

From bounded spaces to relational social constructs: conceptualization of the region in geography

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From the outside, it must sometimes seem very odd to see the ways in which academics and theorists scrabble around trying to understand words that most of us use most of the time without worrying too much about their meaning. And region is one of those words. Surely we all know what a region is when we use the term in everyday conversation. Yet, for very good reasons, debates around the ways in which the regional should be defined and mobilised conceptually have been among the most heated in contemporary human geography. (Cochrane 2018)

Introduction

It has been something of a paradox that during the last few decades the region, a notion that was predicted to vanish along with the rise of 'dynamic modernity' in societies, has re-emerged in both academic debates and wider social practices (cf. Keating 2017, Paasi 2009, Paasi and Metzger 2017). The 1990s in particular witnessed a renaissance in regional thinking. There were several factors that contributed to/led to this phenomenon. National states were facing worldwide neo-liberal globalization, increasing economic competition, the rise of the knowledge-economy and demands for policies focusing on regional scale (Storper 1997, Scott 1998, Le Gales and Lequesne 1998, Dunning 2002). Separatist tendencies generated a wider search for regional identities and spurred claims

for political autonomy in regions (Augustjein and Storm 2012). At the same time, social and regional interests became fragmented and 'stretched' across spatial scales. In many states a devolution of power to regional and local institutions took place. Efforts to cut costs and make services more 'effective' led to mergers of regions at different scales. At the same time, city-regions were identified as critical in development policies, and networks of global cities were recognized as key attributes describing the spatialities of the globalizing world (Knox and Taylor 1995). Cross-border regions, for their part, were seen as tools to lower the barriers of interaction between states (Perkman and Sum 2002). Such ideas resonated with Ohmae's (1995) notion of the 'borderless world', which was based on the idea that borders and nation-states would gradually lose their power and that cross-border regions would eventually become critical in the globalizing economy (Paasi 2019).

Region has been the most important category in geographical research since the institutionalization of geography as an academic discipline. It was crucial when geographers were developing the early disciplinary identity of the subject and provided an elementary methodology for the discipline into the 1950s and 1960s. Despite being partly overshadowed by the ostensibly more general concepts of space and place since the 1960s (Paasi 2011, Agnew 2018, Entrikin 2018), it has stubbornly upheld its position among the core categories of geography. This has been partly based on the fact that the world is evermore often perceived and categorized through overlapping regional types, such as supra-state regions (EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, etc.), governmental sub-areas of such macro-regions (e.g. the 'Europe of regions' in the EU) and 'unusual', 'non-standard' cross-border regions (Deas and Lord 2006). The rise of such regionalizations has been paralleled by a tendency to contemplate in terms of connections, interactions and networks, which has challenged the region- and state-centric views of the world.

The 1980s was a particularly important period for regional geographers since they advanced both conceptually and methodologically in the study of regions and developed a new approach that drew on social theory, that is, 'new regional geography' (Thrift 1983, Gilbert 1988). Since the 1990s region has become an increasingly important category not only in geography but also in other fields such as archaeology, history, political science and international relations (IR) studies. At the same time, a relational perspective on region emerged in geographical thinking which questioned the self-evidence of bounded spaces and suggested that all borders have to be seen as porous and what matters are connections, interactions and networks (Massey 1995, Allen et al. 1998, Amin 2004, Paasi 2010). Just recently, scholars have called for the development of a 'new new regional geography', which would focus on the 'chiasmatic' relation between territorial (bounded) and relational (networked) approaches instead of treating these two methodologies as separate (Jones 2018).

This chapter will assess the factors that underlie the resurgence of the region in geography and in wider social practices such as politics and governance, which are critical social contexts for the allure of regions. It also traces the transformation of regions from static entities to more flexible abstractions that allow regions to be interpreted as relational social constructs made by individual and collective actors in a socio-spatial division of labor and through institutional practices in domains such as politics, economy and state policies.

The following sections will focus on a number of specific perspectives that have been used to approach/study regions. The first section will map critical questions that geographers have presented regarding regions and will then discuss the shifting understanding of region in geographic thinking. The next sections will examine how regions are reified and at times fetishized in social and linguistic practice and how regions are continually made and presented as meaningful entities. The ensuing section problematizes in more detail

why a wide-scale reemergence of the region has occurred. Then, the institutionalization of regions is scrutinized from two perspectives, i.e. how 'old' and 'new' regions come into being. The concluding section makes a plea for more consolidating approaches in regional research that could provide constructive alternatives to the current fragmentation of regional studies.

