

Regional identity and image in re-scaling of the regions

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Abstract: In this article I examine regional identity. The aim is to explore on one hand the methodological and conceptual challenges that are linked to it, and on the other hand its role and meaning in ongoing regional restructuring and inter-regional competition. I also present the interconnectedness of regional identity and image, as both can be seen as language-based social constructs. The purpose of this article is also to justify some of my own personal motivations and academic viewpoints related to themes of regional identity and image. Criticism in this paper extends to the urban bias of current research.

Introduction

In recent years regional restructuring has taken place throughout Europe. Much of it can be explained by the European Union and its regional policy, at the centre of which there lie ideas of subsidiary and cohesion. Despite the idea of *monotopia* (Jensen & Richardson 2004), recent years have seen much effort invested in boosting regionalist trends where the regions themselves have the main responsibility for their own success or failure. Regionalism has meant – if not strictly hollowing out of the nation state – shifting at least some tasks from central government to regional actors and administrative units (Keating 2006, 26; Goodwin et al. 2006, 37).

Regional restructuring can be traced to two more fundamental changes in contemporary western societies. First, the regions today are seen to be in a state of competition, in which heavy rivalry for skilled labour is going on at a national level while it is growing even stronger at an international level (Kostiainen 2001). In consequence of the increased competition more attention than ever has been paid to the pull factors of regions, as the division of regions into “winners” and “losers” evolves according to how they succeed in attracting skilled labour into their spheres and to emerge as nodes of the networks in network society. Second, there have been huge demographic changes. This has commonly

meant the process of urbanization and in western societies also rising the average age of people. In Scandinavian welfare states development has brought about an increasing pressure to update the mechanisms of providing public services. The municipality-led production has been partly replaced by other, governance-based structures, nevertheless municipality mergers are being regarded as key solution in reducing the costs of services. The restructuring of services has thus been parallel with regional restructuring.

Although in Nordic countries and especially in Finland regional restructuring has involved mostly municipalities, the process has strengthened the roles of the provinces and to some extent also sub-regions. The development seems quite diverse though, as the municipalities seem to lose some of their status and obligations whereas other regions gain new tasks. Currently the amount of municipalities has diminished essentially as many mergers take place. The mergers are usually between two municipalities but there are several cases where more than two municipalities merge, the largest one involving ten municipalities in south-west Finland. Overall, the amount of

municipalities will reduce from the current 415 to 348 in one and a half years (Kuntaliitto 2008).

In this article I examine the dynamics of regional restructuring and the role of regional identity in the Finnish context. I will do this by pointing out some of less studied or even completely neglected standpoints that are related to the phenomena. This paper thus serves also as a critique of the ongoing scientific debate. In addition, some suggestions are given for further studies of regional identity. In order to do this I explore the concept of identity and contemplate how regional identity is usually studied. I bring out the methodological challenges and subjectivity of concept. After that I scrutinize the meaning of identity with the emphasis in deinstitutionalization of a region and in so-called resistance identity. The second important concept is that of image, which I open up briefly in chapter three when I develop the interconnectedness of regional identity and image. At the end of this paper I present the concluding remarks, but I also contemplate the role of more rural regions within the competition of regions. In that section I try to underline the gratuitously neglected

position of peripheral regions in the current research agenda of regional competitiveness.

My aim is to offer reasons for my previous and current studies in regional geography. Much of the following themes have been studied in more detail in my PhD-thesis (Zimmerbauer 2008), which consists of seven independent yet interconnected articles. The inspiration for the themes come from my professional background as a rural researcher and developer. During my previous work at the Ruralia Institute of Helsinki University I had the privilege to see the concrete (and sometimes very grass-root) development efforts and measures of peripheral regions. It can be said that in that period between 1999 and 2008 I realised very clearly that regional development is not an exclusively urban phenomenon, although in current research and development policy the urban bias is remarkably strong. So my somewhat idealistic purpose has been to make the more marginal regions also heard.

Another quite confusing fact is that some of the key concepts are used rather carelessly. Both image and identity are often referred to in speeches as key factors of regional

development. It is, however, unclear what we mean by them and how they actually appear in the various processes of regional restructuring. Thus I want to find out what we talk about when we talk about regional identity or image, how they are being produced and what their actual meaning is. As I consider regions to be primarily social constructs, I have realised the interconnectedness of regional image and identity both conceptually and in the everyday practices of regional development. In practice I saw this while coordinating the projects on sub-regional promotion in the South-Ostrobothnian region. It appeared that although identification with sub-regions was weak and they were regarded as artificial and distant even by their residents, they were becoming the essential units in region-marketing. I simply started to think if it made any sense.

