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Regional development is not a dinner party: a research agenda on power relations and the use of language in regional development studies

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Abstract Regional development is not a dinner party, but rather a largely contested matter in which its political dimension and power relations play key roles. This paper calls for a research agenda to understand more about how power relations and the use of language—specifically, metaphors—can be integrated into regional development studies. In contrast to major strands of the regional development literature, an important contribution of this paper is that we treat regional development processes not as a purely economistic process, but rather as a conflictual process in which different opinions or even divergent views emerge and compete through different language relationships. This occurs on a multitude of occasions, such as when there is a discussion about building new infrastructure and its related socio-economic and environmental impacts, when people have different views on possible regional futures or when certain regional economic sectors are prioritised by politicians and policymakers. We address three main research questions. (1) What can scholars in the field of regional development learn from previous studies of power relations in the fields of economic geography and political science? (2) What are the most promising research tendencies in which the study of politics and power relations can be embedded? (3) Through which original lens (i.e., language) and methodology (i.e., narratives) might empirical analyses best be conducted on the topics we illustrate?

Introduction

The primary aim of this paper is to call for a research agenda on the systematic integration of a political dimension into regional development studies. We seek to understand better how politics and power relations influence regional development outcomes. This topic is highly relevant in democratic societies where political processes can often shape regional futures. With a few exceptions, for example, global production networks, which are concerned with coupling processes between endogenous and exogenous networks (Coe & Yeung, 2015), and the work of Sotarauta (2009) on how power affects regional development in Finland, scholars in the regional development field have shown limited interest in how politics and power relations can shape regions and influence their performance. This is particularly the case in two influential strands of the literature, namely evolutionary economic

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geography (EEG) (Boschma & Martin, 2010) and regional innovation systems (RISs) (Asheim et al., 2019). Hence, the starting point for our paper is the idea of regional development as a largely contested matter, in which its political dimension and the power relations between the various actors involved play a key role in developing regional futures.

Although we have learned much about how regions diversify across space and time from the EEG literature (Frenken & Boschma, 2007; Neffke et al., 2011), and how organisations and collaboration processes are important for innovation in RISs (Asheim & Isaksen, 2002; Tödtling et al., 2018), we argue that new development paths are not exclusively triggered by technology or the ability demonstrated by regional firms and entrepreneurs to diversify into related sectors. Our argument is that regional development is actor oriented (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020), and more complex, contested and influenced by skewed power relations and power dynamics than previously highlighted in the EEG and RIS literature.

Regional futures are open to different and, in some cases, unpredictable possibilities. However, in many cases, they are disputed. Divergent views and opinions can be observed even within groups of economic and social actors operating in the same sector and regional area (Nilsen et al., 2024), which allows us to hypothesise that new regional development paths are often the outcome of different or divergent narratives, contested points of view, manifest and occult collective aspirations, actions and reactions, heterogenic impulses and the hegemonic distribution of power resources (e.g., Dahl, 1961; Foucault, 1978; Gilpin, 1981; Lukes, 2021). Equally important, by reversing the metaphor used by evolutionary scholars in various fields (including economic geography), we claim that it is not always the 'strongest' or the 'fittest' that wins or survives and that the ability shown by given local agents to mobilise resources and power may lead to unexpected outcomes and original regional scenarios (Nilsen & Njøs, 2022; Wilson, 2014).

Accordingly, we propose the integration of power relations into the study of regional development. Our explicit intent is to call for more analyses that address this theme by providing a conceptual understanding of how regional development debates actually include a variety of arguments, where only a few of these arguments reach the position of being manifested as dominant narratives. Other and competing narratives

are defined as peripheral or semi-peripheral arguments and thereby become marginal narratives within the debate. These often lack the necessary influence and power to reach the surface of the existing debate and are therefore marginalised. As regional development is a contested matter, we believe that the issue of who possesses and exercises power through dialectical confrontation is of key importance and should be studied in greater depth by scholars in the field of regional development.

Our reflections are inspired by key concepts within political science, which represents the natural background in which to find, and from which to source, relevant ideas to be applied in an attempt to reinvigorate key strands of the EEG and RIS literature, by offering alternative or complementary theoretical and conceptual approaches. In short, we highlight the need for a systematic integration of a political dimension into the study of regional development by specifically looking at how power relations influence regional development trajectories, and how a tool such as language shapes, and is simultaneously shaped by, power dynamics between different regional actors and agents.

The following three research questions (RQs) are addressed. (*RQ1*) What can scholars in the field of regional development learn from previous studies of power relations in the fields of economic geography and political science? (*RQ2*) What are the most promising research tendencies in which the study of politics and power relations can be embedded? (*RQ3*) Through which original lens (e.g., language) and methodological approach (e.g., narratives) might empirical analyses best be conducted on the topics we illustrate?

