

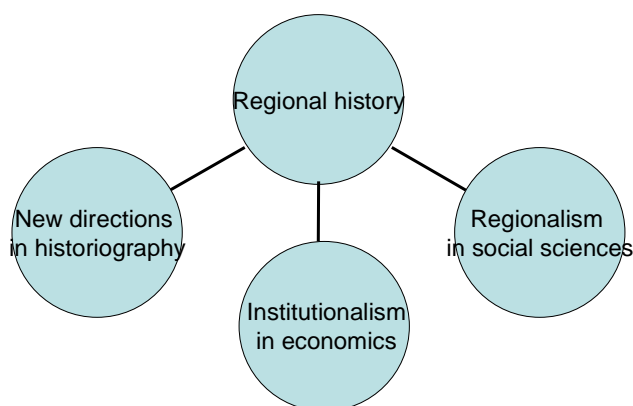
Sulevi Riukulehto

## The Concept of Region in Regional History

Such a branch as regional history does not really exist yet in the family of human sciences. But there should exist. In the past decade a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have turned their attention to space as a means of understanding historical processes. Specific conferences are arranged concerning the meaning of space. [For example in April 30, 2010 at Berkeley.] Finally, after the twenty years of linguistic turn, historians and other history-oriented scholars have deliberately risen such terms as "region", "space" and "territory" into the focus of historiography, too. The turn to space has connections with the various forms of history from below, such as the traditions of local history, micro-history and family history. In all these directions of historiography the role of space must have been taken into account in a new way. [Olofsson and Öhman ] The specific features of the place – the forum where history is made – may be decisive to historical analysis.

The spatial turn also has connections to the general globalisation analysis and the wave of regionalism in the world. The regionalist paradigm is stressing the importance of place in explaining success and failure and the need for endogenous growth strategies. [Hise; Klieman; Frisvoll and Rye; Gerber and Gibson]

The current turn may still have connections to the new arrival of institutional and evolutionary drifts in economics; the adherents of so called new institutionalistic school are interested in the implications of all kinds of institutional changes in economy, including the institutions of spatial basis. [Pastor & al; Sen] Territories are no longer considered interchangeable. Markets and capitalism are not the same everywhere, but vary from one place to another, as does the entrepreneurial activity and regional institutions.



**Figure 1. Regional history has connections to various traditions in history, economics and social sciences.**

The new regionally oriented directions in historiography are so recent that no generally recognised orthodoxy has yet been adopted. The various elements from localism to globalisation can still be seen in the first works written under the label of regional history. What is a region? There exist competing views concerning the definition and criteria of a region. In this presentation I am going to make the various meanings of the concept more visible. As the primary source I make use of a book edited by Bill Lancaster, Diana Newton and Natasha Vall: *An Agenda for Regional History* (Newcastle 2007. Later: the *Agenda*). As far as I know it is the first major book written under the label of regional history.

The *Agenda* consists of 19 articles throwing light on regional history from different points of departure. I try to analyse the different conceptions that can be found in the articles by categorising them through a number of dichotomies such as **simple–complex, static–evolutionary** and **administrative–discursive**. Certain aspects can better be examined through such multifold qualifications as **sub-national – supranational – cross-national** and **geographical – socio-cultural – economic**.

### **What is a region?**

Some authors of the *Agenda* are pondering their definitions in details while some others do not question the concept at all. Sometimes regional history is almost synonymic to local history [Saunders; Jackson]. This is a little bit confusing to me. Why not to use term local history if one actually means it? Clearly the great majority of the authors have a more special content in their idea of region; i.e. they make a difference between the concepts of local and regional.

There are differences in the criteria by which the regions are assorted. Naturally, a region may be differentiated on account of **geographical** details. An area may have such a peculiar geographical realization that it obviously differs from surrounding areas. In a way, this criterion is fundamental and sometimes it is even indisputable. Such is the case of Åland, an archipelago between Finland and Sweden. The mere geography gives Åland her peculiarity and uniqueness. In the *Agenda* the geographically oriented concept of a region can be seen in Brian K. Roberts' article of North Eastern England [Roberts]. He looks at geographical facts like climate, coastal profiles, forms of land and vegetation in order to define the region of North Eastern England in medieval and classical periods. Besides he – interestingly – makes use of the concept of positive and negative evidence, with a spatial distribution being reversed to ask about the negative spaces and what they mean. Do they form a region by virtue of omitting certain peculiar features?

