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The Politics of Spatial Identity: Regional Governance and the Strategic Constitution of Regional Identity

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Abstract: Recent German planning discourse focuses on major urban agglomerations and their role for societal, economic, social and cultural development. Of special interest are questions concerning the European Metropolitan Regions. Seen as an effective concept of German strategic spatial planning and policy, European Metropolitan Regions have emerged across Germany. The Rhine-Neckar Region represents one of these major urban agglomerations. It shows a comprehensive mode of regional governance. Against this backdrop, collaborative actors do not only establish the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region on an economic but also on a symbolic level as they attempt to form a new identity in correspondence with that region. This study considers the relation between regional governance and the strategic constitution of regional identity by looking at the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation. One of the overall conclusions is that the politics of spatial identity is used as a specific (significative) strategy for the constitution of geographic world-ties. In addition, it is a practice complementary to structural and economic practices of regional governance and networks. Four strategies become significant for the constitution of regional identity. Employing these strategies it is aimed to form a "mental infrastructure" in order to cope with the requirements of economic and societal globalisation.

Introduction

This article is primarily an attempt to work out the relation between regional governance and the strategic constitution of regional identity. Since there is a lot of literature on spatial identity and identity formation, it is the central issue of the article to specify this topic by focusing on the politics of spatial identity as undertaken by the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation. As we will see, this regional corporation does not only develop the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region in economic aspects but also attempts to form a rather *new identity* corresponding with that region.

I have arranged my argument in following way: First, I want to introduce the concept of "European Metropolitan Regions" as a key element in German strategic spatial planning. Second, I address the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region and the related Rhine-Neckar Corporation as an example of regional governance. Third, I give a theoretical insight into regional governance and identify its characteristics. Fourth, I will focus on the relevance of regional identity and actors' motivation doing the politics of spatial identity. And finally, I give an understanding of what is meant by the politics of spatial identity and which strategies are used to form geographic world-ties.

European Metropolitan Regions in German strategic spatial planning

To start with, the planning discourse in post-war Germany has long been guided by the premise of balanced economic development and inter-regional equality. The idea of a "spatial equilibrium at a national scale" was to ensure equivalent living conditions throughout the national state (Brenner 2000:323). Because of German reunification and accelerated European Integration, a gradual shift has become visible in German strategic spatial planning (Blotevogel & Schmitt 2005). That is a reorientation which moves away "from a system of policies for alleviating uneven geographical development into a framework that actively intensifies it by promoting the continued recentralization of growth within specialized core urban regions" (Brenner 2000:332; Hoyler & al. 2006).

According to the Standing Conference of Federal and State Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning (Ministerkonferenz für Raumordnung MKRO), *major metropolitan regions* act as "engines for societal, economic, social and cultural development" (BBR 2005:188; MKRO 2005; Adam & al. 2005:417). They are expected a) to stimulate the interregional competition, b) to ensure the German and European competitiveness in a globalising economy, and c) to accelerate the process of European Integration. For this reason, major metropolitan regions rather than individual cities or the national economy as a whole require specific attention. Two key policy documents – the Raumordnungspolitischer Orientierungs-rahmen (1993) and the Raumordnungspolitischer Handlungsrahmen (1995) have first emphasised the strategic importance of major German urban agglomerations (Hoyler & al. 2006; Sinz 2005).

In 1995, six German conurbations including Berlin-Brandenburg, Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt-Rhine-Main and Rhine-Ruhr, have been nominated as "European Metropolitan Regions" in the German Federal Action Plan. This list was officially expanded in 1997, adding the so called "Saxony-Triangle" which includes the former East-German cities of Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Halle and Zwickau. In 2005, the European Metropolitan Region status was finally granted to Hanover-Brunswig-Göttingen, Nuremberg, Bremen-Oldenburg and the *Rhine-Neckar region* (Figure 1; MKRO 2005; BBR 2005). By looking at these designated metropolitan regions, some of them are monocentric urban regions (i.e. Hamburg, Munich, and Stuttgart), while others are mere loosely defined and administratively fragmented polycentric urban regions (i.e. Rhine-Main, Saxon-Triangle, Hanover-Brunswig-Göttingen, Bremen-Oldenburg, and Rhine-Neckar).

The latest federal spatial planning report reinforces the importance of metropolitan regions as an overall concept of German strategic spatial planning and policy (BBR 2005; Sinz 2006). Thereby, it repeats earlier calls for the creation of regional expertises in administration, business, science and culture. However, the realisation of a vibrant governance structure varies substantially between German metropolitan regions (Hoyler & al. 2006; Blatter 2005; Fürst 2005; Hesse 2005). It strongly depends on the cooperation of a spectrum of actors within different institutional contexts acting for varying interests.

Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar

Europäische Metropolregionen in Deutschland

Kiel

Schwerin

Hamburg

Bremen-
Bremen
Oldenburg

Hamburg

Berlin-
Wolfsburg
Hannover   Berlin
Braunschweig   Potsdam

Hannover-   **Brandenburg**
Braunschweig-
Göttingen   Magdeburg

Essen
Dortmund
Düsseldorf   Göttingen

Leipzig
Rhein-Ruhr   **Halle/Leipzig/**   Dresden
                                     Sachsendreieck
Köln
Bonn   Erfurt   Chemnitz

Frankfurt/
Rhein-Main
Wiesbaden
Frankfurt
Mainz

Ludwigshafen Mannheim   Erlangen
Saarbrücken   **Neckar**   Fürth
              Heidelberg   Nürnberg
Rhein-   **Nürnberg**

Stuttgart
Stuttgart

München
München

100 km

Figure 1: Metropolitan Regions in Germany. Source: ROV-Rhein-Neckar

In fact, while cooperation between German cities and their neighbouring municipalities have a long tradition (i.e. collaborative regional planning or cooperative public transport and waste management), the development of comprehensive modes of regional governance has often been hindered. This is due to the strong constitutionally safeguarded autonomy of local management, territorially fragmented regional identities and state competition in the federal system (Fürst 2005; Hoyler & al. 2006). From this follows that most notably polycentric urban regions faces specific challenges in the creation of strong regional governance structures – an issue that is particularly relevant for the *Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region.*

The European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region

With its population of over 2.3 million, the Rhine-Neckar region is one of Germany's largest conurbations. Situated at the intersection of the three federal states of Baden-Wuertemberg, Rhineland Palatinate and Hesse, the region represents one of those administratively fragmented polycentric urban agglomerations (Figure 2). In April 2005 the Rhine-Neckar region was recognised as a "European Metropolitan Region", and in July 2005 an interstate agreement (Staatsvertrag) was signed by the three state ministers – as it was the first of its kind in Germany. This interstate agreement is to set the foundation for cross boarder cooperation (i.e. regional planning) and to strengthen the governance structures in that region.

By looking at the constitution of the European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region, the importance of the regional initiative "Zukunft Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar" is certainly to be mentioned. Seen as an example of cooperative federalism, the regional initiative integrates a broad number of administrative, economic and educational (collaborative) actors. That is, for instance, the city of Mannheim, Ludwigshafen and Heidelberg, the major companies of BASF Inc., SAP Inc. or MLP Inc., the located chambers of industry and commerce (IHK Rhine-Neckar), and the universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim. For its founder, Dr. Eggert Voscherau (Executive Vice-President BASF Inc.), the regional initiative is to stimulate the development of a comprehensive mode of regional governance. It is to strengthen the network of (collaborative) regional actors (Federwisch 2008; Schmitz 2005).

At the beginning of 2006, the regional initiative "Zukunft Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar" was transferred into the *Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation*. The regional corporation is by now the major corporative actor for regional development and assigned to develop the region as "one of the most attractive and economically vibrant places to live in Europe" (IFOK 2004; 2005a, b). In fact: It is the aim of the regional corporation to enhance the competitiveness of the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region, to strengthen administrative, economic or transport structures and to become excellent in educational or scientific aspects. It is to be aimed to position the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region in the context of other German metropolitan regions as well as a

Figure 2: Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region. Source: ROV-Rhein-Neckar

global competition at locations or qualified employees and executives (IFOK 2004, 2005a, b). In order to reach these objectives, the regional corporation supports regional governance structures and networks. For this reason, I might give a more theoretical insight into the concept of regional governance and network constellations.

Regional governance

Originally, the term 'governance' stems from the "new institutional economy" (Coase 1937; Williamson 1975, 1985) and has later been used in the context of the "new economic sociology" (Granovetter 1985; Powel 1990; Grabher 1993; Sydow 1993; Kenis 1996) as well as in the fields of "international relations" (Rosenau

& Czempiel 1992; Rosenau 2000) and "policy-research" (Scharpf 1991, 1993, 2000; Kooiman 1993; Mayntz 1997, 1998, 2002, 2007; Blanke & al. 2005; Schuppert 2005). In the context of political and administrative science, the term refers to new modes of societal coordination and administrative management, and thus indicates a considerable change in the way of collective administrative action (Benz 2000, 2004). Against the backdrop of a declined state capacity to govern, the concept of 'governance' refers to action "beyond" the nation state (or state hierarchies) and highlights a widely ramified network regulation system. By this, it endorses the role of the civil society and focuses on cooperative management between public and private actors (public-private-partnerships).