The structure and contribution of our paper

We call for a research agenda on the systematic integration of a political dimension into the study of regional development and discuss the role of language to this end. In Section "Politics and power relations: insights from political science and regional development studies", we first identify a knowledge gap with respect to the lack of attention that scholars interested in regional development dynamics, particularly in EEG and RIS, have paid to power relations. In Section "Integrating power relations into regional development studies", we contribute to the debate on regional dynamics and call for other scholars

to do the same, by affirming that regional development is an unequivocally contested matter and that this largely depends on how power is widespread or concentrated, as well as possessed and exercised, by different actors and agents. We explain how concepts borrowed from political science may provide new insights into regional development studies. Section "How language shapes meanings in political discourse" provides a conceptual framework whereby we explain how language and, in particular, metaphors are used as tools for establishing control and domination of some actors *over* others in regional development dynamics. Conversely, metaphors allow alternative aspirations and (positive, negative or neutral) points of view to emerge. In Section "Studying power in regional development: narratives as a method of analysis", we illustrate why and how narratives represent an effective method for studying power relations and the language of power in different regional contexts. Finally, in Section "Concluding remarks and a possible research agenda", we systematise the various contributions of our paper and outline a possible future research agenda for researchers in the field of regional development (Fig. 1).

Politics and power relations: insights from political science and regional development studies

Rickard (2020) argues that "economic geography … merits the attention of political scientists" (p. 187) because the introduction of this discipline into theories of policy-making and politics can resolve long-standing thorny theoretical debates. In particular, Rickard (2020) stresses how economic geography may help explain the political dimension of an uneven distribution of industries in space, the geographical concentration of special interests and the influence that the specific location of a dominant firm may have on trade. In turn, these and other spatial factors may contribute to explaining electoral aims and their expected effects on economic policy, international economic conflicts and why governments react differently to common external economic shocks. Importantly, economic geography may provide the foundation for explaining why some regions in developed countries show a more negative attitude than others towards globalisation. This generally depends on the fact that nontradable services and manufacturing employment are often unevenly distributed within a given country, with the regions where manufacturing tends to be concentrated primarily paying the price of unequal global economic exchanges (Rickard, 2020).

We support the notion that economic geography may provide interesting insights into the study of politics. We attempt to strengthen this line of inquiry by arguing that key concepts in political science may reinvigorate a specific and animatedly debated strand of the economic geography literature such as regional development.
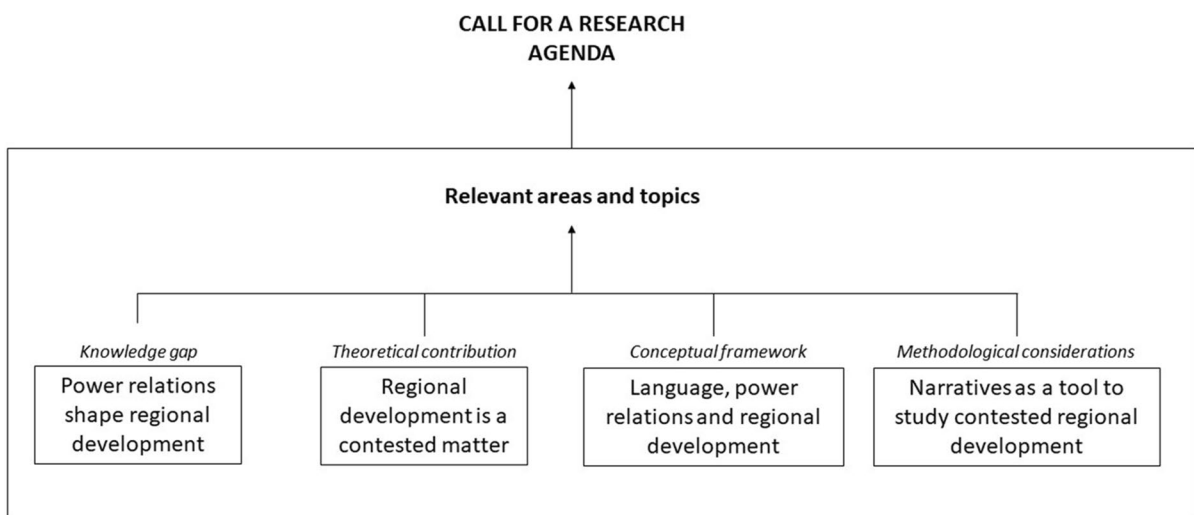
Fig. 1 Contributions of the present paper to the literature on regional development

Scholars have previously discussed how to apply a political dimension to geographical studies with an economic background (e.g., Essletzbichler, 2009; Pike et al., 2009). Sotarauta (2009) explicitly discusses power in Finnish regional development and states that the more complex the situations become, the more dependent regional development is on political leadership. Agnew (2012) affirms that politics is the "deployment of power for collective purposes" and that its study should be better integrated into three specific areas of contemporary economic geography—globalisation, finance and spatial clusters—to show "how politics tends to figure … in these, how different stories can be told when practical politics is introduced, and how ontologically this then makes it possible to talk about changing them" (p. 658). Other works have adopted geographical political economy to address the issues of spatial clustering of poverty and prosperity or international income inequalities (Venables, 2006), politicised processes of production (Sheppard, 2011) and de-industrialisation dynamics in the Global North and South (Pike, 2020). In addition, scholars in the field of global production networks are particularly interested in asymmetrical power relations and their consequences (Coe & Yeung, 2015; Kano et al., 2020). Finally, economic (Faulconbridge, 2012; Lagendijk, 2007; Sotarauta, 2021), radical (Allen, 2003; Massey, 2004) and Polanyian (Eisenschitz, 2022; Peck, 2013) geographers have similarly provided in-depth investigations of how power relations are embedded in knowledge and space by examining how different economic, gender and racial inequalities are produced and reproduced. Importantly, many of these scholars suggest how power relationships in political and socio-economic structures are not always visible but perpetrated through invisible forms of power and domination. This approach, inspired by scholars such as Gramsci (1947/1999), Bourdieu (1989), Foucault (1979) and Lukes (2021), underpins the present paper and informs the related call for a more thorough integration of visible and invisible forms of power into regional development research.

