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A Solution in Search of a Problem: A ‘Garbage Can’ Approach to the Politics of Territorial Cohesion

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Abstract

Those who promote spatial planning or spatial policy at the European level have increasingly done so under the banner of ‘territorial cohesion’. Since the inclusion of this term in the draft Constitution as an objective of the European Union, territorial cohesion has drawn the attention of an increasing number of actors and interests. By virtue of its vague but undeniably positive connotation, it is emerging as a successful metaphor in European policy discourse. In this paper it is argued that the territorial cohesion policy process should be understood in terms of the opportunities the concept presents to individual actors to solve contingent problems. Linking the ‘solution’ of territorial cohesion to different problems (garbage can model) has resulted in the production of a plurality of oftentimes mutually exclusive interpretations. Nevertheless, in the discursive struggle for hegemony between these interpretations, some progress is being made towards a common understanding.

Keywords: territorial cohesion, garbage can model, European integration, spatial planning, cohesion policy

1. Introduction

For years, the European Union has used ‘united in diversity’ as its official motto. Disregarding the veracity of this claim for a political and economic project unswervingly directed towards breaking down barriers to trade and mobility and assiduously promoting standardization, this slogan is an appropriate enough epithet to describe the term territorial cohesion. Since the Lisbon Treaty, territorial cohesion has become an official objective or ‘shared competency’ of the European Union, yet remains relatively unelaborated. For this reason, it is essentially a *carte blanche* for European policymakers. So far, territorial cohesion has had the good fortune that a diversity of actors could imbibe the term with radically different meanings without undermining the core integrity of the concept (Faludi, 2009a; Waterhout, 2008; Evers, 2008; Doucet, 2006). It is a solution without a problem. Among other things, territorial cohesion has been framed in terms of socioeconomic solidarity across regions in Europe, good governance, public services, unique geographical characteristics, sustainable development, economic competitiveness, rural/urban partnerships and spatial planning. Over time, some interpretations have achieved prominence while others have receded into the background, but none can claim hegemony or must admit defeat as long as an official definition is outstanding. Until that time, it is strategically efficacious for participants not to oppose the term outright, but to advocate a particular usage or interpretation, and thus remain united in diversity.

Although territorial cohesion currently resides at one of the earliest phases of European policy development, not even having entered the formal co-decision procedure, it is the outcome of a drawn-out, complex, and open-ended political process spanning at least two decades. Although the professional debate which engendered it goes back even further, a suitable starting point is 1989, at the first informal meeting of European ministers of planning in Nantes, commonly referred to as ‘ministerials’, which had the distinction of being attended by the then Commission President Jacques Delors. Despite the fact that this ministerial was held under the banner of spatial planning, many issues were raised then which are still being debated in the context of territorial cohesion today (Faludi, Waterhout, 2002, pp. 37-38; Williams, 1996). Because of these commonalities and the continuity provided by the ministerials and related forums, the twenty year period can be conceptualised as being part of a single on-going process. For the sake of brevity, I will use the term ‘the territorial cohesion process’ to denote the entirety of the policy discussions related to issues of European spatial planning, policy coordination, balanced development and the like which has taken place at various levels of scale across Europe and involved countless individuals and organisations at various points in time.

Explaining the territorial cohesion process in teleological terms is challenging. Most individuals participating in the process will surely have a clear idea about what they wish to achieve at a particular moment, but from a distance these preferences can appear quite contradictory. One reason is that the territorial cohesion process is so multifaceted that it is difficult to be consistent across themes and issues. Another reason is that problems can

look very different at different levels of scale. Finally, preferences can change over time. As a result, the standpoints and actions at the collective level, particularly statements made by member states, are often unpredictable. For example, each of the three Nordic member states, although having similar socio-economic and spatial similarities vis-à-vis the rest of Europe, has a quite different understanding of territorial cohesion (Damsgaard et al., 2008, p. 16). Another example regards the Dutch role in the process, which in hyperbolic terms has changed from a Europhilic trailblazer to a Eurosceptic foot-dragger (Faludi, 2010: 84-88). Because of the complexity of the territorial cohesion process, much of the academic literature has attempted to explain it descriptively in terms of an additive process based on some form of implicit dialectical rationality (e.g. Faludi, Waterhout, 2002), or as the outcome of competing ideologies (e.g. Doucet, 2006; Evers, 2008; Waterhout, 2008; Servillo, 2010; Vanolo, 2010). In these explanations, the one unifying protagonist — the ‘process’ itself — sometimes moves ahead or suffers setbacks, but these terms are used more descriptively than analytically.

This perspective on the territorial cohesion process strongly resembles so-called ‘garbage can model of organizational choice’ (GCM) used in the social sciences. This approach is premised on the observation that in unstructured processes, solutions are not necessarily found for problems, but that problems are found for solutions which have presented themselves (Cohen et al., 1972). According to the GCM, events present ‘choice opportunities’ for participants to engage in the act of ‘problem allocation’. In this case, the ministerials are important events at which participants try to attach their particular problems to the ‘solution’ of territorial cohesion. The results of the problem allocations are found in the myriad documents which have been produced by the participants such as publications by the European Commission, studies by European planning experts, manifestos of interested parties and minutes of meetings and parliamentary debates; these also constitute the primary sources on which this analysis is based.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which this theory presents a useful way to understand the heterogeneity, fluidity and multidimensional character of the territorial cohesion process. It does so by presenting a brief GCM application and reflecting on the results. First, the case for choosing the garbage can model for the territorial cohesion process will be argued in Section 2. An adapted version of the model will then be presented in Section 3 as a conceptual framework. Afterwards, four ‘problem allocations’ of territorial cohesion will be explored (Section 4). The next section will reflect on the way in which participants used choice opportunities, which were the most significant and lasting, and what this means for the future evolution of territorial cohesion policy in Europe (Section 5). Finally some reflections will be made on the limitations of the garbage can approach for understanding territorial cohesion (Section 6).

