



Review

Understanding Narratives in Governance: Naming and Framing Regional Inequality in the United Kingdom

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Abstract: Narratives play a pivotal role in solving complex problems, as they provide an interpretive framework for facilitating the solution to a given challenge. We presume that if the basis of a narrative applied to a complex problem is incorrect, the interpretation of the problem will also be distorted. Therefore, solutions that are primarily low-efficiency in nature demand new or “rframed” narratives. We examine this premise through the case of the United Kingdom in the light of changes in narratives created to solve regional inequalities, particularly regarding the interpretative framework of the “Levelling Up” policy agenda and narrative, which was introduced by the government of Boris Johnson. Additionally, we conducted a literature review on the Levelling Up policy to provide a supplementary theoretical background beyond the concept of narratives. Conclusions on narratives and Levelling Up are also outlined.

Keywords: narrative; complex problem; regional inequality; lagging region; Levelling Up

1. Introduction

Contemporary states, societies, and economies face many complex issues due to globalization, security policy, climate change, demographic shifts, digitalization, artificial intelligence, and the energy crisis. The essence of these challenges is similar almost everywhere: with regard to “complex problems” in an uncertain environment, there is an urgent need to build sustainability and wellbeing at the individual and communal levels. It is also crucial to develop governance capabilities to react quickly, flexibly, and effectively to global, regional, national, and local changes (Alford and Head 2017). Dealing with multi-dimensional, horizontal issues requires a wide range of responses that cut across organizational boundaries and are tailored to the capacities and needs of the people who feel deprived. Furthermore, the essence of complex problems is unknown in many cases. The above situation poses a severe challenge to the governments and public administrative bodies involved, as standardized and mechanically applicable tools are only available to a limited extent (Peters 2017).

The knowledge required for governance is partly based on skills acquired in practice and partly on paradigms involving a high level of abstraction and combining accumulated experience, theories, and methods organized into a problem-solving model for the cultivation of learning (Kuhn 1962; McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). However, narratives are also needed in the functioning of governance, serving as an interpretive framework that fixes and stabilizes meanings and creates unified contexts (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). These narratives never emerge by chance but always reflect the current era’s economic and social problems (Lakatos 1976), regardless of whether they are connected to digitalization, artificial intelligence, or regional differences in development. In the governance process, narratives’ credibility, influence, and renewability are tested. They play a role in designing the conditions and objectives of governance, finding the right mixture of governance modes, instruments, and strategies, and also serve to establish the relationship between the central and local levels. All of this is underlined by the fact that traditional



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areas of governance and public policy, such as education, social policy, innovation, and strategic industries, are being complemented by new areas, such as migration, terrorism, climate change, and disease management. These intractable, complex problems require strategic thinking, including a horizontal and integrated approach.

Our starting point is that narratives play a key role in solving complex problems, providing an interpretive framework for the available experience, perceptions, knowledge, and methods. However, several competing trade-off narratives can unfold around a single phenomenon, creating electoral constraints and decision dilemmas for governments (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). This phenomenon is introduced through complex problems and narratives of spatial development disparities, whose interpretive framework and governance responses are narrowed down to an analysis of the processes and changes in the United Kingdom (UK) over the last decade. We presume that finding the appropriate narrative is inevitable to develop the interpretive frameworks and governmental methods to solve a given problem. However, if the interpretation of a complex problem, which can pave the way for a narrative, is wrong, it is possible that inappropriate methods will be chosen to mitigate political, economic, demographic, or security challenges. As a result, ineffective solutions call for new or “reframed” narratives instead of implementing problem-solving policies.

In this study, we will first briefly introduce the theoretical backgrounds of narratives and “complex problems” in the light of competing and shifting approaches to regional development. Even though the term “narrative” is well known in public policy literature, the inner logic and the interplay of different narratives are still unexplored, especially in special policy domains. Then, specifically, we will shift our focus to Levelling Up, which has been a much-debated and fuzzy umbrella term since 2019 in the UK. Given its slippery nature, Levelling Up can be considered an economic strategy, a political agenda, and a narrative (McCann 2021; McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021; HM Government 2022; McCann 2023). In this paper, we regard Levelling Up as an agenda, and more importantly, as a narrative, that leans on Boris Johnson’s and the Conservatives’ populist vision to bring back welfare to once prosperous regions that are now lagging behind, having suffered from economic inequalities for decades (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; HM Government 2022). This research topic is important because Levelling Up has been the political priority of the British government since the December 2019 general elections (Billing et al. 2021; HM Government 2022). Furthermore, Levelling Up and governmental narratives are connected with the British government’s political communication; however, it is still unknown how they will be implemented in practical terms. In sum, our aim was to collect scholarly arguments from research papers on Levelling Up in the UK. This contribution is valuable because, to our knowledge, no systematic literature review on Levelling Up has yet been conducted. We find it important to systematically review the scientific knowledge on the Levelling Up agenda and narrative because it addresses an important—if not the paramount—problem in the UK: developing lagging regions.

After a review of the literature, we then examine changes in narratives developed to resolve regional inequalities through the case of the UK, particularly regarding Levelling Up, which was the primary feature of the Boris Johnson government’s rhetoric, based on the Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019 and Johnson’s main policy speeches (Prime Minister’s Office 2020; HM Treasury 2021). Finally, we will formulate some conclusions regarding the applicability of narratives to complex problems.

