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COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

Uncovering Denied Agency and Imaginative Exclusion in Local and Regional Development

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ABSTRACT

This commentary advances the concept of denied agency to rethink how agency is understood in local and regional development research. Although agency has become a central concern in regional studies, the interpretive and emotional dimensions through which individuals understand, narrate and imagine regional change remain underexplored. Denied agency draws attention to actors whose perspectives and aspirations remain marginal or unheard, yet whose experiences may reveal alternative developmental possibilities absent from dominant policy and planning debates. By integrating individuality into structural and agentic perspectives, the commentary develops conceptual and methodological strategies to capture narratives, emotions and imaginative capacities that shape engagement with regional futures. Focusing on neglected voices, hidden discourses and fragile expressions of aspiration, the commentary calls for an interpretive turn in economic geography that recognises the diversity of lived experiences and the unrealised futures that denied agency can illuminate.

1 | Introduction

Understanding the views and perspectives of marginalised groups is increasingly recognised as an important concern for local and regional development research. These perspectives are essential to understanding how regional economic change impacts human well-being; diverse perspectives also allow for different ways of seeing regional challenges and solutions (Ormerod 2023). Yet, too often research in this field confines itself to those who already have a voice, such as large firms and policy-makers, or highlights implications for different groups without seeking to understand lived experiences, emotions and perceptions of change. In a context of 'discontent', 'left-behindness' and 'backlash' (Fiorentino et al. 2024; Rodríguez-Pose 2018, 2025), uncovering marginalised voices is particularly important for understanding these challenges.

As such, this commentary argues for greater focus on 'denied agency' in local and regional development research, emphasising the importance of lived experience, desires and emotions in shaping how individuals interpret and respond to regional change, and in turn producing alternative perspectives on regional development.

Although agency has been extensively studied, the interpretive and emotional dimensions of individuals remain largely underexplored. Uncovering denied agency—experienced by marginalised or unheard actors—represents alternative developmental possibilities that are often absent from policy, planning and strategic regional visions. By embedding individuality within both structural and agentic perspectives, this commentary outlines methodological and conceptual strategies to capture narratives, emotions and imaginative capacities. We emphasise the significance of neglected voices, hidden discourses and perspectives

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that remain largely unrecognised in mainstream accounts. An interpretive turn enables a richer, more inclusive understanding of potential local and regional development futures and contributes to a deeper appreciation of how individuals perceive, respond to and shape the spaces in which they live and work.

Local and regional development research has increasingly foregrounded human agency, building on approaches that previously prioritised structural and systemic perspectives such as Evolutionary Economic Geography (Boschma and Martin 2010) and Geographical Political Economy (MacKinnon et al. 2019). These approaches have emphasised actors, processes and mechanisms that drive regional change (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2019). Despite this attention, the characteristics, experiences and internal worlds of agents themselves remain underexamined. Research has often focused on agency as a process rather than on the agents themselves (Calignano and Nilsen 2024a). In our view, individuality—the unique interpretive, emotional and imaginative capacity of persons—is a central factor in how local and regional change emerges and develops over time, influencing both immediate policy outcomes and the broader trajectory of regional futures.

Existing scholarship has also largely concentrated on change agents (Blažek and Květoň 2022; Calignano and Nilsen 2024a; Píša and Hruška 2023; Rekers and Stihl 2021), those who mobilise resources to effect regional transformation. Far less attention has been given to individuals or groups marginalised or excluded from decision-making arenas. We adopt the term *denied agency* (Eadson and van Veelen 2023) to denote those whose perspectives, aspirations or critiques are absent from the spaces where futures are negotiated, often without explicit recognition of the processes of exclusion that shape these absences.

Denied agency embodies alternative and often unexplored development possibilities. In their unvoiced narratives, hesitant critiques, uncertain aspirations and unshared ideas, potential futures emerge that dominant discourses overlook. Recognising denied agency is thus not only a matter of social justice but also an epistemic imperative. Without attention to marginalised voices, regional futures become narrowed, and the diversity of possible developmental trajectories is diminished. This potentially leads to repeated cycles of exclusion and the reinforcement of existing power hierarchies that constrain the imaginative horizons of regions and their inhabitants. We term this ‘imaginative exclusion’.

The remainder of the commentary first conceptualises denied agency, then discusses its interpretive and emotional dimensions, before outlining methodological implications for identifying and studying denied agency in local and regional development research.

2 | Conceptualising Denied Agency

Denied agents are not passive or disengaged. They may hold rich alternative visions, articulate critiques of prevailing models or maintain different assumptions about what a region needs and could become. Yet their exclusion often occurs subtly through processes of non-recognition rather than overt

conflict. Calignano and Nilsen (2024b) describe this as silent domination, a form of power in which exclusion is pervasive yet invisible (Lukes 2021). In democratic and liberal contexts, certain groups—women, migrants, youth, minority communities, small firms or third-sector organisations—may be systematically underrepresented in decision-making. Their ideas are neither actively dismissed nor included; they simply fail to be acknowledged as credible, legitimate or even thinkable within institutional spaces.