2. The Garbage Can Model

Before describing the inner workings of the garbage can model it is useful to provide some context to its emergence and subsequent use. GCM resides within and predates the new institutionalism literature in the social sciences, particularly the strand described by

Hall and Taylor (1996) and others as ‘sociological institutionalism’.¹ The main intent of the new institutionalism was to react against explanations of social phenomena as the aggregate outcome of individual rational choices (Peters, 1999; Lowndes, 2001 and see Dowding, 1996 for a rebuttal). In the article where they coined the term ‘new institutionalism’, March and Olsen (1984) argued that social conventions play a large role in producing social phenomena. In their 1989 book, which expands on this article, March and Olsen list a number of examples that are common in descriptive or anecdotal explanations of political phenomena, but which can confound rational-choice explanations.

The purpose of the GCM is to provide an analytical framework for understanding apparently irrational decision-making, particularly in an unstructured environment. The ground-breaking paper in which the model was originally presented (Cohen et al., 1972) became an instant classic in organization theory, and sparked a large number of theoretical elaborations and empirical applications (March, Olsen, 1989). The widespread success and acceptance of the GCM was paradoxically viewed by Bendor et al. (2001) as one of its weaknesses: it was rarely subjected to critical reflection. Using the terminology used in the debate on the garbage can model, the original paper contains both a ‘verbal theory’ part in which the core concepts are articulated, and an ‘operationalization’ of these concepts for a computer simulation (a program written in Fortran was included in the appendix). As the operationalization was performed with a specific instance in mind (namely decision-making in universities), and includes some questionable assumptions regarding behaviour of participants to this end (see Bendor et al., 2001 for a critique), only the verbal theory of the GCM will be treated here. This has generally been the approach taken by notable scholars such as Kingdon (1984) who built his ‘multiple streams model’ on the GCM verbal theory and subsequent work by March and Olsen and others within the framework of the sociological institutionalism.

According to the verbal theory, problems and solutions are defined and linked as a result of serendipity and availability. Problems are often sought for pre-existing solutions, for example (Cohen et al., 1972; March, Olsen, 1989; Bendor et al., 2001; Olsen, 2001). The garbage can is used as a metaphor to illustrate this: it is a receptacle “into which various kinds of problems and solutions are dumped by participants as they are generated. The mix of garbage in a single can depends on the mix of cans available, on the labels attached to the alternative cans, on what garbage is currently being produced, and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene” (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2). Taken to the extreme, even participants are exogenous to the system (March, Olsen, 1989, p. 12), while other factors, such as the role of time cycles in framing decision-making become paramount. By definition, this is an iterative and co-producing process (Gualini, 2001; Healey, 1997), rather than one which terminates when a problem has

¹ This name has been widely applied as a result of the influential article by Hall and Taylor, but Peters (1999) argues that ‘sociological institutionalism’ is too narrow a description for March and Olsen’s approach.

been solved. For planning theorists, this conceptualization of the policymaking process is hardly unfamiliar (see e.g. Lindblom 1996).

European politics is particularly suited to this kind of conceptualization, especially with regard to topics such as spatial planning and/or territorial cohesion which reside peripherally or prior to formal decision-making structures. In their justification for the application of the ‘sociological institutionalist’ approach to planning, González and Healey (2005) recall Jessop’s conceptualization of the state as a “specific institutional ensemble with multiple boundaries, no institutional fixity and no pre-given formal or substantive unity” (1990, p. 267). As an entity even more amorphous and fluid than an individual state, the European Union would certainly fit these criteria, and as the territorial cohesion process has not even entered the formal co-decision procedure and because territorial cohesion is still being elaborated as a concept, it should exhibit even more GCM characteristics. To investigate this further, we will turn to how well the verbal theory fits the case of the territorial cohesion process, focusing as much as possible on the verbal theory contained in the original article by Cohen et al. (1972) and subsequent references to the GCM by March and Olsen.

3. Application of GCM to the Territorial Cohesion Process

Cohen et al. (1972) introduced the garbage can model as a means to explain decision-making in a complex environment or as they called it, an ‘organized anarchy’. In the spirit of application, we will examine this term more closely.

The first [property of organized anarchies] is problematic preferences. [...] The organization operates on the basis of a variety of inconsistent and ill-defined preferences. It can be described better as a loose collection of ideas than as a coherent structure. [...] The second property is unclear technology. Although the organization manages to survive and even produce, its own processes are not understood by its members. [...] The third property is fluid participation. Participants vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to different domains; involvement varies from one time to another. (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1)

From this definition, the territorial cohesion process can clearly be viewed as occurring within an organized anarchy. The first criterion, ‘inconsistent and ill-defined preferences’, is visible in the loose collection of somewhat self-contradictory key concepts that have been produced over the years such as ‘balanced competitiveness’, ‘polycentricity’ and ‘urban/rural partnership’. Secondly, the territorial cohesion process is informal and unstructured, non-transparent and unclear about its objectives, but does manage to produce tangible results periodically. Finally, we can see that participants temporarily assume more prominent roles due to enhanced institutional capacity or the desire to influence or guide the process in a meaningful way at a particular moment in time (e.g. the Dutch in 2004, the Germans in 2007, the French in 2008, DG Regio at

various moments), often corresponding to the revolving EU presidency. This coincides with the ‘fluid participation’ characteristic.

