Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues, Comparative Designs (REGov)

The region, identity, and power

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Abstract

This paper discusses current perspectives and interpretations of region and regional identity. It looks at the social and historical production and transformation of regionality and spatial meaning making. It also reflects on how discourses on regional identity are currently being exploited in various institutional contexts, such as regional planning. The article similarly reflects how purported regional identities are related to the mobility of citizens and how this mobility perhaps calls for a further re-conceptualization of spatial categories. Since regions and identities are historically and spatially contingent, both the theoretical and empirical understanding of what regions and regional identities mean must be based on contextuality. A comparative analysis of such meanings is a most laudable aim to avoid abstract, empty generalizations.

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic "What is a region?" Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of Anthony Lehmann, University of Geneva, John Allen, Open University (UK), and Ronan Uhel, European Environment Agency (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html.
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1. Introduction

Regions, regionalism, borders and identity have rapidly become keywords at various spatial scales during the last few decades. Regions have become particularly significant in the European Union as part of the "Europe of regions." This has been a paradox since the demise of the region (as well as other similar 'collective' phenomena related to solidarity and community) has been predicted since the 19th century (Keating, 1998; Paasi, 2009). Such demise should have followed almost automatically from the deepening modernity and the consolidating state-centric spatiality. Yet, strong senses of regional expression or identity, partly cutting affiliation to nations have been found recently in a number of places. Whether or not regional affiliations mobilize people into conflict with their respective state, their belonging to a region calls upon a sense of community and identity which often questions and nuances national feeling in subtle and distinctive ways (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996, p. 109).

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Regions, identities, borders have become highly important also academic research, where scholars have looked these phenomena at various spatial scales (Paasi, 2009). Some of them have scrutinized the rise and functioning of economic macro-regions and regionalisms such as the EU, NAFTA or ASEA, while others have concentrated on global city regions or polycentric urban regions that have been proposed as the primary motors of future regional dynamism (Meijers & Romein, 2003). For one group of researchers the region still denotes simply a given spatial unit between the state level and localities (Scott, 1998). Identity has become also important in governance and planning. Most scholars today understand regions as "social constructs" and expressions power relations but it is not always clear what such arguments would mean in practice (Allen et al., 1998; Paasi, 2010). For most scholars this simply means that the 'material' and 'discursive' come together in region-building processes. Regions are seen as results and expressions of social relations that may have their origin in complex institutional contexts that can locate in the regions but also outside, and respectively be 'local', 'regional', 'national' and 'global'. Indeed, the existence and functions of regions make such apparently distinct scales to fuse.

The resurgence of region can not be explained by any single, straight-forward reason. Such general tendencies as uneven development, observations on regional languages and cultures being threatened with decline, national devolution or federalization as a means of reducing the power of central states or as a means of managing separatist aspirations and conflicts have been identified behind the rise of regions at least in Europe (Anderson, 2000). Similar tendencies have also been identified as expressions of new regimes of regulation that are transforming the spatialities in the triangle between the state, economy and governance. By tradition the state has been the key actor and context for region-building and regionalization processes but current interest displays the processes of the re-scaling of state (governance) as part of globalization (Jessop, 2002). One significant feature of the new regional dynamics – and one that simultaneously challenges existing state borders – has been the rise of so-called 'unusual' or 'non-standard' regions. Such regions in the EU include both larger scale regionalizations (e.g. Baltic Sea and Barents Region) and local cross-border regions that do not inevitably fit to the existing state-bound statistical NUTS area classification (Deas & Lord, 2006). The NUTS system has been an important medium in creating an understanding of the existence of a specific 'Europe of regions' but unusual regions are increasingly significant spatial units of governance, and more than hundred such units exist today. Some of them are ordinary cross-border regions while some are uniting several states (like the Baltic Sea region).

A much used term 'new regionalism' condenses partly these tendencies and suggests that the new role of the region is based on its institutional position in the broader field of political, cultural, economic and administrative processes (Keating, 2001; Jessop, 2002). It also suggests the territorialities of current capitalism are best regulated and governed in/through the decentralization of socio-economic decision-making and associated policy implementation to regional institutions, frameworks and supports. New regionalism and its claims for devolution have been underpinned by three interrelated concepts that see the region as a focus for 1) the formation of common economic strategies in the context of globalization, 2) new forms of cultural identification, and 3) the mediation co-present in social interactions (Raco, 2006). Respectively it has been suggested that new regionalism is characterized by "multidimensionality, complexity, fluidity and non-conformity. It involves a variety of state and non-state actors, who often come together in rather informal multi-actor coalitions" (Söderbaum, 2003, pp. 1-2).

