Reconstructing regions and regional identity

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Introduction

Region, boundary, place and territory are very popular terms in current academic discourse and also in applied research that aims at mapping the changing spatialities of the contemporary world. These categories are reflected today from many perspectives. At one extreme some authors are ready to argue that these elements, or at least some of them (especially territories and boundaries), are losing their traditional meanings as a consequence of the increased spatial interaction and flows of capital, people and information. A whole new metaphoric language – generated above all by Castells (1989) – has been taken into use to depict the importance of flows. Concomitantly the 1990s have witnessed a resurgence of regions and boundaries on the one hand in academic discourse and in concrete research, on the other hand, in everyday life struggles of various social groupings. These categories have been particularly significant in recent research and ideological debate on the future of Europe, especially in boundary studies and the ideologies of so-called new regionalism. An important challenge in much of current research has been to reflect the emerging forms of governance in a situation where globalization and the apparent re-scaling of state governance are fusing our traditional thinking on spatial scales and categories.

But let us take one step back and return to the development of geographical thinking. We can start from the fact the tradition of every scientific discipline includes concepts which typically characterize the discipline in question. In geography these keywords have by tradition included such categories as region, place, space and their derivates, such as location, distance and direction. Probably the most important single concept has been region, since it has been the central intellectual problem for geographers when concrete research is concerned. This has been important both in reflecting the research process and in the representations of results. Region has been significant also when philosophy and methodology of the discipline (i.e. theoretical arguments for research frames and the concepts employed) has been reflected.

It should be noted that at the same time the concept of region and the arguments connected with it have in various forms given an important conceptual basis for the legitimation of the discipline among other academic fields, hence being important also for the identity of geographers: these concepts have been major ‘totems’ in geographer’s academic territory. We know from the history of the discipline, that especially the arguments presented by the representatives of chorological thought were based on the principle of the division of labour between sciences and the role of geographers in this division of labour was legitimated by using their role as specialists of ‘regions’ as the key argument. We also know from the later developments that the idea of geography as a specific science of ‘spatial’ dimension has not been only the idea of chorologists, but similar ideas have been put forward in several
later interpretations in which space has been comprehended as a causal factor, in a way over-emphasizing its importance in the social organization of human action. This has had serious implications. Geography has been, for instance, a crucial factor in the construction of the territorial trap, to use the concept of John Agnew (1994), a state-centred narrative that has dominated international relations, geographic education and many other things.

The implications of these modes on thought (exceptionalism) prevented for a long time the development of geographer’s concepts of region. Thus major problems have been, it seems to me:

- the understanding of regions as non-historical frames or settings, in which various natural and cultural phenomena are arranged
- reducing regions to purely ‘mental categories’, which the researcher creates on the basis of his needs to classify his or her research objects

The latter problem is not, of course, a new one. Rather it has been one part of the eternal discussion of geographers, which can be put forward in the form of two questions, already noted by Minshull in late 1960s.

1. Are regions mere ideas, i.e. a method for analysing the diversity of the world, or
2. Are they really existing units?

The second question put forward by Minshull is more problematic that it superficially taken seems to be. A logical new question is, what kind of philosophical and methodological commitments we have when answering to the second, ontological question. So, does the ontological aspect involved in the question refer merely to the problem of empirical observation, so that the existence of regions would be based only on the ability of researchers to ‘find’ regions. Region would thus be a descriptive instrument that fits into the hands of each scholar. This viewpoint is nicely illustrated in the classical texts of Richard Hartshorne, but it is surprising to find also in a much more recent text written by Hart who wrote in 1982 that

"Regions are subjective artistic devices, and they must be shaped to fit the hand of the individual user. There can be no standard definition of a region, and there are no universal rules for recognizing, delimiting, and describing regions. Far too much time can be wasted in the trivial exercise of trying to draw lines around 'regions'."

A social scientist, of course, does not limit the question of the ‘nature’ of regions merely to the problems of classification or to the process of definition as such. A far more serious claim is that the ontological aspect implicit in all images of region inevitably forces us to trace abstractions which help us to trace the meanings, symbols and structures of regions – which are at times invisible - and finally, to make the regions to the objects of concrete research.

Aims of the presentation

My presentation discusses first briefly the evolution of regional geographical thinking and then goes on to reflect on regions as social constructs. The argument is that we can agree with the traditional notion of geographers that regions are in a way unique but we should not stop at this and take regions for granted. Instead we should search for a basis for comparison by developing abstractions that could
make the common elements of regions visible. The construction of regions and territories is part of the perpetual transformation of the spatial system, in which regions emerge, exist for some time and may finally disappear. My presentation will scrutinize this process, which I have labelled as the institutionalization of regions. This is a process through which a territorial unit becomes an established entity in the spatial structure and is then identified in political, economic, cultural and administrative institutionalized practices and social consciousness, and is continually reproduced in these social practices. I will argue that this conceptual perspective also makes it possible to understand how regional identities are constructed and how they manifest themselves in daily life and at the societal level.