Critical questions for the geographical debates on regions

Consolidation of the research on regions entails that we can diagnose the problems that thwart the development of the study studies of and debates on regions. Critical geographers relentlessly underscore that regions should not – neither as academic categories nor as categories related to the concrete empirical 'realities' of states (and supra-state systems) – be taken for granted. Yet, many scholars do so in their research practices, particularly when they take regions as given governmental/administrative entities or as simple 'containers' for statistical information. Another major question is how to imagine and conceptualize the never-ending regional transformation of the global system of spatialities and how to avoid falling prey to the ostensible fixity of regional constellations that consist of regions, territories and borders at and across various spatial scales. One more equally critical elementary question is how should we fathom social constructionism/constructivism in the case of regions, that is, what does it mean that regions are increasingly acknowledged as 'social constructs'? This label is widely used but rarely critically evaluated (Hacking 1999). These rather wide questions raise more specific queries:

- How to conceptualize region and the processual view on the institutionalization of regions, as well as the relations of regions to spatial scales?
- What kind of agencies and forms of power are involved in the making of regions?

- How to problematize the role of agency (1) in the slow institutionalization/de-institutionalization processes of regions or, alternatively, (2) in the often rapid ad hoc construction of non-standard regions (e.g. cross-border regions) that is particularly common today?
- Can we regard regions as 'subjects' rather than objects without falling into spatial fetishism?
- To what degree are regions material and/or discursive formations and how does this impact how we conceptualize regions?
- What is the practical and ideological role of cartographical techniques and maps in making and representing regions and in creating imaginations related to regional worlds (maps bring together the past, present and future, see Wood 1992)

There are undoubtedly diverse answers to these questions, reflecting different views on regions and varying ontological and epistemological perspectives. For example, many critical scholars see regions as historically contingent institutionalized structures (Pred 1984), or sometimes as processes that are constituted by and constitutive of social processes (in the spheres of economy, politics, culture) that 'stretch' a region across local, national and supra-national scales and borders (Paasi 1991). Scholars following post-structuralist approaches, for their part, have suggested that regions should be considered as assemblages that are always 'becoming', not just being, and that both regions and their borders are expressions of networks (Murdoch 2006). A pragmatist scholar would probably be happy to start from given statistical units, such as the European Union's NUTS regions, and understand these as meaningful entities needed in practice-oriented research.

Geographers today conceptualize regions characteristically as 'social constructs' that are crafted for specific purposes at various scales and note that this act of making often reflects power relations that may stretch across borders (Murphy 1991, Paasi 2010, Paasi

and Metzger 2017). Social construction/ism can refer to the processes of 'region-building', to the 'products' of such processes, or to both. Such products, whether they are sub-state, state-level or supra-state regions, are materially and discursively rooted, and are always provisional solutions that will become de-institutionalized/re-institutionalized at some stage of the continual regional transformation.

The construction of regions brings together various modalities of power that may vary from external and coercive to inherent and entrenched, from powers that border and fix regions to powers that unlock and link them to wider spatialities. When a region becomes as an established part of a wide-ranging regional system, this transformation, together with the existing dynamic assemblage of political, economic, cultural and administrative networks branded 'region', 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, and thus, for example, proficient to 'compete' or 'learn', such a capacity means in practice that a multifaceted set of practices, discourses, and competences related to spatial divisions of labor and to social positions, expectations, motivations and advantages will arise in the institutionalization process of the region. This complex 'action' is critical for performing and reproducing the territorial, symbolic, and institutional shapes of the region and narratives on regional identity, but also for challenging these. In Latourian language we could perhaps regard a region as a network and an actor 'that is made to act by many others' (Latour, 2005, 46), where such 'others' exist both 'inside' and 'outside' of the recurrently reconstructing socio-spatial process that we label as the region (Paasi and Metzger 2017).

While every academic discipline has keywords that are critical in the evaluation of the progress and reproduction of the field, the issue of the nature of key categories is

particularly characteristic in social sciences that study 'open systems', contrary to the 'closed systems' ('natural' or experimental) of natural sciences. One of the main reasons for the openness of social systems is the fact, Sayer (1992, p.123) argues, that we can interpret the same material conditions and statements in different ways and thus learn new ways of responding, so that 'effectively we become different kinds of people'.

Paradoxically, Sayer continues, 'it is because most systems are open and many relations contingent, that we can intervene in the world and create closed (non-human) systems. At the most, social systems can be only quasi-closed, producing regularities that are only approximately and spatially and temporarily restricted'. Sayer's observations powerfully highlight the importance of context and this also holds true in the case of the concept of region, a point made by both geographers and IR scholars.

