



Mapping regions, framing projects

A comparative analysis on the role of mapping in the region-building process of two European regions



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ABSTRACT

For the last two decades, publications within the “new regional geography” have given little emphasis to cartography. This paper examines the specific role of mapping, its political stakes and modalities, in the region-building process. It illustrates this with an analysis of mapping and database production in the institutionalization process of two “project regions”—the Alps and Carpathian mountains—and in two related, on-going efforts to promote macro-regional strategies. This paper argues that the production of maps and databases deserves to be seen not only as a technical moment, or simply as one output among others in the region-building process, but rather as a component of the process itself, a component that is especially decisive and complex in that it makes explicit the connection between the territorial and the relational dimensions of region-making. The two cases illustrate that mapping is a significant component of the region-making process for three main reasons: (1) it gives shape to the region, provides arguments for its construction, and therefore is a decisive cognitive and rhetorical tool for territorialization; (2) it contributes to the shaping of relational arrangements for the corresponding region; (3) its contribution is important at all different stages in the region-making process – conceptualization, creation, and consolidation – through various modalities.

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1. Introduction

In 1991, eight states and the European Union signed the Alpine Convention (AC), an international treaty aiming at promoting common policies on environmental protection and sustainable development. In the 20 years since, the production of maps at the scale of the AC territory has been intensive, but poorly coordinated, and the main organizations responsible for administering the Convention are still determining what kind of spatial monitoring system they should establish. In 2011, on its 20th anniversary, the AC came under strong criticism for its mode of governance and, according to many, limited tangible results (Price et al., 2011). Since then, several actors involved to varying degrees in AC activities have been working on competing scenarios for an Alpine macro-regional strategy in the European Union Regional Policy framework. So far, these stakeholders have been cautious in outlining, on maps, the extent and the content of their respective projects.

A parallel endeavor, the Carpathian Convention (CC) was signed by seven states of Central and Eastern Europe in 2003. Ten years later, the various stakeholders have at their disposal a wide and very organized set of maps, atlases and electronic databases, displaying the Carpathian region in many different ways. Meanwhile, the main organization responsible for the Secretariat of the CC has been promoting a macro-regional strategy for a wider area, the ‘Carpathian Space’, strongly relying on complementary work in cartography and the production of databases.

The Alps and the Carpathians are the subjects of similar regional projects, international conventions and macro-regional strategies, but mapping issues have been raised in very different ways in their respective region-making processes. This paper addresses the role of mapping in these regional projects, highlighting issues and some of the reasons for such differences. It argues that the production of maps and databases deserves to be seen not only as a technical moment, or simply as one output among others in the region-making process, but rather as a component of the process itself, a component that is especially decisive and complex in that it makes explicit the connection between the territorial and the relational dimensions of region-making. The two cases illustrate that mapping is a significant component of the region-making process for three main reasons: (1) it gives shape to the region, provides

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The second section of this paper analyzes the relative under-theorizing of cartography in academic papers and debates in the field of new regional geography, despite a profound renewal of interest in maps and mapping in other fields of geography. The third section proposes a conceptual framework for analyzing the modalities of mapping in the region-making process. The fourth and fifth sections illustrate the role of maps in the construction and consolidation of two regional projects, the Alps and the Carpathians. The paper concludes pointing to the mutual influence of mapping and the institutional framing of project regions. As a whole, the analysis advocates greater attention to the role of mapping in the region-making process.

2. Relational and territorial approaches to region-making

Since the mid 1980s, and owing to the academic project of the so-called “new regional geography” (Gilbert, 1988), regions have widely come to be analyzed as socially and politically constructed entities. Such a constructivist epistemology was advanced in an influential paper by Anssi Paasi, who proposed focusing academic attention on “the institutionalization of regions”, this being understood as “a socio-spatial process during which some territorial unit emerges as part of the spatial structure of a society and becomes established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness” (Paasi, 1986, p. 83). Subsequently, many authors, including Paasi himself (1991, 2009), refined this way of seeing region-making processes (Gilbert, 1988; Pudup, 1988; Sayer, 1989; among many others).