A key concept in the GCM is ‘choice opportunity’. This is an occasion “when an organization is expected to produce behaviour that can be called a decision” (*ibid.*: 3). In our case, choice opportunities arise at the ministerials that occur at six-month intervals, but also with the publication of documents such as green papers and white papers. Waterhout (2008) explains change in the territorial cohesion process using similar concepts: that a ‘window of opportunity’ had opened due to a confluence of agendas or a ‘critical juncture’ had presented itself. This term is also similar to that of ‘opportunity structure’ as used by Faludi and Waterhout (2002) to explain the ESDP process.

So, using the terminology of the verbal theory: in the open-ended nature of the territorial cohesion process, territorial cohesion presents itself as a ‘solution’ to which decision-makers can attach their ‘problems’ at a given ‘choice opportunity’. This provides the conceptual vocabulary for describing, for example, how the Lisbon Strategy and spatial planning were linked at the Rotterdam meeting in 2004 under the Dutch presidency, how climate change was given such a prominent place in the Territorial Agenda and how territorial cohesion is linked to economic recovery in Europe 2020. Over time, events occur which give rise to specific ‘choice opportunities’ in which participants link together problems and solutions, or in this case, link problems to the pre-existing solution of territorial cohesion. Some events allow the linking of a single problem, while others will allow for multiple linkages. These ideas are summarized in the figure below.

Problem \ Event	P ₁	P ₂	P ₃	...	P _n
E ₁		CO ₁			
E ₂	CO ₂	CO ₂			
E ₃		CO ₃	CO ₃		
...					
E _n					

In this case, the first three events provided choice opportunities for linking the solution to the second problem definition. The second and third events also provided choice opportunities to participants wishing to make a link to the first and third problem definitions respectively. Since this is a theoretical example, there can be any number (n) of events and problems. In the original GCM, this is even more complex as there are multiple solutions as well, which in this schematic would have to be expressed as a third dimension. In fact, the verbal theory describes a situation of simultaneous streams of problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities.

According to the verbal theory, several things can occur at each choice opportunity: energy additivity, energy allocation and problem allocation. Of these, we are primarily interested in the latter, as it is crucial for giving shape and meaning to the term territorial cohesion. Alternatively, we can interpret ‘energy additivity’ as events which raise European spatial planning or territorial cohesion on the political agenda, that is, add

energy to the process itself. The concept of ‘energy allocation’ on the other hand seems to be less suitable for our analysis as we have little information in the amount of time/resources participants have invested in the territorial cohesion process.

As stated, for our purposes problem allocation is the most important of the three operational concepts. The next step is to provide an explanation of how problems become linked to the solution of territorial cohesion at a particular choice opportunity. Cohen et al. (1972) do this for their case study of decision-making in universities by making a number of behavioural assumptions which were subsequently used for a computer simulation.² As the purpose here is not to create a theoretical model of decision-making, but explain a real phenomenon using qualitative data sources, we need to find another method to link solutions and problems.

As a political phenomenon, problem/solution linkages in the territorial cohesion process can effectively be made using concepts from the political science literature, particularly those that explain how rhetoric, symbol and argumentation ascribe meaning and connect disparate topics. For simplicity, two particular terms were selected for the analysis: storyline and frame. Storylines, as the name implies, refer to narratives which suggest a causal chain exists, and in this way can act as a powerful cognitive tool to link problems to solutions or vice versa (Hajer, 1993). Similarly, a ‘frame’ is “a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting” (Rein, Schön, 1993), which is also very useful for linking problems and solutions. These ideas have found their way into the core of planning and policy literature, first via the ‘argumentative turn’ (Fischer, Forester, 1993) and then via the ‘institutionalist turn’ (Salet, Faludi, 2000).

In view of this operationalization, it can no longer be claimed that this analysis of territorial cohesion constitutes a pure application of the garbage can model in the strict sense. The method employed by Cohen et al. (1972) would require information regarding specific actors and choice opportunities over a long period of time, much of which is unavailable to all but the actual participants in the process, and even then, this surely would be incomplete, undocumented and/or forgotten. Instead, this analysis can be said to be strongly *inspired* by the garbage can model, and seeks to construct an account of the territorial cohesion process using its main principles and available information.

² It was posited that decisions are made only after a certain amount of energy is devoted to them, participants allocate their energy to the choices closest to a decision, and that each problem is attached to no more than one choice in any given period. These assumptions are obviously not very applicable to TCP.

4. Outcome of the Application

The following section discusses how four ‘problems’ have been and are being attached to the ‘solution’ of territorial cohesion. The investigation was performed by a reading of relevant documentation for potential problem allocation, paying particular attention to the contingencies surrounding the events, timing and the storylines and frames employed by the participants which produced it. For the sake of readability, the attempt to allocate a particular problem to territorial cohesion will be referred to as an ‘interpretation’ of territorial cohesion. The four interpretations are:

- Territorial Cohesion as Socio-Economic Convergence
- Territorial Cohesion as Economic Competitiveness
- Territorial Cohesion as Spatial Planning
- Territorial Cohesion as Policy Coordination

Although every attempt will be made to provide a description of each interpretation as a discrete entity, the analytic distinction made here remains arbitrary. Particularly the latter two interpretations are often taken as one and advocated by similar groups, even if they address a different problem. Even diametrically opposed interpretations (the first two) are often argued in official publications to be synergetic or at least complementary. This being said, the interpretations are not intended as explanations of the territorial cohesion process, but as tools for the application of the garbage can model as they contain distinctly different problem definitions.

