, Fordism, uneven development, discourse, institutional change, the UK

## Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Reinterpreting the Regulation Approach
    - 2.1. Regulation as Process
    - 2.2. The Geographies of Regulation—or the Spatialisation of Regulatory Processes
  3. The Coming of the Sustainable City: The Re-regulation of Britain’s Urban Economy
    - 3.1. The Coming of the Sustainable City: the Case of the UK
    - 3.2. The Sustainable City in the Sustainable Society—“Third Way” Politics in the UK
  4. Sustainable Development and the Regulation Approach
    - 4.1. The Environment and Notions of Crisis
    - 4.2. Scalar Translations
    - 4.3. The Scope of Sustainability
  5. Conclusion
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketches

## Summary

The regulatory geography of sustainability has traditionally been understood in terms of the rules and laws which are used to control and monitor the implementation of sustainable development. This paper attempts to develop an alternative framework for both understanding and analysing the regulatory geography of sustainable development.

Drawing on the notion of *régulation*, not as a system of rule-making and laws, but as it has been deployed within the Regulation Approach—to refer to the reproduction of the contradictory relations inherent in capitalist societies—this work investigates the emerging regulatory significance of sustainable forms of development to the (re)regulation of urban economies. Suggesting that the environment represented one moment within the wider social and economic crises associated with the regulatory period customarily referred to as Fordism, this chapter argues that within the discourses and material practices associated with sustainable development lies an attempt to reconcile the economic, social and environmental discontents of Fordist urban economies. Focusing on the UK, we go on to illustrate the ways in which one particular country is attempting to implement the principles of sustainable development at the urban scale.

In the case of the UK, the regulatory geography of sustainable development has been complicated by the problematic process of translation which surrounds conceptualisations of sustainable development as it moves from the international, to the national, regional and urban scales. The often necessary re-interpretation of sustainable development at the national and urban scales of implementation means that, in the case of the UK, the role of sustainable development within any emergent regulatory form appears to be unclear. What is clear is that, within the scalar translation of the meanings attached to sustainable development, the regulatory geography of the sustainable city will be an uneven one.

## 1. Introduction

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development stated that “The future will be predominantly urban, and the most immediate environmental concerns of most people will be urban ones” (p. 255). Having come to power in Britain on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1997, the New Labour Administration commissioned an extensive review of the problems and opportunities confronting the urban areas of England. The review was conducted by a specially selected Urban Task Force group which drew on the knowledge and expertise of an array of representatives taken from the fields of architecture, ecology, planning, housing, transport and urban regeneration. The Final Report of the Urban Task Force, delivered in 1999, called for an *urban renaissance* within the towns and cities of England, and outlined a framework to deliver a new future for urban England.

Significantly in the context of this volume, and the portentous vision of the World Commission on Environment and Development, the urban renaissance envisioned for England is based upon one particular vision above all others—the development of “sustainable cities”. This paper claims that the prioritisation of sustainable development within the UK government’s urban renaissance programme is actually emblematic of the wider incorporation of the principles of sustainability and discourses of environmental justice into British urban policy and local strategies of urban development. Since the publication of the UK’s first White Paper on the Environment in 1990, and the subsequent production of *National Strategies for Sustainable Development* in the UK (first issued in 1994 and revised in 1999), the principles of sustainability have increasingly provided a critical set of collective values around which urban policy has been formed and urban development strategies realised. But despite the dissemination of sustainable development within local, regional and national strategies of urban development within the UK, there has been a surprising dearth of critical academic analysis into the links which are being made within Britain, and indeed the rest of the world, between the principles of sustainable development and urban social, economic, and ecological development.

This chapter attempts to sketch out a framework which allows these connections to be made, and which enables us to locate the current significance of sustainability within broader sets of political and economic processes. In particular the chapter will be concerned with outlining a framework that allows the exploration of the linkages between international environmental agreements and local institutional capacity. Although it will make reference to ongoing policy manoeuvres in the UK, this

framework is not limited to interpreting developments in Western Europe, and indeed the flexibility it offers in terms of understanding events at different spatial scales allows the linking of processes at local, national and international levels. Drawing predominantly upon the work of the Regulation School of political economy, it will build an analysis through which the relationship between sustainable development and contemporary forms of urban development can be simultaneously contextualized and problematised.

