

Introduction: The Changing Cultural Geographies of Place, Region and Mobility

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Place and particularly region have been for a long time key categories in geographical thinking. Indeed, region was one of the main ideas when geographers started to create an identity for the new discipline that had entered the university system during the late 19th century. For scholars such as Alfred Hettner in Germany and Richard Hartshorne in the USA the region and regional approach were the major categories of geography that they employed to position the new field in the academic world of sciences. The field of history, looking at natural and cultural phenomena in relation to time dimension, and geography, doing this in relation to space, formed the so-called exceptionalist subjects that did not have any particular research object. Rather it was exactly this perspective on space and time that made these fields relevant for these classical authors. Region and place have been significant also later in geographical debates but much more dynamic approaches have been developed.

While the emergence of the quantitative movement since the 1950s led to the marginalization of regional geography, the ideas of region have persistently emerged to the core of the field. In some circles of the English speaking world the idea of place was found useful. Especially humanistic geographers reflected the ideas of place seriously in the 1970s and also critical geographers have since the 1980s looked

at the problems of place and region, this time regions and place were interpreted as historically contingent processes, not merely static backgrounds for social life.

These originally rather fixed ideas on region have been challenged during the last decades by the emergence of all kinds of economic, political and cultural networks, flows of capital, migrants, and cultural influences as well as trans-nationalism. No wonder then that the almost self-evident understanding of a certain “boundedness” of place and region is currently questioned. In geography the so-called relational thinking in particular has challenged the ideas of the power of territoriality and at the same the validity of borders.

Both perspectives are needed and the challenge is to integrate them in theory and practice. It is namely obvious that region and regional identity are not universally losing their significance. Space makes a difference. Along with the previous tendencies of globalisation they have become catchwords round the world and not only for scientists but also for regional activists and politicians. The idea of the Europe of Regions in particular has given new strong role to the idea of region in this regional context. Regions are very significant in the current EU where the processes of re-scaling have led to an increasing competition between regions; a tendency that has been argued to result from both the neo-liberalization of the global economy and from a regionalist

response of regional actors (Rumford 2000). European politics and planning have been characterized by a shift to economic ‘entrepreneurialism’ at sub-national scales. This pursuit of global competitiveness is channelled through regions and has enabled the “recruitment of locally defined identities to strategies for ‘competitiveness’”, as Lovering (2007) puts it.

Both the ‘opening’ of regions and the search for regional identities can be interpreted as mirror images of globalization. No wonder then that one current keyword in contemporary cultural geography is mobility, which forces us to reflect the power of place and region in the globalizing world, as well as the dis-embedding and re-embedding processes of the cultural worlds. Some authors are ready to talk about an emerging mobility paradigm that

“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” and further, “Places are like ships, moving around and not necessarily staying in one location. In the emerging mobilities paradigm places themselves can be seen as becoming and travelling, slowly or quickly, through greater or shorter distances and within networks of both human and non-human agents” (Hannam & al. 2006: 13)

Even if the previous citations are far from conceptual clarity and certainly reflect the currently modish rhetoric on ‘mobilities’, we are definitely living in an increasingly mobile world. Due to this ambivalent situation the organizers chose the title “Changing Cultural Geographies of Place, Region and Mobility” for the IGU’s “Cultural Approaches in Geography” Commission’s conference that was organized during 25th–

26th May, 2007, at the University of Oulu. We think that this title clearly shows our aim to bring together scholars interested in the current conceptual challenges and transformations taking place in geographical thinking on region, place and mobility, as well as scholars who have been reflecting the meanings of these transformations in diverging empirical settings and from various research perspectives. Key sub-themes of the conference were hence:

- Region, place and mobility: conceptual challenges for cultural geography
- The problem of borders: are both relational and territorial perspectives necessary?
- Crossing borders: the impact of ‘flows’ and networks on our thinking on bounded spaces and borders
- Regional identity: conceptual and empirical approaches

The enclosed collection of papers shows how some of the participants have reacted to these questions and themes, by scrutinizing bordering, de-bordering and identity processes at various spatial scales.

Roald Plug’s article focuses on the international relations of the European Union with its neighbouring states. The Union’s neighbourhood policy discourse is examined in the context of the so-called “Ring of Friends”, the label given for the countries surrounding the EU area. With a focus on the *politics of friendship* he discusses the languages of friendship, integration and difference, and their implications for our thinking on the European space.

Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola scrutinises the cross-border regionalization and cooperation in the context of the Finnish-Swedish border area. Particular attention is paid to the changing border discourse in this internal area of the European Union and

the manifestations of the EU in this old, rural border region. She examines regional factors that create the current demand, but also opportunities for the cooperation in this context.

Rubén C. Lois-González, José L. Palmiero-Piñeiro and Miguel Pazos-Otón examine the meanings of cultural heritage and memory in the enhancement of cross-border integration in the Portuguese-Galician (Spain) border context. This border is one of the oldest and “authentic” in the world. The current tendency in this border area is the increased construction of new cross-border facilities that enable new forms of interaction and also strengthen people’s identification across the border.

Tanja Löytynoja’s article examines the representations of the national boundary in tourism landscape. Particular attention is paid to visual, narrated and exhibited representations of the Finnish-Russian border in the context of various staged tourism settings. By these means border crossing experiences can be transformed and lived through beyond the “actual” geographical location of the border. This border is also one of the external borders of the European Union.

Tobias Federwisch examines the politics of spatial identity in the European Metropolitan Regions. By using the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region (Germany) as a case study he shows how regional identity building can be used as a strategy in the establishment and legitimation of new forms of regional governance. The construction of regional identity can be understood as a political practise which is complementing the economic development of a region.

Clara Copeta and Lucrezia Lopez examine the territorial identity of the city of Bari (Italy). They look at the historical development of this Mediterranean city and the *constants* such as the seafront and other public spaces on which the territorial identity of the city is grounded. They also emphasize that the shaping of city by its inhabitants is an important factor which should be taken into consideration in the preservation policy.

Agnieszka Kozakiewicz discusses the concept of leisure and the meaning of leisure activities in human life. She presents results from a survey conducted among the inhabitants of Turku to show how people spend their free time and what are their most popular leisure activities.

Federico López Silvestre and María Álvarez Cebrián focus on the construction of art centres and their influence on urban tourism and local inhabitants. Their special interest is on the construction of the Cultural City in Santiago de Compostela (Spain), and by comparing other similar architectural settings they outline architectural models, and evaluate the social and economical impacts of these cultural and architectural initiatives.

We hope that the articles published in this collection give an impression of the versatile themes and geographical contexts that the speakers, representing altogether ten nations, were displaying. The enclosed papers are representing not only cultural geography but also regional and political geographic approaches, hence themselves displaying the border-crossings that are taking place in the current geographical research.

References

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