The region in geographical thinking: a brief historical review

Region has been the major keyword of geographical thinking, methodology and research practice practically since the institutionalization of geography as an academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century. Even before formal institutionalization, region had been a keyword for early 'geographical' research (Paasi 2011). The concepts associated with this word have varied dramatically over time. There has been no lack of due effort among geographers to define what the region is, a point made by Allan Cochrane in the epigraph above. An exploratory study charting the changing connotations of the notion of region identified no less than twelve concepts that geographers have set forth since the institutionalization of the discipline (Paasi 1996a). Most of these have gradually lost their significance and new terms have supplanted them. Since the 1990s, novel concepts have emerged related to the upsurge of relational thinking (Allen et al. 1998). 'Relational region' can perhaps be seen as the thirteenth concept with the most recent efforts to find a

balance between territorial and relational approaches as the fourteenth (Jones and Paasi 2015).

If it has been customary for geographers to understand regions as social constructs and historically contingent processes, they are not alone in this line of thinking; in political science and IR studies as well constructionist outlooks have been important complements to the traditional realist understanding that often sees space and borders as a fixed and stable categories. A good example of constructionism is the notion of regionness which Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) proposed as part of New Regionalism Theory. This notion highlights historical and contextual approaches and differentiates five key constituents of regions: regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community and regional-state. While a certain evolutionary logic is embedded in these components, they argue that there is nothing deterministic about with the rise of regionness.

Geographers' conceptualizations can be categorized under three main labels that only partially reflect the 'evolution' of regional thinking in geography from one connotation to the next. Oftentimes these conceptualizations have existed in parallel, sometimes in competition, and in that respect illustrate the academic struggle over symbolic capital among geographers. The first approach (label) is to see the region as a 'taken-for-granted' or 'pre-scientific' category. As the label suggests, in this view region is not an intellectual problem for scholars but rather a practical commonplace. This approach has become ever more significant since the 1990s in social sciences and other fields, especially in applied research. It has become widespread particularly in the context of territorial governance and related research. An important contributing factor in Europe, for example, was the establishment of the EU's statistical NUTS system which has brought all European Union states under the same regional-scalar-statistical umbrella. Statistical regions are often seen as appropriate frameworks in research and therefore taken as given by academics.

Likewise, the social and political problems and power relations rooted in region formation are frequently ignored or not seen as an intellectual problem – hence the label pre-scientific.

Under the second label are discipline-centric interpretations that reverberate with the evolution of geographical thinking as well as with the progress of research methods and techniques. In geography this perspective has provided, until the 1970s, the most productive categories for reproducing and developing the ideas of region, and for justifying geography's disciplinary identity. Within the third main category are 'critical' interpretations that vary from humanistic to Marxist approaches, from constructionist to post-structuralist and beyond, thus emphasizing agency, social relations, emotions and affects, as well as the scalar dimensions embedded in region-building processes.

This ceaseless fabrication of new approaches and concepts has led to the fragmentation of regional thinking, which in turn has spurred a call for consolidating regional approaches (Paasi, Harrison and Jones 2018). The conceptual lexicon that geographers link with the word region has been constantly expanding and the idea of region is related to a dizzying number of societal and academic propensities that vary from different interests of knowledge (technical, hermeneutic, emancipatory) and philosophical and methodological frameworks, to wider intellectual and structural connections, tendencies and events (Paasi 2011). These have set the backdrop for the rise of three strata that can be labelled as 1) regional geographies; 2) spatial analysis; and 3) space, regional and social practices that are linked in various ways with societal and academic developments. The first stratum refers to the heyday of regional geography which continued until the 1960s. It was common for the early representatives of institutionalized geography to search for formal regions (referred to as natural and later geographical regions) on various grounds and ultimately put them onto maps as part of wider divisions of regions. Distinguishing and

isolating such regions from each other by defining their borders was crucial in research practices. Regions were hence products of the research process whether they were seen as 'really existing entities' or 'mental devices' needed in classification. Both normally resulted in maps representing regions at various spatial scales.

The second stratum refers to positivist approaches to region that accentuated modelling and spatial classification. These approaches were related to the rise of regional science and the quantitative revolution that necessitated a furious search for abstract spatial patterns and forms. In such spatial separatism, regions and spatial patterns were treated as logical, geometric realities, underlying and to some degree separate from the contextual meanings of social life.

The third stratum stands for approaches that draw on social theory. These approaches display how a new generation of geographers, since the 1980s and 1990s, connected regions to contested social practices and discourses. From this angle, regions are social constructs that are produced and reproduced by social actors. The socio-spatial division of labor in societies means that the production and reproduction of the region and, for instance, the invention of identity narratives related to the region and its citizens is a specific 'job' for particular actors, especially academics, politicians, civil servants, journalists, and marketing people operating at and across various scales. Their key mission is to contribute to region-building and to make regions meaningful.