Usually the mere geography is not enough. Actually, it is not enough for Roberts either. He goes on to social, cultural and economic factors. Charles Phythian-Adams starts his definition right from the **socio-cultural** level. So, Phythian-Adams gives us seven key features for defining a regional society: 1. concentration of population; 2. hierarchical structure; 3. intra-dependence of the region; 4. self-identifying; 5. own provincial interests against national power structures; 6. a demographic concentration (of indigenous families); and 7. the regional sense of belonging together. Also Bill Lancaster's list is consisting of pure socio-cultural factors: space, language, culture, economy, political movements, traditions, and relationships to the nation state.

We are familiar with these kinds of listings from another historical context. The theorists of a nation defined same kinds of lists two hundred years ago in order to demonstrate the existence of a nation. The parallelism between a nation and a region seems evident to me.

Some authors are highlighting especially the **economic** criteria. Of course, the economic distinctions can be included in as part of socio-cultural criteria. Or, alternatively, the socio-cultural criteria could be divided to three to five more criteria. However, we have a great number of economists who have studied regions and defined them merely on account of economic meters. In the traditions of regional economics it has been quite common to omit all factors external to economy. I do not claim that all the regional economists would have been using criteria so tightly drawn but there certainly are a plenty of those who do so.

<b>Criteria for identification</b>	Geographic	Socio-cultural, economic
<b>Form of manifestation</b>	Administrative	Discursive
<b>Durability</b>	Static, fixed	Procedural, evolutionary
<b>Complexity</b>	Simple	Complicated
<b>Hierarchism</b>	Hierarchical	Non-hierarchical
<b>Way of formation</b>	Projected, dictated	Spontaneous, autonomous

**Figure 2. Profile fields for regions**

What forms of manifestation does a region have? What is the place of **administrative** institutions in a region? Some authors are looking for administrative units with stable, regional institutions. In a way, they seem to think that the more institutions a territory has the more it is a region. [Guibernau; Cloke, Goodwin, Milbourne; Thiesse] This makes A. C. Hepburn, for example, focusing to exceptional, "contested regions" like Ulster, Saarland, Punjab, Basque region, and Bengal. They have a number of regional institutions, they may be nations, and they are almost states.

Others maintain that a region – being a **discursive** phenomenon – can have an important influence on identities although it was on the stage of idea rather than that of geographical or social reality. [Holford] The cultural idioms reflect the spread of particular ideas. The spread is not necessarily uninterrupted and coextensive but sporadic. [Phythian-Adams] It can be easily seen that the administrative and discursive criteria lead to entirely different map of regions.

A number of profiles can be differentiated if we combine the forms of manifestation with main criteria: a region may be differentiated from its environment on account of its geographical, socio-cultural or economic features. Besides a region may have its manifestation in administrative or in discursive form, or in both forms. These possible categories of conceptions can still be further refined. The concepts of region differ from each other concerning the complexity, durability and relation of regions to other territorial formations, such as national states (to the last mentioned I have given the name *hierarchism* in figure 2).

## The complexity and durability of regional structures

The structure or the form of a region can be either **simple or complex**. The geographically defined regions are often structurally simple. However the majority of the authors confine regions as complex entities whether they are defined by shapes of the ground or some discursive constructions. [Walton]

The geographical differences between regions are naturally almost permanent. In the traditional historiography, however, all kinds of regions have been taken to be quite **static**. The regions have been defined once and for all in history. The statistic data is produced following certain static frontiers, usually projected backwards from present tense. That makes history writing much easier but certainly not more reliable. In the *Agenda* the attitude is criticized by Michael Keating: economic, cultural, institutional and political integration do not necessarily coincide in time and place. Static analysis makes violence to the procedural nature of regions.