2. Theoretical Background of Narratives and Why They Are Relevant to the British Case

Conceptually, we justify why we chose narrative as a research perspective instead of discourse to analyze Levelling Up. First, Levelling Up has been a catchphrase rather than a specific economic strategy. Boris Johnson and his government suggested that they were to create optimism, unity, and commitment to redress inequalities within the UK (Connolly et al. 2021). Second, Levelling Up is a vague slogan that can cover a wide range of agendas, policies, the willingness to invest in lagging regions, building communities in left-behind

areas, and so on (Connolly et al. 2021). Since Levelling Up lacks specification, we argue that it generally suggests a positive change for deprived individuals rather than outlining how long-lasting economic inequalities could be mitigated. Finally, Levelling Up is closely interconnected with Boris Johnson's brand (Johnson 2020). The people-centrist story of Levelling Up suggests that Boris Johnson is the champion of the people and aims to resolve inequalities that harm poor people, especially the working class living in left-behind places in the UK.

In the fields of psychology (Bamberg 2011), political science, sociology, political psychology (Andrews et al. 2008), linguistics (Freeman 2015), and philosophy (Carranza 2015), narratives might be considered framing techniques that "reflect a common shared sense of identities, perceptions, beliefs, know-how and methodological routines and allow for the experience to be understood and interpreted in particular ways" (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). We subjectively give meanings to the world via narratives (Bruner 1990). Thus, in practice, public policies are explained, backed, or justified not just through formal rules or good practices, but through commonly shared narrative stories that provide framing devices and situated language use for subjectively interpreting, shaping, and managing collective identities (Bruner 1990; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). Moreover, narratives are useful because "we believe that by doing so [narrative analysis] we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change" (Andrews et al. 2008, p. 2).

As a consequence, narratives wield political and social power by bringing together events, happenings, and actions into a thematically goal-oriented process (Polkinghorne 1995). The narrative-based approach relies on different interventions to support policy-making, namely, (1) mobilizing, (2) reframing, and (3) contesting narratives (Lowndes and Gardner 2016). However, many narratives might emerge in different social, economic, and political contexts from which individuals and communities could choose by mobilizing knowledge, skills, experiences, perceptions, identities, or historical legacies. At this point, we must acknowledge that these narratives might be competing regarding their natures and connotations. Competing narratives emerge everywhere (including politics, economy, and academia), and they are vital in shaping research programs that link epistemological themes to political and economic praxis and policies (Lakatos 1976). Accordingly, as the weight and influence of narratives have a key role in policy-making, the contestation of narratives further reinforces the necessarily political character of policy-making.

We now turn to the most important and relevant theory, which is the backbone of this study: Bruner's (1990) description of narratives. Here, we will outline Bruner's relevant theoretical argument, and in Section 8, we will introduce the specific instances from Boris Johnson's vision on Levelling Up that are connected to the description introduced. First, Bruner (1990) posits that the principal feature of narratives is sequentiality: they consist of sequences of events that imply humans as actors or characters. Second, stories that fuel narratives can rely on fictitious or real happenings. Both narrative types can work effectively if the sequence of the sentences suggests a coherent story. Third, tradition can, to some extent, provide a pivotal segment of narratives. Fourth, narratives can create an interconnection between the exceptional and the ordinary, which we will also introduce in Section 8. Even though we acknowledge that Bruner introduces other features of narratives, we stick to the aforementioned four aspects because they support the understanding of Levelling Up.

What is important to us in this paper is that political narratives might completely disregard conventional or mainstream epistemological narratives, such as in the issues of Brexit and Levelling Up (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). Political narratives (e.g., storytelling) serve to elicit a feeling of belonging to a (local) community (Collier 2018). In other words, political narratives might foster agendas, mobilize actions, and win audiences' support so as to legitimize specific economic and political goals (Collier and Tuckett 2021). During crises and uncertainty (King and Kay 2020), narratives can shift rapidly, but this

often means reframing and rethinking existing ones. In addition, the competition of narratives might affect how society reacts to wars, recessions, pandemics, or other forms of deprivation and grievances. Scholars argue that mainstream research programs and conventional decision-making processes that prevail in stable conditions cannot facilitate effective responses to turmoil (Manski 2013; King and Kay 2020). This is the point where the pivotal role of narratives kicks in: amidst severe societal challenges, narratives are important to coordinate activity as well as to elicit a feeling of belonging within a (local) community (Collier and Tuckett 2021). Narratives are essential in these severe circumstances because they can help decision-makers to coordinate and manage citizens' behavior.

In the case of the UK, sticking to the goal of Brexit (leaving the European Union) is the fundamental narrative that highlights the importance of legitimizing regional development policies in the so-called "left-behind" areas (Collier 2020). Based on this observation, the need to counterbalance the negative consequences of Brexit as a whole is inevitably interconnected with complex problems. In other words, the above narrative and complex problems of the "left-behind" regions of the UK are inevitably intertwined within the Levelling Up narrative (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). In this paper, we consider Levelling Up a policy agenda and narrative that builds on closely related—albeit somewhat inconsistent—narratives. Firstly, due to the expected successful completion of the "Get Brexit Done" message, the long-lasting regional inequality problem will be solved by resetting and reconciling the relevant political economy narratives under the umbrella of Levelling Up. Secondly, the "cities versus towns and rural areas", as an apparently political narrative, reflects on the changed geography of support for the ruling Conservative Party, while reducing Levelling Up to a localism-based agenda (HM Government 2022).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how different narratives influence regional development in the case of the UK concerning the agendas of successive governments from 2010 to 2022. It aims to identify and characterize the main types of narratives, the drivers, determinants, and roles of their development, and examine how different policy narratives connect and build on each other.