The rest of this paper will discuss the current interpretations of region and regional identity. It will look at the social and historical production and transformation of regionality and meaning making. It will also reflect how discourses on regional identity are currently being exploited in various institutional contexts, especially regional planning. The article will similarly observe how purported regional identities are related to the mobility of citizens and how this mobility perhaps calls for a further re-conceptualization of spatial categories.

2. Region as a conceptual problem

Region has been an extremely complicated category in the history of geographical thought (Paasi, 2011). I have suggested earlier that regions themselves are historically contingent social processes that become institutionalized as part of the wider regional transformation and which may ultimately de-institutionalize, in practice merge with other

regional spaces or dissolve into smaller units. Regions are hence time- and space-specific in that sense that they have their beginning and end in the perpetual regional transformation. The institutionalization of each 'concrete' region is a manifestation of numerous institutional practices and discourses related to governance, politics, culture and economy that are constitutive of and constituted by the institutionalization of the region – this is a dialectical process. These practices and inherent motives and power relations may be based on economy, politics, culture or governance, for example. These motives and power relations may originate from the 'region' in question or from the outside (as they often do), from past or the present (and even from future expectations), and they may come together in unique ways in each region building process (cf. Allen, 2003). The production of space and associated motives and meanings are thus in a perpetual transformation. Regions are therefore not isolated, bounded islands but may be effectively constituted by networks and processes extending well beyond the administrative borders of each region (Paasi, 2010). Today this context is more often than not the global neo-liberal discursive landscape characterized by purported regional 'competition'.

Despite the flourishing literature the conceptual development of regional geographic research has been slow and ambivalent. Recent efforts to make sense of the region have led to a paradoxical situation where scholars have very different views on the significance of regions and boundaries (Paasi, 2011). For some scholars regions and their identities are meaningful elements, for some others regions are results of all kinds interactions that do not have fixed identities. The representatives of relational thinking, such as Amin (2004) suggest that regions (territories) should be understood as open, non-bounded categories and that the opening of territorial borders is a real challenge for a progressive science and politics.

Relatively little attention has been paid to such major questions as what is a region, how it 'becomes', how diverging regions exist and how social power is involved in region-building processes. It is common to take the idea of region as a given unit and then analyze social, economic and cultural practices/ discourses taking place in these 'ready-made' contexts, rather than to theorize and scrutinize the emergence of these contexts as part of broader political, economic and administrative practices. It is also common to understand regions often as 'actors' capable of doing or transforming things – an approach that social geographers have for a long time labeled as spatial fetishism (this fetishism is at least implicit in certain sectors of the EU's regional policy accentuating regions as actors) (Paasi, 2010). Yet it may be more correct to think that regions are not independent actors but rather they are institutional structures and processes that exist and gain their meanings in social practice and in wider constellations of power (Allen et al., 1998). Regions are social constructs that are historically contingent and respectively they emerge in socio-spatial division of labour.

While relational thinking is now emerging in Anglophonic geographical circles, in some other contexts regions and boundaries have become concomitantly objects of fierce research activity and their practical importance as fuel and catalyst for the operation of regionalist movements and for practical planning strategies has been recognized (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2006). Most clear this impact has been in the case of ethno-territorial groups but regional identity narratives produced and reproduced e.g. by regional activists and media are also examples of this politics of distinction. More recently some scholars have searched for theoretical and empirical grounds to balance the relational and region-based approaches (Jones & MacLeod, 2004; Paasi, 2009).

3. Regional identity: conceptual issues

Expressions such as heritage, past or roots have been on headlines since the 1970s. At the same time also 'identity' – a category bringing together many elements contained by the previous words – has become one of the most popular categories in social and cultural science. For psychologists identity means normally the relative permanence of the experience of the self and at the same puts emphasis on the social content of personal life. Hence, 'national identity', for instance, is often understood to refer to national features that are important for individuals, such as the success of 'our' artists, sportsmen or academic scholars in international scene, 'sexual identity', for its part, has been associated with the images of self as representative of sex. The break-up of the all kinds of ideas of fixed identities, and their reconstruction in the globalizing world have been important topics the works of contemporary social and cultural theoreticians, which often develop their own rhetoric. Sociality, tribal society,

tourist, or pilgrim, for example, have been much used examples of categories when researchers have mapped current societal tendencies and the changing roles of individuals. It has become common to accentuate the constructed character of identities and to note respectively that it is not useful to ask only what identity is but also people mean when they talk about identity (Billig, 1995).