Identity in regional restructuring

The concept of identity is somewhat ambivalent. Etymologically concept stems from the Latin word 'identitas', which can be translated as sameness. Sameness, however, is always linked to the idea of differentiation, which

means that the self is always defined in relation to the other. Regional identity can therefore be understood as based on the sense of belonging to some region. At the same time a region is distinguished from other (neighbouring) regions. Regional identity can also be conceptually divided into two aspects. On one hand, it refers to regional consciousness and people's identification with a region and, on the other hand, to characteristics of the region, which can mean for example various geography-based classifications. Characteristics of a region links regional identity to the concept of image, as both can be seen as language-based constructions relying on representations of a region. For example, Paasi (1986) thus sees regional image as one dimension of regional identity. Regional identity has collective basis as well, which means that although the sense of identification is fundamentally subjective and personal, the idea and presence of the concept of region is shared and understood in fairly the same way by the members of the community. Collective basis separates identification with region from identification with place, as the latter refers to attachment to uninstitutionalized settings.

Here, however, it is not so much the different conceptualizations of regional identity that are essential, but rather how the concept is used in contemporary geography and especially how it is treated in the current regional restructuring. First, there are some evident conceptual and methodological challenges related to regional identity that are not taken into account thoroughly enough. Second, although we can witness the resurgence of regions and borders on various scales, very little is known about the meaning of regions as a source of identity. Although region is naturally only one of the building blocks of identity, its role can be decisive in certain cases. It is these two aspects that we now turn to.

Measuring identity

According to Zimmerbauer and Suutari (2007), there are several studies that have investigated regional identity. They usually focus on which regional scale or level people most often identify themselves with (see e.g. Pekola-Sjöblom et al. 2006, Oinonen et al. 2005). Studies have been conducted by barometer-type surveys, where respondents usually tick the right box. In those kind of surveys

regional identity is usually taken for granted and linked to the sense of attachment to various regional entities. Identity is thus usually studied very mechanistically, as all respondents can do is to choose between the values or regional scales (i.e. village, municipality, sub-region or region). Although it is common and much used method, it has not given uncontradictory results about identification on different regional scales. For example, three different studies (Zimmerbauer 2002, Oinonen et al. 2005, Pekola-Sjöblom et al. 2006) that have been done in Finland in recent years show somewhat mixed outcomes. They only shared one aspect, which was that identification with the nation-state is very strong. With regard to sub-regional and regional identity generalizations were harder to make (albeit identification with sub-regions seemed generally weak). In addition to this, it is hard to say whether the socioeconomic status explains regional identity. For example, evidence has been found as to the correlation between age and gender and identification to municipality (females and the elderly identifying most), but there is no such correlation with regard to the place of residence or the level

of education. In fact one study has pointed out that those living in town centres or city centres with a higher education background tend to identify with their municipality stronger than others, while other research has produced quite the opposite outcome (the rural and low-educated identifying more).

According to my reasoning, the inconsistent results of various studies can be explained by two separate factors. The first one stems from methodological differences and limitations and the second from more conceptual challenges (that are linked to methodological sensitiveness) of regional identity. Methodological limitations and challenges are simply decisions that have to be made in the research process: what regional scales are studied, in which order the questions are set, etc. The question is thus not only whether to use qualitative or quantitative methods but rather how these methods are used and how the idea of studied regions and regional identity is presented in interviews or surveys. The conceptual aspect refers to the subjectivity of regional identity, as each respondent (and researcher as well) has their own idea of different overlapping regions and identifica-

tion with them. After closer scrutiny identification with the municipality, for example, can thus be understood as identification with anything within a municipality, such as their own neighbourhood or football team (making it more identification with places). The two aspects also overlap partly, as the subjective character of identity poses methodological challenges and such methodological limitations impede the interpretations of identity. Studying regional identity is to a great extent studying people's emotional attachments to regions and, like emotions generally, they can be partly subconscious and inexpressible.

As we know the methodological and conceptual limitations in researching regional identity we do not need to confuse seemingly contradictory results of various studies. Like regional identity as a whole, the studies are always contextual, too. However, it would be fallacious to think that regional identity is *merely* contextual, as there seem to be certain similarities and regularities between the results. The dissimilarities can therefore be thought to stem partly from the contextual nature of identity and partly from methodological choices and deficiencies. To

consider regional identity entirely as relational and contextual would easily lead to a lack of efforts to improve the methodology as a whole.

Despite the challenges of methodology and conceptualization, studying regional identity will be crucial in the future as regional restructuring will continue. Currently regional identity is involved in processes where, for example, so called non-standard regions (many of which are cross-border ones) are beginning to institutionalize (see e.g. Deas and Lord 2006) at the same time as various more traditional regions are being merged and thus de-institutionalised. As the challenges are recognized, it must be carefully scrutinized if methods could be developed to understand better the essence of regional identity in regional restructuring. I thus suggest some alternative methods in studying regional identity as identification with a region. The so called identity narratives enable various different research methods, many of which have not yet been widely used. As an examples focus-group interviews and autobiographical research (Bagnoli 2004) can be mentioned.

