Region Building and Strategic Planning in a World of Relational Complexity

Professor Anssi Paasi
Department of Geography
University of Oulu
Outline

- Why are ‘regions’ back on agenda?
- Regions as ”social constructs”
- The varieties of relational thinking: challenging bounded spaces and problematizing regional identities
- Practices that maintain ’boundedness’
- Empirical illustration: How planners cope with regional ’borders’ and ’identity’ in strategic planning?
- Conclusions
The resurgence of the region: changing ‘state-centric’ spatiality/territoriality

- Neo-liberal globalization, geoeconomic and geopolitical competition
- Supra-state alliances
- Legitimation crisis of the post-Keynesian competitive state: fragmentation of social and regional interests
- Devolution of power to regional and local institutions.
- The importance of city-regions in urban locational politics
- The new economic geography of city-regionalism is related both to geoeconomic, geopolitical and ideological construction of competitiveness.

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the resurgence of the ‘region’ in geography, IR, political science, history, cultural studies, etc.
What is ’region’?

“..the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them” (George Orwell 1953:169-170)
Concepts of region

- ‘Pre-scientific’, taken-for-granted unit

- ‘Discipline centric’ (e.g. geographical region, cultural region)

- Critical concepts: social and discursive constructs that are related to practice
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| Concept of space       | Regional geographies | Spatial analysis/systematic geographies | Space, region & social practice |
| Absolute space         | Pays                 | Spatial Geometry                       | Virtual space                 |
| Coexisting order/Container | Landscape            | Locational analysis                    | Identity                      |
| Relative-Functional Space | Functional region    | Time-Space Territory                   | Scale                         |
| Social space            |                       | Production of space                    | ThirdSpace Mobility           |
| Relational space        |                       | Site-situation                          | Site TPSN                     |

| Pre-scientific         | "Region as Given"   | Statistical regions                    | Administrative regions         |
|                       | Regions as settings |                                       | Regions as settings for economic activity |
|                       | Statistical regions |                                       |                               |

| Discipline-centred     | Natural region       | Human/Geographic region                 | Functional region              |
|                       | Formal/homogeneous region | Cultural region | Perceptual region                 |
|                       |                          | Regions as Result of capital accumulation | Unbounded relational social constructs: Part of Life-world entity |
|                       |                          | Regions as Result of capital accumulation | Unbounded relational social constructs: Part of Life-world entity |
|                       |                        | Regions as Result of capital accumulation | Unbounded relational social constructs: Part of Life-world entity |
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| Critical               | Regions as Result of capital accumulation | Unbounded relational social constructs: Part of Life-world entity |
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| "Boundedness"         | Distinct "real"unit or mental category or no precise limits | Instrument of classification | Region as social practice and discourse |
|                       | Regions as Result of capital accumulation | Unbounded relational social constructs: Part of Life-world entity |
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| Key social practice    | Nationalism/national identity | Geopolitics | National/regional planning and Policy | New spatial divisions of labour | Globalization Rescaling |
|                       | Colonialism                  | Geopolitics | National/regional planning and Policy | New spatial divisions of labour | Globalization Rescaling |
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| Interest of knowledge  | Practical-instrumental | Technical | Emancipatory |
|                       |                        |           |             |
|                       | World                   | World     | Marshall Plan |
|                       | World                   | World     | Citation indexes |
|                       | Marshall Plan           | Marshall Plan | OECD     |
|                       | Citation indexes        | Citation indexes | OECD     |
|                       | EU/ European research area | Research Assessment | Research Assessment |
Relational approach to regions: challenging ’borders’ (territorial views) from various angles

- Relationality as an ontological condition
- Relationality as normative politics
- Relationality as a ’real world’ condition
- ”Mobilities paradigm”
- Relational complexity/planning theory
Relational *ontology* (e.g. ANT)

- How things can be *imagined*: the world consists of fluid networks of actors and relations

- Examples:
  
  ”A given actor-network is not confined to a finite, homogeneous territory demarcated by clear-cut boundaries; rather it carries the potential of infinite expansion due the unproblematic incorporation of all the kinds of actors, however different, the network may mobilize” [Pedersen 2009: 140]

  “Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understanding” (Massey 1993:66)
Normative views on bounded region

”..globalization and the general rise of a society of transnational flows and networks no longer allow a conceptualization of place politics in terms of spatially bound processes and institutions” (Amin 2004:33, emphasis mine)

”Put simply, in terms of real flows of economic activity, nation states have already lost their role as meaningful units of participation in the global economy of today’s borderless world” (Kenichi Ohmae 1995:11, emphasis mine). → “Region state”
”Real world developments”: globalization & networking

- Theoretical ideas on multilevel governance and empirical observations on the changing functions of borders and scales have raised networks on agenda.