Similarly regional identity has become a hugely important category in academic research and policy debates around the world. In the EU context regional identity is more often than not seen as an instrument to cope with globalization (Millard & Christensen, 2004). Reflecting the spirit of neo-liberalism regions and their identities are seen as important mediums for economic competiveness.

In spite of this new interest also regional identity has remained thinly theorized – a sort of enigma. It is often taken for granted as an automatically positive thing that can contribute to well-being and social cohesiveness (Bristow, 2006). A perpetual problem is that writing and talking about regional identity creates concomitantly a content and an agenda for understanding this general idea: narratives on regional or 'our' identity become easily given constituents of the views on what identity actually is and what it means. This forces us to reflect the relations between regional spaces and identities and how these relations are used as instruments to create social distinctions and to promote the region, for example. The use of region in such debates has become increasingly flexible so that 'region' is not any more located merely between the state and the local but may exist on whatever scale. This is also the case with so-called new regionalism that indeed points to regions that are 'in-between' diverging scales (Paasi, 2009).

While regions are nowadays increasingly defined in academic debates as relational, networked and non-bounded entities, regional identity implies certain boundedness and a politics of distinction. Yet both categories have become crucial, often uncritically, in the regional planning schemes, development ideologies and regional marketing strategies pursued by regional, national and supranational actors. It is therefore useful to look briefly at the relations between the region and regional identity.

4. The institutionalization of regions: bringing the region and identity analytically together

In spite of the flourishing literature the conceptual development of regional geography has been ambivalent and different views exists on the significance of regions and boundaries. The representatives of relational thinking suggest that regions should be seen as non-bounded in the mobile world and that the opening of borders is a real challenge for a progressive science and politics (Allen et al., 1998). Accordingly regions 'stretch' in space so that their social contents and relations are networked across borders and this networking indeed constitutes regions – regional boundaries and identities need not to be exclusive. In some contexts the importance of regions and boundaries as catalysts for regionalist movements and for planning strategies is nevertheless obvious. This is evident in the case of ethno-territorial groups but identity narratives produced and reproduced e.g. by regional activists, media and governmental bodies are also typical examples of this politics of distinction. Jones and MacLeod (2004) have made a useful distinction between approaches that study regional spaces of economic development (mainly economic geographers/ regional development scholars) and spaces of regionalism around such themes as citizenship, political mobilization or cultural expression (mainly political geographers, IR scholars and anthropologists). One problem for current ambivalence is that history is often missing from current theorizations, as is the reflection of the relation between agency and structure i.e. practice (Paasi, 2010). Many scholars also mix region and place conceptually and lose much of the analytical potential that this distinction could provide. The theoretical and empirical value of this conceptual distinction will be discussed below.

The theory of the institutionalization of regions that I have been working with since the 1980s suggests that regions should be conceptualized as historical(ly contingent) processes. The constitutive powers of regions may originate both from the region and from the outside, from distant power houses. Four stages can be abstracted for analytical purposes from this process: territorial shaping (making of 'soft'/'hard' boundaries), symbolic shaping (naming/other symbols) and institutional shaping (institutions producing/reproducing other shapes) and the establishment of the region as part of the regional system and social consciousness i.e. the region has an 'identity'.

Identity can be respectively conceptualized analytically as consisting of two elements: the identity of the region and the identity or regional consciousness of the people living in the region or outside of it (I will discuss this analytical division in more detail below). These shapes are produced and reproduced in the perpetual structuration of individual and institutional practices and discourses of economy, politics, governance, culture/media and education. Accordingly, to understand the production, reproduction and de-institutionalization (i.e. merging or dissolving) of regions, we have to look beyond the 'region' itself to the institutional practices through which regions are perpetually becoming (rather than being fixed). This theory also stresses the division of labour: some actors actively produce regions, while others rather reproduce them, and this matrix of power relations is subject to a perpetual change. These actors can be 'noisy' activists that visibly struggle to promote the region-building process (think Umberto Bossi and Padania, for example) or can be advocated that have their position in the division of labor and participate in the 'silent' region-building process as journalists, entrepreneurs, teachers, administrators etc.

