

# **A Sense of Place**

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### **REGIONAL IDENTITY – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:**

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### **Regional Identity – A Conceptual Framework**

The aim of this paper is to discuss a framework which facilitates an understanding of the nature of regions and their evolution as human and social institutions. Following the new cultural and social geography, the concept of region is decomposed analytically into pieces which characterize its historical and social nature from different perspectives. With the Finnish Geographer Anssi Paasi the point of departure is to conceptualize the region as an institutionally mediated sphere of society. The purpose is to begin from the relationship between the institutional sphere of society and the individuals, as this relationship forms the fundamental meeting place where society, social consciousness (and as a part of the latter, regional consciousness) are continually reproduced.

Structures of expectations – as the ways in which people organize their knowledge of the world and use it to generate interpretations and relationships with regard to new information and experiences – form an important category which facilitates comprehension of the role of regions in social classification and in classifications based on physical and cultural features of reality. An understanding of the perpetual reproduction of structures of expectations is a prerequisite for any analysis of the historical process that has produced the region and regional consciousness.

The acceptance of regions as historically continuous processes facilitates an understanding of a specific regional identity. The very concept of the development of the society and its spatial

structure, and in order to understand its different meanings, a processual perspective is again needed. Regional identity integrates the material phenomena of the regions with the ideas of the regional community formed by the inhabitants, the images of the region and the structures of expectations.

## 1. How Do Understand „Places“ and „Regions“?

### „Place“ and „Regions“ as Human and Social Categories

On the following the region is understood not as a pure concept which can be reduced to the ideas of individuals or as a purely technical category for classifications - neither is it understood as some kind of pre-given „container“ for social processes. Rather a region is comprehended as one expression of time-space specific relations and structures of society, being formed through the development of the society.

Space and its symbolic and ideological dimensions, as well as its material basis (nature, economic development ...), are essentially social categories, and thus essentially reflect the development of the society. Its organization, use and meanings are products of social translation, transformation and experience. With regard to the constitution of social life, „to be alive is to participate in the social production of space, to shape and be shaped by constantly evolving spatiality which constitutes social action and relationship“ (E. Soja).

The following distinction between the concepts of „region“ and „place“ is useful not only for understanding the role of institutional practices as mediators in the constitution of individual practices, society and time-space. Moreover, it offers one possibility for understanding the development and role of individual and collective spatial consciousness in societies.

For the present purposes it appears to be practicable to define the concept of „place“ as a phenomenon that is structured in the process of one’s everyday-life and hence is based on the day-to-day practices of individuals. It is a perpetual, personal interpretation of the meanings emerging from time-space specific situations in one’s everyday practices. However, this does not imply any restriction to the immediate environments of individuals. In everyday life different regions and localities may transform themselves to constitute a part of one’s place. The distinction of region and place is not based on the scale or areal extent of these spatial units, but instead on their relationship to one’s daily life.

The concept of „region“ is understood here (also) as an abstraction to be realized in the relation between individual action and social structure through the structuration process of the society. Instead of the man-centred category of place, a region is interpreted by Paasi as a category with an explicit collective dimension which represents institutional practices and the history of the region. A region is mediated in our everyday life in the form of various symbols, which are the same for all individuals in the one region – though the meanings associated with them will always be construed personally on the basis of the individual’s life situation and biography. As a fundamental basis for the emergence of regions, it is also important to note the variable, time-specific- role of physical conditions (geology, climatic conditions ...) and the spatial organization of production and the division of labour.

It is the „**place**“ where an individual reproduces his material and intellectual existence. This is structured through participation in social actions and in interaction with other people and institutions, and through the meanings given to these. The essence of place lies in a „sense of

place“, a feeling of belonging to one’s place. One’s place, therefore, ceases to exist when one dies.

The „**region**” is an institutional sphere of *longue durée* representing one specific dimension of the spatial structure of the society. Although a region is a contingent historical process within the society, just as it a place for an individual, the former, because of its institutional role in the society, manifests itself in a more permanent structure. The fundamental point is to comprehend the region as a process which, once established, is continually reproduced and gradually transformed in individual and institutional practices. When speaking about the regions of some specific society at some moment of time, the existence of a region always represents some specific cultural and historical phase in the development of the society.

## **2. The Emergence of Regions and the constitution of Regional Identity**

### **2.1 Institutionalization of Regions**

In order to understand the emergence and development of a region – as one expression of time-space specific relations and structures of society -, A. Paasi theoretically distinguishes different aspects of the historical formation of concrete regions in a society. Following him, the process of institutionalization of a region is logically (!) divided into four stages: 1. assumption of territorial shape, 2. development of conceptual (symbolic) shape, 3. development of the sphere of institutions, and 4. establishment as a part of the regional system and regional consciousness of a society. In reality, this division does not work similarly with all regions, and in practice the stages may be entirely or partly simultaneous, or they may be ordered in different ways.

As regards the individual actors and groups in a society, the emergence of a region can thus be looked on as a consequence of the goals established and the decisions reached by local or non-local power-holding individuals and/or coalitions of individuals operating in the context of the ongoing structuration process. In the course of the institutionalization process the region and regional consciousness will be continually reproduced in individual and institutional practices.