Unfortunately, similar attention has not been given to the issues of politics and power relations in the EEG and RIS literature, which represent two of the most important geographical approaches in the study of regional development. An established and influential strand of literature such as EEG attributes a dominant role to firms as agents in the evolution of economic landscapes. EEG emphasises how the behaviour and routines of single firms, as well as their ability to adapt to changing economic conditions and diversify in other sectors, determine successful regional development dynamics. Although we now know much about the mechanisms that lead to regional path dependence and allow firms to escape lock-in situations, we consider that this approach, albeit certainly valuable and broadly adopted, inadequately integrates critical reflection on the role of politics in regional development. It is worth noting that recently Martin and Sunley (2022) acknowledge the lack of attention that EEG has traditionally devoted to the impact of power relations on the economy.

The other equally influential theoretical perspective through which regional development can be studied is represented by RIS. Unlike, or rather complementary to EEG, the RIS literature primarily adopts a systemic approach in which regional development is seen as the result of a complex web of relations between different actors (e.g., firms, higher education institutions, stakeholders and policymakers) and their interactions. According to RIS, new development paths depend on the specific set of assets, economic actors, degree of networking, capabilities and institutions possessed by a given region. Based on the characteristics of different types of RIS and their related degree of 'thickness' (see, e.g., Asheim et al., 2019), some leading scholars have hypothesised the existence of many different possible new development paths, the degree of novelty of which largely depends on how well-integrated and developed a regional system is. Our criticism of this originally disruptive conceptualisation is that too many types of possible regional trajectories have been identified; in some cases, they are hardly distinguishable, thereby progressively making them too rigid and difficult to test empirically. Among its many merits, the RIS literature can claim to have introduced and systematically considered the study of institutions and regional policy. Despite this, we argue that power relations have only been indirectly addressed (e.g., when considering path dependence and the role of single dominant firms or sectors in less developed RISs; Tödtling et al., 2018) and that a more thorough conceptualisation and greater empirical evidence of their primary role in regional development studies are required.

We argue that key concepts in political science, such as power, control and domination (Lukes, 2021), hegemony (Gilpin, 1981; Gramsci, 1947/1999), opposition (Blondel, 1997; Dahl, 1966) and discourse

(i.e., a type of analysis that seeks to reveal structures of languages and meanings, as well as the practices within them; Harrison et al., 2015), may represent a particularly fruitful background for studying how power relations strongly contribute to regional development dynamics, and how language shapes and is shaped by power relations.

The ability to change is also covered in the geography literature related to agency. Human agency can essentially be understood as the "capability of the individual to 'make a difference'" (Giddens, 1984, p. 14), that is, to exercise some degree of power. In the context of regional development, agency is exercised by a changing set of actors and relates "to intentional, purposive and meaningful actions, and the intended and unintended consequences of such actions" (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020, p. 707). In this literature, place-based leadership means that "the emergence of new paths can be seen as a multi-actor construction," and that it "is important to orchestrate actions and to pool competencies, powers and resources to benefit both the actors' individual objectives and a region more broadly" (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020, p. 708). We believe that the strand of literature on human agency is one of the most interesting arenas in which the study of political actions and power relations is integrated systematically (see, e.g., Calignano & Nilsen, 2024).

Integrating power relations into regional development studies

Power relations refer to how power is distributed among different actors in a society (Dahl, 1961; Lukes, 2021). These relations may be influenced by various factors, for example, political traditions, socio-economic asymmetries, formal and informal institutions, economic specialisation and historical events that contribute to determining the most influential actors in each place. Based on a critical approach and the main literature on the topic (Bourdieu, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Foucault, 1979; Gramsci, 1947/1999; Lukes, 2021), we identified two predominant types of power that seem to be particularly useful to inform our research agenda on integrating power relations and the use of metaphoric language into the study of regional development. These two types of power may have a significant impact on

regional development dynamics, and we define them as visible and invisible power.

Visible power

In its most intuitive form, power can be defined as a process in which given actors exercise their ability to make others think and act in ways that they otherwise would not (Dahl, 1957). In practice, this is the power that one or a few actors exercise over others.