3. Interconnections between Narratives and Complex Problems

Due to their hard-to-grasp and slippery nature, complex problems behave as moving targets without offering definitive explicit solutions suitable for everyone involved. In addition, a given problem might be the symptom of another problem or one problem may be linked with others. Another particularly important aspect is their endogenous resolution space: a tentative resolution depends on the direction of the approach taken to find the solution, creating new connected problems to be managed (Rittel and Webber 1973). In other words, ill-defined problems tend to imply a preferred solution (Peters 2017). According to the literature, complex problems can be described with a standard model with many variations on the formulation that offers a variety of alternative strategies for tackling them. However, if there is no "root cause" of "complexity", there can be no single best approach to cope with such problems, so a more comprehensive approach is necessary (Alford and Head 2017).

At the moment, whether it is possible to escape from the trap of complex problems and trade-off effects remains an open question. Nevertheless, as we have seen, narratives play an important role in interpreting and framing public policy choices and their complex, interconnected social and economic impacts. They emerge in politics, in everyday life of a society, and in different dimensions of business through their role in offering explanations and solutions. Narratives continuously develop and evolve as they are applied, creating large and small communities based on their shared acceptance of narrative truth. In social sciences, paradigmatic truths are partly based on narrative truths. As a result, whether a paradigm persists or changes might be affected by the evolution of the life cycle of narratives (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). Although narratives cannot replace the efforts of solving or resolving complex problems, they may be useful and empowering

tools for governments to shape and frame the public policy agenda while preserving the trust and support of relevant electorates and the business community.

Interregional inequality is one of the manifestations of complex problems, and it is this issue that we focus on here, in its manifestation in the UK as a model of interconnecting complex problems, narratives, and types of spatial policies. The stark reality is that although regional inequality showed a significant decreasing trend until the late 1970s or early 1980s, over the past four decades, it has begun to widen all over the world. According to one of the most important findings of the literature on the root causes and effects of growing inequality in the lagging or (to use a rather fashionable term) “left-behind” places, regional inequality hinders economic growth, thus weakening both social cohesion and political stability (Piketty 2013; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Piketty 2020). Since we focus on complex problems (interregional inequalities) and narratives (primarily the Levelling Up) in this paper, we emphasize that narratives are neither “issues” nor “guidelines” that might provide solutions. In turn, narratives are political stories that revolve around issues such as economic inequalities that might help us understand how the political agent interprets a complex problem.

In Europe, after the economic and financial crisis of 2007–2008, remarkable differences emerged between the dynamically developing metropolitan agglomerations and the declining, isolated industrial regions (Iammarino et al. 2018). As a result, increasing differences in economic productivity, employment, housing, and income have emerged within countries and regions, between core and peripheral (often rural) areas, and between prosperous metropolitan, stagnant, or declining regions (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). These trends have recently been further reinforced by the severe effects of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian–Ukrainian war, showing remarkable cleavages in the economic, health, infrastructure, mobility, innovation, digitalization, governance, and management indicators of each region within countries. Often, the differences are greater between regions than between nations (Dodds et al. 2020). Due to the shortening of supply chains, the relocation of innovation and logistics hubs, the emergence of flexible forms of remote work, and services contrasted to offline jobs, we review and reconsider regional policy narratives. Reconsidering these narratives is helpful to develop solutions at both the global and national levels, adjusted to these rapid and sharp changes.

Traditionally, regional development was essentially a “top-down” sectoral policy in most countries with the aim of temporarily compensating for the location disadvantages of lagging regions through redistributive budget transfers, state aid, and large-scale state investments. However, by the end of the twentieth century, a qualitative transformation began to shift from the “old” paradigm towards a more decentralized bottom-up approach called the “place-based development policy” (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). The new, basically growth-oriented paradigm seeks to map and make the most of the underutilized potential in all regions to enhance development and innovation with a toolkit of both “hard” and “soft” infrastructure.

Yet, contrary to the traditional and modern regional development economic strategies, “spatially-blind” and “people-based” approaches came to the fore in the wake of the 2007–2008 economic and financial crises. The spatially-blind narratives represented by the New Economic Geography and New Urban Economics highlighted that the agglomerative benefits arising from geographically uneven growth concentrated on developed regions would “trickle down” to lagging areas (World Bank 2009). Defining itself as a universal approach, it has devoted less attention to the problems and effects of regional inequality by assuming that knowledge and technology spill-over effects will correct any type of regional inequalities. For this reason, practitioners and international development organizations have criticized this “city-growth” narrative, as trends emerging from surveys and evaluations have shown that the trickling down of goods, services, and knowledge produced in developed regions does not solve the problem of lagging areas. In this regard, a plausible explanation might be that the drain effect of developed agglomerations has always been stronger than the efforts to promote the diffusion of knowledge goods.

Moreover, the city-growth narrative went hand in hand with the people-based approach, which emerged to promote the development and prosperity of individuals, in line with the concept of the welfare state, and having the principle of fairness at its core (Bentley and Pugalís 2014). The “city-growth” narrative also evolved in parallel with the “people-based” approach that forms an essential part of the “spatially-blind” narrative. Importantly, the people-based approach supports and encourages disadvantaged people to move towards more prosperous areas to exploit the economic benefits of their development (Bentley and Pugalís 2014). The tools for its implementation are centrally managed job-creation and social subsidies, increasing the opportunities for education and mobility and developing sufficient knowledge and skills. Translating this narrative into practice, however, led to the problem that the mobilization capacities of individuals cannot be based solely on targeted development programs, as their sustainability is subject to numerous factors that are highly dependent on external conditions.

