

Sibylle Baumbach (ed.)

Regions of Culture – Regions of Identity

Kulturregionen – Identitätsregionen

GCSC

Giessen Contributions to the Study of Culture

4

Edited by

Horst Carl, Wolfgang Hallet, Ansgar Nünning, Martin Zierold



International Graduate Centre
for the Study of Culture

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Sibylle Baumbach
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CONCEPTUALISING ‘REGION’, ‘IDENTITY’ AND ‘CULTURE’, AND MAPPING APPROACHES TO REGIONS OF CULTURE AND REGIONS OF IDENTITY

SIBYLLE BAUMBACH

1. Mapping the ‘region’

The region has attained a remarkable centrality during the past two decades. The “invention of the region” (Anderson 1994) after the Second World War as a result of the decline of provinces and the growing movement of regionalisation and decentralisation in Europe (cf. Mény 1982) – which reached its peak with the emergence of what has been referred to as a ‘Europe of the regions’ (cf. Keating 1998; Hrbek/Weyand 1994; also Jöhler 2008) – fuelled the proliferation of neo-localism and gave rise to numerous studies in the field. While there is a strong focus on the development of (new) regionalisms within the European Union (see esp. Conzelmann/Knodt 2002; Wagstaff 1999; Le Galès/Lequesne 1998), popular areas of research also embrace processes of regionalisation in the Americas (cf. Saldívar 1997) and the Asia-Pacific (cf. Lawson 2003). In these studies, increased attention has been directed to the interaction of memory culture and regional history (see esp. Schmid 2009; Lancaster et al. 2007), to the institutionalisation of “multi-level governance” (Marks 1993) and its challenges to national authority, as well as to political, economic, and social forces involved in constituting a region and establishing regional identities (cf. esp. Sagan/Halkier 2005; Mühler/Opp 2004). What has yet to be investigated in depth, however, are the ways in which regions can be described and distinguished from one another from a cultural perspective.

What are the conceptual and cultural nodes that create and ultimately hold together a regional network while drawing the boundaries to other (adjacent) regions? To what extent do forms of “top-down regionalisation” (Keating 1998: 9), such as are imposed by state or administrative borders or federalism, have an impact on or interact with prevalent elements of a specific material or intellectual culture? How do political and economical regions relate to the extant linguistic structures, social practices, and traditional customs they embrace? In addition to political, economic, and social forces, the main agents involved in creating and sustaining ‘regions of culture’ and ‘regions of identity’ by communicating shared traditions, customs, and values include a wide range of different sites and media devoted to the promotion of regional history and the creation of a regional collective consciousness, such as, for instance, museums and monuments, traditional fairs and festivals, art and especially literature (cf. Burdorf/Matuschek 2008; Wagner-Egelhaaf 2001; McCullough 1999; Lindner 1994). Before

further embarking on the structural and cultural foundation(s) of spaces that qualify as ‘regions’, which are addressed from many different perspectives and disciplines by the articles in this volume, let us briefly reconsider what is at the centre of our investigation: the region.

What exactly do we refer to when we speak of a ‘region’? In its most basic meaning, the term denotes “a subdivision of the earth or universe” (*OED* I), or more specifically, “any large portion of the earth’s surface considered as defined or distinguished from adjacent areas in some way, as by culture, government, topography, climate, fauna, flora etc” (I. 2). Especially in economic and political contexts, regions are considered areas that encompass “several neighbouring states that, from an international standpoint, are considered socially, economically, or politically interdependent” (I. 2 e). While a ‘region’ is often understood as referring to a subnational organisational structure that lacks the affirmation of a government and whose boundaries are looser than those of a nation-state, the expression is also used to denote a supranational area. Thus, the European continent, the European Union as well as distinct areas within its member states can all be described as ‘regions’; the first is distinguished by its geographical borders, the second by an economic and political union, and the third by socio-political and cultural markers. Moreover, ‘region’ can refer to a metaphysical place that is subject to specific features and influences, as is the case, for instance, in the expressions ‘region of knowledge’ or ‘region of identity’.

In the attempt to further structure the different areas embraced by the term ‘region’, three main factors are salient. Regions are formed by functional, formal, or vernacular parameters, i. e. (1) by administrative devices, political and economic factors; (2) by a shared language, culture, and/or religion; and (3) by social structures, by “the spatial perception of average people” and “the mental maps of the population” (Jordan 1978: 293). The connotations associated with a specific area, the memories and emotions it evokes in the individual as well as his or her relation to, and identification with, its elements, constitute a region (cf. Mühler/Opp 2004: 14), but the formation and consolidation of regions ultimately rests on a dynamic relation between intrinsic and extrinsic forces, between perception and attribution, and can be conducted both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’. Bringing together representatives of local and regional governments, the European Committee of the Regions, for instance, formed in 1994, combines both strategies, being designed to give a voice to regional authorities in EU legislation and supranational policy development.

The significant role of the inhabitants in processes of region-building ties in with the notion of variability and therefore instability of these areas: Regions are subject to change as their borders have to be continuously redrawn. Instead of constituting durable and static demarcation lines, their physical boundaries are historically determined: “[i]t is how human beings have reacted to, and in some cases modified or evaded, the physical environment that has shaped the changing concept of the physical ‘region’” (Royle 1998: 2). Regions therefore underlie a dynamic process of composition, decomposition, and re-composition as they undergo dramatic demographic,