Following Lukes (2021), one of the easiest ways to identify and study this type of power is to examine the conflicts that manifestly emerge in a given geographical context and to "determine for each decision which participants had initiated alternatives that were finally adopted, had vetoed alternatives initiated by others, or had proposed alternatives that were turned down" (Dahl, 1961, p. 336). By adopting this perspective, the most influential actors in contested regional development settings are those who prevail in decision-making processes or, in other words, the individuals (e.g., political leaders, entrepreneurs) or organised groups (e.g., political parties and coalitions, firms, lobbies) that benefit from the greatest number of successes in the case of regionally conflicting decisions. This unequivocal form of power is often observable when decisions are made by regional governments or other key actors (e.g., a dominant firm) on critical issues for the local population, such as the privatisation of an industrial site, the start of major building projects or a decision to move a factory offshore (e.g., Bateman, 2022; Konings, 2003; Petrini & Wettergren, 2022). Such events frequently lead to visible expressions of opposition or strong protests, even though what appears to be immediately clear—and of particular relevance to our present purpose—is that this manifest power is the result of skewed power relations in which a process of subordination—or in the words of Lukes (2021), domination of the powerful over the powerless—takes place in an unambiguous form.

Although the most powerful actors generally exhibit a dominant position, as certified by their higher number of successes in decision-making processes, it is not always those who appear to hold a dominant position who are able to impose their views on others. This is demonstrated in a case study by Nilsen & Njøs (2022), which shows how the Sámi population in Norway is challenged by the

construction of new wind farms. These represent a threat to the Sámi, who risk losing the marginal land where they herd reindeer. The indigenous people in northern Norway are traditionally a marginalised group, but in this case they were able to mobilise agency through the available resources to achieve their key objective, namely to resist renewable energy and new wind farms in the region despite their apparently disadvantaged initial position. By virtue of the institutionalisation of their interests in decision-making bodies and their strong commitment to international indigenous law, the Sámi's arguments on land conservation and reindeer herders have given them influence in the debate (Nilsen & Njøs, 2022). The issues of contested energy transition and the need to engage people of colour, those with lower income and indigenous people in locally produced and controlled energy have recently been forcefully stressed by Baker (2021).

Another example of visible power is the case of Plan Puebla Panama in southern Mexico (Wilson, 2014), announced by newly elected President Vicente Fox Quesada in 2000 and supported by the Inter-American Development Bank. According to the project, nine Mesoamerican states, including the southern part of Mexico, would become more integrated into the global economy by benefiting from new or more modern transport and energy infrastructures, the harmonisation of border regulations, the liberalisation of trade and investments in tourism, manufacturing and agribusiness. However, the idea of making a regional area such as southern Mexico a new global economic hub in an abstract space (Wilson, 2014) collided with its historical and socio-economic characteristics; that is, a backward regional area strongly characterised by semi-subsistence agriculture, indigenous culture and social discontent. Negating the differences between the objectives of the Plan Puebla Panama project and the long-established political and economic conditions of southern Mexico led to what Wilson (2014) defines as structural and symbolic violence (Lefebvre, 1991; Zižek, 2008), in other words, a form of domination forcing local firms to enhance their productivity to compete on the global scene. The Plan Puebla Panama project was abandoned in 2008 because of the opposition of many place-based social movements that "challenged its reduction of social space to an abstract factor in the logic of accumulation, and that emphasized the profound connection between space, identity and social practice in the history of Mexico's indigenous and peasant populations" (Wilson, 2014, pp. 119–120).

In addition, our argument is strengthened by cases of disputed regional transition to low carbon in Indonesia (where political leadership and power relations seem to play a key role; Setyowati & Quist, 2022) and in Iceland (where rural communities are expected to choose between sustainable energy and sustainable tourism; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2019). These examples demonstrate how contested regional development is a habitual event in both the Global North and South, even though the issue has hitherto been mostly overlooked by economic geographers in addressing regional development from theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical viewpoints.

Invisible power

The cases we illustrate above suggest that regional development is often the result of asymmetrical power relations (Foucault, 1980), actions and reactions (as in the cases described by Nilsen & Njøs [2022] and Wilson [2014]), and dialectical confrontations, which may eventually lead to the domination of certain actors over others (Lukes, 2021). These elements may produce a hegemonic view (Gilpin, 1981) and tend to shape how regions perceive themselves and postulate their possible future developments.

The cases described above refer to manifest conflicting perspectives in which dominant and alternative views emerge each time, thus implying the existence of winners and losers at the end of the decision-making process, that is, domination of the powerful over the powerless or less powerful. We referred to this as 'visible power'. However, power is pervasive and cannot be simply relegated to the sphere of formal political activities or open conflicts (Garland, 1990). Lukes (2021) stresses how the greatest power manifests itself precisely when agents do not have the need to use it. This means that hegemonic views may similarly emerge without explicit forms of opposition in various regional contexts when power relations are highly skewed and there are few dominant actors. We define this behaviour as a kind of 'silent domination', which entails the powerless accepting or even internalising their marginalisation. This is what we term 'invisible power'.

However, invisible power can sometimes be characterised by non-domination, which occurs when unforced interactions and fair decision-making are observed (i.e., a certain alternation between powerful and powerless actors when decisions are made). We can speculate that such a form of positive consent takes place on very few occasions and, in general, only in fair, open and transparent societies. From our perspective, this implies that the structural properties of a regional landscape—including 'soft' institutions such as trust and a good balance between bonding and bridging social capital (North, 1990; Putnam, 1995)—play a vital role.