Hence, I will at first approach these problems in a historical perspective and comprehend the history of geography as a many-sided, multilayered whole, where historical processes with various durations take place simultaneously. This approach is necessary since the debate on the future of regional geography or so-called new regional geography which has taken place since the 1980s, indicates, that the history of nature, social history, history of various institutional practices and individual histories all offer different frameworks of interpretation to regional researchers.

On the basis of my empirical studies on spatial experience I have argued that generation has been a neglected category in geography. This is also true as far as the ideas of region and regional geography are concerned, since these ideas mean different things for different generations. For geographers who studied geography during 1930-50s geography means in most cases descriptive regional geography. For those who have been deeply involved in the rise of scientist thinking and quantitative approaches, regional geography was hardly more than a harmful field, harmful, since it was 'just regional geography' that mediated the image of a naive, empiricists and descriptive discipline to outsiders. For this groups of geographers region was above all an instrument to classify data. Those approaching regional problems from the perspective of humanistic or critical geography had their own viewpoints, which criticized both naive regional description and positivistic approaches – of course both of them beginning from their own premises. But, all in all, these changing and developing viewpoints are of course a necessary phenomenon: in the case of regional geography they are an expression of creative tensions, which some scholars have called for geography.

Variations in the idea of region

Gilbert (1988) made in her much-cited review a distinction between three different approaches in 'new regional geography'. The first may be labelled as a 'materialist' one and it is connected with the spatial organization of social processes associated with a specific mode of production and which concentrate on the political-economic basis of regions and put stress on the role the logic of capital circulation within these processes. This interpretation was been common for geographers who have adopted a Marxist viewpoint, perhaps the most typical examples were some Massey’s publications from the late 1970s. The second starts from the region as a setting for social interaction and typically argues that this setting or medium plays a fundamental role in the production and reproduction of social relations. The representatives of this approach have been typically inspired in their efforts by ‘structuration theorists’ or have developed their ideas on this basis.

Both of these approaches emerge from the fact that space (as well as time), its symbolic and ideological dimensions and its material basis (nature, economy) are social and cultural constructs. Space and spatial patterns are not independent of social, cultural and natural processes but, as it has been strongly emphasized, space is not a causal power which would as such determine social processes, rather social (and cultural) and spatial are constituents and outcomes of each other.
The third approach to regions stresses culture as the prime point of departure, concentrating on problems such as regional identification and regional identities. Region is therefore understood primarily as a set of cultural relations between a specific group and a particular place; it is a people-bound category, thought not inevitably bound with individuals but rather connected with social communities.

While Gilbert’s typology has been an important source of inspiration for much of debates, it is of course possible to create more much detailed classifications of the concepts of regions that geographers have worked out in the course of years. In my earlier studies I have made a distinction between different concepts and sub-concepts of region which sums up some of previous ideas and also partly expands their field. These concepts may be loosely classified in three broader categories. In the first category, that is the prescientific concept of region, region is comprehended as a ‘taken for granted’ category, discipline centred interpretations start usually from the idea that region is a construction that is created by the researcher and which is used as a methodological tool and legitimation basis for the research, in order to classify or represent various phenomena. Critical interpretations start from individual and social practice and they aim at conceptualizing the construction of the spatiality of the world on this ground. I will briefly characterize the content of this typology.

Prescientific concept of region

- Region is understood mainly as a practical, unreflected choice of researcher, whether it is a village, commune, province or what ever pre-given spatial unit. Region is a frame for research but it has no specific intellectual role in the research setting. It is obvious that this idea of region has become more common along with the rise of applied research in universities when the representatives of various administrative units (communes, municipalities, provinces etc.) have subscribed projects from researchers.

Discipline centred interpretations

- Region as an object has been typical in Landscape or Landscaft geography. At its extreme regions have been regarded as ‘living’ organisms. It can be argued that so-called territorial, regionally tuned strategies in regional planning also at times include hints of this organismic way of thinking.
- Region as a picture of landscape (Landschaftsbild) has been typical in landscape studies.
- Region as an instrument of formal classification means that regions are used as methodical tools in classifying the phenomena of nature and culture. This procedure typically produces regional divisions which are based on one or more ‘traits’ of nature or culture.
- Region as an instrument of functional classification means that researchers use ‘regions’ in the description of the functional spatial structures of societies, mainly when shaping the territorial structure expressing centre-periphery relations.
- Region as a community points to vernacular spatial units, regions as such as people experience them. A much used example is Mid-West in United States.
- Region as a perceptual unit points to spatial units that researcher constructs on the basis of the perceptions of ‘test subjects’ (e.g. space preference studies).