Although reducing inequality, enhancing growth and fostering social inclusion are all essential in the face of complex problems (e.g., interregional economic inequalities), the strong territorial embeddedness of public policies for this purpose also determines the opportunities of individuals and communities in the place-based approach—an aspect that was explicitly reasserted after longstanding debates. This narrative rejects universal, one-size-fits-all approaches, as it recognizes that regional disadvantages are multi-dimensional and that the causes of economic decline can often be traced back to a combination of social, community, cultural, and environmental problems (Martin et al. 2021). Instead, it calls for development solutions adapted to specific conditions and to the potential for exploiting territorial and social capital, including the promotion of investment, job creation, and the development of innovative public services (Barca 2009). However, this narrative has suggested that some degree of spatial inequality is inevitable (HM Government 2022), and that every region must take responsibility for their success or failure. From this perspective, a place-based approach may favor localities with stronger institutions and capacities, which is typical of more developed regions. Accordingly, many researchers and practitioners have criticized the place-based narrative because of its overemphasis on the endogenous drivers of development outcomes. Yet, on the contrary, place-based strategies are highly contingent on exogenous factors, including spatial-blind policies.

However, the real problem with all of these spatial policy narratives is the still-unsolved puzzle of the trade-off effect between economic efficiency and equity. Despite many efforts, striking a balance between strengthening growth and reducing territorial disparities will continue to be one of the main challenges of regional development. In the absence of commonly accepted practical solutions, political actors must name and frame the multi-scalar causes and components of regional inequality characteristic of complex problems.

4. Competing Regional UK Policy Narratives: Is There a Solution to Complex Problems after All?

In order to understand the scale and nature of the problem, it is useful to keep in mind that during the decades following the Second World War and up until the early 1980s, regional inequalities slowly, but steadily, decreased in many developed countries (Piketty 2013, 2020; Crafts 2021). However, over the past four decades, this process has reversed, and—at different times and to diverging extents—cleavages between successful and lagging regions have emerged, the latter often being referred to as “left-behind” places. This has recently become an umbrella term for underdeveloped or disadvantaged (particularly post-industrial and rural) areas, creating the essentially non-economic narrative of a geography of discontent. More precisely, left-behind places are characterized by the absence of community, educational, or cultural assets, without an active community, public transportation, or a local job market (Local Trust 2019). In this sense, feeling largely undervalued, deprived, and marginalized paves the way for a specific form of voter behavior: millions of citizens all over the world have expressed their discontent by voting against

“mainstream” parties and elites (Atkins 2022). According to many experts, this international phenomenon is “the revenge of the places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 190).

The model country of this kind of discontent is the UK, where regional inequalities between the northern and southern regions have been deepening since the 1970s. Dealing with the regional economic problem, successive British governments have combined the main elements of the spatially-blind and place-based approaches (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). However, as a result of the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008, the North–South problem received a new narrative in the public political discourse: “spatial imbalance”. The reference to imbalance means that the British economy is excessively vulnerable to the performance of the financial, service, and high-tech sectors concentrated in London and the South East of England (Calafati et al. 2020). This narrative suggests the need for “rebalancing” the high interregional inequalities between the North and the South by creating the Northern Powerhouse as a single functional economy, involving the big northern cities in England (Lee 2017).

In the context of the Brexit referendum and the subsequent 2019 parliamentary elections, the narrative of efforts to reduce regional inequalities was assigned a new interpretation. In opposition to large cities and their elites—considered the main beneficiaries of globalization and EU membership—Boris Johnson’s cabinet identified the agenda and narrative of Levelling Up small and medium-sized left-behind towns and rural areas as being the primary objective of its program. Subsequently, we review the substance of the listed narratives and the context in which they have changed. Before we outline these changes, we introduce the methods by which we review the literature on Levelling Up, a review that we find necessary because it will contribute to a better understanding of the analysis of governmental narratives that follows.

5. Materials and Methods

We conducted a systematic review process on the literature dealing with Levelling Up, using the Scopus database to collect the latest articles on this phenomenon. Our search criteria limited the database to social science, environmental science, economics, and decisions sciences. After setting the time range between 2019 and 2022 and excluding two irrelevant studies, we found nine papers relevant to our study. All Scopus-indexed documents were full articles published in 2021 and 2022. We operationalized the following search string to explore the relevant papers on Levelling Up:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (levelling AND up AND united AND kingdom) AND (LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY, “United Kingdom”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOCI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ENVI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ECON”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “DECI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “MULT”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2022) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)).

Based on these articles, we summarize the most important findings and scientific knowledge on Levelling Up in Section 6.

6. Levelling Up: A Short and Systematic Literature Review

Since the literature on the Levelling Up narrative is very narrow, we aim to present recent papers dealing with Levelling Up from several angles, such as: political and economic narratives, economic geography, the level of productivity, municipal development opportunities, income differences between leading and lagging regions, and the UK’s post-1945 economic reforms. To begin with, McCann and Ortega-Argilés (2021) highlight that the Brexit and Levelling Up narratives are interconnected due to the “geography of discontent”. While the political communication that supported Brexit relied on the narrative that people outside of the (British) metropolitan elites had suffered as a result of EU membership, the economic facts show a different picture. A considerable part of the lagging regions’ GDP (between 12 and 17%) had been fueled by EU markets, while the richer southern region is much more diversified in terms of production and markets

(McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). Therefore, the Levelling Up narrative had to move to the “political left” to claim that mitigating economic inequalities in lagging regions was crucial for the British government (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). Moreover, the scholars above argue that the British government is uncertain regarding devolution (i.e., giving more power to municipal authorities) as a solution to the inequalities between rich and poor regions in the UK. Furthermore, they outline that “[u]nless the political narratives aimed at galvanizing coordinated action across all relevant stakeholders [. . .] then “Levelling Up” will not succeed and the geography of discontent will only get worse” (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021, p. 557). Leyshon (2021) concludes that the economic differences between left-behind places and developed regions have become features of British political communication. Additionally, he argues that it is time for academics to participate directly in political debates in order to put pressure on decision-makers. Hudson (2022) highlights a crucial observation: even though the Boris Johnson government promised to mitigate inequalities within the UK by 2030, it never described how these Levelling Up measures would be implemented in practice.