- ”Regions are, after all, constituted by their place within a wide constellation of forces and events, some of which may come out of long-running shifts in the structure of the region or society more generally, whilst others take their shape from a particular historical moments” (Allen et al. 1998:17)

- Assemblage
"Mobility paradigm"

"The emerging mobility paradigm thus argues against the ontology of distinct places and 'people'. Rather there is a complex relationality of places and persons connected through both performances and performativities”

(Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006)
Relational complexity approach in planning (Patsy Healey)

- "RC emphasizes the multiplicity of the webs of relations which transect a territory and the complex intersections and disjunctions which develop among them"

- RC "means echewing the notions of inherent territorial coherence or 'integration', and univocal concepts of territorial identity"
Processes maintaining an *understanding* of ’bounded spaces’ 1

- Ethno-regionalism: contextuality
- Rescaling of the state; region becomes ”a question”
- EU’s rhetoric and practice of the region (Europe of the regions)
- Note: EU has simultaneously promoted normative visions of the EU space as relational, non-bounded, and fluid (”seamless space”, Tim Richardson)
- ’Governmental’ power in networked governance
- ”Regional identity” discourses in spatial socialization (education), marketing and image-building
- Regional fetishism in competitiveness rhetoric: ”degrees of actorness” in decision making (economy, politics)
What are ’borders’ – a need to redefine them!

- In traditional political and regional geography borders = ’lines that separate’

- Argument: Borders are not only ’lines’ separating spaces (= no essential bounded ’regional identity’); yet used often ideologically in the creation and promotion of regional identity and images in media or planning discourses

- Borders are institutions and symbols used in organizing and ordering social spaces; part of ’structured coherence’ (Harvey), ’structure of feeling’ (Williams) or ’structures/horizons of expectations’ of regions

- Fixed imaginaries of borders have been challenged by the steps from (hierarchical) government to networked governance

- Borders are contextual processes
Practices maintaining an *understanding* of ‘bounded spaces’ 2

A. Politics

- ”When performing their practical politics, agents imagine and identify a discrete, bounded space characterized by a shared understanding of the opportunities or problems that are motivating the very nature of political action” (Jones 2009:494)

- ”Rightly on wrongly…political institutions, lend themselves to the language of territory, fixity and boundaries…territorial focus has remained much the same, despite a more flexible spatial vocabulary that speaks about regionalization and the re-scaling of the state (Allen & Cochrane 2007:1162)
B. ’Securitization’ of spaces

- State borders (borders are everywhere…) - post 9/11 biopolitics of mobile bodies/mobile borders

- Urban dividing lines

”…states are becoming internationally organized systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations deemed risky or malign from those deemed risk-free or worthy of protection. This process increasingly occurs both inside and outside territorial boundaries between states, resulting in a blurring between international borders and urban/local borders” (Stephen Graham 2010:89)
C. Governance

- while many geographers and planners, “have rejected essentialist understandings of phenomena, the corporate state apparatus – for its own reasons – continues to operate in the world of essences” (Phelps and Tewdwr 2008)

- “…in the case of social world there are a range of other clearly demarcated forms of coordination and governance that compete with networks: various forms of market organization, multi-level governance, neo-corporatist private interest governance, hierarchical supra-nationalism and inter-governmentalism, multilateralism….As for anything else, there need to be limits to the embrace of networks” (Thompson 2004:422)

- ”Yet, while motion and relationality define contemporary policy-making, this is only half of the picture. Policies and policy-making are also intensely and fundamentally local, grounded, and territorial” (McCann and Ward 2010:175)
D. Identity building

- Related to both institutionalized practices and operations of diverging organizations (e.g. education, media, planning, culture) and the everyday lives of citizens (and other parallel/competing social groupings)
Empirical example: Regional planning

- The case of 19 Finnish Regional (provincial) Councils
- Historically major identity units (media)
- No directly elected political representatives
- Distant units from everyday life
- Membership in the EU made provinces key planning units
- Planners key agents in making a territorial shape/continuity to regions
How do borders "exist" in Finnish strategic regional planning?