In geography, the term 'regional governance' has been introduced by British Geographers looking at the development of sub-central government institutions and processes, the devolution of power to Wales and Scotland ("devolution politics") and new forms of regionalism (MacLeod & Goodwin 1999; MacLeod & Jones 2000; Larner & Walters 2002; Jones & MacLeod 1999, 2004; Marshall 2003). Hence, the usage of 'regional governance' corresponds with a significant transformation of the British regional planning strategies and the emergence of regional institutions (Regional Development Agencies). By now, these new patterns of regional dynamics have (more or less) been observed across Europe. As a consequence, the concept of 'regional governance' has widely been used – even in German academic literature (Fürst 1994, 1996, 2001; Knieling 2003; Benz 2001, 2003; Benz & Fürst 2003; Danielzyk & Rietzel 2003; Kübler 2003; Herrschel & Newman 2003; Graute 2004; Diller 2004; Altrock & al. 2006).

What is meant by 'regional governance'? According to Fürst (2003:VII) 'regional governance' is more than inter-municipal cooperation. "It is characterized a) by a mixture of institutional and network-like regulation systems, b) by cooperation across social sub-systems (state – economy – society) and c) by paradigmatic changes in the treatment of regional problems (orientation towards common welfare, preparedness for co-operative self-management)." Thus, regional governance refers to the "relative decline in the state's direct management and sponsorship of social an economic projects, and an analogous engagement of quasi- and nonstate actors in a range of public-private-partnerships and networks" (McLeod & Goodwin 1999:506). Therefore, Fürst

(2003) has entitled regional governance as an "intermediate action" by claiming that a) private (corporative) actors have gained an enhanced role in governing a region, and that b) the state becomes a primus inter pares who only takes control through public policy regulations. In order to substantiate the overview, regional governance might be ideally characterized by at least following six aspects (Federwisch 2008):

• *Spectrum of Actors*: The spectrum of (corporative) actors participating on decision making processes has been broadening. Deciders might have a political, administrative, economic or educational background (Nischwitz & al. 2002; Frey 2002, 2003).

• *Voluntariness*: The actors are not forced to work together. In the contrary, they cooperate in a voluntarily manner. Everybody has the option to leave governance structures (exit-option) (Fürst 2003, 2004).

• *Institutionalisation*: Regional governance is characterized by a rather weak institutionali-sation. Actors only refer to a minimum of rules and procedures to derive an outcome (Fürst 2003:445).

• *Logic of governance*: The logic of regional governance is that of networks. This implies that state centred sovereign top-down-strategies become more and more displaced by bottom-up-strategies of regional actors.

• *Principles of governance*: The principles of governance are that of cooperation and concurrency. Thus, principles of control and coordination become displaced by that of collaboration and competition (Frey 2002).

• *Instrument of governance*: Although regional planning still regulates regional development, processes of moderation and mediation

contribute to an interactive decision making as well as problem solving (Fürst 1996).

Acting within regional governance structures has got many advantages. It generates, for instance, synergy effects or initiates Benchlearning of best practices as well as sophisticated conflict management (Federwisch 2008). However, activities within flexible policy networks or even loosely integrated issue networks (which are typical for regional governance structures) also show arbitrary problems. That is, for instance, the abandonment of a clear power structure as it is typical for the logic of sovereign state-hierarchy. For this and other reasons it has often been observed that comprehensive modes of governance structures tend to fail. In fact: Jessop (1998) and Stoker (1998) have termed this phenomenon as "governance failure". In order to understand those governance failures it is therefore certainly appropriate a) to ask for the challenges of regional governance structures and b) to look for the corresponding relevance of regional identity.

Relevance of regional identity

In the context of my empirical observation on the politics of spatial identity, I have asked representatives of the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation, what actually challenges the creation and maintenance of strong and comprehensive regional governance structures. In addition to this, I have asked for the expected relevance of regional identity trying to get an insight into possible actors' motivation

doing the politics of spatial identity. As a result, the interviewees have been mentioned four challenges which altogether refer to the necessity of the politics of spatial identity.