Empirical analysis has also been conducted to help scholars and policymakers understand the lagging regions’ harsh situations. Harris and Moffat (2022) introduced two essential findings regarding the Levelling Up policies. First, they found that lagging regions in the UK are outperformed by lagging areas from other advanced countries. Second, they suggest that most of the productivity gap between London and lagging regions cannot be explained with “plants characteristics (multinational ownership, trade involvement, enterprise structure, plant age, subsidization, size or industrial structure)” (Harris and Moffat 2022, p. 1725). They suggest that reducing interregional differences between developed and lagging areas in terms of plant characteristics will only have a minor effect on productivity cleavage. Etherington et al. (2022) agree with the above suggestion and argue that developing the infrastructure of the lagging regions is not sufficient to reach the Levelling Up program’s goals, namely, the devolution of power and increasing prosperity. On the one hand, they emphasize that securing employment and installing job rotation should be implemented into Levelling Up. On the other hand, the above scholars criticize the program because it disregards or says little about mental illnesses, indebtedness, and food insecurity (Etherington et al. 2022).

Billing et al. (2021) analyzed experts’ views on the local development opportunities and Brexit-related implications summarized from four symposia. The scholars emphasize that municipal or sub-state authorities are “in the dark” about redressing the regional challenges created by Brexit. Additionally, ample evidence suggests that for the authorities, the political and economic context of the post-Brexit era will be much more difficult to handle than the pre-Brexit context. Finally, there might be a chance to develop municipal governance; however, this is mainly up to the government and depends on its flexibility. In sum, subnational governance devolution reforms are needed, but the appropriate format and means of implementation are still unclear.

Calafati et al. (2020) analyzed income differences between developed and lagging regions to study the inequalities in living standards. They found that London and South East England have a significantly higher gross household income than the North East and North West. Additionally, they discovered that the house price increase brought GBP 20,000 untaxed capital for homeowners living in London between 2008 and 2017, while house prices grew only modestly in the North East. This finding is important because the results show that “this capital gain for the average property owner in London is more or less equal to median individual gross earnings in North and West Britain at the beginning of the decade. By way of contrast, most owners of property outside London and the South East made no capital gains . . . ” (Calafati et al. 2020).

Relying on historical experience, Crafts (2021) emphasizes that the UK’s economic progress was successful after the Second World War: strong growth, low unemployment, and the decreasing debt-to-GDP ratio all contributed to the glory of the welfare state. Even though the economic policies of the 1940s and 1950s succeeded in levelling up the UK, these

instruments would not be useful to overcome contemporary challenges. In other words, Crafts suggests that instead of repeating the formerly successful economic program of the UK launched almost eight decades ago, new policies are needed to level up an economy that has been shaken by recent turmoil.

Finally, Bell (2022) provides four suggestions to support the regional policies of the UK in the post-Brexit era. We emphasize two of them, considering their feasibility and connections. First, he suggests that regional initiatives should define regional priorities; second, he argues that switching from the universal funding scheme to one that is “largely responsive to requests for greater local autonomy” will suffice to reach the goals of Levelling Up (Bell 2022).

7. Narratives from 2010 to 2016: Rebalancing, Deal-Making, and Brexit

The root of complex problems might be found in regional development differences within the UK, the extent of which has increased continuously over the past four decades. These regional inequalities are also significant when we compare them to international data (McCann 2020). According to benchmark calculations, the UK has the fourth worst indicator among 30 OECD countries for differences in regional development (Davenport 2020). Although productivity and income differences between South East (including London) and North East England were already problematic before the Global Financial Crisis, this problem has widened since (Bela et al. 2020). As an example of inequality, it demonstrates that between 2008 and 2017, the median property price increased by 74% in London (from GBP 265,500 to GBP 460,000), while the increase in North East England was 11% (from GBP 121,500 to GBP 135,500) (Calafati et al. 2020).

In line with this observation, inequalities within individual regions and districts are also problematic in the UK. London has the country’s highest poverty rate, and the capital city’s economy proved to be remarkably vulnerable to the first wave of COVID-19 (Norman and Corfe 2020), while there are also underdeveloped areas in the “rich” South East as well (WPI Economics 2020). Meanwhile, the crisis caused by the coronavirus also made it clear that regions with weaker economic indicators have much less flexibility in reacting to economic shocks (Sensier et al. 2020).

The first regional policy narrative of the past decade was announced by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition that ascended to power in 2010. As a starting point, it broke with the regional approach of the Labour governments, which had become unpopular, and replaced it with the narrative of local public spaces and communities (e.g., “localization”). In line with this change, the government transferred tasks top-down. Nevertheless, their recipients were not municipal governments, but functional economic development areas operating in diverse configurations and with different spatial boundaries in the forms of “Local Enterprise Partnerships” (non-statutory bodies comprising local authorities and businesses) and city regions.¹

In practice, this constituted a correction of the former city-growth (or in a broader sense, the core–periphery) narrative, originally based on London’s outstanding economic performance, which has become a dominant political economy narrative since the 1980s, as London’s economy was regarded as a national priority (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2022). It was assumed that the economic success of London and other large British cities would “trickle down” to regional and economic stakeholders. After the 2007–2008 crisis, the narrative of the capital city as the “engine of growth” began to unravel. This is due to the fact that the capital and its vicinity increasingly decoupled from the rest of the country, which was primarily linked to the global economy to a much greater extent than North East England or Wales. At the same time, strong doubts arose about the results and impacts of agglomeration economy and the city-growth narrative. These doubts questioned the widely shared narrative that “what is good for the capital is good for the country as a whole”.