The history of geography thus displays an almost uninterrupted tendency to invent new spatial keywords but the logic of this 'evolution' has also involved ruptures and struggles, typically reflecting wider societal tendencies, such as uneven development, emerging new divisions of labor, struggles over identity and even wars and conflicts (Paasi 2011; Paasi and Metzger 2017). If the primary question has traditionally been 'what is the region', today, more often than not, geographers seek to understand what the region does and

how and why the region is made (or mobilized) to do something – questions that are valid at and across various spatial scales (cf. Paasi and Metzger 2017). Hence, both questions about agency and the tasks of social science in general become critical.

Reifying and making regions visible and meaningful

There are hence numerous social actors and institutions in society that both produce and reproduce reifications of abstract concepts of space. Such reified language characterizes both the sophisticated discourses of regional thinking as well as concrete regional planning and development practices, for example. Indeed, it was long commonplace to see as geography's basic task the production of such reifications, and this activity is still part of geographical research practice. In the worst case this has led to a mystification of the roles of the region (Jones and Paasi 2015, Paasi and Metzger 2017).

Regions and territories do not arise *in vacuo* but are the result of various forms of agency, struggles and power relations occurring at and across various scales. Agency is certainly not a neutral category in this context. As Edward Soja (1989:6) has stated, 'We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology'. It is common to see in academic literature – not to speak of media or political and policy texts – that regional entities are uncritically represented as subjects that can act, do things and negotiate. Such imaginary is also deeply rooted in ordinary language, and is also often mobilized in narrating regional, national or supranational identities in fetishized ways. Anthropomorphic language and terminologies are mobilized at various spatial scales in social action, particularly in politics, economy, culture and even sports life ('the US did this and that', 'Germany beat Sweden', etc.). It is beneficial to humbly recognize that the act of conceptualization frequently involves some form of fetishism. Humans seemingly must and

do 'fetishize' incessantly to be able to get some manageable 'grips' on a relationally complex world of open or semi-bounded systems. Questions that need to be asked concern therefore the situated consequences of assuming specific ways of figuring out and labeling the various aspects of the (regional) world (Paasi and Metzger 2007).

In the context of geography spatial fetishism has typically referred to a situation in which the relations between social groups or classes are understood as relations between areas, as regions or sections of space would be related, for instance, so that dominant regions would exploit subjugated regions or that such spatial relations would determine a given social structure (Anderson 1973, Urry 1985). Gregory (1978:121) talked about this phenomenon using the phrase 'fetishism of area', by which he referred to the view of a geographical region as a specific entity that can interact with other regions as if the regions were a world apart from the society that they encompass. Spatial fetishism thus refers to a tendency to give an independent role to space and to see it as a causal force in the organization of social relations and meaning.

Spatial fetishism displays itself in many ways, from simple core–periphery-related political rhetoric, for example, to views on spatial entities or units as fixed, stable, bounded and unchanging – a feature frequently associated with the concepts of space, territory and region not only in geography but also in IR studies (Walker 1993, Agnew 1994, 2018). Urban sociologist Brenner (2004:38), for example, characterizes spatial fetishism as non-historical in that it entails a conception of social space 'that is timeless and static, and thus immune to the possibility of historical change'. Sometimes fetishized spatial entities are deeply naturalized as if they were everlasting units, like in the case of state territories. People are socialized as members of such bounded territories and because such spaces appear as being produced naturally rather than historically, they serve to connect the biographies of people in distinct territories and also cut relations across them (Watts

1999). In strategic regional planning, for its part, it is typical to represent regions as actors capable of learning, making decisions, struggling with each other, and promoting themselves (Paasi and Metzger 2017). In the media, regions, nations and cities are often depicted as participants in struggles that take place in economic and cultural activities. Regional actors continually aim to convert regions into packages that can be promoted as appealing products to individuals, families or businesses, which are seduced to the regions as workers, employees, or tourists.

It is beneficial to note three analytically related elements in the rise of fetishism. First, 'fetishizers', that is, actors and institutions that are involved in fetishizing space. Second, the practice and discourses wherein the production and reproduction of fetishized ideas takes place. Societies typically host a plentitude of intertwined institutions in which such practice occurs, for example, national and regional media, institutions related to education, planning, or governance, and – as the case of geography displays, at times the thinking mobilized in academic fields. And third, the language of fetishism, in which space/region can be represented as a causal power and space and spatial identities as fixed and stable.