The power of one or some actors directly or indirectly diminishes the power of others (Lukes, 2021), which means that the ability of human agency involves furthering one's own interests while affecting the interests of others. This can be achieved in a visible manner, as seen in the open conflicts illustrated in Section "Visible power" (e.g., Nilsen & Njøs, 2022; Wilson, 2014), or in a less visible manner. Agency may play a positive role in driving change for the broader interests of an entire society. This is what is called transformative power (Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1984) and clearly assumes an undoubtedly positive connotation (see, e.g., Calignano & Nilsen, 2024). By contrast, human agents can similarly represent resistance to change and an aspiration to protect the vested interests of the few against the interests of a community, which in turn may clearly hinder a progressive view of society or the necessary changes in a socio-economic context.

Paraphrasing a well-known saying by Mao Zedong, regional development 'is not a dinner party'; it is a clear representation of unbalanced power relations, even when domination is silent. In this latter case, however, what can be generally observed is a shift from one-dimensional power (i.e., determining who prevails in decision-making) to two-dimensional power, where the most powerful actors have the possibility to control the agenda by simply limiting the range of alternatives that people and firms have available or the issues that are discussed and decided at a given meeting. This is termed 'mobilisation of bias' and refers to the fact that "some issues are organized into politics and others are organized out" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 71), thus not allowing some conflicting topics or alternative points of view to emerge or be included in public debates.

In a situation where a certain (silent or explicit) hegemonic view of possible regional futures emerges, firms and entrepreneurs tend to adapt to that designated development model by hindering the possibility to benefit from opportunity spaces, alternative views, experimentations and positive deviations (see Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). In most cases, however, dialectical confrontations take place, and the result of such open conflicts cannot be taken for granted. The ability that agents show in activating and mobilising the resources they have available plays a critical role in determining the success of one given position or another, and it is not always the case that the strongest or apparently more powerful actors are able to impose their hegemony on others (see, e.g., Nilsen & Njøs, 2022; Wilson, 2014).

How language shapes meanings in political discourse

We argue that dialectical confrontations and language are forceful means through which opponents may express dissent, promote different points of view and propose alternative development models (Wodak, 1989). For this reason, what we have defined as silent domination (i.e., the acceptance or internalisation of subordination) is considered by Lukes (2021) as the most pervasive and effective form of power. However, language itself represents a symbolic form of domination and tends to shape or reflect the existing skewed power relations observed in a society. Therefore, we consider the integration of the study of how language is used into regional development dynamics as a key point of our research agenda.

Regional development is very often the expression of dialogic conflicts between actors and agents representing different interests, perspectives, identities, ideals and possible futures. If we adopt this point of view, language cannot be clearly relegated as a neutral means of communication through which one simply conveys thoughts; rather, it represents one of the clearest emanations of power relations in a society. This is the case not only with visible power but also with invisible power. Although the more powerful agents use language as a means to establish their domination over others, these others may also try to use language to challenge the dominant group and resist their subordination.

Gingras (1996) claims that language and political action are reciprocal social phenomena; symbols evoked through language are reflected in political actions, while these actions influence

political language. Therefore, language does not simply describe or is used to explain political actions or events but plays a crucial role in creating shared meanings and perceptions. Gingras (1996) cites Green (1987), according to whom "power is a process of conflict resolution, conflict creation, and conflict management; and political language at once reflects and contributes to these processes" (p. 7).

In political discourse, the use of language as a tool for control and domination is evident when spatial, racial or gendered metaphors are used in a derogatory form to perpetuate inequalities. Meier et al., (2011, p. 617) argue that

> metaphor can bias perception and decision making. For example, consistent with metaphors for affect and spatial perception (up = good, down = bad), people more readily identify positive things when high in location. North and south are abstract concepts, which are also tied by metaphor to spatial perception (north = up, south = down).

Another well-known example here is the use of the term 'welfare queens', as popularised by Ronald Reagan during his presidential campaign in 1976. The future president publicly referred to a "'woman from Chicago' who wore furs and drove a Cadillac while receiving government checks" (Covert, 2019), who was identified as a black woman, when describing in a derogatory way families who received government financial support despite multiple reported frauds. Even though the main recipients of the welfare aid to which Reagan referred were not black families, the term continues to be used in political debates in the US as a cliché to define black mothers who receive government support, allegedly in a fraudulent manner (Covert, 2019; Foster, 2008). Finally, we can also mention the boats operated by non-governmental organisations and the maritime humanitarian workers in the Mediterranean, who have been recently stigmatised as 'sea taxis' by populist and right-wing governmental parties in Italy and "accused of incentivizing people to cross borders irregularly, thereby aiding and abetting illegal immigration" (Cusumano & Villa, 2021, p. 24).

From the other side of the barricade—an apt metaphor in our context—such figures of speech have proved to be useful tools that are frequently used by less powerful actors (e.g., opponents and minorities) to express dissent and alternative views; metaphors "allow the compression and blending of the highly complex conceptual, cultural and evaluative meanings of a community in a very brief and efficient way" (Romano & Porto, 2018, p. 656). Countless examples show how metaphors are used in the language of agents to promote alternative or critical views. There is the celebrated speech that Greta Thunberg gave at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, in which she exhorted the audience to urgently find a remedy to the climate crisis because "our house is on fire" (Thunberg, 2019). A lesser-known case, but one certainly more related to our regional approach for studying power relations, is the so-called Green Tide, a Spanish movement in 2011–2016 that protested against the conservative regional government of Madrid and many other regional governments because of significant budget cuts in public education. In addition to making use of numerous metaphors during the protests, the name of the movement itself contained an effective metaphor, given that a tide is "frequently associated with concepts like flooding and therefore danger, risk, lack of control and threat" (Romano & Porto, 2018, p. 661).