The correction took shape in the double narrative of “rebalancing” and “localism” in the first phase of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2015). In a broad sense, this represented the government’s consolidation program following the

crisis, with its aim to maintain a balance between spatially-blind and place-based narratives. However, in reality, it was seeking to cover the budget cuts affecting the public sector, the biggest victims of which were, once again, the lagging regions (McCann 2020). In the latest phase of the “rebalancing” narrative, the Conservatives, now in sole government since 2015, announced the Northern Powerhouse program in order to tackle longstanding problems associated with the North–South division, the need for reducing regional disparities, and the centralized British state (Lee 2017).² In fact, “rebalancing” was merely a repackaged old idea, namely, that a single northern mega-region would boost economic productivity.

Recognizing that the UK’s centralized government system might also be part of the regional imbalance problem, the Coalition government took incremental steps to decentralize power, which continued under successive governments. In doing so, separate agreements between the government and municipal governments were launched with a series of deals (city deals, combined authorities, mayoral combined authorities, and devolution deals) that assigned tasks and power to the relevant municipalities—although, taking the traditional piecemeal approach, the scope of these deals still did not cover the entire country.³

The narrative of “rebalancing”, completed with targeted regional developments, was gradually connected to the need for regional restructuring, which led to an old/new interpretation framework of reducing regional inequalities in 2017. In other words, after eight years of alternating austerity and development, the narrative of rebalancing returned to its roots in the form of addressing the complex problems of regional inequalities. Meanwhile, during the Brexit campaign, one of the leavers’ false mantras (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021) was that the only beneficiaries of EU membership were big cities and their associated elites, while small towns and rural areas paid the price (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). The narratives of “taking back control” and the “parasitic” big city elites effectively connected the benefits of leaving the EU with the structural problems of regional inequalities and the dissatisfaction of lagging regions. This narrative was based on partial truths and highly questionable economic evidence, as ample evidence suggested that the lagging regions were the main beneficiaries of EU subsidies. Although there was an inherent contradiction between the narratives of Brexit and the tangible benefits of EU membership, the “Leave” slogan nevertheless proved more attractive to many people living in small and medium-sized cities and rural areas.

After the referendum, however, the narratives that sought to justify both rebalancing and Brexit suddenly disappeared from the government’s communications. The various deals were concluded, with different content, on a regional scale and continued to expand under Theresa May’s government, but this was almost entirely separate from the Brexit negotiations.

8. The “Levelling Up” Narrative: Boris Johnson’s “Wonder Weapon” in the Post-Brexit Era

In general, the “Levelling Up” narrative seeks to respond to territorial development disparities by creating jobs, training, and boosting productivity. However, this cannot be a zero-sum game, so catching up with developed regions by redistributing existing wealth cannot entail holding back the more developed ones. It is not only about reducing inequalities between regions, but also about ensuring that the effects of development policy are felt everywhere. Thus, in this sense, Levelling Up means a universal development process (HM Government 2022).

In a narrower sense, as a policy to help individuals to catch up, the narrative of Levelling Up has appeared from time to time over the last quarter of a century in both Labour and Conservative Party rhetoric, primarily as part of an education policy of talent management and offering opportunities. However, it became truly pervasive after Boris Johnson’s government came to power, ushering in an essentially place-based approach with rebalancing and growth-oriented goals, offering opportunities for everyone, including social and economic actors that were added as new dimensions to traditional public policies.

Moreover, the rhetoric and the promises of the Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto and Boris Johnson's public speeches, based on offering equality opportunity and including the abstract notion of One Nation, proved to not be very far from the Levelling Up program (Espiet-Kilty 2022).

Here, we return to Bruner's (1990) four descriptions on narratives. First, we address the sequences of events that led to the Levelling Up narrative. Aligned with the observations above, we argue that the geographical discontent that began in the early 1980s fueled Brexit. Preceding the Brexit vote, a master narrative (Hyvärinen et al. 2021) was built on how the "metropolitan elite" benefits from the EU membership, while the "populist" people-centrism narrative argued that ordinary, forgotten citizens could not benefit from it (Norris and Inglehart 2019). When "Leave" won, the narrative had to shift to Levelling Up, which revolves around the nostalgia for the UK's former status as a great economic power while addressing the fact that it now has many lagging regions that should catch up with the richer areas.

Second, Levelling Up's preceding narrative, whereby the "metropolitan elite benefitted more from EU membership than citizens in lagging regions", is false (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). In other words, the explanation underlying the narrative was fictitious, but the many lagging regions in the UK were and are still real. Specifically, as stated above, the GDP of left-behind areas was considerably bolstered by the EU market, while richer regions such as South East England have much more diversified business relations than Wales, North West England, and other less developed areas. When the Leave votes won, the narrative about the metropolitan elite had to shift to another direction, namely, Levelling Up. As the Levelling Up whitepaper claims, this agenda is not about pitting one part of the UK against another, but improving wellbeing within the UK's less developed regions. At first glance, it seems that the audience of the Levelling Up narrative are the inhabitants of lagging regions. However, the target audience is every individual in the UK who feels deprived, regardless of their location.

Thirdly, the conservative Boris Johnson appealed to tradition and nostalgia, citing the UK's former dominant role within the EU (and to some extent, globally) in contrast with its current difficulties, and that mitigating these requires supporting ordinary citizens who deserve fair and equal access to services, jobs, and public transportation.