Substantively, the four interpretations of territorial cohesion have an affinity with those identified by Waterhout (2008), Evers et al. (2009), Servillo (2010) and the thematic workshops carried out under the 2008 French presidency. Given the plurality of opinions on territorial cohesion in the EU27 at this time, and the uncertain role of the next European Commission, it cannot be stated with any degree of certainty which will gain in acceptance in the future, and it cannot be excluded that an emergent discourse could become dominant. What is certain is that, if a definition and operationalization is chosen, for example in a white paper, it will not be on the basis of just one interpretation, but a mix of several. The use of the concept in recent policy documents of the European Commission (e.g. Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and the fifth cohesion report) point towards a hybrid problem allocation.

The description of the interpretations in this section will occur in several steps. First, a brief description is provided of the *problem* to which territorial cohesion is attached. Next, the main *participants* promoting this interpretation are identified. This is followed by a brief explanation of how participants used *choice opportunities* to promote a particular problem allocation and/or embed it institutionally. Victories for a particular interpretation can be read as text in official publications by the European Commission and informal political documents such as the Territorial Agenda and the conclusions of European presidencies.

Territorial Cohesion as Socio-Economic Convergence

In this interpretation, territorial cohesion is taken to mean socio-economic equality between regions in Europe. The ‘problem’ that territorial cohesion must solve is the persistence of regional disparities, not only between the wider areas of Europe (core versus periphery, north-south axis, east-west axis) but also within member states (growing regions versus lagging regions). This interpretation frames territorial cohesion in terms of the so-called European social model (Faludi, 2007a). This interpretation is highly embedded institutionally and has played a significant role in the political process ever since (Doucet, 2006, p. 1475).

Various participants have advocated linking territorial cohesion to the problem of disparities. At times, DG Regio of the European Commission has made this link, and participants poised to materially gain from this interpretation have been rather consistent in their support. The Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions, for example, argue that, “it [territorial cohesion] is based on the key idea of equity and, thus, of cohesion between territories at a given scale” (CPMR, 2008, p. 2). Likewise, Euromontana, an organisation promoting the interests of mountain regions in the EU, has lobbied for the inclusion of territorial cohesion into the treaty text “and its correct interpretation and delivery” (Euromontana, 2008). The Assembly of European Regions also adheres to this interpretation. Support can also be found in the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. As far as this interpretation is linked to services of general interest, one can point to those advocating that this be included in the treaty: Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Bulgaria and Romania (Waterhout, 2008, p. 103). Finally, many member states have this kind of territorial cohesion policy at the national level, such as Germany (support to the Eastern Neue Länder) and Italy (support to the Southern Mezzogiorno).

Many events presented choice opportunities to link territorial cohesion to the problem of disparities (in terms of socioeconomic development between regions, geographic handicaps and access to services). In general, the presidencies of countries such as Spain, Greece and Italy usually presented opportunities for this. At the 1990 ministers’ conference, for example, the Italian Presidency argued that disparities in Europe were structured between an economic core area, a 500km circle around Luxembourg, and the periphery (Faludi, Waterhout, 2002). So even at this early stage of the debate on European spatial planning, the link with economic development policy — and what would later emerge as territorial cohesion — was explicit. The core/periphery frame was successfully carried forward in the ESDP and the ESPON programme as the ‘pentagon’ concept (the space bounded by the cities London, Hamburg, Munich, Milan and Paris).

This interpretation has greatly benefited from the inclusion of socio-economic cohesion in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The term territorial cohesion made its entrance in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) in article 7d regarding services of general economic interest (Robert, 2007, p. 27), such as shops, health care facilities and post offices (Peyrony, 2007, p. 61). In this sense, territorial cohesion is framed in terms of levelling out disparities, but at the local rather than pan-European scale. Significantly, as it appears in

later drafts of the Treaty (e.g. the draft Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty), territorial cohesion is listed as a third objective after social and economic cohesion. In the original French version of the text, it appears as *cohésion économique, sociale et territoriale* implying, semantically at least, a clear interconnectedness rather than a stand-alone concept. This is also how the Interim Territorial Cohesion Report interpreted it.³

Other choice opportunities presented themselves due to the similarity of this interpretation of territorial cohesion to the main objective of regional policy, namely reducing disparities to allow regions to compete on a more equal footing. The language employed in various policy documents reflects this: "...people should not be disadvantaged by where they happen to live or work in the Union" (CEC, 2004a, p. 27). As will be discussed later, this interpretation has lost ground since the 'event' of the launching of the Rotterdam process. This is reflected in the fact that the use of the term by DG Regio has become more inclusive. In addition to traditionally less-developed areas (low GDP per capita), areas with a 'geographical handicap', such as mountains, deserts or border regions, have also been problematized. This language, in which the scope of territorial cohesion has been widened, permeates the fourth cohesion report (CEC, 2007a: 10, 14, pp. 100-102) and is one of the main areas of focus in the report Regions 2020 (CEC, 2008b), published shortly after the Green Paper.

The drafting of the Territorial Agenda posed another choice opportunity to frame territorial cohesion as a means to address socio-economic disparities. The degree to which this document reflects this philosophy is a good indicator of the status of this interpretation in 2007. It is visible in some passages of the Territorial Agenda: 'we regard it as an essential task and *act of solidarity* to develop preconditions in all regions to enable *equal opportunities* for our citizens and development perspectives for entrepreneurship' [emphasis added] (TA, 2007: 3), but it is certainly no longer dominant. It is also present, at a much lower level of scale, in the Leipzig Charter — signed at the same meeting — which warns against segregation and social exclusion in cities. Significantly, the most important recent statements on territorial cohesion by DG Regio, the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and the fifth cohesion report, have chosen to avoid embracing this and most other problem-oriented interpretations of territorial cohesion.