Denied agency can take several forms and operates through multiple, often overlapping, mechanisms. Analytically, it is useful to distinguish between three dimensions through which agency may be denied or rendered invisible: *institutional*, *discursive* and *interpretive* forms of denial.

Institutional denial of agency refers to situations in which actors are excluded, underrepresented or weakly positioned within formal governance structures and decision-making arenas. In such contexts, participation mechanisms may formally exist, yet institutional arrangements, power asymmetries or established policy networks can limit the effective influence of certain actors. Marginalised groups may therefore find themselves structurally constrained in their ability to shape development strategies, even when participatory procedures appear formally inclusive. Institutional denial of agency thus emerges through both explicit exclusion and subtler forms of structural marginalisation that restrict access to resources, decision-making channels or agenda-setting power.

Discursive or recognitional denial of agency occurs when actors are not acknowledged as legitimate contributors to collective decision-making processes. Here, the issue is not simply access to institutions but the ways in which certain groups are represented, interpreted or framed within public discourse and policy debates. Some actors may be routinely discussed as policy beneficiaries, social problems or target populations rather than as political agents capable of shaping development trajectories. In such cases, their experiences, aspirations and knowledge may be overlooked or dismissed, even when they are formally present within decision-making arenas. This form of denial is closely related to debates on recognition justice (McCauley et al. 2013), as processes of misrecognition can render certain actors invisible or illegitimate within regional development discourses, even when formal participation mechanisms are in place.

Interpretive or internalised denial of agency refers to situations in which individuals' perceptions of their own capacity to influence collective outcomes become shaped by repeated experiences of marginalisation, exclusion or limited influence. Over time, these experiences can shape how actors interpret their possibilities for participation and action. Some individuals may disengage from formal processes, withdraw from participation or assume that their contributions will not be valued or effective. Others may develop alternative imaginaries, critiques or aspirations that remain largely unexpressed in institutional contexts. In this sense, denied agency emerges at the intersection of external institutional barriers and individuals' interpretations of their position within regional development processes.

It is important to note that these categories refer to analytical dimensions rather than to distinct social groups. In practice, the same actors may experience several forms of denied agency simultaneously. Young people provide a clear example of this dynamic. As highlighted by Calignano and De Siena (2024), young people can be considered a paradigmatic case of denied agency in contemporary governance systems. They may experience *institutional* denial of agency through their limited representation in political institutions and decision-making processes, a situation that has prompted initiatives such as the proposed Italian bill on 'generational quotas in institutions' (Quotidiano Nazionale 2025) and broader efforts such as the EU Youth Policy Dialogues (European Union 2025) aimed at strengthening youth participation. At the same time, young people may face *discursive or recognitional* denial of agency, as they are often discussed as policy beneficiaries rather than recognised as legitimate political actors capable of shaping policy agendas. Finally, denied agency may also operate at an *interpretive* level, as repeated experiences of marginalisation can shape how young people perceive their ability to influence public decisions, sometimes contributing to disengagement, electoral abstention or polarised political behaviour (Calignano and De Siena 2024).

Taken together, these dimensions illustrate that denied agency extends beyond absence from decision-making arenas. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of institutional structures, discursive recognition and individuals' own interpretations of their possibilities for action. Understanding denied agency therefore requires moving beyond analyses that focus solely on visible participation or formal representation. It also requires attention to the ways in which voices become marginalised, ignored or rendered invisible within policy debates, as well as to the interpretive and emotional processes through which individuals respond to these conditions. In this sense, denied agency reveals how alternative perspectives, critiques and imaginaries of regional development may exist even when they remain largely absent from institutional discourses (e.g., Calignano and Nilsen 2024b; Eadson and van Veelen 2023).

3 | Interpretive and Emotional Dimensions of Denied Agency

Our conceptualisation of denied agency infers that exclusion is political and imaginative. When diverse perspectives are systematically absent, the horizons of what is considered reasonable, plausible or possible shrink. Even when individuals inhabit the same institutional and economic environments, they interpret and respond differently, imagining varied futures and emotional reactions to change (Nilsen et al. 2024). Individuality captures these differences. It encompasses the interpretive and emotional dimensions of agency: how people understand themselves, narrate their place in the world and imagine what is possible. Denied agency, therefore, is not just the absence of capacity. It is the unrecognised presence of alternative interpretive and emotional trajectories that lack institutional or social validation and remain unrealised in both policy and practice. Such trajectories might include frustration, hope, critique or refusal.