Much of this personification occurs in the form of symbolism, metaphors and allegories that are used in region-building and nation-building processes (Paasi 1996b). Metaphors are particularly significant in the practice of spatial fetishism. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have suggested that the most productive ontological metaphors are those in which a physical object is suggested as being a 'person'. A fitting example is the personification of the region/territory, that is, interpreting such units as if they were 'persons' with an individuality and capacity to act and make decisions. This has been a prominent way of thinking in the tradition of regional geography, but ideas of specific 'national characters', for example, are still are still notable features of national consciousness, which also reveals such collectivized ideas. The personification of physical and social entities is of

course characteristic of human discourse. A step further in such personification, however, is to raise regions or territories as subjects capable of action and even cognition (Gilbert 1989), as actors able to 'act'. Such underlying fetishism lurks in the debates that trace the evolution of regions from objects to subjects (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). This often gives rise to an anthropomorphic language that is used in both everyday ordinary language and sophisticated academic discourses. The use of metaphors and the personification of the region are good examples of the ideological roles hidden in language (Paasi 1996b). Consequently, it is critical to pay attention to how certain ways of producing and signifying the regional world and regional words become hegemonic and how they are justified, naturalized and normalized in specific contexts (Jones and Paasi 2015).

As cartographic representations of regions, maps have played a decisive role in making (and maintaining) regions 'visible', giving them a past, present and future, and in creating the image of regions as 'actors' (Wood 1992). This is obvious on the state level but also emerges in the case of supra-state 'meta-geographies'. Lewis and Wigen (1997) define meta-geography as a set of largely taken-for-granted spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world. Meta-geographic imaginaries are powerful ideological instruments in the development and manipulation of geographic worldviews. Such meta-geographies, especially of bounded spaces and related dividing lines and borders, have been significant in geopolitics, geography and international relations. Geopoliticians perpetually shape nationalistically rooted representations of the world's major regions and their borderlines, as well as of the power relations, bringing regions together or separating them. Textbooks, atlases and maps used in geography education ('spatial socialization') have been mobilized to reproduce cartographic images, regional divisions, and borderlines based on selected natural and cultural 'traits'. They have been critical in creating ideas of separate, bounded cultures, thus overlooking the elementary

observation made by anthropologists already a century ago: 'culture' is always based on social interaction, circulation and loans. This is important to note also today when territorial conflicts, genocides, and xenophobic attitudes and measures towards immigration persist and are perpetually featured in initiatives to 'purify spaces' (Sibley 1995).

With this in mind, it is fairly staggering that geographers seldom questioned global cultural dividing lines and bounded cultural spaces before relational thinkers brought the issue of the porousness of borders onto the agenda (Massey 1995, Paasi 2013). Ó Tuathail (1996), for example, while making thoughtful remarks on Samuel Huntington's (1996) much-criticized proposition on the 'clash of civilizations' and on separate cultures divided by 'fault lines', failed to point out that geographers have played a conspicuous part in shaping such cartographic and fault lines since the institutionalization of the subject and recycled them in educating generations of geographers and other citizens into the world of bordering, stereotypes and Othering. While spatial imaginaries can be mobilized towards progressive goals, regressive ones, such as images of threat or enemies, 'Othering' and building insides and outsides or geographies of exclusion, often dominate (Walker 1993, Paasi 1996b).

Therefore, it is important to scrutinize contextually how spatiality is made socially meaningful in governance and in social identities, and respectively, to pay attention to spatial socialization – the process in which individual actors and collectivities are socialized as members of territorially bounded spatial entities through which they internalize collective identities and adopt shared traditions, memories and other elements of spatial imaginaries (Paasi 1996b). This puts particular emphasis on the roles and functions of borders, another elusive and much studied category since the 1990s. Spatial socialization helps to understand how the regionalization of a state and the related production and reproduction of regions, territorial symbolisms and borders come about.

This idea is particularly significant in times and spaces where the images of threat and enemies are produced and mobilized to maintain social cohesion or aggressions.

However, these ideas also work for the processes of regionalization that occur on wider spatial scales, for instance, the scale of Europe or other supra-state regionalizations.

Why do regional concepts transform?

