



Transformations in regional planning research: the case of the Regional Studies and Regional Science Associations 1965-2005

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Learned societies provide the social structure within which individual disciplines, sub-disciplines and field of intellectual enquiry can be promoted. They invert the geographically specific and intellectually extensive nature of the university, providing a forum for discussion and mechanisms of dissemination tailored to the needs of the particular area of enquiry that it exists to promote. The manner in which they are established can orientate the development of knowledge and impact upon the vibrancy of its discipline, sub-discipline or field.

During the 1960s, 'the region' and regional planning enjoyed favourable attention in Britain. A sympathetic government, along with specific national economic concerns highlighted both the need to address visible problems at the regional level, but also to improve the communication and mutual education of researchers and practitioners. These factors, combined with the shift from planning as a largely physicalist activity to the inclusion of social science perspectives and the advance of new quantitative methods, signalled that some form of association that would network these interests and disseminate research amongst them, was needed. However, the form the new organisation would take was contested: the U.S. based Regional Science Association with its abstract quantitative methods proclaiming to be the future, clashed with those hailing from the British Group of the International Centre for Regional Planning and Development with their post-war physicalism and policy orientated interpretation of planning. The clash resulted in two organisations - the British section of the Regional Science Association and the Regional Studies Association - each with distinct interpretations of methods and purpose in the study of regions - were formed in Britain by the end of the decade.

After discussing the contested formation of the Regional Studies Association in 1965 and the eventual formation of a Regional Science Association section in 1967, this paper examines the relative successes of these two learned societies' approach to regional research up to the present day. It then moves on to examine the impact that their different methods, objectives and social structure has had on the field of enquiry, the challenges posed by division in regional research and the attempts to unite the two communities.