Focus on emotions has been a blind spot for urban and regional studies. This possibly follows from an essentially rationalist

approach to understanding economic and policy processes, which devalues questions of subjectivity, passion and desire (Anderson and Smith 2001).

Huggins et al. (2018) have made significant contributions to understanding some of these challenges by exploring the cultural, cognitive and motivational foundations of regional development. Their work demonstrates how values, attitudes and shared orientations influence regional outcomes. Although these insights are invaluable, they remain largely focused on collective or generalised cultural tendencies, rather than on the individuality of actors. Advancing this perspective requires examining how individuals interpret and emotionally respond to structural, institutional and cultural conditions. Eadson et al. (2025), for example, explore how regional policy-makers engage in individual sense-making processes to decipher and act upon new events or concepts. They show how relative homogeneity of policy-maker characteristics and regional development norms and cultures constrain imagination and possibility for change. Individuals within the same region may share some cultural patterns, but their experiences, identities and aspirations differ (Nilsen et al. 2024). Denied agency emerges in this interpretive space. Exclusion involves non-recognition of diverse imaginative horizons.

Bringing individuality and denied agency into analysis involves recognising how structural constraints intersect with interpretive and emotional capacities to shape alternative regional futures. Agency cannot be understood solely through visible participation or formal action. It is also shaped by how individuals interpret their circumstances, imagine alternatives and emotionally relate to processes of regional change (Küttel 2025). This demands an appreciation of how people internalise, contest or transform structural conditions into imaginative and emotional responses. Some may adapt silently, some may withdraw from participation, whereas others sustain hope or generate critique that challenges dominant narratives. In some cases, denied agency leads to finding agency in other forms of action that are rooted in their emotional responses to marginalisation (Ho 2024). For instance, Küttel (2025, 206–7) describes how some workers in East Germany, despite losing economic agency over their labour in response to structural economic change, continued to express agency 'in the emotional and social bonds workers maintained, in acts of mutual support'. Others who feel they are denied agency may seek to reclaim it through destructive means allied to populist mobilisations of discontent (Schachtner 2025).

These invisible dynamics hold epistemic value. They reveal unrealised possibilities and alternative trajectories for regional development. Attention to these interpretive and emotional dimensions helps explain why denied agency may remain difficult to detect within conventional policy debates and research frameworks that focus primarily on visible forms of participation. It is also important to recognise that such focus—or lack of—is also a gendered challenge. As Anderson and Smith (2001) point out, marginalising individuals' emotions is part of a gendered politics of both research and policy. Individuals' emotions tend to be classified as private, feminised and separate to the public and/or economic sphere. This means researchers have an ethical duty to act: 'If the logic of efficiency *depends on* the silencing of the

emotions, academics have a role in pointing out that this is ... ethically questionable' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8).

Integrating these perspectives encourages researchers to move beyond views of regional development involving the coordinated actions of empowered actors, towards a dialogical, iterative process in which structural conditions, cultural narratives and individual interpretations converge. By foregrounding denied agency, it becomes possible to recognise the creative, critical and imaginative contributions of those previously excluded from decision-making arenas, enriching our understanding of what development could entail.

4 | Capturing Denied Agency: Methodological Approaches

Denied agents cannot be identified solely through formal categories of marginalisation. Rather, they become visible through analyses of how exclusion is experienced, interpreted and narrated. This requires a methodological openness to voices that are often fragile, tentative or overlooked, as well as a sensitivity to the conditions under which people either withdraw from, resist or reinterpret institutionalised pathways (Calignano and Nilsen 2024b). Understanding these dynamics requires attention to narratives, life stories, emotional experiences including hope, discouragement, resignation and desire, and imagination, conceived as the cognitive shaping of what is possible. This requires researchers to look beyond the most audible voices and actively engage with those that remain quiet, hesitant, unspoken or marginalised. Many perspectives relevant to regional futures do not appear in official plans, strategic visions or policy documents. Nevertheless, they persist in alternative or neglected views, minoritised discourses, everyday criticisms and what Scott (1990) has described as 'hidden transcripts': the informal, often cautious forms through which people express dissent, uncertainty or alternative imaginaries.

Because denied agency often remains partially hidden, capturing it requires methodological approaches capable of identifying both visible and subtle expressions of agency. We now consider different appropriate approaches across each of the three forms of denied agency outlined above.

Investigating *institutional* forms of denied agency requires attention to policy mechanisms, governance arrangements and decision-making processes through which some actors gain influence whereas others remain excluded. In this realm, well-established approaches such as policy analysis (Howlett et al. 2009), institutional analysis (Lowndes and Roberts 2013), stakeholder analysis and mapping (Reed et al. 2009), and governance network analysis (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016) can be particularly useful, provided that attention is directed towards questions of inclusion, exclusion, representation and influence. In addition to asking simply how decisions are made, these approaches encourage researchers to examine whose interests, perspectives and forms of knowledge are recognised, marginalised or rendered invisible within development processes.