• *Challenge I – set of initiatives*: Usually, a set of locale and regional initiatives already exist, i.e. an issue network for developing a local labour market or a regional life-science cluster. Unfortunately, many of these initiatives are not permanent but short-time. In order to create a permanent regional governance structure it is the challenge to integrate these different initiatives and (collaborative) actors into the regional corporation.
• *Challenge II – multi-level negotiation*: Many of the participating actors act in several institutions. They carry out a job as business manager or university professors. For this reason, regional governance is not only a multi-actor play but also a multi-level play. Actors come with strings attached to different institutions, and so, it is the challenge to achieve a motivation for acting within regional governance structures and its corporation.
• *Challenge III – technocracy*: Regional development is frequent criticized for its technocratic character. Since actors engaged in regional governance structures are not legitimized by the people but may affect the day-to-day live of the people, it is the challenge to achieve their acceptance. It exists because of the need for acceptance of political or economic decisions carried out by the regional corporation.
• *Challenge IV – deficit of legitimacy*: It is always complaint that regional governance has got a deficit of legitimacy due to the fact that elites can act beyond the parliamentary democracy. Decisions can be made in a "sub-parliamentary sphere". It is the

challenge not only to achieve the acceptance by law but also of that of the people. It is the challenge to establish a functioning regional civil society.

At this point, the aspect of regional identity comes into play. The interviewees generally endorse the importance of common regional consciousnesses. My empirical findings have shown that regional identity is seen as the *linking category* for the mentioned problems and challenges of regional governance. The interviewees expect that regional identity has an integrative effect for the spectrum of initiatives and (collaborative) actors. It is further seen as necessarily for governance network development and strengthening within that polycentric European Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region. The interviewees expect that an emotional consciousness with the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region leads to sympathy and trust as well

as loyalty and motivation. And in addition, it is expected that regional identity encourages the participation process and contributes to the creation of a functioning civil society corresponding with that metropolitan region (Table 1).

Hence, the interviewed regional actors are aware of the necessity of regional identity concerning the creation of a comprehensive and strong regional governance structure. Moreover, they are certainly interested in *constituting* an identity with the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region. As seen as important for the coherency of regional actors and networks, and for the encouragement of the regional population, regional elites politicize regional identity. Organized in the mentioned regional corporation, the actors constitute a symbolic region trying to integrate a differentiation of (collaborative) actors as well as territorially fragmented identities.

Table 1: Challenges of regional governance and expectations to regional identity

What are the challenges to regional governance?		Expectations
set of initiatives	integration	integrative effects
multi-level-negotiation	necessity to act	sympathy and trust
technocracy	acceptance by the people	loyalty and motivation
deficit of legitimacy	public control	participation

The politics of spatial identity

What is meant by the politics of spatial identity? To begin with, the term 'politics' can be seen as intentional and goal oriented action in the realm of the symbolic (Arendt 2002). It aims to organise and configure a society in territorial and functional aspects. It is further a misleading assumption that the 'political sphere' in constrained to activities of those of government and the parliament. On the contrary, politics also includes actions and interpretations of many other groups and individuals (Giddens 2001).

The politics of spatial identity might be understood as an intentional, goal-oriented, discursive and power-driven practice which reflectively aims to constitute and configure a certain space-oriented consciousness or place-identity. By this, actors doing the politics of spatial identity strategically create and use a set of symbols as well as discursive practices to produce geographic knowledge and to assign a territory with meaning (Luutz 2001, 2002). They aim that people can a) identify the (social) environment, b) identify themselves with the (social) environment, and c) are being (socially) identified by "the others" (Graumann 1983, 1999). For this reason, the politics of spatial identity is a practice which tends to produce a certain self-perception as well as outsiders perception for collective acquisition. It might especially influences the behaviour, the thinking and day-to-day action of individuals and groups situated *within* a defined and bordered space (container metaphor). As a practice of social engineering, it aims to constitute orientation, social cohesion, and loyalty with a certain space (Weichhart 1990; Weichhart & al. 2005).

What is important in the context of regional governance is that the politics of spatial identity highly contributes to the formation of what is expected to be the "kit" or the "engine" of governance creation and processes – that is regional identity (Federwisch 2008). It may consequently be understood as a way of "significative regionalisation" (Werlen 2007) or symbolic "institutionalisation" of a region (Paasi 1996). In addition, I term the politics of spatial identity as a practice *complementary* to structural and economic practices of regional governance and networks. While a regional structural and economic policy aims to enhance the competitiveness, and thus has possible effects on regional identity (Berg 2001), symbolic practices aim to create a certain regional consciousness. This is to entrain the population and support governance networks through "*mental mobilisation*" (Luutz 2001, 2002; Federwisch 2008).

Table 2: Economic and symbolic practices of regional governance

	Economic practice	Symbolic practice
Policy	structural & economic policy	image & identity formation
Purpose	modernisation	mental mobilisation
Politics (example)	reduction of bureaucracy	image & identity campaigns

In order to capture the reach of the politics of spatial identity, the empirical findings have revealed four strategies which become significant for the constitution of regional identity. Although the agenda of these strategies is neither pure nor uncontested but is instead subject to continuous negotiation, the regional corporation constitutes a narration which combines a) territorial criteria (dimension, nature, landscape) with b) a concept of collective habits and c) temporal aspects (Federwisch 2008).