Metaphors are therefore a particular figure of speech that are appropriate for constructing, shaping, reinforcing or challenging power relations in a society and, specifically in our context of regional development. The speeches of politicians, activists and other key actors in the public arena are characterised by the use of a broad choice of metaphors, which range from natural elements (e.g., a new breeze, the moral climate, a mountain to climb) to the vegetable and animal world (e.g., the frequent use of the terms growth and to grow, the roots of a territory, various zoomorphic analogies), and from military jargon (e.g., fighting a war against injustice, our allies, enemies of freedom) to architectural metaphors (e.g., pillars of our history, separating barriers, building bridges) and the personification of places (e.g., the heart of a land, the body of a nation) (see Digonnet, 2014).

For this reason, we argue for integrating language into the study of different forms of power and related power relations in regional development studies. This can be achieved in various ways, for example, through the study of metaphorical language and the more frequent adoption of methodologies such as narratives in the EEG and RIS literature.

Language, metaphors and power relations in regional development

Our shared language shapes meanings among people and between groups. In a social context, the construction of meaning can take place in many ways. First, our language can, for example, create shared understanding and meaning between members of a group by allowing individuals to communicate and then establish a common understanding of concepts, ideas and emotions. Indeed, shared meaning can help build a sense of unity (or community) within a group or between different groups. Second, language can reinforce social norms and values by signalling adherence to them, thereby creating a sense of what is acceptable behaviour within a particular social context. For example, certain words or phrases can be associated with specific attitudes, beliefs or even world-views, and thus reinforce or challenge social norms within a group. Third, and particularly relevant for the present paper, the use of language can signal social status or hierarchy, with certain forms of speech being reserved for those in positions of power or authority. Talking about regional development initiatives in one way or another, either very positively or very negatively, can shape how individuals or groups interpret social situations and relationships. The way in which language is used to describe people, events and behaviours can foster positive or negative attitudes towards different groups or individuals. Finally, language is a powerful tool for bringing about social change by challenging societal norms and values through new terminology and alternative narratives (Neumann, 2000).

This last point is of relevance in regional debates and discussions about different initiatives in regions and how they perform in the selection of development paths. When actors in the region oppose the dominant narrative or story about a certain regional development initiative and how it can influence the future of the region, language itself becomes a powerful tool to divert attention towards an alternative direction, or even away from how the more powerful actors have previously framed and 'packed' the initiative or story. By creating new meanings and perceptions, language can therefore facilitate alternative paths for regions by revealing different and perhaps more nuanced opportunities and effects for regions by having competing or contested narratives in place.

Metaphors can be defined as "a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison" (Underwood, 2023). Metaphors explicitly refer to words or expressions that mean something different to their literal definition, and they often appear in literature, poetry, music and writing, but also in speech. The expression 'metaphorically speaking' means that the receiver of the message should not take what is said as being the truth, but as more of an idea. However, metaphors can also be used in a more implicit way, where the naming or description of an initiative or event takes the form of a metaphor. In this case, the meaning of the initiative and the effect of its influence on regions will point in a specific direction where certain effects are more visible in one metaphor compared with another.

Two examples that we observed in the Norwegian context highlight how two diametrically opposite (i.e., positive and negative) metaphors work in social processes in regional development. When the industrial plant for receiving oil and gas off the coast of Finnmark (i.e., a peripheral region in northern Norway) opened in 2000, the declining regional situation challenged the labour market and employment. People had moved away to find jobs elsewhere, and young people left after finishing school and did not come back. The leading oil company in Norway (Equinor) and the country's largest industry association (the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise), together with the mayor of the local community, proposed a new initiative that would create jobs and competence development in the region. The actors in political power attributed a very positive connotation to the new construction by referring to it as a 'fairy tale', and the oil company actually renamed the field 'Snow White'. This fairy-tale metaphor created certain expectations about the role of construction, job creation and skills development for the people and the community in both the short and long term (Nilsen & Snøhvit, 2002). The use of the metaphor pointed towards a specific direction for the kind of development that the proposal was going to create for the region, and it was adopted by the oil companies and industry associations in the media, as well as by the county administration and the majority of politicians in the region. The proponents drew considerable attention to the new facility by pointing to the possibilities it would create for the region. The metaphor was effectively adapted to the regional past and possible

regional future by the proponents, and the actors of change in the region had the financial and industrial muscle needed to alter its development paths. They possessed the resources and combined them to the extent of having a hegemonic position in the discourse concerning what the facility would create in the future.