Finally, the connections that Levelling Up creates between the ordinary and the exceptional show the relevance of Bruner's (1990) observation in this regard, as the Johnson cabinet suggested that it is the contributions of ordinary people that will help the UK navigate the exceptional challenges it is facing, such as COVID-19, economic inequalities at a domestic level, and economic turmoil at a global level.

In fact, Levelling Up has since moved from a purely policy-related objective to a multi-layered political narrative, including (1) the realization of the post-Brexit aspirations for self-government ("take back control") and (2) meeting the expectations of broad electorate support for the Conservatives. During the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the general election in December 2019, the industrial areas in the North and the Midlands that have been stagnating or declining for some time and which were traditionally Labour's committed voter base (the so-called "Red Wall" constituencies, as opposed to the "Blue Wall" areas that traditionally voted Conservative), now saw the Conservatives' promises to "get Brexit done" as a chance to rise.⁴ This phenomenon explains why, during the Brexit referendum, the narrative of the "metropolitan elite" as a scapegoat faded to some extent, but still latently lives on, with a focus on support for small and medium-sized left-behind towns and rural areas in comparison to the big cities, which became central to the narrative of Levelling Up. This is due to the fact that the North and the Midlands are more exposed to the effects of Brexit than the most developed regions, as they are strongly integrated into UK-EU market relations and global value chains, particularly in manufacturing and services. At the same time, this situation also implies that the economic restructuring of the northern and central regions requires greater government efforts than in more developed regions (HM Government 2022).

According to economic data and forecasts, Brexit will increase the differences between regions, which again only strengthens the narrative of Levelling Up and underlines its relevance. On the other hand, this trend contradicts the narratives used in the Brexit campaign. While London has not been severely affected by the impact of leaving the EU, many large cities in North and Central England with their vicinities, particularly in deprived areas, have been left quite vulnerable. The situation is further exacerbated by the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the deepest recessions in the history of the UK—a 20.4% drop in the second quarter of 2020 and 9.9% for the entire year—and one that widened regional development disparities even more (Etherington et al. 2022).

If the prioritized/target areas of Levelling Up are left-behind places, the government must consider that the phenomenon lacks a widely accepted definition and a scientifically sound set of criteria to identify it, national or international reference points, and a precise spatial delimitation. Although the narrative can be interpreted in the wider context of longstanding regional inequalities and One-Nation Conservatism, it incorporates several, rather diffuse elements: transport and infrastructure investment, research and development support, free ports, the relocation of London civil servants, and upgrades in local heritage to restore local people's pride in their community. However, the fundamental problem is that a left-behind place can be described statistically (e.g., income per capita, productivity, and local unemployment rate) on a given timescale, but these are only snapshots and do not tell us anything about the causes of backwardness or decline. In reality, there is a wide variety of left-behind areas, each with its own specific problems and stories, and each very different from the others (Etherington et al. 2022).

Moreover, two selected regions may have the same level of development indicators, but the underlying causes and drivers behind the two development paths may differ significantly (Martin et al. 2021). As a result, different types of left-behind places with diverging development paths can be identified in the UK: large towns and cities outside London and the South East, former industrial regions, coastal towns, and remote rural areas. Notably, although these places are supported by different place-based funds (Community Renewal Fund, Levelling Up Fund, and Towns Fund), these generally promote growth and productivity rather than “Levelling Up” in the sense of lagging regions catching up with more developed ones. One of the main lessons of the unfolding debates around the interpretation of Levelling Up is that “being left behind” is a real problem that articulates a collective feeling and that can be analyzed through complex, transdisciplinary approaches in order to draft proposals for solutions. At the same time, the detailed exploration of specific cases of left-behind areas can be a useful and indispensable auxiliary narrative for the master narrative of Levelling Up.

However, the narrative of the Johnson cabinet was only partially descriptive of reality. The economic data show that, primarily in South England, but also in less developed areas, there are many dynamically developing small and medium-sized cities, towns, and villages where the rate of development and the quality of life are higher than in many big cities (Davenport 2020). The real problem is the weaker economic performance of big cities in lagging regions. The trickle-down approach does not work in their case, either; thus, these cities are unable to catalyze the development of small and medium-sized towns, villages, and rural areas (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). This observation calls for prudence in addressing complex problems with associated narratives: if the narrative is misleading, the interpretation of and solution to the problem will also be confused and inefficient. Nevertheless, for most of British society, the narrative of Levelling Up appeared convincing, as can be seen from the results of the December 2019 general election and of subsequent opinion polls. However, due to various political scandals (including “partygate”) and the 2022 economic crises, the Johnson cabinet eventually resigned.

Finally, we would like to address the “impact” of Levelling Up from 2021 onwards. Levelling Up was not just a political agenda and narrative during Boris Johnson's reign; it has been turned into a funding scheme as well. In 2021, most of the GBP 1.7 billion funding scheme was allocated to North West England and the East Midlands, two large

regions considered to be left-behind areas (BBC 2023). The Department for Levelling Up adjusted its policies to the interregional inequalities within the UK: in 2021, North West England received significantly more funds per capita than London or South East England (BBC 2023). However, it is also worth mentioning that regions led by Tories were funded a total of GBP 1.21 billion, while Labour constituencies were awarded GBP 471 million in subsidies (BBC 2023), a phenomenon referred to as the “pork-barrel” politics (Stone 2021). However, we must also note that Levelling Up did continue to exist as a narrative. Finally, it is too early to tell whether the “impact” of Levelling Up (e.g., the launch of the funding scheme) will soften complex problems in the UK, but future research can give us useful insights regarding the effects of subsidies.

9. Conclusions

Contemporary states, governments, and communities face many new and complex challenges in a dynamically changing, uncertain environment, where reactions and responses based on traditional operations often prove to be ineffective. The financial and economic crisis of 2008 and the turbulent political changes of 2016 (the Brexit referendum, the US presidential election), followed by the myriad and unpredictable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing threat of climate change, and the fourth industrial revolution have reinforced a state of radical uncertainty, in which the narratives themselves have evolved.