Critical concepts of region
• Region as a *constituent of lifeworld* points to an humanistic interpretation which starts out from human experience and puts stress on the ‘insiders’ point of view. Humanistic geographers have tended to prefer the concept of ‘place’ when discussing the nature of human spatial experience.

• Region as a *manifestation of capital accumulation* is a marxist interpretation of region and it emphasizes the production of spatially uneven development without any prespecified regionalization of that space. So-called locality studies that emerged during the 1980s were partly emerging on this basis, partly expressing a more sensitive understanding of the fact that ‘geography matters’. Later a more culturally grounded perspective emerged and localities were understood as specific discursive formations.

• Region as a *setting for social practice* points to regions as a medium of social interaction (Thrift 1983).

• A very important idea in the mid-1980s was to understand region as *historically contingent process*, which means that regions are seen as dynamic categories which instead of ‘being’ are perpetually ‘becoming’ (Pred 1984).

• Taylor (1991) discussed *historical regions*, which means that region are seen as spatial units that have been produced socially and culturally to become part of the territorial system, they exist for some time in social and cultural practices and discourses and disappear in the continual regional transformation (Paasi 1986, Taylor 1991).

**Re-inventing the region**

Critical interpretations on region have been developed mainly since the 1980s and new interpretations seem to be under construction also now. Regions have become a particularly important topic in debates on the future of Europe since the 1990s. A number of geographers have also reflected on their general meaning in socio-cultural life and this interest seems to continue. Several authors have evaluated the meanings of regions both on a general level and in the context of concrete case studies. Recently many economic geographers have contributed on this topic when reflecting the possible forms of new regionalism. Allen Scott (1998) puts particular emphasis on ‘regions’ as the ‘fundamental building blocks or motors’ of the current economic life. He does not, however, define ‘region’ in any specific way but seems to understand it as a medium where social, particularly economic, processes occur. Michael Storper (1998) maps the position of regional economies in the globalizing world, but ‘region’ is also for him the context where social action and processes occur, not something that as such should be problematized.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the crucial question of what is a region - what makes it, and how ‘regions’ operate. It seem to be relative common to take the idea of the region for granted and then discuss the social processes occurring in these contexts, rather than theorizing these contexts themselves. It is also still quite common to understand regions as active ‘actors’ that are as such capable of doing or changing things. Regions are not, however, independent actors; they exist and ‘become’ in social practice and discourse. Allen et al. (1998) aptly note that regions are not ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered, rather ‘regions’ are our (and others) constructions.

The topics of authors writing on regions may vary from the questions of economy (knowledge economy, economic restructuring) to the questions of administration/ governance, from culture and identity to the roles of new institutions in regional development. One suggestion that can be made is that

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1 This section is based on my article “Europe as a social process and discourse: considerations of place, boundaries and identity” (European Urban and Regional Studies 8(1):7-28 (2001))
the region should not be regarded merely as a passive medium in which social action takes place. Neither should it be understood as an entity that operates autonomously above human beings. ‘Regions’ are part of this very action; they are social constructs that are created in political, economic, cultural and administrative practices and discourses. Further, regions may become crucial instruments of power that manifest themselves in shaping the spaces of governance, economy and culture.

While we can agree with the traditional argument that regions are sort of unique but we must not stop at this argument and take regions for granted. Rather we have to search for a basis for comparison by developing abstractions to make visible the common elements of regions. The construction of regions and territories is part of the perpetual transformation of the spatial system, in which regions emerge, exist for some time and may then disappear. I have labelled this process as the institutionalization of regions (Paasi, 1986, 1991). It is useful to distinguish analytically between four simultaneous aspects (in practice these elements are always different sides of the same process), the formation of (1) territorial, (2) symbolic and (3) institutional shapes of a region and (4) its establishment as an entity in the regional system and social consciousness of the society concerned. Through this process a territorial unit will gain an established position in the spatial structure and is then usually identified in political, economic, cultural and administrative institutionalized practices and social consciousness. I will briefly characterize below each of previous processes and will try to draw on broader discourses on boundaries, symbols and institutions.