Meaning of identity

Although regional identity has a crucial role in whether regional restructuring succeeds, regional identity is also connected to broader questions of regional planning. According to Raagmaa (2002, 60), regional identity can become an ‘administrative strategy, which helps to mobilize local people for regional development’. Also, an entrepreneur with a close attachment to the region and its community through personal ties may become the driving force in reshaping the local entrepreneurial culture. Indeed, regional identity can stimulate the collective will and various actors to act for the region and thus increase its prosperity (Raagmaa 2002, 62). The role of regional identity is also emphasized in various regional development documents. It is thus evident that at best regional identity can fuel the development of a region and strengthen the region’s positive buzz.

More emphasis should however be put on the fact that regional identity is not stable, but dynamic in time and space. For example regional restructuring can affect identification with a region. As municipalities, counties or provinces are under threat of being merged, they can gain importance

and attachment to them can suddenly increase. This can lead to what Castells (1997) calls ‘resistance-identity’, which means that restructuring processes are protested. For example, in municipal mergers resistance identity can take various forms of actions, as for instance in the case of the Nurmo municipality in Finland, where the threat of merger triggered the ProNurmo movement that printed an anti-merger newspaper and t-shirts and used the internet extensively to promote their ideas. If data is gathered during these processes, the region under threat can have an overemphasized valuation. This was also the case when the regional identity of the residents of former Peräseinäjoki municipality was studied soon after it was merged with the bigger municipality of Seinäjoki (Zimmerbauer & Kahila 2006, Zimmerbauer & Suutari 2007).

It is evident that regional development can hinder regional restructuring. The question is not only whether mergers should be implemented, but also concerns more fundamental questions where local and regional democracy are involved. Finnish municipalities are the traditional units of administration, but also units of service-production and local democ-

racy. As the tasks of municipalities are diverse, it is not a surprise that resistance identity will strengthen when there is a threat that the region will lose its status and role in a regional system. Regional activism can then evolve.

Regional identity may, however, work as a resource for development even after municipal merger, since identification with a municipality need not decrease after merger even though the municipality ceases to have an administrative role. According to my research (Zimmerbauer & Kahila 2006, Zimmerbauer 2006b) after Peräseinäjoki was merged with Seinäjoki, identification with Peräseinäjoki has increased slightly rather more than decreased. Usually, however, identification had remained unchanged shortly after merger occurred. In other literature (Leinamo 2004) it is pointed out that identification with deinstitutionalized regions has stayed strong even if the mergers took place as early as the 70s.

It seems, thus, that regional identity is facing twofold expectations. On the one hand regional identity should not be too strong in processes of regional restructuring in order to enable them to happen, but on the other hand regional identity

should be strong enough to absorb locals into regional development. Therefore, what seems desirable from the viewpoint of regional developing agencies and administrative units is some kind of moderate regional identity or at least identity that strengthens only conveniently and contextually when most needed. In reality, regional identity rarely works so obviously and so neatly.

Interplay of regional identity and image

In an academic context it is only rarely brought out that regional identity and image are intertwined, although they are clearly overlapping conceptually as well as in everyday practices of regional development. As mentioned earlier, characteristics of a region, which were defined as one aspect of regional identity - meaning identity of a region - is somewhat synonymous to the concept of image, as in both language-based reproduction and representation of place are essential. Both image and identity of a region can thus be seen as social constructs, albeit the world has also its material dimension. It is also evident that regional identity as a sense of attachment and identification is

also based on linguistic processes, as collective regional identity can evolve when a region has been institutionalized and symbolized. Region must thereby be constructed (by language-based representations) to gain familiarity and serve as the shared unit of identification. Regional image is built by representations and symbolizations alike, as conceptually image refers to reputation or character of a region (Karvonen 2001: 45-46). To create an image requires producing various signs and symbols, with which, of course, interpretation is also associated. Regional image and identity thus evolve much as results of similar processes of representations.

It can be claimed that in everyday practices good regional image should be based on strong regional identity (Nikkarinen 2001), as image can not be built in the air. In other words, if a region has no place in the awareness of its inhabitants or if the residents do not identify with it, its existence as a social construct can be questioned. This means that building the regional image is extremely difficult if the degree of regional awareness and identification is low. It has been clearly noted that in Finland especially the sub-regions have had huge

challenges in developing their images due to their low degree of familiarity even amongst the inhabitants of the marketed sub-region. In many cases the province is also better known than the sub-region. For this reason it is important to share the work of image-development in a reasonable way between province, sub-regions and municipalities as well as using sufficient time for planning the role of each regional unit.