• *Strategy I – modelling the region*: By modelling the region it is to be aimed to constitute a certain regional shape. In doing so, actors negotiate, define and communicate regional borders, dimensions, nature and landscapes etc.
• *Strategy II – ethnic formation*: By ethnic formation it is to be aimed to constitute a representative inhabitant of the imagined region. By this, actors negotiate, define and communicate traits, affections or "obvious" personal and collective identities.
• *Strategy III – retrospect*: With retrospect I refer to efforts to constitute a collective history (the politics of memory). The actors negotiate, define and communicate memories, i.e. origins of the region, personages or particularly boom-phases.
• *Strategy IV – prospect*: With prospect I refer to the discursive constitution of a political and economic presence and future. By this, collective problems and future challenges, i.e. challenges globalisation, competition of regions, become exploited.

The regional corporation uses many different ways to reach the regional addressee. First of all, it uses public relations and the political speech in many situations such as cultural events and conferences. In addition, it uses a variety of brochures, advertisements, an internet-platform, special issues of newspapers (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Handelsblatt) and TV-trailer (Rhine-Neckar TV). By this, the regional corporation uses a corporate identity consisting of "Economy" (Region der Wirtschaft), "Science" (Region der Wissenschaft) and "Quality of Life" (Region der Lebensqualität). Figure 3 might be seen as an example of the communication strategy as undertaken by the regional corporation (Federwisch 2005, 2008).

Table 3: Spatial discourses and political strategies

| subject	agenda	strategies
discursive constitution of regional shape	borders, dimension, nature, landscape etc.	**modelling the region**
discursive constitution of a representative inhabitant	personal and collective habits	**ethnic formation**
discursive constitution of a collective history (memory)	origins of the region, personages, boom-phases	**retrospect**
discursive constitution of a presence and future	collective problems and future challenges	**prospect**
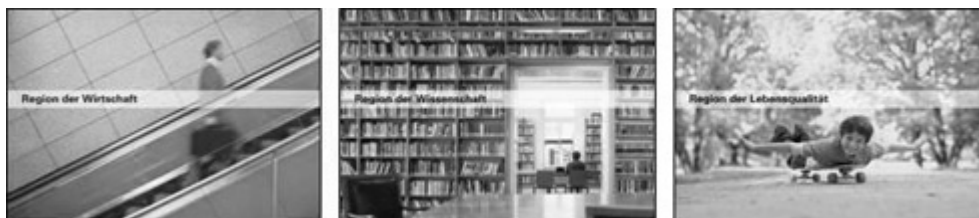
Figure 3: Corporate Identity

In sum, the politics of spatial identity can be understood as a symbolic practice complement-tary to structural and economic practices. It is a political strategy that is expected to ensure integration into governance structures and networks and to ensure sympathy and trust as well as loyalty, motivation and participation by the regional population. As empirical findings show, four strategies can be connected with the politics of spatial identity. Altogether, they might constitute a holistic conception of regional identity under late-modern conditions.

Conclusion

The Rhine-Neckar region represents a polycentric urban agglomeration which has been designated as a "European Metropolitan Region" in the German Federal Action Plan. Situated at the intersection of three federal states the Rhine-Neckar region shows an intense cross border and inter-municipal cooperation. However, the creation and strengthening of a comprehensive mode of regional governance and network constellation is still particularly relevant for the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation.

Based on my empirical research on the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region Corporation I have addressed the relevance of regional identity in the context of governance and network constitution. In doing so, I have given an insight into possible actors' motivation doing the politics of spatial identity. As a result, the strategic formation of regional identity might be seen as an important political practice complementary to economic regional development. Seen as a way of "significative regionalisation" the politics of spatial identity tends to support the emerging governance and network constellations though mental mobilisation.

An addition, I argue that *globalisation* and *competition* plays a central role in the argumentation of regional elites. It seems that the politics of spatial identity is primarily forward oriented rather than backwards. Although the instrumentalisation of memories and traditions takes certainly place, the regional corporation aims to constitute a prospective and mobilizing consciousness (strategy IV – prospect). This let me to the assumption that the politics of spatial identity tends to form a "mental infrastructure" in order to cope with the requirements of economic and societal globalisation: that is, socio-economic change and the need of continuous modernisation. Hence, the politics of spatial identity becomes an instrument contributing to globalisation. It accelerates the formation of governance-networks and accelerates processes of decision making and their implementation.

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