The starting point of this paper was that narratives are essential elements in designing the conditions and objectives of governance by providing an interpretative framework for dealing with multi-dimensional problems. The British case highlighted that complex problems result from regional disparities. Accordingly, the narratives generated and mobilized by successive British governments (rebalancing, Northern Powerhouse, Levelling Up) have sought to, on the one hand, respond to longstanding, unresolved structural problems (core–periphery), and an unfinished institutional transformation (devolution), and, on the other, to articulate the realignment of British politics.

However, it is characteristic of “complex problems” that one aspect may be a symptom of another, or link to yet another one. The former case is shown by the emergence of “left-behind places”, while examples of the latter are found in the different performances of towns and cities and the structural problems of the British economy. While the internal complexity of these issues is apparent, the competing narratives also proved to be vague, as inner conflicts and trade-offs led to different interpretative frameworks and conflicting regional policy paradigms (spatially blind, place-based, and place-sensitive approaches) promoted by various political actors. As a result, the common denominator of the main narratives is that they rely on old ideas: in the case of the Northern Powerhouse, this idea is that a single northern mega-region would boost economic productivity, while in the case of Levelling Up, it is the issue of entrenched regional inequalities. These ideas have merely been repackaged as “rebalancing” and “left-behind” places.

The UK’s case shows that reducing regional inequalities is an important economic, political, and social issue. However, the ways and measures of problem-solving and the hard factors listed are influenced by repackaged and often competing narratives propagated by constantly changing or even diverging interests. According to the current dominant territorial policy narrative, lower levels of territorial inequality will lead to faster growth if the development of lagging regions is higher than that of more developed regions over a long period of time. Based on our analysis, the reality is complicated, which is further demonstrated by the fact that the regional development differences in the UK cannot be interpreted solely as a contrast between big and small cities, metropolitan and rural areas, or northern and southern regions. The associated narratives embody a simplified, interest-driven, context-dependent breakdown of the longstanding interpretive framework of the center–periphery problem, which has a considerable history in the UK. In a nutshell, we argue that the pivotal problem is the following: Boris Johnson and his government have not used the Levelling Up narrative to understand the causes of inequality between regions

in order to get closer to efficient solutions but to suggest that the government is seeking to alleviate this complex problem.

The common feature of the three recent major crises in the UK—the 2008 recession, Brexit, and COVID-19—are their regional impact over the short and long term. Politically speaking, the Brexit campaign and its aftermath forged together the narratives that had developed in the previous decade. Even though these narratives are fairly distinct from one another, they are fundamentally related to economic restructuring and managing regional inequalities.

Within this overall framework, the narrative of Levelling Up offered both political value and a mobilizing message by creating a “narrative of success” for the whole of the British economy, focusing firstly on the development of left-behind places. In practical terms, the aim of the Conservative Party was to reframe the unresolved, complex problem of regional inequality to reposition the influence of the Conservative Party in the constituencies of the North and Midlands. Broadly speaking, one of the main policy innovations of Boris Johnson’s government was the relaunch of earlier narratives (rebalancing and Northern Powerhouse) as the reinterpreted Levelling Up narrative. More specifically, the British government reformulated the anti-urban and anti-EU interpretative frameworks that emerged in the Brexit context, giving priority to small and medium-sized left-behind towns and rural areas. However, the long-term success of this narrative depends mainly on the ability of governments to not only assess and interpret the complex problems of each region but also foster the growth of all areas and tackle the grievances fueled by growing economic inequalities, both in the Red Wall and Blue Wall areas.

We suggest that future empirical research can take into consideration this paper’s theoretical contribution. For instance, extensive content analysis could analyze Boris Johnson’s or other British politicians’ speeches, press conferences, and social media content to understand how the “Levelling Up” narrative is articulated in political communication at the country and local levels. Additionally, future research that analyzes mayors’ communication and regional media outlets’ content by considering their implemented local policies would provide an opportunity to compare how they utilize “hard” and “soft” political power. Finally, surveys, such as the European Social Survey, contain information on crime, demographics, economy, immigration, unemployment, GDP, Gini coefficient, and political institutions, thereby allowing for the analysis of correlations between them that can be connected to deprivation and inequalities within the UK.

Due to the narrative analysis aspect selected, this paper has some limitations. First, this study does not deal with (municipal, regional, or national) news, reports, public speeches, or social media content on Levelling Up; thus, interpreting the aforementioned narrative mainly remained on a theoretical level. Second, narrative analysis is not eligible to prove causality: even though we aimed to interpret and describe Levelling Up, we cannot explain why Conservative-led regions gained more funding than areas led by Labour. Therefore, and finally, narrative analysis harms the generalizability of the findings and makes it difficult to make conclusions without utilizing both surveys and interviews conducted with politicians and citizens.

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Notes

- ¹ There are 38 LEPs currently operating within England and which are members of the LEP network. For more detail, see: <https://www.lepnetwork.net/about-leps/the-38-leps/>, accessed on 20 December 2022.
- ² The Northern Powerhouse policy agenda was led by George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, from 2010 to 2016 with an aim of counterbalancing the size and economic power of London, and making the region “be as strong as any global city”.
- ³ We consider different types of agreements: city deals, combined authorities, combined authorities under the control of a directly elected mayor (mayoral combined authorities), and devolution deals.
- ⁴ This development is one of the main reasons that the narrative of Levelling Up took a prominent place in almost all of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s public speeches, including the New Deal for Britain and Build Back Better.

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