1. Borders are 'given' entities in strategic planning spaces
2. The choice of actors in contemporary coalition based planning is territorially limited
3. Maps matter: they make and delimit space
4. Borders are expressions of power relations
5. Regional identity discourse
1. Borders are ‘given entities’ in planning space

- Planner: **well...we make, you know, the plan for our province within those borders that we have...** During this round we have prepared our plans simultaneously (with other regions, AP), but this has not meant much more than asking normal comments and statements, and discussions between colleagues, that is ‘how is this issue in your region’

- Planner: Of course, in administrative sense we are forced to think (regions) as very much bounded. But, as I referred earlier to issues related to regional structures...here we come to dimensions that cross borders... similarly in logistic issues and those related to accessibility...networks can not be restricted by any administrative border. But in some bureaucratic figures, I take as an example the case of structural funds, so we have to stay in certain formulas. But I see the future definitely so that borders will lose something of their meanings
AP: *Do the borders of provinces matter today? You mentioned earlier in the case of this province that certain episodes have served ‘as borders’?*

Planner: *Yes, they certainly have, since *regional identity is somehow bounded* … they (borders) are present, because Finland is divided into provinces and Regional Councils have their tasks, based on legislation, so it is rather difficult to go on to plan neighbouring regions, so that there would immediately emerge a query on what are you doing here!*
2. Coalition based planning is ‘bounded’ by borders

- AP: Yes, what do borders mean in your current regional plan?
- Planner: Well, they mean at least that when preparatory meetings are organized and we think who should be invited, it is the people from our province that are invited. We have not much bothered the people from neighbouring provinces with the contents of the regional plan. During circulating the proposal for comments – when we had the draft – it was also sent to the neighbours (to ask them)… what do they think about this what we are thinking here. But when we were brainstorming it, we did not. …At least this is a consequence of borders.

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- AP: When we think these documents (plans), what do borders mean in them today?
- Planner: Yes, yes. They (plans) have been made largely inside the provinces, at least in our region, and as I have looked at the neighbours (activities), so perhaps this is the case all too often. Maybe we should think less of borders in regional plans, especially as we prepare them for decades ahead.
..even if borders are challenged:

- Planner: “I think that today such border gazing is primitive thinking, even if there is much such thinking and borders are raised, partly with good reasons and because of tradition, as obstacles for governance and all cooperation. But as I discussed earlier, that **as we have now instruments for communication and our cooperative culture, and possibilities, the border is merely a line on the map. If there is a will for cooperation, experience has shown that also means can be found and cooperation can be done. So the border is not such an absolute bugbear that congeals all cooperation already in the starting block”**

- Planner: “Borders mean of course the fact that each province compiles its own regional plan, but as I earlier referred, we should not see the border in a traditional way as an obstacle and disadvantage. **While the border is there and can be seen in border signs in highways...in provincial cooperation between two or more provinces, the border can be...”demolished” in administrative tasks, so that it exists on road signs and maps, but in trusteeship and in other activities we have means for cooperation”**
3. Maps matter part I

Both bounded spaces and ‘networked’ representations:

- Planner: *If we take another approach then, so 15 years ago our maps (in plans AP) could be such that…the basic map did not extent outside of the border, so the province was, as it were, a patch on a white bottom that had been dropped down from a spaceship*

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- Planner: “*So passions arise latest when people start to think where the borders should go. And all kinds of map exercises are extremely explosive. So such discussion is very meaningful and it is sensitive. Very sensitive*”

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- Planner: *Yes, in some functional issues borders can be fuzzy and so, but when people think where a region really belongs (in the wider regional structure, AP), so this discussion parallels it.*
4. Maps matter II: ”Networks open regions”…

- Regional Plans

“The province is a co-operative network of regional actors, which improves the competitiveness of enterprises, and the incomes, welfare and influence of citizens in Southern Savo” (Southern Savo)

“Networks and interaction provide a chance to promote all other aims of the regional plan. They are at the same time the key in the effort to reconcile the aims of various actors and provinces. Networks and interaction exist between human beings, themes and sectors, public actors, centres, population centres and villages, provinces; nationally and internationally” (Etelä-Pohjanmaan liitto)

- ‘Metropolitan network thinking’ in Capital provinces
and planners...