Territorial shaping

It is obvious that ‘regions’ typically require some kind of boundaries - but these do not need to be exclusive physical lines as has typically been the case with state territories. Many European scholars currently evaluate the roles of boundaries at various spatial scales. Often this takes place more or less technically, and particularly at the scale of the state a lot of attention is paid to interaction, cross-border co-operation and integration. This implies that the boundary itself is a passive line while cross-border processes matter. This has been the major perspective that has characterized the tradition of political geography. I do not regard borders as fixed lines, but rather I will understand them as elements that arise out of processes in which territories and their contested meanings are socially and culturally constructed. This means that boundaries are not located merely on the border area but everywhere in a society, in diverging social practices and discourses. This also means that the scale of the state manifests itself on other scales as well.

State boundaries are typically strictly controlled and visualized but sub-state and supra-state boundaries may be less dominating. Boundedness may well be based on symbolic and cultural - even invisible - lines. While some authors are now ready to argue that boundaries are not important in making regions and that they are rather networks (Allen et al., 1998), this is hardly true if we understand regions as sources of meaning and identification. Many authors from different academic fields have emphasized the close links between boundaries and identity. None of them, however, argues that these boundaries should be totally exclusive.

Boundaries are of vital importance to all human processes, both at the individual and social level. Boundaries are not passive, ‘natural’ dividers between social entities. Individuals and communities use their qualities to create inclusions and exclusions, divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between those who belong and those who do not. People make themselves aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries, argues Cohen. This comment is not without its problems, since we can always ask who defines and what is [national] culture? Nevertheless the importance of symbolism finds expression in the fact that many authors have discussed the social construction of individual and community life.
Boundaries have a dual role: they work to establish insiders who belong to the place, and they establish outsiders, who do not belong. The division between the established and outsiders is a universal theme, since members of groups often think of themselves in human terms as better than others and, therefore, seem to establish boundaries between groups. International relations scholars have shown the meanings of boundaries in foreign policy rhetoric and in narratives of (national) identity. Boundaries should thus not be taken for granted, as self-evident constituents of a ‘territorial trap’. Neither should they be understood as having some universal, independent causal power. Rather they are social and political constructs which are established by human beings for human purposes and whose establishment is a manifestation of power and a social division of labour. Boundaries also mediate contacts between social groups, and not only separate them. All this means that while the disappearance of boundaries (and the state) is a popular theme in much current research, we can not ‘write’ boundaries away in our academic discourses as seems to be case in ultra neo-liberalist manifestos. What we can do is to re-conceptualize them to understand the functions and meanings they have played in the construction of ‘territorial traps’ at various spatial scales.

Symbolic shaping

Symbolic shaping is also crucial in the institutionalization of all regions. I have emphasized previously the meaning of naming as the process that enables the use of regions in political, academic or everyday discourses. Political elites everywhere put labels on concrete and symbolic ‘landscapes’ to divide and control space and people, and to signify territoriality. Symbolic shaping includes not only names but also many other elements. Coats of arms, flags, rituals such as parades, and so on are of crucial importance. Similarly songs, poems, novels and movies bring spatial symbolism as part of daily life, transforming this symbolism as an essential part of nationalism. Some of these symbolizations may be expressions of the territorialization of memory and the past, others may emerge from current life. In the contemporary world and in many European contexts various actors (mainly politicians and entrepreneurs) strive to create new symbolic meanings to localities and regions to promote their economic success and the supposed ‘difference’ is then transformed into a commodity in the tourist industry. ‘Culture’ is one of the keywords in this place promotion, where local resources and culture are transformed into a selective heritage.

Institutional shaping

Boundaries and symbols are important in making regions but what is also needed are institutions (political, economic, cultural) and even formal organizations (like administrative bodies) that are capable of maintaining and reproducing territoriality and inherent symbolism. Some institutions may have a long time-span (firms, educational bodies, administrative organizations, and the media). Some others may operate more on an ad hoc basis (cultural events). The depth of territoriality in the operation of these institutions may also vary. Some institutions are explicitly bound with maintaining territoriality (army, police, border guards), others do this mainly through the slow processes of spatial socialization (schools, media). Some institutions may promote culture, some the economy and still some others governance. Also various combinations exist; the promotion of economic life is currently effectively combined with cultural policy in many regions.

Regions may become established, i.e. they achieve a recognized position in the territorial structure and social consciousness. An established region is then identified in various spheres of social action and discourse both inside the region and outside, i.e. it has an identity. This requires (usually) strong media in the production and maintenance of territorial ‘order’ and meanings. In the case of states
establishment usually occurs when its sovereignty is recognized. Administrative regions, for their part, may gain formal status in the administrative territorial system. On the other hand, some regions may have a strong cultural position and identity in the spatial consciousness of citizens (and outsiders) even if they do not have any formal role in territorial administrative structures. It is nevertheless usual that regions must become established before they can become instruments in the struggle over social and economic power and resources, for instance in regional policy. In contemporary Europe deeply institutionalized regions with a strong ‘performance’ are significant, since many activities constituting regions are increasingly exposed to international competition over resources.