Finally, the economic crisis has presented another choice opportunity: "the current crisis with its asymmetric territorial impacts has increased the importance of territorial cohesion within the EU" (CEC, 2009, p. 11). Various participants are hard at work to reframe cohesion policy, and territorial cohesion in particular, as a vehicle for economic recovery. The most significant statement in this regard can be found in the publication of Europe 2020 which states: "It is also essential that the benefits of economic growth spread to all parts of the Union, including its outermost regions, thus strengthening territorial cohesion" (CEC, 2010a, p. 16). As we shall see, this activity, has the characteristic of a rearguard action in view of the green paper and fifth cohesion report.

³ Namely: "Territorial cohesion, meaning the balanced distribution of human activities across the Union, is complementary to economic and social cohesion" (CEC, 2004b, p. 3).

Territorial Cohesion as Economic Competitiveness

This interpretation is diametrically opposed to the previous one: here, territorial cohesion is perceived as an instrument for producing an economically competitive Europe. The ‘problem’ that territorial cohesion is intended to address is increasing global competition. In this view, each region can and should take advantage of its own ‘territorial capital’ to pursue strong economic development and achieve a higher quality of life. This interpretation is closely linked to the Lisbon Strategy to make Europe “...the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council, cited in Faludi, 2009a, p. 7) and its follow-up Europe 2020.

Various participants have advocated linking territorial cohesion to the problem of global competition and the Lisbon Strategy. Insofar as DG Regio has internalised this interpretation, it can be seen as a proponent. The same can be said for some ministers for spatial planning involved in the territorial agenda process. From a purely instrumental point of view of obtaining subsidies from regional policy, member states with strong economies should be more inclined towards this interpretation, as it could serve to increase their eligibility (Waterhout, 2008, p. 110). The Netherlands, in particular, has advocated this interpretation in the past and has a similar policy for its own regional economic development, as does Ireland (Martin, Schmeitz, 2012) and Denmark (Billing, 2007).⁴ Finally, in so far as this interpretation concerns promoting regional self-sufficiency, it could also receive support from organisations such as the Committee of the Regions or have sympathisers within the European Parliament.

Linking territorial cohesion to competitiveness is perhaps less institutionalized than socio-economic convergence, but it has gained in prominence due to the strategic use of several choice opportunities. A key event was the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, followed by several influential reports supporting it. The first was drawn up by André Sapir to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the European economy. This document suggested among other things, the creation of a growth fund, which, “should be destined for those projects that would make the greatest contribution to the EU growth objective” (Sapir, 2003, p. 163). A year later, the mid-term evaluation of the Lisbon Strategy advocated even more European resources be allocated to the promotion of growth and jobs (Kok, 2004). In response, the Third Report on Social and Economic Cohesion argued that regional policy promoted ‘growth and jobs’ (Faludi 2007b, p. 4). According to this report, not only peripheral and otherwise disadvantaged regions were sources of concern, but ‘problems of congestion in certain central areas... affect the overall competitiveness of the EU economy’ (CEC, 2004a, p. 28). Still, when this document does mention territorial cohesion, it is framed as socioeconomic convergence.

⁴ Interestingly, however, there are reservations within the Dutch Government about implementing a similar policy at the EU level, based on the subsidiarity principle, as it would imply cross-subsidization of wealthy nations. Equally interesting considering its traditional spatially redistributive politics, Italy seems to have internalized elements of this approach, as well: ‘...territorial cohesion should be conceived as a tool to exploit all the territorial potentials promoting the sustainable use of territorial, e.g. environmental, cultural and human resources, that may lead to regional development and competitiveness’ (Bubbico, 2007).

The meeting of European ministers of spatial planning in Rotterdam in 2004 was an important event providing the choice opportunity for reframing territorial cohesion. It can also be seen as adding energy to the process in general. At this meeting, territorial cohesion was explicitly linked to the Lisbon Strategy and the notion of ‘territorial capital’ used by the OECD (2001).⁵ The storyline is that European competitiveness and territorial cohesion should be achieved if each region makes optimal use of its own territorial capital. Even the European Parliament, often quite concerned with equity issues, seemed swept up in the competitiveness storyline: “...the aim of spatial planning at European level is to take each specific characteristic and optimise it as a source of growth” (European Parliament, 2005, p. 8). This interpretation seems to have been advantageous in garnering political support for the Territorial Agenda: “... the dominance of all embracing policies, such as the Lisbon Strategy has given a new dimension to the Territorial Agenda by giving it a relevance to other policies besides cohesion” (Martin and Schmeitz, 2012). The final text confirms this: ‘Through the Territorial Agenda we are also helping to strengthen the global competitiveness and sustainability of all regions of Europe. This is in accordance with the renewed Lisbon Strategy agreed by member states in 2005’ (TA, 2007, p. 3).

The reframing of territorial cohesion in terms of the Lisbon Agenda and its successor Europe 2020 has found its way into publications by DG Regio, most notably the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Tellingly, this document bears the phrase “turning territorial diversity into strength” as its subtitle, even though the lion’s share of structural funds continues to be allocated to lagging regions.⁶ Concerning this, Robert and Lennert (2008) note that: “The EU Commissioner for regional policy, Danuta Hübner, [...] urges a ‘paradigm shift’ in the definition of cohesion policy, calling for ‘a dynamic process of empowerment helping overall European economic growth and competitiveness’ and thus distancing herself from the traditional equity-oriented approach to cohesion policy (Robert, Lennert, 2008, p. 181).” In addition, and despite the fact that Europe 2020 frames territorial cohesion in terms of socioeconomic disparities, the thrust of the document is growth and jobs. This should allow proponents of this interpretation to reframe it at the next appropriate choice opportunity.