### **2.2 Structures of Expectations**

As far as the relationship between a region and its inhabitants and also outsiders is concerned, the concept of structures of expectations (which has been employed in linguistic and cultural research) appears to be significant for comprehending the emergence of a region and its regional identity. In general, this concepts depict the ways in which people organize their knowledge of the world and use it to generate interpretations and relationships with regard to new information and experiences. These structures are based on one’s experiences of the world in a given culture or combination of cultures.

In the present context, the concept of structures of expectations is employed as a scheme that is bounded by a specific region, being relatively permanent and mostly represented in the form of time-space specific, region bounded, institutionally embedded schemes of perception, conception and action. These structures refer to both the physical and the cultural character of a region and can comprise real, imagined or even mythical features.

In order to comprehend the emergence of a region and its regional identity, structures of expectation are crucial for several reasons. First, in the case of regions we can speak of a collective „spatial role“ which is expressed in these structures. This role is based on knowledge or beliefs concerning the historical and cultural features of a given region, which are gradually reproduced in society (by regional institutions, the education system etc.). Hence the collective, institutionally mediated roles expressed in the structures of expectations are essential as for the transformation of regions into places, centres of feeling of belonging to time-space specific, more or less abstract reference groups. Secondly, in the reproduction of the idea of a region the most significant tools will presumably be symbolic processes, expressing and portraying realities other than those of day-to-day local experience. Structures of expectations are essential for establishing the past and the future as a common frame of reference for the inhabitants of a region. A further meaning of the concept is, therefore, that it provides a conceptual basis for the historical analysis of the formation of the images of a region.

### 2.3 Stages in the Institutionalization of Regions

Starting out from these basic ideas and concepts, it is now possible to consider the stages in the institutionalization of regions in detail. As mentioned above, the first stage refers to the development of the social practices through which the region achieves its boundaries and will become **identified as a distinct unit** in the spatial structure of society. Boundaries of some kind as a basis for social classification are the fundamental requirement for the emergence of a regional consciousness among inhabitants. The space of a region can be fixed (e. g. administrative regions) or vague, so that the idea of a region, e.g. various elements in its structures of expectations (nature, culture, landscapes, stereotypes of the inhabitants ...) can predominate over its limits.

During the formation of the **conceptual shape of a region** certain structures of territorial symbols (one important is the name of the region) will become established. The emergence of the symbolic significance of regions, i. e. the formation and reproduction of structures of expectations, depends crucially on the communication – based relationship between institutional and individual practices. The formation of the conceptual and symbolic shape of a region canonizes an apparatus for distinguishing the region from all others, and constitutes the frame of reference in which the structures of expectations are grounded and by means of which they are reproduced.

The second and third stages are in reality simultaneous aspects of the same process, as the **emergence of institutions** is linked with the increasing employment of the name and other territorial symbols and signs of the region. The expansion of the number of institutions beginning to maintain the image of the region and the criteria for the identity among the inhabitants is hence of crucial importance for the reproduction of regional consciousness. The development of institutions refers here not only to formal establishment (e. g. mass media, regional literature, education) but also to local or non-local practices in the spheres of politics, economics, legislation and administration as a consequence of which the region attains a specific name, social organisations and institutions which are linked with it through their identification (territorial symbolism), function and/or areas of influence (market areas, for instance).

The fourth stage refers to any continuation of the institutionalization process after the region has achieved an **established** (not necessarily administrative) **status in the spatial structure of the society and its social consciousness**. At this juncture a region also has specific

structures of expectations which are constantly being reproduced by social institutions. This stage gives the region an identity which comprises not only a material basis (e. g. nature, landscapes, culture, economic system) but also a „mental sphere“, i. e. images which together establish the foundation for the structures of expectations.

### **3. A Framework for Conceptualizing „Regional Identity“**

The essence and history of a region is connected with the biographies of individuals through the agency of the sphere of institutions, which is reproduced in the everyday practices of individuals. „Regional identity“ is a theoretical category which as such is not of much obvious importance for one’s everyday life. The concept connects both the objective, material (nature, culture, economics) and subjective (individual/collective representations) dimensions of a region. It weaves together elements that are significant in the institutionalization of a region and which are represented in its structures of expectations. The latter, for their part, operate as a framework for social classification among the inhabitants and those living outside the region. However, it is useful to isolate some other dimensions from regional identity as well, and the framework presented here is an attempt to conceptualize some of these.

The fundamental distinction is between the „identity of the region“ and the „regional identity of its inhabitants“.

#### **3.1 Regional Identity of Inhabitants**

The regional identity of inhabitants or the regional consciousness may be further divided into the „identification with the regional group or community“, and the „role of a region in the hierarchy of regional consciousness“, i. e. the identification with a specific region. The former refers to those inhabitants of a region who have a more or less clear opinion of their „own“ regional group in which they feel that they belong.