What are the motives behind the perpetual transformation of regional concepts? There are certainly both individual and structural reasons. Individual motives are often related to promoting one's academic career and the accumulation of symbolic capital in academia. Structural reasons are related to the operations and evaluation systems of the academic world but also to wider social factors, for example, globalization, as was noted in the introduction. Multifarious processes related to this complex transformation have not only manifested in the domain of (global) economy but have also had a critical impact on the rescaling and stretching of state spaces, the (re-)organization of regional governance at and across spatial scales, and the rise of geo-economics in tandem with geopolitics (cf. Brenner 2004, Smith and Cowen 2009, Moisiu and Paasi 2013). Intensified globalization, especially after the collapse of the divide between the capitalist West and the communist East, contributed to the transformation of the existing regional patterns of socio-economic and cultural life. It also boosted the rise of multiple regionalisms that were mobilized to revive or create wholly new forms of economic, cultural, political and security-related activities and even identities. Critical analysts of globalization have recognized the need to analyze social processes delinked from national spaces and to develop global social theories that do not take globalization for granted and that transcend the distinction between the international and the domestic (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). New regionalisms have varied from claims about regional competitiveness to investigations of sub-state or cross-border ethno-regionalisms of various independence movements, and to

economic and security-related supra-state alliances of states. Regions and regionalisms are often contested in this vein of research. Keating (2017) suggests that region must always be seen as a result of political contestation over the definition and meanings of the spatial entity in question. This is most obvious, he argues, in cases where regions as tools for state policy are in tension with regions as a form of territorial autonomy. Respectively, 'regions are arenas for playing out some of the most important political issues such as the balance between economic competition and social solidarity' (Keating 2017, p. 16).

Globalization and the neo-liberalization of the world economy and governance have also challenged the idea of fixed scales which is perpetually rooted in socio-spatial practices and social consciousness (think, for example, of the simple scalar logic used as a 'self-evident' basis for Eurobarometer surveys). Criticism and calls to politicize taken-for-granted spatial entities – regions and scales – have emerged in both geography and IR studies (Paasi 2009, Agnew 2018, de Oliveira 2017). At the same time, new regionalist claims about competitiveness, and for the related need for learning, innovativeness, sustainability and resilience, have manifested themselves in the transformation of the region-related lexicon. Hence, expressions such as learning region, innovative region, sustainable region, and resilient region – recycled especially in economic geography – have become part and parcel of the terminology of regional studies. Paasi, Harrison and Jones (2018) recognized no less than 150 concepts related to new regional forms, new processes of regionalism and new types of region, illustrating the present state of research on regions/regionalism.

The difference between economic and political arguments for regionalism was at the core of the new regionalist debates in economic geography (Paasi, Harrison and Jones 2018). The economic reasoning leaned on theories of agglomeration that were used to explain why regions were evolving as competitive entities within globally-oriented reflexive

capitalism (Storper 1997). Information sharing and networking were seen to be replacing market-based competition. 'Regions' were regarded as the proper scale at which this should occur. The political argument, for its part, focused on an understanding that a retreat or hollowing-out of the nation-state was taking place, with power diffusing upwards through processes of internationalization, downwards through a revival in regional/local identities, and outwards through globalization and market forces questioning the very world of bounded regional spaces (Paasi, Harrison and Jones 2018).

Whereas (economic) geographers typically recognize the region as a sub-state category (whether as a region per se, city-region or network of city-regions, etc.) in the context of new regionalism, the spatial referents of IR scholars are typically macro-regional – normally supra-state entities. Söderbaum (2003: 6) makes a distinction between micro-, meso- and macro-regions. Micro-regions are sub-state or cross-border regions (the latter cross the borderlines between domestic and international), meso-regions are mid-range state or non-state arrangements/processes, and macro-regions are wider world-regions. IR scholars also investigate spatial forms of governance and the roles of civil society in shaping and building large-scale regional governance structures in a globalizing world (Söderbaum 2003, Fiamonti 2014). For Von Hlatky (2013, p. 285), regionalism means cooperation between regional partners through the creation of multilateral regional institutions. Regionalization for her is a product of bottom-up sociopolitical processes which are tied with the notions of identity. In political practice, regionalization is often seen as a strategy of the state to delegate specific state functions and institutions to sub-state regions. Katzenstein (2005) argues in his *A world of regions* that globalization and internationalization create open or porous regions. This relational perspective seems to prevail also in the theoretical debates on regions and on the regional system itself.

Globalization and accompanying claims about increasing economic competitiveness have also given rise to a number of new categories and spatial frameworks. Megaregion, resonating with new regionalist tendencies, is one such example (Ross 2009).

Megaregions have a relational tuning and mesh with the fact that the contemporary world harbors about 300 city-regions with populations exceeding one million and at least 20 city-regions with populations of ten million or more. Megaregion is the name given to one or a grouping of several urban areas that are linked by social, economic, demographic, environmental, and cultural ties. Such entities are formed into networks so that actors can make infrastructure and planning decisions. By definition they are 'networks of metropolitan centers and their surrounding areas' (Ross 2009:1). Megaregions are seen by many scholars today as 'the underlying driving forces of the world-economy' (p. 6).

