
Commentary

Regions are social constructs, but who or what ‘constructs’ them? Agency in question

Introduction

Raymond Williams (1976) showed in his *Keywords* how words that are crucial for understanding society and culture are incessantly loaded with new meanings. This reflects wider transformations in society. As if to confirm this, he revised the book only seven years later and added twenty-one new entries. Academic disciplines are also characterized by keywords that are crucial for understanding transformation and progress in their fields. Keywords express various degrees of abstraction and challenge scholars to contest existing views and to develop new ones.

In geography, keywords reflect wider transformations related to philosophies, concepts of space, science/state/society relations, ideologies, and interests of knowledge. I have suggested—referring back to the seminal idea of Williams (1977) on three forms of culture—that it is helpful to distinguish between *emergent*, *dominant*, and *residual* categories when tracing the genealogy of spatial keywords (Paasi, forthcoming). Academic practice and discourse—in which individual and institutional motives related to disciplines, universities, assessment cultures, and wider science policies become fused—are ceaselessly giving rise to words and conceptualizations that may become dominant keywords. Simultaneously some keywords are becoming residual, perhaps to become dominant again later [consider, for example, the changing roles of *territory* or *scale* (Elden, 2010; Mackinnon, 2010)].

This commentary will concentrate on *region*, a keyword that has dominated geographical discourse ever since the field became institutionalized. While region has been declared at times to be irrelevant for our purported modern society or geography’s theoretical cutting edge, it perpetually pops up like a conceptual jack-in-the-box. Its persistence has been witnessed again in this and other journals as scholars have reflected on the scales of region, how regions are performed, the relation of open versus bounded regions to the relevant politics/policies of space, the conflation of the incongruous geographies of different kinds of regionality into a generic concept of ‘region’, and the significance of regions for food systems or political ecology (Donaldson, 2006; Jones, 2009; Kneafsey, 2010; Neumann, 2009; Paasi, 2009a; 2009b; Painter, 2008).

Why should we return yet again to the question of region? Methodological problems still exist regarding how *region* is understood, and these problems are related to a more general issue of how new keywords often begin to ‘act’ so that, instead of motivating further theorization/conceptualization, they become ordering frameworks that are taken as given (cf Sayer, 1992). My example here is the idea of ‘region as a social construct’, which is nowadays almost axiomatic. Yet it is often unclear who or what it is that ‘constructs’ a region or what this means in practice. Does it refer to the *process* of constructing or to the *products* of such construction? (cf Hacking, 1999). In social theory the basic prototype of social action includes four elements: actor, means, purpose, and context (Heiskala, 2000). More recently the idea of action/actors has been expanded. I will look at this idea here through the prism of ‘region’.

What are ‘regions as social constructs’?

Ian Hacking (1999, page 21) distinguishes three things that are said to be socially constructed: *objects*, *ideas*, and ‘*elevator words*’ (eg truth, facts, reality) that are used in a philosophical sense to ‘raise the level of discourse’. All these are related to the

everlasting methodological debates on whether a region is a 'really existing thing' or an 'idea', and what can be said about it. This divide is no longer particularly relevant, since the 'existence' of regions is now related to the chiasm of social practice and discourse. Yet, in order to problematize the issue, I will look at how regions are 'constructed' in research and in relation to wider social practice.

A region exists in geographical research in three modalities (Paasi, 2002). The most common approach, though not the oldest one, is to take the region as a given (statistical, administrative) unit that provides a spatial frame for the phenomena or processes that are to be scrutinized or compared. While such units will also have been constructed for some purpose, the region plays second fiddle in this kind of research. This view has emerged along with applied research, but it is not uncommon even in most sophisticated accounts in economic geography (eg Scott, 1998). Such views will probably gain in strength due to the increasing demands for applied research and due to institutional arrangements such as the Europe of regions or the statistical areas (NUTS-regions) that are used to 'harmonize' European space. They also tend to harmonize spatial thinking, making this spatial matrix in a way into an actor that starts to guide the research.

