Guest Editorial: Regional World(s): Advancing the Geography of Regions

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Guest Editorial: Regional World(s): Advancing the Geography of Regions

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INTRODUCTION

But what, after all, is ‘the regional’? A region can be as large as the European peninsula. Within the political enterprise that is the European Union, however, regions subdivide a continent already sliced up into nation-states – and even then what counts as a region is far from certain. According to the latest Map of European Regions, a region might be an abstract geographical area like ‘Mid East Ireland’; a subnational cultural and political unit like Bavaria; or a national but substate territory like Scotland or Wales. England appears to present a different problem altogether: the Assembly of European Regions divides it into some eighty-seven portions, including counties, parts of counties, and metropolitan authorities. Things are hardly more clear at the level of literary history, where ‘region’ is used to describe something as diverse as multilingual and multi-national literatures of the Caribbean archipelago and as specific at 1960s ‘Liverpool Scene’ poetry. If we are truly to grasp the implications of regionalism as a thematic and generic trend in English fiction of the interwar years, then we must first be clear about the protean nature of this thing called a region.

(HART, 2009, p. 89)

Matthew Hart is neither a geographer, nor a spatial planner, political scientist or sociologist. He is a scholar of English and comparative literature, from the United Kingdom (currently based in North America) and, as the above quotation indicates, somewhat fascinated (and confused) by the variable, changeable, mutable, adjustable, fluctuating, erratic and somewhat inconsistent use of the word ‘region’, such that ‘region’ means so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. Hart goes on to discuss different interpretations of the region in English fiction of the interwar years. Authors such as George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Winifred Holtby are briefly examined and their use of spatial metaphors and regional deployments are unpicked. HART (2009) draws particular attention to a tension between ‘exceptionality’ and ‘typicality’ running through these established writings – an observation that, of course, has run through geographical analysis and regional studies for the last century (AGNEW, 2013; HARRISON, 2013; THOMAS et al., 2013). Regions, for Hart, are ‘points of difference’ and their ‘being’ is thus linked to processes of nation-state formation, international and transnational movements. Hart, then, is depicting a territorial and relational world, one that can be read in and through literature (HART, 2013).

THE RESURGENCE OF REGIONS

Hart is definitely not alone in his search for the meanings of regions in literature. Indeed, ‘literary regionalism’ has a long and diverse tradition around the world (cf. GILBERT, 1951; PRYSE, 2004; PRESCOTT, 2011). Yet, it is a sort of a paradox how not only the region or regionalism, but also regional borders and identities rapidly have become important keywords in social science since the 1990s. And this occurred not only in academic discourse, but also in governance, planning and politics, at and across various spatial scales of the international geopolitical and economic landscape (PAASI, 2009; MOISIO and PAASI, 2013). Regions became important elements in making sense of the rapid transformation and rescaling of state spaces in this landscape (cf. JESSOP et al., 2008). Debates and practices related to multilevel governance in the ‘Europe of the Regions’ industry are fitting illustrations of these developments (STUBBS, 2005), but sub-state, supra-state, and cross-border regions and regionalisms have become topical around the world: from Europe (KEATING, 1998) to Latin America (RIGGIROZZI and TUSSIE, 2012), from East Asia (BEESON, 2007) to Africa (GRANT and SODERBAUM, 2004). Some key tendencies can be identified behind these developments (JONES et al., 2008). These include, for example:

- Accelerating globalization of economy, culture and ‘consciousness’ after the collapse of the Cold War...
divide between the capitalist and socialist worlds (Keating, 1998; Agnew, 2013).

- New regionalist claims for competitiveness, social cohesion and identity in promoting regional development (for example, Bristow, 2010; Paasi, 2012a; Thomas et al., 2013).

- Reorganization of regional governance around the world, especially through devolution and/or mergers (for example, Harrison 2013; Riggirozzi and Tussie, 2012; Jones and Macleod, 2004).

- Regionalization and region-building processes at and across various spatial scales, often progressing from abstract discourses to concrete plans, maps and ultimately political and governmental action. Often such processes cross the existing state borders (for example, Baltic Sea or Barents region) (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; García-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaria, 2013; Rutherford and Holmes, 2013; Zimmerbauer, 2013).