Most authors are emphasizing the **evolutionary** or procedural nature of region. Regions are to a large extent historical constructs without permanent size and shape. [Wilson] There are geographical, political and religious grounds for regional identity. Region and regional identity are not a priori defined realities, but are constantly ongoing creations. [Granier] In a long-term perspective, at least, the process is evolutionary rather than episodic. [Phythian-Adams]

## Regions and nation state

Concerning the relation to nation state three kinds of attitudes can be differentiated: a region is seen as a **sub-national, supranational or cross-national** creation.

Usually the regional is seen as a level in a hierarchy. Regions are parallel parts of the whole; they form one stage in **hierarchical** continuum of territorial spaces. The idea is usually presented in **sub-national** form (from bottom to top): *local – sub-regional – regional – national – international*. A region, thus, is defined as constituting the largest and most extensive intermediate collectivity between the individual and the nation state. [Walton] Many variations of the conception can easily be found. [Gilli, Russell, Wilson, Walton, Holford] So, in Patrick Gilli's article on Italian and Florentian regional identity there is the Italian consciousness which is above the level of the state of Florence concerning the entire peninsula. There is a distinction between the Italian homeland and the little, local or regional homeland, which was only a sub-unit of the former zone. [Gilli]

There certainly is a plenty of exceptions and untypicalities such as semi-independent in-betweens, frontier areas etc. Sometimes regions are regarded to as kinds of embryos, potential future states, still politically ambivalent elements in the state formation process. [Wilson]

According to this conception the regions are contingent, relatively short-lived, specialised subdivisions of some wider plane of national activity. Alternatively a region is taken to be a more enduring, intermediating actor between localities and the nation. [Phythian-Adams] A region has identity, a social memory, myths, institutions, and own iconic buildings.

Some scholars get embarrassed when the searched hierarchical structure can not be found. Does it mean that England, for example, does not have regions? [Holford] If a region is understood as **self-defined, spontaneous** formation, independent from the hierarchy of localities and nations, the

absolute difference between a regional and national consciousness disappears. A region has geographic, strategic, cultural, functional and historic factors that may or may not follow national borders. A region is a local, a national or an in-between formation; it can be even international or cross-national in nature. In order to study regions concepts like meaning, identity, history, territory and power are more useful set of tools than the hierarchy of nation, region and place. [Aronsson] Again, the variation in the use of the concept is great.

According to this point of view there is no absolute difference between a regional and national consciousness. State is a region with an army. [Hepburn] In a way, the role of national history is reducing as a special case of regional history. **Cross-national** regions can be recognized even if the inhabitants of a region do not necessarily regard themselves as a homogeneous group of people. [Hepburn] This also makes it possible to study city as a region like Belchem does with Liverpool and Thompson with Berlin.

A completely different idea of region can be found in international economics. A region is a **supranational** share of states. This definition positions a region at the other end of the hierarchy. Regions are summed-up nations. [Pollard] They are composing international economic areas, such as South Asia, European Union etc. In the *Agenda*, however, no author is leaning to this interpretation.

### **A frame for regional history**

Many kinds of social, cultural, economic, operative, geographic and historical factors may be essential in forming a region. I would not give a primacy for any factor among them.

It is easy to agree with Peter Aronsson and Dave Russell: We need a comprehensive theory of the use of history in the construction of identity. [Aronsson] We need far more historical geography of cultural activity, a mapping of networks that allows us to view more clearly the highly distinctive cultural regions that have emerged over the last centuries. [Russell] Besides I am convinced that we also need more historical analysis of the development of operative and economical interaction between regions. In what directions the actors of a certain area have been operated in their social, cultural, economical, and functional operations?

In order to differentiate regional history from local history and national history the regions should not be defined as divisions of states or as multiplications of localities. They should not be taken as hierarchical unit between local and national. A region may be situated between them but they do not indispensably be situated there. A region should define itself autonomously. This means that neither national level nor local level should be given any primacy in historiography of regional phenomena. Regions should not be taken as projections from national level. Necessarily a region is a procedural, evolutionary actor. It may be local or cross-local; it may be a state, a part of a state, or the entity of many states or their parts. A region may have different positions and statuses in different times. Regions are evolutionary, procedural and non-hierarchical actors.

