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Regionalisation processes as practices of borderisation[1]

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Regionalisation processes as practices of borderisation

This paper explores processes of 'borderisation', that is, a set of practices whithin which individuals conduct their daily life as spatial relationships. It is based on the ongoing IDENT2-research project conducted at the University of Luxembourg. Our understanding of the border area is neither based on political or administrative categories, nor does it necessarily assume a fixed regional entity. It refers to social contexts in which border practices become effective, comprising actions by institutions or individuals to deal with borders of any kind in variegated ways.

Our starting point is the assumption that the spatialities resulting from practices of borderisation are no longer represented adequately by political or administrative categories. They can only be understood by investigating how this border space is being produced and reproduced. According to our research perspective – known as "everyday regionalisation" (Benno Werlen) – spatial constructions and their governance logics can be examined in transnational contexts, or border areas, respectively. In so doing, essentialist ideas of space and borders from the classical geographical sciences are overridden, and concepts assuming a production of space and active borderisations become central.

The changes addressed here concerning the perception of space refer to constructivist research approaches that received increasing attention in cultural studies and social sciences over the past few decades. The linguistic, cultural and – last but not least – spatial *turn* from a rather material, objectivistic perspective towards a more interpretative, subjectivist view of the world entails a broad variety of research approaches. Though drawing on quite heterogenous bodies of theories and approaches, these accounts do have a common frame of interpretation: they are no longer predominated by one 'correct' or 'true' idea of their subject matter, but allow for deploying multiple perspectives, based on different perceptions and interests (Döring/Thielmann 2009; Bachmann-Medick 2009).

In the following, this paper will delve into presenting two central conceptual categories of our research: first, *regionalisation* will be introduced as a specific human geographical approach to territory and region; second, I will discuss *identity*, as a certain means of perceiving and constructing everyday life, the associated territory, and the role of borders. I will conclude by bringing a few cases.

1.   Regionalisation

The term 'regionalisation' has been introduced to the German-speaking realm by the cultural geographer *Benno Werlen*, whose action-centred understanding of space has been widely discussed in human geography (Werlen 1995, 1997). The action-centred approach was developed as a theoretical framework in social geography, aiming at nothing less than a para-

digmatic shift of the discipline. It emerged against the background of a renewed ontology of territory, whose focus had switched from explaining society through space (the traditional perspective) towards analysing societal relations through space – an analytical category.

In this context, regionalisation is defined as a social practice of acting subjects relating to their environment. Regionalisation is thus *not* a means of spatial classification (referring for instance to the Greater Region), but designates a particular connection between individuals and their environment, a form of attachment to the world actively sought by subjects, as they react to the changes brought about by globalisation, technological change and rising degrees of mobility and locational freedom (Werlen 2000). Its major contentions were that space is a relational rather than absolute construct, and that traditional and late-modern societies differ fundamentally in terms of spatial relations.

As a consequence, our understanding of territorial categories such as space or region has two significant dimensions. First, it includes overcoming the traditional imagination of the world as being located in a kind of 'container space'. Territory and region are no longer considered as given, fixed entities of physical and material properties located on a certain segment of the Earth's surface, but as different parts within a system of interrelations (Gregory 1993); second, regionalisation includes both processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. On the one hand, individual action and societal structures appear to be dis-embedded from their spatio-temporal conditions. Quite paradoxically however, on the other hand, the idea of placelessness is challenged by processes of re-territorialisation, where space is no longer defined as a reified, static container, but as a relational, intersubjective construction, to which individuals or collectives are positively attached.

Traditional approaches of regionalisation have emphasised a spatial re-structuring and re-organisation of society, aiming at a certain congruence of territory and action. This was e.g. a key issue of administrative reform or 'new regionalism'. In contrast, the paradigm of regionalisation as taken up by IDENT2 underlines the disembeddedness of societal action from territorial materialities. Regionalisation is no longer, at least not predominantly, about spatial categories, but particular forms of life and social organisation. It is not about the geography of the subjects and their spatial order, but it seeks to clarify how certain subjects are 'doing geography', under the conditions of dis-embeddedness. Thus, the core question of this project addresses the ways in which individual subjects interpret the world around them and relate to it in their social practices.

Forms of regionalisation may be observed at all levels in which notions of space play a role for a subject's actions. However, these patterns of actions are necessarily distinct and need to be treated differently.

Related research has been focusing in particular on normative-political or administrative bordering, e.g. in the case of the 'Greater Region' (Auburtin 2008, Clement 2008, Chilla at al. 2010), or on the symbolic framing of space, as it is for instance expressed in the terms of 'diaspora' or 'home', functioning as *Heimat* (Péporte et al. 2010, 160-174) of landscape (Sunnen 2008), or 'terroire' with respect to wine (Reckinger 2011). The same applies to recent conceptualisations of material flows and 'mobilities' of any kind, which lead to new spatial constellations. The increasing significance of circular, residential and labour migration for instance has been transcended into the concept of transnationalisation (cf. Pries 2008), 'transnational spaces' (Jackson et al. 2004) or 'spaces of frontier' (Wille 2012), where multiplying and shifting borders seem to be constitutive.