The institutionalization of a region usually means at the same time the de-institutionalization of the previous territorial order and regions. This may occur in the form of concrete territorial changes or symbolic ones. This has been visible in the recent transformations of the Eastern European space and its contested representations in relation to traditional Western European ones. De-institutionalization may be seen also in the fact that some regionalist movements and forms of activism have declined in Europe. The formation and dissolution of territories, and hence also the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of their boundaries, is taking place all the time and on all spatial scales, being just as observable at the local, regional or national level as it is on a broader scale. Further, these processes/scales are usually deeply intertwined.

An established region has usually an ‘identity’. Here I suggest that – to get more analytic power in the conceptualization of regional identities - it is useful to make an analytical distinction between the identity of a specific territory, and the regional identity of the inhabitants (i.e. regional consciousness). The former points to narratives, symbols and practices that are associated with a specific territory, whether depicting its nature, landscapes, history, or population. We can think that this is the ‘story’ of a region that is provided to citizens in the media and through education, for instance. It is an image of a community of ‘we’ that may be labeled as an ‘ideal’ or written identity. On the other side we have ‘factual’ identities that may manifest themselves in various ways in civil society. This is an expression of personal spatial experience or regional consciousness. This also can manifest itself in collective forms. A typical form is regional(ist) activism of certain actors. This activism, for its part, may of course produce visions of a (utopian) ‘ideal’ identity that manifest themselves in the media. Ideal identity is only one element in the complicated constellation of identifications that people may have, based on such elements as class, gender, generation, ethnic background or religion. Some of these identifications, for their part, may be associated with a specific territory, some with other territories, while some may be non-territorial. The key idea of nationalism as a major territorial ideology is to suppose a homology between these two identities, which means that national identity is often closely associated with boundaries and exclusion.

Conclusions

The aim of my lecture has been to analyse conceptually the development of regional thinking in geography and to reflect the spatial elements and links between identity narratives/narratives on region/territory that are produced and reproduced on various spatial scales. In the contemporary world the images of territorially closed identities are to an increasing degree being challenged by flows of people, goods and capital and by ‘hybrid identities’ that are based on sources other than strictly defined elements of identity, or identities that emerge on the basis of a territorially defined group, ‘we’. Refugees and displaced people everywhere are adding elements of their own to the existing cultural mixes. Furthermore, they can be networked to an increasing extent using modern technology, such as the Internet and e-mail.
These tendencies challenge by necessity our fixed images of regional or territorial identities. What are we discussing when we talk about regional identity? Is it the expression of a sincere reflection of regional history and memories or is it rather an explicit exclusive effort to construct boundaries between regions/groups of people and distinguish ‘us’ from ‘the Other’. Are we reflecting tradition and the past, or are we trying to find elements that can be employed actively in practices of exclusion to keep the Other away? These dimensions are probably two sides of the same coin, since inclusion means concomitantly exclusion. Thus we should always be cautious when discussing bounded cultures and identities.

These tendencies also challenge our geographical categories, such as territory, region and place, which have often been used to make spatial distinctions between social groupings. Doreen Massey uses the concept of place to include all spatial scales. Place may then be a local, regional, national or global category. She also aptly reminds us that the identities of places – on whatever scale - are never ‘pure’. This must be the case with national identities, too, even though the ‘purification of space’ through symbolic and physical violence appears to be a crucially important strategy in the construction of national identities and images of citizenship.

This certainly forces us to reflect as well on the connections between territory, political community and democracy. Although we can agree with recent comments on the perpetual power of the national state in a globalizing system of states, it is equally clear that future democratic societies – at least those that have been labelled as ‘cosmopolitan communities’ - will inevitably require increasing openness and ‘crossings’ of cultural, symbolic, legal and physical boundaries between states. In his humanistically oriented account, Entrikin argues that the moral significance of place becomes evident when places are conceived not as locations in space but rather as related to individual subjects. It is through the latter that place draws together the object realms of nature, society and culture. While place has been by tradition associated with the local and particular – a major assumption in the construction of the territorial trap - a serious challenge is posed to this idea, Entrikin argues, by the its understanding as a process mediating the particular and the universal. This requires that we as researchers should be ready to deconstruct the constitutive, at times mystified, elements of spatial identities and territoriality.