Well, yes, as I referred already before, so ‘governmental’ is the administrative border from the perspective of ordinary people, that we are continually persuaded – or even genuinely we move to the world of networks – so these kind of borders are not particularly important but rather different functions and the like. When we think our industrial history, provinces do not matter…our most important branches of industry have always been global and still are. It is more on the cultural side… So I think that networks are more important… the Europe of the regions is a good basic idea in the sense that the Finns tend to cuddle up with their own corners…we should strive to think more widely and such programs as Baltic sea program… force us to such directions”
4. Power relations in regional context

Planner: ”…the power manifests itself of course in the act of making the plan inside the border…. borders exist only because they show the power. “

>>> complicated interests
5. Regions and identity discourse in Finnish provinces

- Region and ‘regional identity’ are historically contingent, materially and discursively embedded processes that lean on culture and nature.

- Non-linear histories, ruptures.

- In some regions identity discourse is stronger and/or more ‘past’ and ‘inwards’-oriented’ than in some others.

- Ongoing image building is often related to the competitiveness discourse and brings in a relational element.
Regional identity and image building discourse merge in regional plans

- [The province of] Kainuu has the need and capacity – based on its identity, distinctiveness of nature and culture – to develop its competitiveness by investing in the development of the resources of the local people, that is, in human, educational and social capital. (KAINUUN LIITTO, 2003, p. 40)

- The background for accentuating identity is often the need to raise the competitiveness of the region. (VARSINAIS-SUOMEN LIITTO, 2005, p. 35)

- The aim is that Eastern Uusimaa becomes a well-known and attractive culture- and tourism province with a distinct identity...strong regional identity provides a creative environment that increases interest to settle down in the region. (ITÄ-UUDENMAAN LIITTO 2005, p. 42, 45)
For planners identities have different meanings that vary from ’openness’ to ’closedness’:

- “Yes, we too have a strategic emphasis in our Regional Plan to strengthen regional identity and internal cohesion…in order to be strong towards the outside, the province must also be strong internally and this requires a certain sense of community that starts from identity”.

- “Regions must have an identity in the sense that they cannot be like the British colonies in Africa, whose borders were drawn with a ruler without thinking at all where certain tribes were living.... Regional identity starts from people and their cultures, as these delimit the “natural borders” of the region and identity serves as an important cohesive force...identity is something that does not come from administrative authoritative orders or statutes...it results from long cultural processes and from a co-operative culture.”
Why are regions often perceived as bounded spaces within relational settings?

- The region as a given administrative context and as a limited object of strategic planning process is simply spatially bounded in the current work of RCs and state’s planning system.

- While a number of actors participate in current coalition based planning process, they come from the region in question and bring in certain understanding of coherence and ‘common will’.

- The region is often understood ‘historically’ so that the elements that have been associated by tradition with regional identity discourses contribute to the reproduction of the ‘territorial shape’ and bring in certain ‘boundedness’ and distinction.
Conclusions

- “Relational thinking” is not a singular idea: there are several different possible perspectives on this issue.
- Discussions on the features of relational, open spaces vs. bounded territorial spaces often occurs on a general, ontological level.
- Such debates often neglect social *practice* where the absolute, relative and relational dimensions of space become fused in material practices (e.g. boundary-making for some specific purposes), representations (e.g. mapping) and lived meanings (e.g. affective loyalties, regional identities) (cf. Harvey 1973, 2009).

A region = a network = an actor “that is *made* to act by many others” (Latour 2005:46). Relational and territorial elements are inseparable.

The region will be with us also in the future!