The second example is from Innlandet (i.e., a southern region in Norway), where the building of a new data centre for the storage of big data was announced by the global company Green Mountain in the city of Hamar in 2023. The company promised the creation of 300 jobs related to the centre's establishment, although no evidence of this claim has been made public (Brandtzæg, 2023). The Chinese company TikToK is one of the industry actors partnering and involved in the investment together with Green Mountain, which is why this decision is strongly controversial. A competing view backed by several industry actors in the municipalities of Gjøvik and Raufoss, including the regional government and global manufacturing clusters, opposes this decision. Nammo (a world-leading firm in the arms industry) considers the Green Mountain investment a bad idea for the region, as it would take up all free capacity in the energy transmission grid and leave the region without the extra capacity to feed new and power-demanding industries into the existing grid. The industry association that represents several hundred workers subsequently wrote an op-ed for a national newspaper, in which they described the Green Mountain initiative as a 'Kinder Egg from hell' (Brandtzæg, 2023). The literal Kinder Surprise Egg comprises a milk chocolate egg surrounding a yellow plastic capsule containing an unknown small toy, promising a surprise that cannot be calculated or predicted. The metaphor applied in this context implies that a positive decision for Green Mountain and investment in infrastructure for data storage represent an unpleasant 'surprise' for the whole region. In effect, this would mean putting all other future development projects on hold, with the implication that Nammo and related industries in the region would not be able to invest in future planned facilities due to the lack of surplus energy in the region. When realised, the data centre will not only hinder new regional industrial development, building on already strong knowledge bases within the region, but also effectively compromise Norway's defence industry and its capacity to help Ukraine defend itself from Russia by reducing Norway's planned supplies of ammunition to NATO. The decision was therefore framed as hindering regional development by confiscating all available energy for the next 15 years, in addition to stopping new industrial development and job creation within already strong regional clusters (Brandtzæg, 2023).

As noted, the role and position of metaphors are seldom considered in discussions of how regional development paths occur and emerge. We contend that the role of the metaphor is underrated in debates about how we comprehend regional development in general and regarding the role of emerging regional development in particular. Metaphors can help people understand complex ideas and concepts by comparing them with something familiar. The term metaphor derives from the field of linguistics and philosophy, and these traditions should be taken into account in regional development issues because metaphors direct attention towards a specific topic, a certain story and a particular 'side of a story', which can, if used effectively, provide meaning for members of a social group or even between groups. We therefore argue that descriptions of social issues can be framed in a particular way that can actually influence how people interpret and understand them. If continuously repeated, the metaphor is no longer a linguistic concept but becomes the actual frame for social processes, thereby influencing the actions and meanings of people within a region. For this reason, we should enhance our study of metaphors and how they are used in the field of economic geography and, in particular, in regional development.

Metaphors are often used in regional development but seldom reflected upon in a critical manner. Given that they are able to make complex ideas much easier for people to grasp, they are effective as 'carriers of meaning', that is, they help break down complexities and make it easier for people to understand the (potential) effects of initiatives. Therefore, we argue that economic geographers need to critically examine the relational aspects of regional development by exploring how language is used in different social processes.

Studying power in regional development: narratives as a method of analysis

The role and position of relational aspects are important for regional development studies, and in this paper, we argue that narratives are one of the methods

through which relational dynamics can be studied. In addition to the extant literature, several fields in the social sciences have used narratives as a method of analysis, most prominently in anthropology (e.g., Hill, 2005; Maggio, 2014), sociology (Franzosi, 1998; Mangone, 2022) and political science (Neumann, 2000). However, in the field of regional development, much less attention has been paid to narratives as a field of study. As exceptions, Fløysand et al., (2016) reported that discourses about renewal influenced the ways in which different international businesses encountered the host regions. Moreover, Nilsen & Njøs, (2022) argue that narratives are a promising method when studying contested regional development processes, and they call for more research with this background.

We acknowledge that narratives are particularly relevant to creating order in a chaotic social system of meanings and arguments (Fairclough, 2013). The method of narratives is particularly important in identifying themes and patterns, that is, in highlighting recurring topics that can be used to identify dominant views or stories of a particular event. Moreover, as a method in regional development, narratives can contribute to uncovering biases and power relations (Nilsen & Njøs, 2022; Nilsen et al., 2024; Gowland, 2021; Maclean, 2009). By identifying certain dominant views and stories, that is, by registering how the stories are told and by whom, how often and through which medium, narratives can be used to reveal biases that are deeply embedded within different social systems in regional development, in addition to the relevant social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts in which the narratives are embedded.

Perhaps the most prominent way to use narratives as a method to elucidate the role of power relations in regional development processes is to exploit the analytical ability that narratives provide in analysing power relations and dynamic social relationships. Narratives can provide important knowledge about how and to what extent power relations are skewed, thereby identifying actors that have the power to communicate different stories about dominant or even marginalised events. Marginalised narratives are often hidden beneath the surface and seldom have the power to define the agenda within a region. Such skewness and imbalance can be effectively revealed using narratives as a method in social science research and particularly in regional studies research where contesting views of regional development

emerge among different political parties, business representatives and officials within the public sector.

The use of narratives as a method of analysis within regional development studies has the potential to provide a more thorough understanding of existing power relations, whether and how different relations are skewed and to what extent these relations come to the surface. In this sense, analysing who has the power, how the power is shaped through language (including metaphors) and the relationships between different actors can be understood from a narrative perspective. As a method of analysis, narratives can provide a deeper understanding of both dominant and more marginalised views in regional development debates.