As a reaction against *classical* economic accounts of capitalist economic change and development, the Regulation Approach has stressed the importance of recognising the whole ensemble of social, political, cultural and economic norms and institutions that are critical to the processes of capitalist reproduction. This chapter argues that sustainable development, as it has been conventionally deployed, appears, at least nominally, to recognise the socially embedded nature of economic activities emphasised within the Regulation Approach. Sustainable development does, however, also stress the environmental factors that are critical to both social and economic development. While the regulatory significance of the environment is gradually being incorporated into accounts of economic regulation, little has been written on the wider regulatory significance of sustainable development and the political, economic and environmental practices it is promoting.

This chapter explores the ways in which the analytical insights provided by the Regulation Approach can inform research into the practice of sustainable development as it is being realised within contemporary forms of urban economic growth and development. As such, this work goes beyond traditional *juridico-political* accounts of regulation—associated with monitoring and controlling sustainability—to consider the role of sustainable development within the wider socio-institutional reproduction of urban economies. Understanding the notion of regulation in this wider sense, analysis begins by considering the ways in which theories of regulation can be used to understand the material, discursive and spatial significance of sustainable development within emerging urban and regional regulatory forms. The chapter then considers the specific ways in which sustainable development has emerged as a principle within urban regeneration and development within the UK and examines the concomitant institutional architecture that has been created to facilitate the delivery of broader international agreements on sustainability. Drawing these two strands of analysis together, the chapter concludes by casting doubt over the ability of emerging urban institutional forms and development strategies to deliver sustainable forms of economic regulation.

## **2. Reinterpreting the Regulation Approach**

Before it is possible to understand how the regulation approach can be used to study sustainable urban development, it is important to have a clear understanding of what such an approach entails. The term approach is used deliberately—as Michel Aglietta has recently written in his 1998 article “Capitalism at the Turn of the Century: Regulation Theory and the Challenge of Social Change” in the *New Left Review*, “a wide range of studies have seized upon its ideas and have developed them in many different directions. We must speak of an approach rather than a theory. What has

gained acceptance is not a body of fully refined concepts but a research programme”. What this section seeks to do is to look at some of the key aspects of this “research programme”, and at how these might be usefully deployed by those with an interest in sustainable urban development.

This theoretical ground-clearing is perhaps even more necessary than usual in this volume, because of the overlap and confusion which exists over the academic usage of the term “regulation” in the English and French languages. Jessop, in his 1990 article “Regulation theories in retrospect and prospect” in *Economy and Society*, recognises a key distinction in French between *règlementation* and *régulation*. In French “*règlementation*” refers to regulation in the sense of rule-making, or law-making, while “*régulation*” refers to regulation in the regulation theorists' sense of contingently emerging regulatory effects. In English, the term regulation covers both uses. In order to avoid any confusion, and in contrast to many of the chapters in this encyclopedia, usage in this paper is restricted to the latter sense of the term—i.e. “regulation” (perhaps better translated as regularization or normalization) of the economy in its broadest sense. This paper does not use regulation in its rule-making sense.

The Regulation Approach emerged as a mode of economic analysis in 1970s France. As a form of economic analysis, the Regulation Approach was devoted to understanding how, despite its inherent crisis tendencies, capitalist accumulation has persistently endured. Crucially, the Regulation Approach argued that in order to understand the continued historical reproduction of capitalism it was vital to recognise not only the economic, but also the social, cultural and political supports which contribute to the maintenance of capitalist social relations. As noted earlier, the very concept of sustainable development would seem to confirm this premise. The approach therefore focuses upon both the economic and extra-economic supports (including social, cultural, political and environmental concerns), which temporarily stabilise the accumulation of capital. As we shall see, the discourses and practices surrounding issues of sustainability now appear to be woven into both the economic and the extra-economic supports of modern capitalism.

## **2.1. Regulation as Process**

The study of capitalist regulation has traditionally focused upon the notion of a “mode”. A mode of regulation represents a fairly well defined and identifiable system of economic and extra-economic forms coming together to secure capitalist accumulation. Typical examples of modes of regulation would be the Fordist socio-economic system of the post-war period, and its purported flexible economic successor, post-Fordism. Significantly, within recent work on regulation, it has been argued that the idea of a mode of regulation is problematic. It is argued that the conceptualisation of regulation as discrete modes is problematic at two levels. Firstly, the idea of a mode regulation tends to overstate the role of stability and uniform functionality within capitalist accumulation. The present authors would argue that even within a seemingly successful regulatory regime capitalist social relations tend to be characterised much more by flux, change and contestation, than constancy and stability. Secondly, from a historical perspective, a belief in modes of regulation suggests the presence of discretely bounded regulatory periods or eras, which neatly follow one another (for example the purported

transition from Fordism to post-Fordism). The authors would argue, however, that the history of capitalist expansion and regulation is much more messy and chequered than this type of historical paradigm would suggest.