This conceptualization provides a way to scrutinize the limits and strengths of current approaches and to develop new perspectives. Previous dimensions are abstractions that should be developed further contextually (Sayer, 1992). They are conceptualized in relation to each other and to general social forces (economy, governance, socialization), not in relation to specific observations. They inform empirical research but are not stuck only with specific regions or observations (Paasi, 2009). This theoretical helps to understand the distinction between historical, 'old regions' that often exists in social practices and discourses that may date far back in history and 'new' regions that often result from political and economic regionalization processes or projects and may be rather fresh inventions (like the 'unusual regions' in Europe).

It is clearly the institutional shape of regions that faces the major challenge in the current rescaling of state spaces, not inevitably borders as many geographers with a relational perspective have assessed (Paasi, 2009). That human beings, ideas and capital cross borders is an undeniable fact. However, it may be suggested that it is the transformation of the institutional sphere that 'draws' the region as part of broader economic, political, cultural practice and power relations even if symbolic and territorial shape may remain more or less the same (and they can be simultaneously meaningful in some social practices and less meaningful in some others). Relational thinkers obviously lean on the traditional political geographic ideas of borders as exclusive lines. However, boundaries are not merely lines limiting spaces - rather they penetrate social (boundary producing) practices all over the society and these practices may well be linked with the external world, especially in terms of economy.

Relational argument perhaps underestimates the complexity and power of so-called 'old' regionalist politics of culture and identity. Certain 'bounded shapes' are namely obvious for such social movements that exploit regionalist arguments either because their concerns are linked to territory or the territory is not strongly colonized by existing movements (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Miller, 2000; Keating, 1998). The relation between regions and identities that is how various social groupings define themselves and their political aims is thus a crucial question. Regions provide a context for certain spaces of dependence through which actors can conduct their engagements (Jones & Macleod, 2004). Regions may also be crucial in mobilizing economic motives (e.g. media, firms). Regions may also be significant in social identification which is often based on distinctions and active mobilization of history, memory and emotions. This means that the degree to which regions are regarded closed and bounded or open and permeable is thus ultimately a context-bounded question, not a purely theoretical or political problem.

All regions have not only a territorial shape (vague or more explicit boundaries) but also a symbolic shape that manifests itself in social practice that produces/reproduces the region and which is used to construct narratives of identity and to symbolize a region. The name of the region – that often results from political or cultural struggle - and numerous other symbols (coat of arms, songs, certain cultural and natural features, myths) may be crucial and their meanings can vary also at different spatial scales. A specific institutional shape, a number of institutions/institutional practices that are used in maintaining the territorial and symbolic shapes, is also crucial element in region building process. Institutions are increasingly important. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, pp. 24-26) suggest that individual's contemporary life in western world is deeply dependent on institutions that, instead of traditional binding traditions, "appear on the scene to organize your own life". They refer here to the bureaucratic and institutional complexity of modernity where life is most securely bound into networks of guidelines and

regulations. Individual's biographies are at the same time increasingly 'globalized' due to increasing travelling and media.

This institutional side manifests itself also in such elements as political representation, planning practices, governance and local forms of social policy, education systems, associations operating in civil society, local and regional media, even literature and novels. It is obvious that people's social practices and minds simply become somehow 'regionalized' at various spatial scales, in such practices. Power relations are part of this complexity. While these institutions are often crucial in the production and reproduction distinctions (and boundaries) between regions and diverging social groups ('us'/'them'), they may well be located outside of the region. Historical elements and myth-making may be crucial here but they are not always significant in region-building. This can be seen e.g. in the case of the provinces I have studied in Finland (Paasi, 2009).