This also means that a historian should be careful while using statistic data produced by national authors; they may reflect unnatural projections of regional structure. This kind of top-down bias, uncritically utilized, may lead to secondary framing of questions and to false results in research work. Perhaps some interesting questions do not penetrate under the analysis at all because the given regional division is irrelevant. Perhaps the phenomenon can not be seen from the data.

## Sources

*An Agenda for Regional History*. Bill Lancaster, Diana Newton and Natasha Vall (eds.). Northumbria University Press, Newcastle 2007.

Aronsson Peter: The old cultural regionalism – and the new. 251–270

Belchem John: A city apart: Liverpool, Merseyside and the North West region. 217–231

Farr Ian & Graham Ford: Bavaria's "German Mission" the CSU and the politics of regional identity, 1949–c.1962. 165–179

Gilli Patrick: Italionità and city patriotism in the states of Florence and Milan at the turn of the fourteenth century. 181–197

Granier Thomas: Local or regional identity in early medieval Latin Southern Italy? 101–114

Hepburn A. C.: Contested regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ulster in comparative perspective. 115–129.

Holford Matt: The North and the dynamics of regional identity in later medieval England. 303–316

Keating Michael: A regional history of modern Europe. Territorial management and the state. 149–

Lancaster Bill: The North East, England's most distinctive region? 23–42

Michie Ranald: The City of London and the British regions: from medieval to modern. 201–215

Payton Philip: "A Dutchy in every respect un-English": discourses of identity in the late modern Cornwall. 317–331

Phythian–Adams Charles: Differentiating provincial societies in English history: spatial contexts and cultural processes 3–22

Pooley Colin G.: The role of migration in constructing regional identity. 63–81

Roberts Brian K.: Time and tide in North Eastern England. 43–62

Russell Dave: Culture and formation of northern English identities from c.1850. 271–288

Saunders David: Andreevskoe, an estate in nineteenth-century Iaroslavl.

Thompson Alastair: City, region, state and nation: Berlin as a political capital, 1880–1920. 233–248

Walton John K.: Imagining regions in comparative perspective: the strange birth of North-West England. 289–302

Wilson Peter H.: Regions and regionalism in early modern German history. 85–100.

Cloke P., Goodwin M., Milbourne P.: Cultural Change and Conflict in Rural Wales. *Competing Constructs of Identity*. 3/1998, 463–480.

Frisvoll Svein, Rye Johan Fredrik: Elite discourses of regional identity in a new regionalism development scheme: The case of the 'Mountain Region' in Norway. *Norwegian Journal of Geography*. 3/2009, 175–190.

Gerber Elisabeth, Gibson Clarc C.: Balancing Regionalism and Localism. *American Journal of Political Science*. 3/2009, 633–648.

Guibernau Montserrat: National Identity, devolution and secession in Canada, Britain and Spain. *Nations & Nationalism*. 1/2006, 51–76.

Hise Greg: Whither the Region? Periods and Periodicity in Planning History. *Journal of Planning History*. 4/2009, 295–307.

Jackson Andrew: Local and Regional History as Heritage: The Heritage Process and Conceptualising the Purpose and Practice of Local Historians. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 4/2008, 362–379.

Klieman Aharon: "Middle Eastener": A Regionalis Denied. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. 1/2008, 305–316.

Olofsson Anna, Öhman Susanna: Cosmopolitans and Locals: An Empirical Investigation of Transnationalism. *Current Sociology*. 6/2007, 877–895.

Pastor Manuel, Lester William, Scoggins Justin: Why Regions? Why Now? Who Cares? *Journal of Urban Affairs*. 3/2009, 269–296.

Sen Amartya: *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux. New York 2005.

Thiesse Anne-Marie: Les deux identités de la France. *Modern and Conpemporary France*. 1/2001, 9–18.