In light of the apparent weaknesses of modal conceptualisations of regulation, this chapter argues that the “process-based” reading of regulation developed by Goodwin and Painter in their 1996 article “Local governance, the crisis of Fordism and the changing geographies of regulation” in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* offers a much more flexible and effective account of regulation. A process-based reading of regulation does not analyse regulation as a thing, but as a collection of processes, which combine at certain times and places to facilitate the more or less effective accumulation of capital. This conceptualisation of regulation emphasises the importance of flux and change within the constitution of regulation. Furthermore, rather than looking for the presence or absence of regulation, this approach analyses the “ebb and flow” of regulation through time and across space. In this context, attention is drawn not to the identification of regulatory periods or structured systems, but to the types of institutions (understood as both organisational forms and social practices), economic practices and socio-economic discourses which frame and consolidate regulatory processes in different time-space contexts. The chapter argues that, within the contemporary era, the institutions, practices and discourses associated with sustainable development are providing an increasingly important framework through which regulatory processes are being channelled and moulded.

-  
-  
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 17 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

### Bibliography

Aglietta M. (1998). Capitalism at the Turn of the Century: Regulation Theory and the Challenge of Social Change. *New Left Review*, Vol. 232(41) pp. 41-90. [This article reviews many of the basic premises of the regulation approach and provides an analysis of the applicability of the approach to analyses of the political economies of the twenty-first century].

Aglietta M. (1979). *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: the US Experience*. London: Verso. [This seminal book is regarded by many as the first comprehensive application of the regulation approach—in this case applying regulation theory to the study of American Fordism].

Goodwin M. and Painter J. (1996). “Local governance, the crisis of Fordism and the changing geographies of regulation”. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography*, Vol. 21 pp. 635-648. [This article provides a review of the application of regulation theory as a methodology for exploring local political institutions. It also introduces the notion of regulation as a *process*].

HMSO (1994). *Sustainable Development—The UK Strategy*. London: HMSO. [The UK first integrated sustainable development strategy. Chapter 24 discusses some of the issues involved in developing sustainable towns and cities].

HMSO (1990). *This Common Inheritance: Britain's Environmental Strategy*. London: HMSO. [The UK's first integrated environmental strategy].

Jessop B. (1990). Regulation theories in retrospect and prospect, *Economy and Society*, Vol. **19** pp. 153-216. [This article provides an exceptionally detail analysis of the development and application of regulation theory over the past 20 years].

Lipietz A. (1992). *Towards a New Economic Order: post-Fordism, Ecology and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press. [Alain Lipietz provides a very useful review of the social, economic and environmental factors which contributed to the regulatory failure of the mode of regulation labelled "Fordism", and which might be implicated in a potential successor].

Swyngedouw E. (1997). Neither global or local: "glocalisation" and the politics of Scale, in *Spaces of Globalisation: reasserting the power of the local* (ed. Cox) New York: Guildford, pp. 138-166. [This article provides a review of the recent theories which have developed on the politics of scale. Particular emphasis is given to the role of scalar narratives in political struggle and contestation].

### **Biographical Sketches**

**Professor Mark Goodwin** is Director of the Centre for Policy Research and Evaluation, and Professor of Human Geography, in the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He has a particular research interest in issues of local and regional governance, and has directed research projects on this theme for the Economic and Social Research Council, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the National Assembly for Wales as well as for a number of Development Agencies, TECs and Local Authorities. He is currently directing research projects on "Economic Governance under Devolution" for the Economic and Social Research Council, and on "Community Involvement in Rural Health Care" for the National Assembly for Wales. He has published widely on the themes of regulation and governance, including a recent book, *Partnership Working in Rural Regeneration*, for The Policy Press and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

**Dr Mark Whitehead** is a lecturer in the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. Mark's research focuses on the links between nature, the environment and social change, with particular emphasis on the role of environmental processes within urban development. His PhD, which he completed in 2000, looked at urban-based environmental groups in the UK. Subsequent to his PhD, Mark has carried out research looking at the links between urban development and environmental protest in Central and Eastern Europe. This project was financed and supported by the Royal Geographical (with the Institute of British Geographers). More recently Mark has been involved in series of projects looking at health policy and the links between health and the environment throughout Wales.