Although all three forms of denied agency warrant attention, the interpretive and discursive dimensions are particularly helpful

for understanding how affective and emotional experiences of exclusion are interpreted, narrated and reproduced in everyday contexts.

To explore *interpretive* forms of denied agency, researchers may draw on in-depth qualitative methods such as narrative approaches (Riessman 2008), life-story research (Atkinson 1998), oral history methods (Thompson 2000) and ethnographic inquiry (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), which are particularly valuable for uncovering how individuals articulate, negotiate or conceal their sense of agency in everyday contexts (see Cherry 2026, for a recent example). Similarly, Willett and Lang (2018, 205) use public engagement research methods, using drama and performance as a 'creative way to engage participants beyond standardised forms of question ... [and] to democratise the research process'. These approaches allow researchers to capture subjective interpretations, lived experiences and informal discourses that often remain invisible in institutional records or policy documents.

Discursive dimensions of denied agency require attention to the ways in which certain voices, experiences and forms of knowledge become marginalised or rendered invisible within dominant development narratives. In this regard, much can be learnt from feminist and diverse economies geographic perspectives (see also Ormerod 2023). For instance, the analytical concept of 'reading for difference' (Gibson-Graham 2020) can help to uncover unvalued or hidden discourses and activities, whereas Weeks' (2011) focus on pragmatic empowerment through 'utopian demands' can support individuals to think about concrete ideas and steps towards realising desired regional futures (Eadson et al. 2023).

Process-oriented approaches such as path tracing (Sotarauta and Grillitsch 2023) can further help reconstruct how individual experiences, interpretations and interactions shape regional development trajectories over time. Similarly, mixed-methods approaches such as qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin 2000) allow researchers to systematically compare combinations of structural and individual conditions that enable or constrain agency across cases. By attending to these dimensions, regional development research can better capture the diversity of perspectives within a region, rather than assuming homogeneity among collective actors.

Collectively, these approaches help illustrate how systemic bias, economic inequality or discrimination can result in marginalised groups having limited voice or influence, even where formal participation mechanisms exist, especially when decision-making structures are closed or dominated by elite actors. This occurs in various ways: when critical decisions are made or in everyday activities—for example, when a dominant firm attracts all attention or resources, thereby limiting potential development pathways driven by less powerful actors in a local industrial scenario, or when a community council makes zoning decisions with limited opportunities for meaningful participation, excluding residents or specific citizen categories from having a substantive influence on outcomes that affect their homes. In all these cases, women, migrants, youth, minority communities, small firms and third-sector organisations are systematically underrepresented. Their ideas and visions

of possible futures are neither actively dismissed nor included; they simply fail to be acknowledged as credible, legitimate or thinkable.

5 | Conclusion: A Geography of Missing Voices and Possible Futures

Regional development is a power-laden process (Calignano and Nilsen 2024b) that is not only about institutional and economic transformation but also a deeply human process of interpretation, meaning-making and imagination (Benner 2025). Denied agency highlights what remains unseen when research focuses solely on empowered actors (Eadson and van Veelen 2023). Foregrounding individuality enables observation of diverse experiences within a region: alignment or misalignment with dominant visions, sustained hope or discouragement, voice or silence. Denied agency expands the horizon of possible futures by incorporating perspectives absent from institutional discourses.

Following our identification of this blind spot in the existing literature, this commentary has argued for a stronger conceptual and methodological engagement with denied agency in regional development research. Conceptually, it has clarified how denied agency may emerge through *institutional* exclusion, *discursive* marginalisation and *interpretive* constraints on perceived possibilities for action. Methodologically, it has highlighted the importance of approaches capable of capturing both visible and subtle expressions of agency, including narrative and ethnographic methods, oral histories, path tracing and comparative mixed-method approaches such as QCA.

Following Huggins et al. (2018) and deepening their approach, we call for an interpretive turn in economic geography—a geography attentive to missing voices, unshared aspirations, abandoned possibilities and unrealised futures. This entails new empirical and conceptual approaches that move beyond actor properties (Calignano and Nilsen 2024a) and recognise the importance of emotional, interpretive and imaginative processes in shaping regional development alongside institutional coordination and strategic action.

Recognising these interpretive and emotional dimensions also requires listening to those whose perspectives remain unheard. The challenge is to document, recognise and give space to marginalised or unheard voices in our accounts of alternative regional futures that may yet be realised or that have remained unrealised because of invisible forms of power (Lukes 2021; Calignano and Nilsen 2024b), thereby contributing to a more inclusive and just understanding of regional development processes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this commentary as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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