2. Identity in spatial contexts, i.e. in 'border regions'

Our second conceptual angle deals with identity. This question, particularly in spatial regards, tends to be as complex and complicated as territory, region or regionalisation are. One of the most prolific thinkers in the study of region and identity, Anssi Paasi from Finland, has sketched it this way (Paasi 2003, 477): "Regional identity has been recognized as a key element in the making of regions as social/political spaces, but it is difficult to elucidate what this identity consists of and how it affects collective action/politics (…). The crucial question is how political passions are regionalized, and here institutions constitutive of region-building (economy, governance, language, media, literature) and inherent power relations are significant."

By following the notion of space and region as being relational, we certainly do not consider identity being something pre-existing and given. We assume it is constantly produced and reproduced by individual and collective action. Among the more robust definitions of identity in spatial regards, authors such as Paasi (2002, 2003) or Weichhart (1999) distinguish between the assumed identity of a region or a territory, and the identification of individuals with certain places. Indeed this debate is extremely broad. Most importantly, we suggest that identity in spatial terms is i) a result of human activity (once people are "doing identity"), it is ii) considered as being contingent, constantly changing, and it is iii) contested, ascribed to different meanings attributed by those involved, according to their variegated power relations.

Concerning the case of the borderland setting of Luxembourg and the Greater Region, the question of being placed or being localised, thus addressing spatial identification, has already been raised by authors such as Cavet et al. (2006). However, their approach was predominantly a statistical one, mainly taking into account the crossing of political borders. In con-

trast, our studies will explore spatial relationships based on social practices conducted across and within certain borders – as a deliberate action, the 'doing' of individuals. Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) suggested the terminology of "bordering, ordering and othering", which precisely points at the constructivist meaning we seek to apply to regions, identity and borders. Borders are as much assumed as relational as we see regions: "Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time, rather they symbolize a social practice of spatial differentiation." (ibid., 126)

Here is our central point: given that the 'region' as such is nowadays perceived as a constructed rather than constitutive matter, and acknowledged that it is increasingly difficult to demarcate, delineate and thus determine regions (Amin 2004), the same can be said for border regions. They evolve from social practices and political conflict, they do not represent a fixed entity, but a constructed reality. Our challenge is how to best approach the related territory, in this case of the Greater Region: Based on our methodology, we do not consider this 'border region' a fixed, solid entity. Instead, we focus on analysing social practices and spatial relations, individual and collective action in relating to the world and to the subjects' identity, as there are political 'b/order' constructions and normative processes of inclusion and exclusion; hegemonic discourses about space; and practices of (self-)rule and power in micro-settings, where subjects

are 'doing space' and 'doing identity' in interaction with others.

3.   The IDENT2-research agenda

Against this conceptual background, our project plans to investigate regionalisation as a practice of borderisation. Our research concept has evolved from the preceding UL-project "IDENT", which was focusing on identity constructions in Luxembourg as a dialectical exchange between processes of attributions and of appropriations. IDENT2 expands the scope of the investigation and systematically explores spatial relations. It seeks to assess how people or institutions perceive space and how they create specific yet diverse 'spatialities' that contribute to the construction of identity.

Our empirical studies will focus on the role of borders that may be social, symbolic, linguistic, cognitive or corporeal. Thus we will not only rely on quantitative methods, but also use non-standardised queries and discourse analyses to examine identity constructions as performed by active subjects. To give you some examples for cases (out of the 23 studies that we plan to conduct), here are three of them:

- In terms *of Institutional action – border and spatial constructions via politics and norms –* one project will explore the current turn in energy policy and ask how the issue of 'energy regions' is being constructed by fostering the biogas production. On the one hand, it anal-

yses institutional and structural conditions that frame processes of regionalisations in the biogas economy and how these conditions relate to socio-technical developments. The theoretical approach is based on evolutionary institutionalism and socio-technical transition studies. Therefore, industrial networks and strategic games, techno-scientific knowledge, cultural and symbolic meanings, sectorial policies, as well as markets and user practices are studied. On the other hand, the focus is on economic practices and everyday actions of actors in the biogas economy (e.g. operators, investors). The main goals are to analyse the economic utilisation of spatial categories and contexts, and to uncover the relationship of economy, action and spatial references.

- In terms of *Media – Representations of border and spatial constructions* – a research project investigates how the issue of prostitution is being framed and thus produced by parliamentary debates, assessing archival material from roughly the first half of the 20th Century that documents plenary discussions at the National Chamber of Luxembourg, and also based on evidence from police reports. By applying a Foucauldian approach on power relations and governmentality, the research seeks to uncover the construction of 'immoral' spaces, the gendered attribution of danger and criminality, where prostitutes are illegal, and their punters are not, etc. pp.

- In terms of *Activity by subjects – Spatial and border constructions through everyday practice*: One project seeks to investigate how people living at the urban fringes identify themselves as being urban, sub-urban or rural. Whereas geographical theories assume a de facto liquidation of the differences between the urban and the rural, the spaces in-between (the geographical ones and the 'lived' ones) need further ontological clarification.

We would argue that Luxembourg and the Greater Region – with its specific setting of territory and borders – provide an ideal environment for conducting a study on regionalisation processes and identity construction.

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