Concluding remarks and a possible research agenda

In this paper, we have highlighted the political dimension of possible development paths, which is a topic that has been rather overlooked in the key strands of the EEG (Boschma & Martin, 2010; Frenken & Boschma, 2007; Neffke et al., 2011) and RIS literature (Asheim & Isaksen, 2002; Asheim et al., 2019; Tödtling et al., 2018). We achieved this by primarily showing how to integrate key concepts and approaches from a discipline such as political science into the study of regional development processes and dynamics (for the potentially fruitful exchange between the two fields, see also Rickard, 2020). We argue that power relations and under-used related topics (language) and promising methods (narratives) need to be systematically integrated into regional development studies.

To address our first research question (*RQ1*: What can scholars in the field of regional development learn from previous studies of power relations in the fields of economic geography and political science?), we argue that possible development paths are often influenced by power relations (i.e., how power is concentrated or more evenly distributed among the various entities involved in political, societal and decision-making processes; see, e.g., Lukes, 2021). This argument appears to be confirmed by the case studies we have discussed, as well as by the myriad of other cases reported in academic publications and newspaper or magazine articles

(e.g., Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2019; Setyowati & Quist, 2022). Thus, an important contribution of this paper is to treat possible regional development paths not as a purely economistic process as EEG and RIS tend to do (e.g., local firms that diversify in other sectors, and effective or less fruitful economic policy), but as a conflictual process in which different opinions or even divergent views emerge and compete. This occurs on a multitude of occasions, such as when there are discussions about building a new highway and the related socio-economic and environmental impacts (Palma, 2022), when different strata of society have different views on a specific issue or possible regional futures (Wilson, 2014), or when certain economic sectors are prioritised by politicians and policymakers in a given regional context (Sotarauta, 2018).

Some emerging or already emerged tendencies in the field of regional development seem to be particularly in line with the arguments advanced in this paper. They may potentially represent relevant arenas in which our suggested approaches may be put into practice or where the appropriateness of the proposed topics and methods may be tested (see *RQ2*); for example, the study of agency as a process leading to new development trajectories (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020) or the need to focus on how key agents may drive regional change due to their specific characteristics. These are what Calignano and Nilsen (2024) define as 'actor properties' in their study on the major role played by political leaders in fostering new regional development models (e.g., vision, charisma, political experience, rhetoric, ability to bridge local and non-local networks and financial resources). These two connected strands of the literature represent fertile ground where it may be possible to develop the research agenda outlined in this paper.

Even though more powerful regional actors and hegemonic views tend to stand out, it is not always the strongest actors or those with the initially dominant position who prevail at the end of the decision-making process. By analysing a few unequivocal examples, we attempted to reverse the Darwinian metaphor adopted by evolutionary economists and EEG scholars in arguing that less powerful actors have the possibility to overturn the existing regionally skewed power relations by actively and effectively mobilising their ideas, networks and resources (see, e.g., Nilsen & Njøs, 2022; Wilson, 2014).

More generally, even though silent domination (e.g., a form of invisible power entailing placid acceptance of subordination) occurs on occasions, we stress that the norm is that regional development processes and paths represent the outcomes of dialogical conflicts (Lukes, 2021). We addressed *RQ3* (Through which original lens (i.e., language) and method (i.e., narratives) might empirical analyses best be conducted on the topics we illustrate?) by showing how language clearly plays a critical role in this dialectical confrontation. Language contributes to shaping certain values and views of given events or an entire society, while it is similarly shaped by political dynamics and affected by power relations (Gingras, 1996). In addition, language offers alternatives to, or heterogenic versions of, a given reality; for example, positive, negative or neutral interpretations of the various situations that constantly occur in the most disparate regional contexts (Nilsen & Snøhvit, 2002).

Among the various figures of speech that feed the imaginaries of speakers and listeners, metaphors are probably the most forceful; they are frequently and effectively used by leaders and activists in their political discourses, while being regularly used by everyone in everyday conversations. Metaphors are so powerful because they stimulate emotions and inspire people and make them dream (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). From our point of view, they represent a relevant figure of speech to illustrate the different visions of a regional reality and future possibilities and to push people to think and act in one way or another.

We have identified narratives as an effective method for studying language and metaphors in regional economic development, by virtue of their ability to shape certain or alternative views in the minds of people, while also guiding different ways of thinking or acting and contributing to the building of power relations.

We utilised narratives, a relatively new and not fully explored methodological strategy (see, e.g., Fløysand et al., 2016; Nilsen & Njøs, 2022), and combined them with more specific metaphor analysis (Pitcher, 2013; Redden, 2017). This appears to be a suitable approach for studying (skewed) power relations in regional development dynamics and their related representations. This could be an interesting way to study both recorded transcripts (i.e., official documents through which one evaluates the influence of visible power) and hidden

transcripts (i.e., opinions, viewpoints and values that are not captured by official documents and accounts and may provide a critical representation of decision-making processes by shedding light on invisible power) (see Lukes, 2021).

Moreover, extending this combination of methods to other relevant figures of speech and key elements of language, or seeking a causal relationship between political discourses, people's opinions and sentiments, views of the future and actual development trajectories (e.g., through qualitative comparative analysis) would be a promising avenue for the systematic integration of a political dimension into the study of economic geography and regional development, for examining whether and how power relations influence new regional development paths.

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