Harrison and Hoyler (2015: 4) have argued that 'megaregions are the latest episode in the long-running political-economic drama that is the search for a post-national spatial/scalar fix for globalized capital accumulation and organizing (inter)national space economies'. At the same time these scholars are ambivalent about the over-determined use of this idea and suggest that the concept itself should be critically scrutinized rather than being accepted as a taken-for-granted self-explanatory category.

Institutionalization of regional spaces: actors, elements, paths

We saw above how regional thinking is continually probing into new arenas, a fact that is also evident in the expansion of the regional terminology noted above (Paasi et al. 2018). This raises an exciting question regarding the current debates on relational spaces with open/porous borders. Borders of regions should not be seen simply as neutral lines separating regional spaces but rather as spatio-temporal processes that can simultaneously be open and closed, depending on which social and political practices and discourses we are looking at; hence borders can be seen as 'penumbral' in that they only

exist in certain light (Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016). Borders are processes, symbols and ideologically laden entities that can in principle be located 'everywhere' (Paasi 2019). This should not be taken literally, since borders are of course located at specific strategic sites: they are lines between discernable spatial entities whether regions, states, supra-state regional constellations, etc. But borders – as symbols, ideologies and institutions – are also elsewhere: in cities, airports, shopping centers, exhibitions, museums, nationalist and other political performances, as well as at times inscribed into human bodies as biometric indicators.

'Region-building' processes are hence based on multifaceted material and discursive practices. In this chapter I have preferred the phrase 'institutionalization of regions' over the rather mechanistic-technical expression 'region-building'. Institutionalization brings together the physical and cognitive elements (constructivism and constructionism) of various social practices and discourses. It is beneficial to distinguish some key abstractions in the process of institutionalization: (1) territorial shaping (implies borders, often taken for granted in geography and IR), (2) symbolic shaping (naming, symbolism, narratives, identity discourses, memory, past), (3) institutional shape (politics, economy, culture, stabilizing institutions like education) and (4) establishment. These 'stages' do not follow each other in neat order but their roles can vary in specific regions (Paasi 1991). Each stage and their relations should be analyzed empirically. An institutionalized region can attain an established position in the regional system but can also become de-institutionalized in regional transformation, typically by fracturing into new regional entities or by integrating into larger units through mergers. Economic, political and cultural relations and practices have a critical role in the institutionalization or de-institutionalization process. Institutional claims on and calls for regions and regional identity are produced and reproduced in a spatial division of labor. This This suggests the importance of

interrogating the actors that contribute to the production and reproduction of regions and identities. Two kinds of actors are of particular importance: advocates and activists (Paasi 2010).

Advocates – individuals and the institutions they represent – are pivotal actors in the ‘soft region work’ and their power stems from their institutionalized positions, which have endurance. Even if individual actors change, such advocacy will normally be continued by others in the division of labor. Advocates operate typically in regional governance and media; they may be planners who are involved in the complex, often normative matrix of information flows, expectations, demands and claims put forward by local, regional, national or supranational governments. They may be media persons or school teachers, whose institutional roles are critical in spatial socialization, in making bounded regional and state spaces meaningful (Paasi 2010). Activists, for their part, participate in an active and often contentious struggle over specific politico-cultural and economic meanings and goals, which they conceive of and define as ‘regional’. In this sense they move a step further than institutional advocates and are thus engaged in ‘hard region work’. Regionalist and separatist political movements, for example, are often led by prominent or charismatic activists, who indulge in publicity and who participate in public debates to promote their aims.

Both forms of agency are pivotal for making claims about what a specific region is, where it comes from, who are the ‘we’ (and the ‘them’) in the region as well as what the prospective future of the region is. It appears that some advocates can simultaneously be activists as well. This is often the case with journalists or regional leaders. In spite of the fact that ‘hard region work’ may make more noise in publicity, soft work is often more influential because it occurs silently through the already established institutions such as media, education system or governance (Paasi 2010). It is thus constitutive of the sort of temporary ‘unity’

that has been variously labelled in academic literature as structures of feeling (Williams 1961), structured coherence (Harvey 1985) or structures of expectations (Paasi 1991). By accentuating the links between culture, politics and economics, these terms indicate the socio-cultural 'cement' that constitutes and holds together the contested material and ideological basis of regional spaces.

