

# The North of England: a multifaceted region, and its representations along the ‘North-South Divide’

Arianna Giovannini

Institute of Northern Studies  
Leeds Metropolitan University – UK –

## *Abstract* –

Within contemporary discourse, the concept of ‘region’ certainly emerges as shifting and complex, and it lacks a univocal definition. Therefore, one effective way to tackle such a slippery conception is to analyse it by developing a *way of seeing* through a specific angle at least one of its many facets. Here, what I argue for is the significance of popular discourse representations in forging a notion of region.

The case I wish to consider in this paper concerns the North of England, and my aim is to investigate those representations so deeply rooted in popular discourse and social imagery, which are key in giving shape to a meaning of ‘*northern-ness*’.

If we consider a region as a dynamic, shifting territorial entity whose boundaries cannot be taken as read, this view applies also to the North of England. First of all it lacks a fixed formal or administrative existence: it is a shifting, relative and fluid region. Where exactly is it? What and who define its boundaries? How does it emerge as a specific territory within the wider UK context? ...What is the North of England? Besides rhetoric, these questions shed light on the manifold meanings of a region that is not just a ‘plain’ geographic area. Rather, it emerges and it imposes itself, both at local and national level, as a complex, multiform and contested space, where territory, its images and representations and the social relations taking place within (and resulting from) it are vitally interconnected, and tightly knitted. The North of England is not merely a place, but also – and crucially – a *state of mind* and, therefore, a relevant discursive entity.

Most of the attempts to define this ‘North’ build on an idea of ‘place-myth’. Such an acknowledgment draws on (and at the same time gives substance to) the most commonly expressed ‘polarisation’ (and fracture) existing within England: that between ‘North’ and ‘South’. A wide range of literature informs the importance of this, underlying how the

North is often known and depicted mainly through ‘internal’ and ‘external’ representations that are long established both in popular discourse and culture. An issue such as the ‘North-South divide’ provides a clear example of a sphere where reality and imagery meet and match, giving rise to imagined boundaries and differentiations going far beyond geography, politics or economy. Along this fissure, in fact, run a number of stereotypes and metaphors about ‘The North’. For example, in recent history, from the mainstream London-centred perspective the North has been depicted as the grey, grim and backward ‘working-class land’, in contrast to the more ‘cultured’ and ‘sophisticated’ South. Conversely, indigenous views revolve around similar elements but interpreting them from an opposite perspective. Although these definitions may appear stereotyped and trivial, they are nevertheless very deeply rooted in social imagery and imaginations, functioning as ‘myths’ or ‘mythologies’ through which people give sense to the Northern region and its identity. Here, a crucial issue concerns the sources/actors from which these representations are produced (and, subsequently, those by which they are consumed). A key factor, thus, is the viewpoint or the ‘geographical positioning’ from which one looks at the North, and how this affects the representations of the region.

In this paper I aim to investigate these representations and both their producers and consumers along the line of the North-South divide in the contemporary discourse, and see the influence/impact they have on the regional identity of Northern England, and its imaginations. To achieve this, I will draw upon literature on space/place-myths and their roots in popular discourse and how these can inform a conception of region and identity. Then, I will illustrate how this complex and prolific relationship works in/on the North of England by analysing its depiction(s) in a case enshrining a typical means for transmission of popular discourse and culture: English newspaper cartoons (and related articles).