However, it is also important to note that regional identity can be built by developing the regional image. Even though the purpose of image-building is to make non-residents aware of the region, the regional identity of the local population is automatically produced at the same time. In other words, although the marketing is primarily targeted outside the region, the content of marketing remains not unclear for those living in the region. Little by little the marketing also thus affects the ways how the region is conceptualized and understood by local people. Even the currently distant and artificial sub-regions can become more relevant and concrete for their inhabitants as the promotion increases and makes the region more solid as a social construct. Developing the image

thus does also improve the regional consciousness inside the region. Regional symbols can, for instance, be created for promotion outside the region, but they serve both as elements of place-marketing and improvers of regional consciousness inside the region. As Paasi (2001) puts it, identification with regions is normally based on symbols, which are experienced as common and shared.

Now the relation between image and identity becomes vital as at this moment regions which do not have a long history and strong identity try to create their images by promotion. As the competitiveness of regions is currently emphasized, one can think that regional identity is increasingly created and strengthened by promotional means. As promotion and marketing have strong roles in the institutionalization of regions, it is not unfair to say that identity-building has gone through some kind of “marketing shift”. This means that regional discourses are not that much produced and utilized *in situ*, instead they are constructed by place-marketers and aimed primarily for carefully selected target-groups. It can be thus also claimed that symbols which are essential both in regional image and identity are currently produced

increasingly for promotional needs.

Concluding remarks

Regional restructuring and regional development as a whole have been mostly motivated by administrative and economic interests, mainly due to current emphasis in competitiveness. Partly for this reason the importance of regional identity has been underestimated. It, however, plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of development measures in a region. An economically well-justified municipal merger can for instance be blocked when regional identity is strong enough.

Also, although current literature suggests that as a result of new regionalism various mid-level and supranational regional units are gaining importance, several studies prove almost the opposite, as people tend to identify most with their municipality and country. It seems, thus, that new regionalism may be a suitable theory as far as regional development is concerned, but it seems that identity is “lagging behind” as it is attached to more traditional and established regional units. In the context of regional identity, nation state and municipality have still very

much relevance.

As I have studied the essence of regional identity and image, I noticed that in contemporary research both are linked mostly to urban settings. As such it is no wonder, since the competition of regions is regarded as an urban phenomenon and the whole idea of (new) regionalism is based on urban conglomerates and metropolitan areas as key players in regional development (for example, Swanstrom 2001, Wheeler 2002). Inter-regional rivalry has thus partly been reduced to mean inter-metropolitan or inter-urban rivalry. As city-regions are regarded as key players in regional competition, they are studied relatively well. Of course, urban bias may also be the result of university campuses being located in major cities. In Finland especially the research of regional images has focused on cities and city-regions (for example, Äikäs 2001, Raunio & Linnamaa 2001, Kostiainen 2001).

Yet, it can be claimed that competition occurs at all regional levels and in rural areas as well. Although rural regions are not considered to be the winning side in regional rivalry, they are to some extent obliged to participate. As I studied the identities and images of more rural regions, I

realized that urban and rural regions are in a somewhat different situation with regard to the competition of regions. In rural settings the resources are usually directed to stop or at least to slow down the negative migration. Lack of resources has led to short-term image-campaigns that fail to have any major impact. In rural regions some kind of benefits or payment-reliefs are nonetheless often used to attract new dwellers. The most intensively used means are related to housing and working opportunities. In Finland a little less than 50 % of municipalities have offered such benefits, most of them being peripheral municipalities (Zimmerbauer & Korpimäki 2006, 8).

In this article I have pointed out some essential themes related to regional identity and image that I have found interesting and relevant. In my studies I have tried to focus on issues that stem from everyday practices of regional development but also have scientific value. This is due to my work in various development-based projects before starting my PhD studies. In fact, I have tried to find research questions that I felt were not only academically interesting but also relevant for various processes of regional development.

I therefore believe that my reasoning has significance both among regional developers and researchers alike. I also have found it very helpful to have impetus and feedback from outside the academic world.

Regional identity and image are important resources for and instruments of regional development, although their impact and meaning is often difficult to measure. With the increasing importance of regional competitiveness it is essential to recognize their multiple influences and both of them must be taken into account in regional development. In everyday regional development the realities are harsh and resources scarce and there may not be easy paths to follow. It is, however, important to point out the critical points and neglected themes, as identifying the challenges is the first step in improving the existing conditions. Although the solutions are not 'out there' to grab, recognizing the contradictions of ongoing processes as well as methodological challenges can move us one step further forward.

In a nutshell, my aim scientifically has been to point out the meaning of identity in regional restructuring and on the other hand to scrutinize the

role of rural regions in inter-regional competition. What has bothered me most is that in regional restructuring (and especially in cases of municipality mergers) the arguments have been based too much on economical or administrative factors and the role of identity has been neglected. In image-development the discourse has focused too much on urban areas. It must be noted that society and contemporary geography is also about the power of identity and the role of peripheral regions.

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