The second, older approach is to see a region as a construct, the end product of a research process. The search for formal/homogeneous ('natural' or 'geographical') regions was a standard practice in traditional regional geography. The regions constructed by scholars were represented as bounded, contiguous entities in divisions of larger units into regions. 'Perceptual regions' were another example. Both bear witness to a 'bordering' process carried out by the researcher. Bioregionalism also includes hints of such thinking when establishing contiguous, mappable geographical regions defined in biophysical terms (Frenkel, 1994).

The third modality relates regions to social practices/discourses: that is, regions condition and are conditioned by politics, culture, economics, governance, and power relations. Such views vary from Marxist to phenomenological, from structuration theoretical to relational. In Marxist accounts the key agency in the construction of regions is the accumulation of capital, which is related to uneven capitalist development. Doreen Massey (1978), for example, suggested that the analysis of uneven development should not start from any prespecified regionalization of a space but rather it is the accumulation from which geographical analysis must produce the concepts in the terms of the spatial division of labour. Social constructionists often criticize *essentialism* in their accounts. Essentialism suggests that complex realities of any sort are ultimately reducible to simpler, *essential*, realities. Essentialism also reduces "an open-ended multiplicity of determinants to one or a few fundamental causes" (Graham, 1990, page 54). Julie Graham (1990) observes how generalizing accounts drawing on macrolevel social explanations often contain an essentialist element when accentuating such core elements as capital accumulation, capitalist relations within production, the class struggle, production, or profitability.

If the circuits of capital accumulation were the macrolevel agent in the construction of regions, phenomenological accounts of place provided by humanistic geographers would constitute the other extreme. Edward Relph (1976) argued that the basic meaning of place (*essence*) does not come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the communities that occupies them, and nor from superficial and mundane experiences. The 'essence of place' lies in the "largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence" (page 43). The key agency involved in the construction of place is thus human intentionality [for a critique of place as an 'unquestioned given' and the phenomenological idea of *region*, see Pickles (1985)].

Hacking (1999, page 17) states that essentialism is often used “as a slur word, intended to put down the opposition.” In geography, too, a number of scholars have suggested that a region/place does not have any ‘essence’ or essential identity. Yet, while certain essentialist ideas often prevail in city/region branding and tourist brochures, it is difficult to find such ideas in serious theoretical debates later than the 1970s–1980s. Hence such criticism clearly relates to the old geographical practice of constructing bounded formal regions in the course of the research process, an idea that has been largely rejected in theoretical debates. Perhaps the idea of a bioregion is an example of ‘mild’ essentialism, similar to the ‘cultural regions’ that perpetually exist in geographical textbooks. The current literature (especially in economic geography) more often displays examples of spatial fetishism (how regions do things, ‘learn’, ‘compete’, etc) that imply a certain essentialism in their fetishized views on agency. Much of this fetishist language is probably unintentional and related to an incautious use of language rather than to a real belief that ‘regions’ do things.

Scholars accentuating *practice* and power relations developed new views on region in the 1980s. It was individual and institutional practices/discourses that mediated agency and social structures. A region was an “actively passive meeting place of social structure and human agency” which is “lived through, not in” (Thrift, 1983), a historically contingent process (Pred, 1984), or a historical process of institutionalization where certain territorial, symbolic, and institutional shapes emerge in a division of labour (Paasi, 1986). It is not ‘constructed’ by scholars, but they can trace the contested construction process and the roles of actors/social relations through which regions become, transform, and achieve meanings. The agency and power relations involved in the construction of a region extend both inside and outside the regional *process*. The assumption regarding the homogeneity of regions is of course irrelevant for this view, yet such ideas are often implicit in regional marketing and identity narratives. Actors such as politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers, and voluntary associations were seen to be crucial in the process of articulating meanings related to regions.