Territorial Cohesion as Spatial Planning

In this interpretation, territorial cohesion is framed in terms of spatial cohesiveness as practiced in various forms and traditions of regional or strategic planning in Europe and in terms of sustainability (as the harmonisation of social, economic and environmental values over the long term). The ‘problem’ that territorial cohesion is intended to solve is promoting balanced development of the territory, integrated spatial development, protecting valuable natural areas and curbing urban sprawl (EEA, 2006, 2010). It should be noted that spatial planning is not the same as ‘hard’ statutory land-use planning, but

⁵ In this interpretation, disparities were reframed as offering potential for growth. This conforms to the concept of comparative advantage in traditional trade theory.

⁶ Expanding on this, the document states “Increasingly, competitiveness and prosperity depend on the capacity of the people and businesses located there to make the best use of all territorial assets” (CEC, 2008a, p. 3).

also uses a variety of ‘soft’ instruments such as coordination and visioning (Dühr et al., 2010).

Participants adhering to this interpretation include some ministers of spatial planning and their staff involved in the ESDP/Territorial Agenda process. Others include professional spatial planners and/or their organisations, such as the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP),⁷ particularly those involved in the ESPON programme. As such, this interpretation does not have an especially powerful political power base, but has nevertheless been influential in shaping the discourse on territorial cohesion. The link with sustainability could potentially attract new allies from owners of the environmental ‘problem’, but so far their participation in the territorial cohesion discussion has been marginal to non-existent.

Many choice opportunities have presented themselves for this interpretation to take hold. As noted, since the late 1980s, EU ministers of spatial planning have been meeting to discuss issues such as cross-border planning, the lack of geographical coordination of sectoral policies and the need for a common understanding and vocabulary of the European spatial structure, as well as the most pressing problems facing that structure. Each one of these meetings can be viewed as an ‘event’ presenting opportunities for placing spatial planning problems on the political agenda. One of the most important of these was the publication of the ESDP (CEC, 1999). Although this document is broad enough in scope to serve all interpretations, it is also the most elaborated and definitive statement on spatial planning at the European level, and arguably has come closest in institutionalizing it (ESPON 2.3.1, 2007). The fact that it largely predates the territorial cohesion discussion, however, means that its influence in allocating spatial planning problems is largely implicit and indirect. This being said, many of the problems identified in the Territorial Agenda clearly have their origins in the ESDP (TA, 2007, p. 4), albeit using different language (e.g. territorial capital) and different examples of spatial challenges (e.g. climate change).

With respect to the institutionalization of this interpretation, it should be pointed out that the link between regional policy and spatial planning is historically weaker than for the previous two interpretations.⁸ The main interface lies in the INTERREG initiative for cross-border and transnational cooperation, which has become ‘mainstreamed’ into the ‘European territorial cooperation’ objective in the structural funds. A high-profile and almost universally lauded example of intergovernmental spatial planning has been the Baltic Sea Strategy, lending legitimacy to this approach (Faludi, 2010, pp. 182-183). Arguably the most important event for participants wishing to frame territorial cohesion in terms of development problems is the ESPON programme. This has provided myriad choice opportunities, most notably at the biannual ESPON seminars, to voice concerns about unbalanced development and discuss the results of research projects on the European spatial structure. The framing exercise is rather transparent from the titles of

⁷ Initially, ECTP stood for European Council of Town Planners. The association was renamed European Council of Spatial Planners but the acronym remained unchanged.

⁸ In fact, the territorial component is weak or nonexistent in implementation of regional policy in National Strategic Reference Frameworks (Mirwaldt et al., 2008).

ESPO publications such as ‘Territory Matters for Competitiveness and Cohesion’ (ESPO, 2006).

This framing of the problem definition gained ground with the publication of the highly influential Barca Report (2009) which argued, using different terminology, that regional policy should become more spatial. Barca argued that ‘a place-based approach’ would be beneficial to policies directed at either socioeconomic cohesion or competitiveness, and that a clear distinction be made between the two (2009, p. 17), namely a territorialized social agenda for the former and efficiency-enhancing, spatially aware, pro-active exogenous intervention for the latter. Recent publications by the European Commission also seem to take more spatial planning issues on board — although, like Barca, explicitly avoiding the term itself — such as the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion which introduces the ‘three Cs’ of concentration, connectivity and cooperation (all spatial planning concerns) and the fifth cohesion report which breaks down territorial cohesion into four main elements, three of which (environment, functional geographies and territorial analysis) are clearly related to spatial planning (CEC, 2010b).

Territorial Cohesion as Policy Coordination

In this interpretation, territorial cohesion is taken to mean the cohesion of European policies within a given territory, the ‘problem’ being a lack of policy coordination. Because decisions on these policies are taken separately from a sectoral perspective, they can supplement, reinforce or contradict each other. Mapping the effects by means of a Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA), for example, can show where potential conflicts may occur or where EU-policies could be combined to achieve synergy within a given area and, thus, territorial cohesion.

Few participants have advocated explicitly linking territorial cohesion to the problem of policy coordination: it remains a rather esoteric interpretation, dealing with issues of ‘metagovernance’ (Adams *et al.*, 2010, p. 5). One of the most vocal advocates is the Netherlands, which has struggled with the implementation of various EU directives into its spatial planning system, along with the United Kingdom and Austria. Regional and local authorities seem to have the most to gain as they are those most confronted with the problems of non-coordination on a daily basis (Zonneveld *et al.*, 2008; Buunk, 2003); these concerns are often voiced by bodies such as the Association of European Regions (AER) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR).