A region is made, or constructed, by social actors but not as they will. Institutionalization always occurs within the wider socio-spatial division of labor. From this perspective, regions are historically contingent processes that materialize through social practices and discourses. An established region often obscures its origin because institutional practices are regimented across diverging tracks and timescales. Respectively, institutionalization is characterized by substantial institutional complexity and sub-processes. Tracing such processes inevitably necessitates a geohistorical approach in research (Paasi 2010).

The archetypical institutionalization process is thus best exemplified in old established regions that are the result of long historical trajectories. Contrary to long historical institutionalization processes, the new regions that are increasingly common around the globe (e.g. cross-border regions, soft planning regions, etc.) are usually constructed on an ad hoc basis for specific purposes that vary from regional development to the pursuit of development funds. New regions are usually based on short-term decision making and are often temporary 'project regions'. Yet they consist of key elements similar to those of old historical regions: they need a territorial shape, symbolism and institutions. The need to make new regions is often instigated by political needs/necessities and discourses created by the advocates and activists about the anticipated region and its potential impacts. In the next stage such imaginations typically result in persuasive cartographic representations/maps and may eventually lead to collective social action. New regions come into being through the processes of regionalization, such as the formation of city

regions and regional development corridors. Soft regions outlined in strategic planning are also fitting examples (Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016). As in old regions, the protagonists of new regions may proclaim a name for the new entity and initiate institutions and some sort of bordering process. As with old regions, the construction of new regions exposes political struggles over power, forms of governance, and potential economic benefits. The institutionalization of both old and new regions are contested processes.

Reification is a common strategy in region- and nation-building processes and occurs at various scales but seems to be particularly common in the case of newly invented regions that do not have a major historical trajectory behind them (e.g. European cross-border regions or supra-state regions). Kupchan (1997:211) suggests that 'conceiving of a certain group of states as a region can be a necessary precondition for inducing them to behave as if they belong to that region and thus enabling them to share the associated benefits'. In a specific sense, he argues, 'structure shapes agency' and further: 'A region is conceived of, then it comes to exist'.

Discussion

This chapter has examined the conceptualizations of region in geography and demonstrates that this term has had a number of historically contingent meanings and usages in the field. Regions have persistent relevance and allure for both academics and policy practitioners. The notion is an extremely flexible, malleable, and mutable object of analysis

Part of the complexity of this notion stems from the fact that academic fields are presently fragmenting into coalitions of subdisciplines and sub-subdisciplines (Billig 2013). In geography an almost endless invention of new regional words and concepts has occurred since World War II and such invention is only accelerating today. At times such progress is

certainly both intellectually and societally beneficial, particularly if the academic community recognizes that a discipline has reached a conceptual cul-de-sac or that the existing concepts do not encourage the development of novel approaches and innovative topics. Fragmentation, however, may lead to disintegration of academic fields and may necessitate more consolidated approaches in regional research. The never-ending pursuit of new regional theories, concepts and words should not be the key motivation of research. Instead, academic fields should be reimagined in ways which motivate the conceptual work that helps to expose the real tendencies of the transforming world and the changing geographies of regions and territories.

To respond to such fragmentation, Paasi et al. (2018:13–18) contend that there is a pressing need for consolidating regional thinking and that this is required both in the case of regional theories, that is in integrating economic, political, historical, institutional processes/drivers of regional change and development, and in the analysis of the exchange and relations between geopolitics and geo-economics. Such consolidation is also needed in the case of variegated regionalisms. The authors suggest that the different regionalisms should be brought into a more effective and fruitful dialogue. This may require new approaches, vocabularies, and frameworks that render possible new perspectives on comparative regionalism (Paasi et al. 2018). There is a need for consolidating regional worlds and words, since all too often regional words and concepts are taken for granted (Jones and Paasi 2015). Consolidating regional geographies also entails discussion and negotiation between researchers working with different methodological apparatuses in different academic fields.

Researchers studying how regional transformation has been understood in IR have likewise suggested that this field should be advanced to new directions. Von Hlatky (2013) distinguishes two scenarios that could be pursued. Some scholars suggests that there is a

need for analytical eclecticism. This is 'an intellectual stance that supports efforts to complement, engage, and selectively utilize theoretical constructs embedded in contending research traditions to build complex arguments that bear on substantive problems of interest to both scholars and practitioners' (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 411).

For others, the solution is context-sensitivity: new analytical frameworks need to be tailored to specific contexts. This resonates closely with present geographical deliberations, especially those emerging from social constructionist thinking. Both approaches may also be useful when geographers and IR scholars seek to map possible common academic terrains and landscapes.

One more important issue is the link between theory and practice: What do we do with regions and when and where do we need to animate them? The ultimate question is, Paasi and Metzger (2017) suggest, what value does it add to see something, or rather – treat it – specifically as a 'region'?

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