Relational thinkers also suggested later that region is not a given entity but rather a “product of a particular combination and articulation of social relations stretched over space” (Allen et al, 1998, page 143). Allen et al see regions as material, discursive, and historical constructs. They suggest that there is no ‘essential’ region that exists in its real authenticity waiting to be discovered by researchers, but rather there are multiple ways of seeing regions that exist only in relation to particular criteria. Correspondingly, since there was no such given region as the *south-east*, the area they were studying in the UK, they had to *construct* it as part of their research. This approach represents a stronger constructivism than earlier views and accentuates not only the agency of social relations but also, again, the agency of scholars in the ‘construction’ of regions.

The above brief excursion demonstrates a few things. Firstly, there are many views on the agency related to the construction of regions because this complex *process* evades accounts that focus only on *certain* elements, often due to the premises behind such accounts. Secondly, a spatial entity *becomes* a region in a plethora of practices, discourses, relations, and connections that can have wider origins in space and time but are assembled and connected in historically contingent ways in cultural, economic, and political contexts and struggles. Thirdly, regions are performed and made meaningful, just as they are also distinguished from each other, in material and discursive practices and networks that cross borders and scales, often simultaneously giving expression or shape to such borders and scales. As social institutions and symbols, borders may ultimately become ‘actors’ in guiding political activity (or research work!) and in reproducing sociospatial distinctions and Othering. Fourthly, region building

may be an intentional project for some actors, while for others it is something to oppose or something that is not at all meaningful. Fifthly, regions differ from each other in terms of history: there are 'old' historical *processes* and 'new' ad hoc units. The latter are becoming increasingly typical of the EU (eg cross-border regions) and often remain distant from people's daily lives (Paasi, 2009a). Sixthly, borders should not be understood as factors defining regions, even though this is often implicit when regions are taken for granted.

Region as an assemblage

Allen et al (1998, page 50) suggest that a region is "the product of the networks, interactions, juxtapositions and articulations of the myriad of connections through which all social phenomena are lived out." Such 'border and scale-crossing' complexity becomes clear when John Allen and Allan Cochrane (2007) look at regional assemblages, politics, and power in the context of governance. Even so, their idea of a region as a relational assemblage can be pushed further to take a broader look at the complexity of actors involved in region building.

A 'region' is normally in a state of becoming, assembling, connecting up, centring, and distributing all kind of things. Yet it has not been always there: it has been constructed and will probably eventually disappear. Material culture, things or *stuff* (Miller, 2010), symbols, people, and institutions thus participate in various ways in the making of regions. Whether or not they recognize it, numerous actors participate in this construction together with and in relation to a number of other actors. A region *becomes* in material and symbolic processes related to nature and landscapes. While there is no reason to accord a privileged position to any particular social process, economic processes and the capacities and interventions of the state provide crucial material and institutional prerequisites for cultural and political processes and governance that in turn are substantial in the construction and reproduction of regions. Regions and their contested meanings are constructed across scales in a spatial division of labour by people representing social classes, all ages, all states of health, gender, and a diversity of ethnic, national, and regional backgrounds. They produce and reproduce regions in their homes and households, factories and offices, building sites, streets and shops, and in their leisure-time activities in 'nature', in pubs, or at sport events, theatres, carnivals, etc, where intentional and nonintentional actions, emotions, and passions come together.

As for wider networks of things and actions, regions are performed by politicians and journalists, newspapers, and other media. They are constructed in contested material and symbolic cultural practices such as regional naming and the choice of other symbols; they come into being in stories, novels, songs, poems, films, and other artefacts that give rise to social classifications, stereotyping, and distinctions. Regions 'act' in regional dialects and in the collective memories selected for museums, exhibitions, and archives. Entrepreneurs and business coalitions often exploit regional distinctions for marketing and sales purposes but also for attracting capital and employees. Regions are produced and reproduced by patients, social workers, nurses, and doctors in regional medical centres, by teachers in kindergartens, schools, and universities, by actors and sites of local, regional, and state governance. A region 'becomes' through infrastructures, systems of transport, and all forms of mobility in which things and people interact, in a spatial metabolism in which trains, trucks, buses, and cars act as intermediaries. Regions also gain their shapes in networks of communication, computers, the Internet, and mobile phones.