Like spatial planning, the main ‘events’ providing choice opportunities for attaching territorial cohesion to this problem of non-coordination are the meetings of European ministers of planning. During these meetings some countries (especially those with a ‘comprehensive integrated approach’ to spatial planning) began to insist on some kind of horizontal coordination at the European level (Waterhout, 2008, p. 107). This gained momentum after the AER published the results of a questionnaire on the unintended impacts of EU sectoral policies, and actually coined the term territorial cohesion in its argument for better policy coordination (AER, 1995). Although the term territorial cohesion was inserted into the Amsterdam Treaty shortly thereafter, its meaning had already been framed in terms of spatial justice.

Choice opportunities for problem allocation mainly presented themselves with the publication of various critical reports on the costs of policy dissonance. Evidence of unintended and uncoordinated territorial effects of EU policies was also investigated in the UK (Tewdwr-Jones, Williams, 2001) and the Netherlands (Van Ravestejn, Evers, 2004). The ESPON programme provided further evidence of policy conflicts (particularly CAP and regional policy). Another report, commissioned by DG Regio, argued that a Strategic Spatial Impact Evaluation (SSIE) procedure should be carried out in early phases of policymaking at the EU level (Robert et al., 2001, p. 158), which over time has acquired the name Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA). At present, ESPON is actively researching TIA methodology and application (i.e. the projects TIPTAP, ARTS and EATIA, see www.espon.eu).

The degree to which participants were successful in linking territorial cohesion to the problem of policy coherence can be read in various official EU documents, particularly as regards TIA. The White Paper on Governance (CEC, 2001), for example, mentions territorial cohesion in relation to principles of openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and *coherence* (Waterhout 2008, p. 107, italics added). Although TIA did not appear in the final text of the Territorial Agenda itself, it did surface in the First Action Programme for the Territorial Agenda six months later (Portuguese Presidency). One of the concrete action points is to gain more insight into how member states and regions assess the territorial impacts of EU policy. Similarly, the Barca report in 2009 argued that present circumstances called for “an approach under which public interventions with a territorial impact are made visible and verifiable ... [a] prospective place-based approach has the potential to ensure this” (Barca, 2009, p. xi). ESPON has been instrumental in supporting research on TIA methodology and application (Naylon et al., 2007). Finally, the fifth cohesion report states — under the heading of territorial cohesion! — that “[t]here is need for a better knowledge of the EU in territorial terms and more robust ways of estimating the territorial impact of EU policies” (CEC, 2010b).

5. Overview and Synthesis

In the description of the four interpretations of territorial cohesion, a number of choice opportunities were identified in which a particular problem allocation occurred. These are summarized in the table below. In some cases the linkage was performed discursively by the use of a particular frame or storyline, such as ‘uneven development’ (indicated in quotation marks). In other cases, the publication of a policy document (cohesion reports) or an organizational change (launch INTERREG programme) served to allocate particular problems to territorial cohesion. Allocation sometimes occurred in direct response to an exogenous event such as the Dutch and French rejection of the EU Constitution and the economic crisis (indicated in italics).

As mentioned in the introduction, the first ministerial in 1989 has been selected as a starting point, although the seeds of the territorial cohesion process were sown much earlier (Faludi, 2009b). The overview is not intended to be exhaustive, but to offer an

idea of the variety of events that shaped the process and how these became choice opportunities for the different interpretations. The distribution of choice opportunities over the interpretations was done on the basis of best judgement, and remains therefore to a certain degree subjective. This method should not be considered problematic as the intent is not to make a statement on the specific allocations or the content of the interpretations, but rather to illustrate in more general terms the workings of the garbage can model in this particular example.

Date/presidency	Cohesion	Competitiveness	Spatial planning	Coordination
1989	E / F	First ministerial meeting in Nantes		
1990	IE / I	'uneven development'	INTERREG started	
1991	L / NL	'urban networks'		
1992	P / UK	TEU soc-econ cohesion	TENs	
1993	DK / B	ESDP approved		
1994	G / D	Leipzig principles		
1995	F / E	INTERREG IIc		
1996	I / IE	AER report		
1997	NL / L	TC in TEU		
1998	UK / A			
1999	D / FI	European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)		
2000	P / F	Lisbon Strategy	ESPON2006	
2001	SE / B	2 nd Cohesion report	Gothenburg strategy	Governance white paper
2002	E / DK			
2003	G / I	TC in TEU	Sapir report	TC in TEU
2004	IE / NL	EU enlargement	Rotterdam Process	
		3 rd Cohesion report	Coordination objective	
		Interim TC report	Kok report	
2005	L / UK	Referenda NL/F		Referenda NL/F
2006	A / FI	Inconvenient Truth EEA sprawl report		
2007	D / P	Territorial Agenda 4 th Cohesion report	TA action programme	
2008	SI / F	Regions2020	IPCC, ESPON2013	
2009	CZ / SE	economic crisis	Green Paper TC Barca Report	
2010	E / B	Europe 2020		
		5 th Cohesion Report		
2011	HU/PL	Territorial Agenda 2020		

From the overview, some observations can be made regarding how participants took advantage of choice opportunities to link a particular problem to territorial cohesion and/or European spatial planning (problem allocation). First, although the process contained a variety of different kinds of participants, a distinction can be made between several clusters. The incremental work which resulted in the ESDP and Territorial Agenda was largely performed by national policymakers and civil servants at their own initiative via the ministerials in an intergovernmental semi-structured fashion. The European Commission, primarily DG Regio, was and remains an important participant working alongside the ministerials, particularly as it is given the opportunity to frame the

debate in its periodical cohesion reports and communications. Finally, the various pressure groups, European MPs, local and regional stakeholders and experts comprise a sundry group of participants whose individual influence is more narrow and ephemeral.