- Region/place marketing, promotion and ‘branding’ (Pike, 2011).

Inside academia and the ‘intellectual industry’, regions have gained currency not only in geography, but also in international relations, political science, history, and cultural and literary studies (Paasi, 2009). Regional worlds certainly exist, yet at the same time ‘region’ remains a vague category, set within a deep geographical lineage, interpreted and understood in many ways (Hart, 2009). Scale also matters. If the region is for geographers archetypally a sub-state unit, among international relations scholars it refers rather to the supra-state institutional arrangements (Hettne et al., 1999; Beeson, 2007) of economies and governance (for example, the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR)). Cross-border regions, for their part, have become important for economists, geographers and political scientists (Rutherford and Holmes, 2013; Zimmerbauer, 2013). We therefore continue to live in interesting times and regional studies remain important around the world.

A resurgence of the region has thus occurred in both academic research and practical politics and governance. This has been a sort of contradiction, since the demise of the region – as well as community, culture or locality – that should follow from the deepening modernity and consolidating state-centric spatiality, has been predicted since the nineteenth century (Watner, 2010). While regionalism has emerged around the world, this has not occurred similarly everywhere. Neither are the meanings of regional concepts singular in various contexts. Both these facts are clearly displayed by this international collection of papers.

In Europe regionalism and integration have been typically generated by the states and the European Union, whereas in Asia integration has been driven by markets than by governments. Cooperation among national authorities is a more recent phenomenon (cf. Beeson 2007). The following papers show that in some contexts (for example, in Finland) the interest and emphasis on regions and ‘regionality’ reflects the endurance of a long, gradually transforming tradition where regions or regional borders do not matter significantly even if both can be mobilized in the service of tourism or regional planning activities (for instance, Paasi, 2012a). Contrary to this, in some other contexts (for example, Spain or South Africa) emphasis on regions is often tied to ethno-cultural identities and ideologies. The resurgence of regions and regional borders is thus related to politics. Respectively, the meanings associated with regions and regional borders matter and are often contested (García-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaria, 2013; Ramutsindela, 2013).

The interpretations of the concept of region have also altered perpetually. Traditional views of regions as bounded, homogeneous units have been mostly rejected and new conceptual alternatives developed accordingly. If the 1980s witnessed the rise of social constructionist views accentuating the role of human agency in regional construction, the 1990s witnessed new relational tunes in the deliberations on regions. After the turn of the millennium, new keywords such as ‘competitiveness’, ‘resilience’ or ‘assemblage’ have been deployed, often in a relational spirit, to broaden the regional concept (Pike, 2007; Paasi, 2010). The region thus seems continually to reanimate the understanding of the spatialities of contemporary societies. Simultaneously, new conceptual interpretations also have emerged that bring together several spatial dimensions (Jessop et al., 2008).

Relational thinking suggests that regions should be seen as non-bounded in the current mobile, globalizing world. Relational approaches have a long history in social sciences. In geography relational views on the region were firstly proposed by economic geographers, but this idea soon extended to cultural and political geography (Jones, 2009). Such thinking is attractive also in planning circles (Haughton et al., 2010). In terms of politics, seeing regions as bounded is labelled then as ‘regressive’, while seeing them as open is ‘progressive’ (following the work of Massey, 1994; see also Jones and Woods, 2013). Accordingly, regions are seen to ‘stretch’ in space so that their social contents and relations are networked across borders and this networking indeed constitutes both regions and their borders – regional boundaries and identities need not be exclusive (Thomas et al., 2013; Rutherford and Holmes, 2013; Varró and Lagedijk, 2013).

In spite of these dynamic and progressive ideas, in some contexts the importance of regions and boundaries as catalysts for regionalist movements and
for planning strategies is nevertheless obvious (Jones and MacLeod, 2004; Garcia-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaria, 2013; Ramutsindela, 2013). This is evident in the case of many ethno-territorial groups around the world, but identity narratives produced and reproduced, for example, by regional activists, media and governmental bodies, are also typical examples of this politics of distinction, often mobilized in the name of ‘strategic essentialism’ (cf. Spivak, 1987). The next step has been a search for a balance between the relational and territorial approaches, and the papers in the special issue contribute to this terrain. McCann and Ward (2010) (cf. Paasi, 2012b) have noted how regional policy-making (and regional borders) has to be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. Jonas (2012) suggested, in turn, that the distinction between territorial and relational can be ‘registered obsolete’ if critical attention is paid to matters of territory and the nature of territorial politics, both of which are products of bounded and unbounded forces. This special issue offers further insights on all this.