This by no means exhaustive, but rather a heuristic list shows the *fragmented* complexity of agency and the multitude of actors related to region building, and reminds us that much of this ‘regional work’ is related to mundane practices and networks rather than to explicit ‘construction’. It is also important to realize the agency of academic scholars in creating a conceptual and empirical shape to such a process [cf Allen et al’s (1998) ‘construction’ of the south-east].

While regions may or may not be important in people’s daily lives, they are produced and reproduced by daily actions as part of a wider process of social reproduction. We can distinguish *analytically* between ‘soft region work’ (institutional advocacy), as carried out by journalists, entrepreneurs, or teachers, and ‘hard region work’ (systematic activism), as carried out, for example, by (ethno)regionalists. The former is based on a division of labour, and the individual advocates can change while the advocacy itself continues. The soft work is often more influential than the hard work, because it is reproduced through innumerable institutions. Both forms of agency (that can also become fused) are crucial in performing the region, and in narrating where it comes from, who are the ‘we’ in the region, or what is its future.

Region building brings together various forms of power, varying from coercive to immanent, from power that bounds spaces to power that opens them up. While some practices (such as media discourses) both open and close spaces, the action of activists—individuals and social movements—often leans on territorial distinctions, regionalism, and ‘identities’. When a region becomes an established part of a wider regional system, this transformation and dynamic constellation of networks often achieves a sort of immanent capacity for reproducing itself. Contrary to the reified spatial fetishist ideas that see a region as a unit capable of acting (‘competing’, ‘learning’, etc), such a capacity means that a complex set of practices, discourses, and competences related to social positions, expectations, motivations and advantages will emerge during the institutionalization process. This complex ‘action’ is crucial for performing and reproducing the territorial, symbolic, and institutional shapes of the region and narratives on regional identity, but also for challenging these. We should perhaps be thinking in terms of: a region = a network = an actor “that is *made* to act by many others” (Latour, 2005, page 46), where those ‘others’ lie ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the perpetually reassembling socio-spatial process that we label as the region. Abstractions such as structures of feeling (Williams, 1977), structured coherence (Harvey, 1985), or structures of expectations (Paasi, 1986) have been used to shape the sociocultural ‘glue’ that hold together regional spaces that are ceaselessly being transformed in reflexive and practical action.

One special profession or group of advocates who are faced with the fragmented complexity of regions today are planners. Current planning theory accentuates relational perspectives (Haughton et al, 2010; Healey, 2007). Yet regions and their boundaries are also partly constructed in planning discourses. Interviews that I have conducted with planners in nineteen Finnish provinces show that some of them suffer anxiety because they see borders as severely restricting their strategic work towards shaping futures for regions in a world where not only economic processes but also planning and development practices cross scales and borders. For many others, however, ‘boundedness’ is not a problem that cannot be solved:

“I think that such border gazing is primitive thinking nowadays, even though there is much such thinking and borders are raised—partly with good reason and partly because of tradition—as obstacles to governance and all cooperation. But...now that we have instruments for communication, a cooperative culture and its possibilities, a border is merely a line on the map. If there is a will for cooperation, experience has shown that the means can also be found and cooperation can be carried out. Thus a border is not an absolute bugbear that stifles all cooperation in its starting blocks.”

As for the challenges raised by borders in the study of regions, one planner hit the nail on the head when suggesting that “borders exist only because they show power” (cf Paasi, 2009b). The key questions therefore remain to be resolved through abstractions and concrete research: who or what ‘constructs’ regions and borders, and how, through what associations/networks, and for what purposes? The answers are, without doubt, contextual.

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