A second observation regards the breadth of choice opportunities. In the verbal theory of the garbage can model, choice opportunities are where solutions and problems become linked. While this in theory may suggest a single problem/solution linkage to the exclusion of others possibilities, this application found that some choice opportunities were clearly applicable to more than one interpretation. These shared choice opportunities are highlighted in grey according to, again, best judgement rather than a methodical analysis (for this reason, one could engage in a discussion about the range of particular choice opportunities). Due to their broad scope, the first meeting of European ministers of spatial planning in Nantes and the ESDP provided choice opportunities for all interpretations. This would have been the case with the Territorial Agenda as well, had the TIA been included in the main document, rather than the action programme six months later. It is interesting to note that the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion seems more limited in this regard, giving little room for cohesion-oriented interpretations in its text. Similarly, the third and fourth cohesion reports, together with Europe 2020, emphasize the economic aspect, making it difficult for proponents of the latter two interpretations to use these documents as choice opportunities. The fifth cohesion report, in contrast, has elaborated territorial cohesion in more spatial and governance terms. This reframing is significant because it proves that past use of territorial cohesion in an official document — e.g. the ‘services of general economic interest’ in the European Treaty — is no guarantee that it has been successfully embedded institutionally.

Third, different kinds of events offered choice opportunities for linkages. Many of these were created by official publications by the European Commission, such as cohesion reports, which explicitly use the term in a particular manner. Other choice opportunities regarded matters residing outside the territorial cohesion process but still within the realm of European politics, such as the enlargement, referenda on the Constitutional Treaty and elections. Others were more exogenous such as concerns surrounding climate change and the economic crisis: these acted more as shocks to the system which could be used as springboards for (re)framing the discussion on territorial cohesion.

Finally, we can see that not all choice opportunities proved equally important or had the same temporal impact. The impact of the Lisbon Strategy, for example, was mainly felt several years after its proclamation and especially shortly after the mid-term review, whereas the ESDP was arguably more influential before it was published, due to the mobilization of its authors, than thereafter. Similarly, ESPON and INTERREG continue to offer choice opportunities (e.g. with the publication of results and network relations) and add energy to the process long after their initial founding.

6. Conclusions

For years, a political debate has raged over the possible definition of territorial cohesion. As we have seen, it is not so much the definition of the term that is important — indeed there does seem to be some shared understanding emerging, such as the importance of geographic specificity⁹— but its application. The acceptance and appeal of the term is that it is unanimously understood as a solution, allowing divergent participants in the process to try to attach their problems to it. Using another metaphor in correspondence with the author, a policy official at DG Regio once described territorial cohesion as a ‘hook’ onto which people toss their issues and complaints, hoping these might become caught (he described his own role as a guard against unwanted projectiles). Once (or if) specific problems are definitively attached to territorial cohesion to the exclusion of others by means of a specific EU policy document for example, a new political phase will be entered, and the ‘garbage can’ will become less applicable.

By following the methodology of the Garbage Can Model, the four interpretations of territorial cohesion were seen as existing largely independently of participants. Although some choice opportunities clearly pointed to the actions of certain actors, some of which have long-standing traditions or positions that make them predisposed to a particular interpretation, the problem-oriented analysis provides a better explanation of the territorial cohesion process, as it avoids reading too much into the actions and words of individual participants. Standpoints cannot be assumed on the basis of interests, as illustrated by the fact that most actors argue for multiple interpretations simultaneously, and many change sides over time (due to the entry or exit of individuals or as a reaction to a particular event).

At present, none of the interpretations in this analysis has achieved dominance or become obsolete. This pluriformity of coexisting interpretations is not necessarily problematic for territorial cohesion. Humans have successfully been able to hold multiple mutually exclusive conceptualizations simultaneously: “the sun has not ceased to set for us, even though the Copernican explanation of the universe has become part of our knowledge” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 449). Language is robust and frames pliant, and part of the power of the term territorial cohesion rests, at least in part, on its vagueness. Nor is the lack of structure in the territorial cohesion process necessarily problematic. At the end of their article, Cohen et al. (1972) conclude: “it is clear that the garbage can process does not resolve problems well. But it does enable choices to be made and problems resolved, even when the organization is plagued with goal ambiguity and conflict, with poorly understood problems that wander in and out of the system, with a variable environment, and with decision makers who may have other things on their minds” (Cohen et al., 1972, 16). These words are emblematic of the territorial cohesion process. It is far from elegant

⁹ A recent publication by the European Commission has provided a relatively concise conceptualization that could serve as a definition: “the goal of territorial cohesion is to encourage the harmonious and sustainable development of all territories by building on their territorial characteristics and resources” (CEC, 2009). Another elegant definition is found in Camagni (2007) where he likens territorial cohesion to sustainability. As sustainability wishes to harmonize people, planet and profit over time, territorial cohesion wishes to do the same over space.

and rational, yet it has produced some real political progress and consensus on some very abstract ideas within a fluid, complex and oftentimes opaque policy environment.

The Garbage Can Model was originally applied to the functioning of universities, but the territorial cohesion process seems to be an even better example of an organized anarchy, and hence setting to test the verbal theory — even if there is only one main solution intersecting with the streams of problems and participants. In the territorial cohesion process decisions need to be made by consensus over the long term and incrementally. As such, it resembles other, more familiar planning processes such as the search for problems at a planning department to fit the solution of a new federal grant, or long-term infrastructure projects with unclear objectives and where participants come and go over time. From this application to territorial cohesion, we can see that the strength of the garbage can model lies in its metaphorical power to offer an intuitively correct picture of how complex processes work.

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