Some further analytical distinctions help to conceptualize the 'identities' of regions, to understand regional identity narratives and – what is even more important - to study identities empirically. The identity of a region refers to such features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish a region from others. In practice discussions on the identity of some region are typically discourses of scientists, politicians, administrators, cultural activists or entrepreneurs that aim to distinguish a region from some others. This takes place through the construction of regional divisions, regional marketing, governance and political regionalization. Such classifications are inevitably based on certain choices, where some elements are chosen to constitute an identity narrative and some others are excluded. Thus they are expressions of power in delimiting, naming and symbolizing space and groups of people. On the other hand, it is possible to distinguish analytically the regional identity of the inhabitants, i.e. the identification of people with a region. This is what is often labeled as regional consciousness. People in question may live inside the region (this is the usual presumption in debates on regional consciousness) or outside of it. Regional consciousness is a hierarchical phenomenon but not inevitably fixed with certain existing regional levels and this can be based on natural or cultural elements that have been classified, often stereotypically, by regional activists, institutions or organizations as the constituents of the identity of a region. In the European Union a belief on the existence of a regional consciousness is strong: this phenomenon is perpetually monitored through Eurobarometer surveys and the aim is, of course, to evaluate the European level identification of the citizens.

A major difficulty with the idea of regional identity is that writing and talking about regional identity creates concomitantly a content and an agenda for understanding this idea: narratives on regional or 'our' identity become constituents of the interpretations of what such identity is and what it means. Many current studies on regional cultures and identity often seem start from a set of at least implicit suppositions, such as understanding cultural distinctiveness or identity in a given region (and region is, indeed, often taken as given in these research) is an empirical phenomenon that can be analysed by using such cultural elements or traits as dialects, music, regional food, literature, folklore etc. as indicators of this distinctiveness or identity. Ultimately regional identity is a label reserved for the existence of a kind of spatial shape for these traits. In this sense identity is a feature of the 'region', rather than a feature of the regional consciousness of the people living there. Region itself is often taken for granted in such accounts.

On the other hand, understanding regional identity as regional consciousness often seems to pass the problems normally identified with social classification and power relations; that is the fact that surveys and interviews that are used in analysing this consciousness are sensitive discursive formations that often formalize, label and modify the cultural discourse and the used categories in such ways that simply force ordinary people to adopt to given classifications. Belonging to a region or place is not a self-evident thing even if people often identify themselves with their home region. However, many of them simply do not reflect these facts in spatial terms in their daily life. What we do call as an identity is rather performed in daily life practice.

Whereas individuals move in space, it is often taken for granted that the relations between various cultural indicators or markers and regions constitute sort of more or less permanent 'cultural structures' and their association with native people is more real than with those that have migrated to the area. The relations between regions and regional identities are increasingly complicated in the increasingly mobile, globalizing world where the challenge to

open traditional bounded spaces and the perpetual practices and discourses associated with the production and maintenance of spatial distinctions and boundaries seem to exist simultaneously and also seem to become fused in increasingly complicated ways. Since personal spatial histories increasingly take place in many locations, this forces us to reflect, what will happen to this shaky, asymmetric relation in the increasingly mobile globalizing world. One way to approach this issue is to make an analytical distinct in between region as an institutional structure and place, an accumulation of personal spatial experiences that individual actors accumulate in the course of their life history. Earlier observations and my ongoing large project support this idea and help to understand how regions are constructed in social and spatial division of labour and they may exist even if individual actors (with their spatial experiences) move away (as they increasingly do) or die. As part of the dialectics between the region and place certain characters of regions are chosen as 'indicators' or symbols of the identity of the region. Narratives of such identities are normally reproduced in media and also regional planning.

5. Coda

Whether we like it or not, regions and regional identities seem to have maintained their important roles around the world. They are not merely typical in abstract academic discourses but also crucial as elements of social and political practice and discourse. There are doubtless many backgrounds for such tendencies but in general, people's awareness of being part of the complex and at the same time abstract processes associated with globalization appears to motivate a search for certain orientation points, as well as generate efforts to affirm old boundaries and to create new ones (Meyer & Geschiere, 1999). Regional identities and affiliations with region are not always rosy visions of solidarity or unity but may coexist with internal oppositions based on cultural, economic and political conflict and processes of Othering, i.e. in making distinctions with other groups of people (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996). Thus regional identity may be a crucial element for the 'identities of resistance' that through which actors are opposing e.g. the 'global networking reality' of financial capitalism and its destructive impacts. Such resistance may also emerge, for instance, from the movements of sexual minorities, or ecological radicalism. Since regions and identities are historically and spatially contingent, both theoretical and empirical understanding of what regions and regional identities mean must be based on context. A comparative analysis of such contextual meanings, for its part, may be most laudable in order to avoid abstract, empty generalizations.

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