AIMS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The key motive of this Regional Studies special issue is to push the debate and empirical research further. The Guest Editors are very interested in the evolution of the conceptualizations and practical uses of the idea of ‘region’. Hence, both the intellectual and the practical development of regional studies is a priority and there is a deep trajectory of scholarship on which to build. Respectively the papers in this issue aim at advancing the theoretical and empirical understanding of regions by stressing, firstly, the complex forms of agency/advocacy that are always involved in the production and reproduction of both regional spaces and spaces of regionalism (and the meanings attached to them); and secondly, by stressing the importance of geohistory and context in making sense of both ‘regional worlds’ and the words used contextually to interpret them. The last, but not least, aim of this issue is to take the debate on regions and regional borders beyond the territorial/relational divide that has characterized debates since the 1990s (cf. Paasi, 2012b). The argument here is that this requires the fusion of conceptual work and contextual, geohistorical concrete study. Ontologically tuned either/or debates, so common in the past, are clearly a dead end for regional studies.

The majority of the papers published in this issue were presented, through two paper sessions, at the 2008 Association of American Geographers Conference, held in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The key idea behind these sessions, and a panel that followed (involving J. Nicholas Entrikin, Alec Murphy, Anssi Paasi, Andy Jonas, Gordon MacLeod and Ray Hudson), was to bring together an international group of political, economic, and cultural geographers to reflect on and scrutinize the resurgence of the idea of ‘region’ in both geographical thought and societal practice. The panel was transcribed (Jones et al., 2008) and some of the text frames this Editorial. Invited papers were presented by John Agnew (Agnew, 2013), Mark Goodwin (his paper will be published in another issue of Regional Studies), Maano Ramutsindela (Ramutsindela, 2013), Kristztina Varró and Arnoud Lagendijk (Varró and Lagendijk, 2013), Jacobo García-Alvarez and Juan-Manuel Trillo-Santamaria (García-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaria, 2013), Tod Rutherford and John Holmes (Rutherford and Holmes, 2013), and Nicola Thomas, David Harvey and Harriet Hawkins (Thomas et al., 2013). Additional papers were solicited from Martin Jones and Mike Woods (Jones and Woods, 2013), Kaj Zimmerbauer (Zimmerbauer, 2013), and John Harrison (Harrison, 2013), both to broaden out the contextual features displayed by this special issue and to highlight the importance of scalar dimensions and related agencies for regional thinking. Collectively, the aim here is to build on the excellent and important ‘Whither Regional Studies?’ special issue edited by Andy Pike (Pike, 2007), which offered an ‘in retrospect’ and ‘in prospect’ a take on notions of the region and regional studies. The contributions in the present special issue aim at answering the following questions from different conceptual and concrete-contextual angles:

- How should one understand the continual importance of the region in geographic discourse and how should current debates be pushed further?
- How should one conceptualize place, region, territory, locality, etc. in an increasingly mobile world characterized by all kinds of flows and networks?
- Are relational and territorial views overlapping, complementary or competing, antagonistic, ontological and epistemological concerns and how should one move beyond this conceptual divide?
- How does the region ‘become’ or how is it produced and how do power and politics become constitutive in and constituted by region-building processes?
- What are the ‘boundaries’ of regions, and what are their social and political functions and consequences in various contexts?
- What does it mean in practice and in different contexts to claim that ‘regions are social constructs’?
- What is the role of context (and, indeed, what is this context) in the becoming of regions?
- How does the context modify one’s understanding of the region (for example, the European Union, the state, regional and local contexts)?
The contributors provide contextual answers to these questions and it is hoped collectively they will motivate readers to reflect on the perpetual significance of regional concepts and how they are mobilized by various actors to maintain or transform the contested spatiotemporalities of societal power relations.

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