Building on this constructivist approach to the concept of region, several authors later argued that globalization and the rise of a world of transnational flows and networks challenged the territorial conceptualization of regions seen as spatially fix and bounded units (Allen et al., 1998; Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005). For these authors, new regional configurations are constituted by a variety of dynamic networked relationships and “through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity, and relational connectivity” (Amin, 2004, p. 34). From this perspective, regions should therefore be understood as “a series of open, discontinuous spaces constituted by the social relationships which stretch across them in a variety of ways” (Allen et al., 1998, p.5).

Understanding regions relationally offered a new reading of regional configurations, where nested, bounded territorial formations were replaced by a dynamic patchwork of softer spatial arrangements, often overlapping, sometimes competing with one another. In this new configuration, regional governance “works through a looser, more negotiable, set of political arrangements that take their shape from the networks of relations that stretch across and beyond given regional boundaries” (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, p. 1163). Adopting such a relational perspective emphasized thus, that ‘regional actors’ are not always based in the given regions, but are rather meeting in a variety of places, pursuing different spatial strategies and “operating in a looser, less centered system, mobilizing through networks rather than through conventional hierarchical arrangements” (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, p. 1166).

However, these relational theorists have been criticized for their supposed neglect of the territorial perspective. They have been said to “seriously overstate their case” (Jones, 2009, p. 493). Critics from the so-called “realist relationists” (Jones, 2009, p.

496) have mainly underlined the persisting relevance of the territorial dimension of socio-spatial processes and have argued that the “radicals’ view tends to ignore actual regional differences/particularities, and how/why these differences/particularities persist” (Varró and Legendijk, 2012, p. 2).

Recent studies have suggested that these criticisms were largely overstated (see, for example, Harrison, 2012; Jessop et al., 2008; MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Painter, 2006; Varró and Legendijk, 2012) and that the analysis of region-making processes should combine both relational and territorial approaches to space and socio-spatial relations. Conceiving regions in such a way makes possible the joining of relational analyses, which recognize that regions are formed “through a myriad of trans-territorial networks and relational webs of connectivity” (MacLeod and Jones, 2007, p. 1185), with territorial analyses, which can shed light on how the contiguity of regional elements is approached or even strengthened through institutions and projects mobilized and implemented within the region itself.

This constructivist way of seeing regions and region-making processes, entailing both relational and territorial approaches, has been especially fruitful for understanding the construction of ‘unusual’ (Deas and Lord, 2006; Perkmann and Sum, 2002; Zimmerbauer, 2012) or ‘ad hoc’ (Paasi, 2009) regions; these kinds of entities can be defined as those that respond to a particular problem or need, and facilitate *ad hoc* solutions, before being institutionalized accordingly. Recently, we proposed calling these *project regions*, in order to highlight the fact that, in these cases, the region-making process is driven by a very specific project, distinct from processes leading to constitutional regions (Debarbieux et al., 2013). In fact, the construction of project regions most commonly results from a convergence of heterogeneous networks of actors, based in different places, and acting according to their respective needs and means: some actors find a place in the organizational and hierarchical settings of states (central governments, sub-national and municipal levels, etc.), whereas others largely transcend these frameworks (e.g. NGOs and to some extent inter-governmental organizations, etc.). Altogether, these stakeholders, connected in various ways, contribute to the shaping of a regional territorial entity for different reasons, while constructing its scalar or horizontal connections with a range of complementary entities.

During the last 50 years, many such project regions arose in Europe, owing to the move toward European integration and, more recently, the EU’s wish to promote supranational and transboundary cooperation. Specific tools have been designed for this, such as the INTERREG program, the Water Framework Initiative, and more recently the macro-regional strategies (Dubois et al., 2009). Many of these projects regions have been shaped according to the identification of common issues in environmental governance at the scale of sea catchment areas (e.g. the macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea), major watersheds (e.g. the macro-regional strategy for the Danube) or mountain ranges (e.g. the Alpine Space shaped within the INTERREG program). These environmental regions cut across traditional borders and form spatial entities that defy hierarchical neatness and offer new readings of the European territorial landscape.

New forms of institutional arrangements have been set up to manage these entities, for instance international treaties, working communities, and macro-regional partnerships. Moreover, asserting specific expertise on environmental matters, new networks of stakeholders have also joined the traditional institutional players: intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); global NGOs, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF); and many others with a more limited geographical focus. These specialized networks of actors have often projected a set of territorial environmental entities at the regional scale, such as WWF’s ‘ecoregions’, through which they shape most of their

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