Identification with a community can be further divided into two levels, namely „factual“ and „ideal“ identification. The former points to actual (usually face-to-face) relationships between individuals, which are connected with a region in some manner (participation in regional associations, or actions in which a region is present in the form of a non-problematic „common“ cultural basis for acting involving people having the same structures of expectations regarding the structure of space-time). „Ideal identification“ refers to the „picture“ of identification communicated by and represented in the institutional practices of the region and society (for instance in regional news papers or in the political sphere). The shape of an abstract „we-feeling“ is certainly essential with regard to the socialization and reproduction of consciousness, but it does not tell us in any way how individuals really identify themselves with others living in a region that is held by public opinion to form a community.

#### **3.2 Identity image of a Region**

The „identity of a region“ can be divided into „subjective“ images which can also be apprehended as being part of regional consciousness and more „objective“ scientific classifications based on physical environment, culture, landscape etc. Regions in different divisions are in certain respects “objective”, if they have been made up by objective criteria, and the single regions in such divisions can be understood as having an identity of their own

which distinguishes them from others. The „subjective“ identity of a region refers to images held by the inhabitants and those living outside the region.

Images make up one part of the dynamic process of continuity that is the region. Images portray a physical and social reality which is normally mainly beyond one's local day-to-day life, and it is these and the facts, stereotypes and myths in them that constitute the spatial basis for our view of the world. It is evident, therefore, that both inner and outer images of regions offer a significant medium for social control and manipulation.

The role of outer and inner images is different in social practice. The outer image of a region is its „poster“ in social consciousness and can be manipulated by the institutional sphere. As far as tourism is concerned, for instance, certain features of the structures of expectations can be emphasized more than some others to form a portrayal of a given region which is as exciting as possible. However, the most essential features of the structures of expectations are usually quite permanent, inasmuch as the history of the region has an essential role in them.

The inner image of a region comprises the idea of demarcation of the inhabitants and other features of the region from others. Inner images are in the first place instruments for the territorial classification of the features of socio-spatial reality. This involves explicitly a consciousness of the spatial character of „our“ region, and what factors it is based on.

### **3.3 Spatial Images („Raumbilder“)**

In order to understand the region's role – as both a natural and social produced phenomenon – in the process of forming a feeling of belonging and togetherness, the German sociologist Detlev Ipsen identifies specific regional phenomena which are processed in the individual perception. Following his conceptualization, three qualities of a region are preconditions of identifying with a place which is transformed in a regional context: 1. the contour, 2. the complexity and 3. the coherence of a region. The „contour“ establish a demarcation between inside and outside through regional characteristics, a typical way of life, a shared language etc. „Complexity“ describes the number and quality of so-called „special places“ (i. e. natural environment, landscapes, historic centres, spectacular architecture etc.) and „own places“ where the social, communicative actions of different milieus take place. „Coherence“ means the fund of common ground which shows a region as an entity and establish a regional cohesion and solidarity.

Contour, complexity and coherence of a region are used in the individual perception to make a mental product which constitutes the anchor for regional consciousness in the end. This „**spatial image**“ (Raumbild) includes the interaction of different regional qualities and is the product of their perception at the same time. It describes the cultural biased view on structural facts and integrates the symbolics of space and the varying related emotional and expressive meanings. A spatial image is formed 1. on the basis of an existing macro concept of development which leave its spatial marks, 2. through the valuation of its relevant spatial manifestation in the region, and 3. through the perception of space and its symbolization.

## **4. Epilogue: Working on and with Regional Identity**

One aim of this paper was to conceptualize the process which produces and reproduces regions and regional consciousness as special reflections of social space. The historically continuous institutionalization of a region is a process during which some specific level of the

spatial structure becomes an established entity which is identified in different spheres of social action and consciousness and which is continually reproduced in individual and institutional practices (e. g. economic, political, legal, cultural, educational etc.) The meanings of the concept „regional identity“ (regional communities, regional consciousness and images of regions) were also discussed as an expression of the dimensions of an institutionalized region.

On the one hand, regional identity formation is a varied process of territorial, symbolic and institutional shaping and these different stages of the institutionalization process are open to political interventions to some extent. The symbols of a region, for instance, may be symbols by their nature, like a name or a logo. They can also be material, like buildings or monuments, landscapes and landmarks or infrastructure or human, like politicians. They can be specific actions and celebrations ... With regard to the development of the sphere of institutions, education (in geography and history in particular) supplied by schools is an important factor of intervention. The emergence of organizations and associations which make use of the territorial symbols of the region in their names and actions can be supported ...

On the other hand, an established regional identity based on common social space and local culture forms structures of expectations, which are a collective mobilizing force and a tool for planning. In a way, planning has shifted from a technical exercise to „invention“ of new social structures and consensus building (communicative, participatory and/or collaborative planning). In order to reach a mutual understanding of the goals of regional development and the solutions of the problems, interest in public participation is necessary from both the authorities and the regional inhabitants. Here the strength of regional identity is critical as a basis for more active participation and sustainable civic development. At the same time, involvement of the public in the development planning process may strengthen regional consciousness.

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