



When old and new regionalism collide: Deinstitutionalization of regions and resistance identity in municipality amalgamations

Kaj Zimmerbauer*, Anssi Paasi¹

Department of Geography, P.O. Box 3000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Regional identity
Resistance
Deinstitutionalization

Regions as well as their identities and borders are social and discursive constructs that are produced and removed in contested, historically contingent and context-bound processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization. This article studies the deinstitutionalization of regions in the context of municipality amalgamations and the consequent rise of resistance identities that have followed rural–urban mergers in Finland, a tendency that seems to be accelerating around the world. By identifying various dimensions of regional identity characterizing such resistance, the paper shows how regions are mobilized as distinctively territorial spaces when confronted with forced deinstitutionalization carried out by regional authorities. The resistance emerging among ordinary citizens can be explained by fears related to the loss of public services and autonomy but also by a strong emotional identification with the region. This paper suggests that regional identity, regional activism and resistance should not be downplayed or mislabelled as regressive features, but should be understood as important ingredients in contemporary regional transformation.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The 'region' has become a highly important category in academic research and in planning practice around the world (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2006; Paasi, 2009). New interest in regions resonates with the transformations of the global economic landscape, where neo-liberal ideas of competitiveness in particular have given rise to regional(ist) responses. The so-called new regionalism has emphasized sub-national spaces as products of politico-administrative action (Jonas and Pincetl, 2006) and the inability of nation-states to manage their economies through redistributive policies (MacLeod and Jones, 2007). Underlining the ideology of competitiveness, new regionalism considers sub-national (at times also supranational, see Deas and Lord, 2006) regions as focal units of economic growth. These tendencies have also given rise to city regionalism where cities and their (rural) hinterlands are seen as motors of economic growth. Respectively, the former geopolitical struggle between territorial states is increasingly turning into a geo-economic competition where states actively restructure and rescale their space in order to be more competitive (Moisio and Paasi, in press).

Regions, regional identities and regional borders are widely understood as social and discursive constructs that are produced and dismantled in the processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization (Paasi, 1991; MacLeod, 1998; Painter, 2008; Frisvoll and Rye, 2009). The institutionalization of a region is a process in which the territorial (fixed or fuzzy borders), symbolic (name and more material symbols) and institutional 'shapes' of a region emerge, thereby forging the region as an established, typically administrative unit in the wider regional system and societal consciousness (Paasi, 1991). The shapes are abstractions that help make sense of and elucidate the historically contingent, context-bound power relations embedded in complex institutional practices (governance, politics, economy, and media, for example) that 'mediate' region formation. As historical entities, regions may also come to an end, or 'deinstitutionalize' (Paasi, 1991, 243). Deinstitutionalization means the dissolving of a region when it is either merged with another region or when a (larger) region splits into smaller units. Hence the region ceases to have an official status in the regional system but may still have an important role in regional consciousness. Such transformations are ultimately embedded in wider economic, political and cultural processes and struggles. Existing borders are normally transformed in deinstitutionalization, but certain symbolic and institutional elements of the region may exist long after formal abolishment of the region (Paasi, 1991).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 400 479471.

E-mail addresses: kaj.zimmerbauer@oulu.fi (K. Zimmerbauer), anssi.paasi@oulu.fi (A. Paasi).

¹ Tel.: +358 8 5531703.

Regional identity has lately become an important matter in planning, regional marketing and cultural discourse (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2006; Paasi, 2012). It is also seen as a resource pertinent to the economic success of regions (Cooke and Morgan, 1994). Yet regional identity is much more than a mere instrumental ad hoc asset of place branding; it is also an emotional phenomenon related to regional consciousness, thus entailing a sense of belonging as well as distinctions between social groups. Accordingly, identity is a complicated, politically loaded category that bring together ideas of the both open and bounded character of regions (Paasi, 2003). While the current relational approaches see regional identities as relationally constituted (Allen and Cochrane, 2007), there is tension between the relational concept of the region as a non-bounded unit and regional identity, since the latter implies a certain boundedness as well as an 'us' and 'them' (politics of) distinctions (cf. Jenkins, 2004). Thus, whereas relational thinking is most laudable in the world of increasing interactions and networks, regional (and state) borders may simultaneously be highly meaningful for identification. Moreover, relational thinkers sometimes regard regional identities as politically regressive (cf. Paasi, 2012), but subjugated minorities and social movements may also use territorial-regionalist strategies to promote progressive agendas in their struggles (cf. Agnew, 2001). Such strategies can be based on 'strategic essentialism', i.e. identities are mobilized to achieve certain strategic goals (Jones and Paasi, in press).

In spite of the mushrooming interest in regions and regional identities, one highly important example of 'region-building' processes has been curiously neglected: the amalgamations of regions. Yet merger processes often forcefully display the tensions and power relations in the processes of deinstitutionalization and (re)institutionalization of regions, and may also shake existing regional identities and 'everyday orders'. As regional identity discourse is typically inward looking and draws on distinctions, borders and emotional attachments, resistance associated with the deinstitutionalization of a region is an ideal subject for scrutinizing the complicated meanings of spatial identities. When old regions become deinstitutionalized and new ones institutionalized, the purported regional identities are particularly interesting, since they may either foster or hinder the implementation of region-building (Deas and Giordano, 2003; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Therefore, region-building and regional restructuring processes should not be understood as merely economic or administrative processes linked to nation-states, their devolution policies or the global neo-liberal economy (e.g. Brenner, 2004) but also as processes in which the contested ideas of boundaries, territories and regional identities are mobilized and exploited. This view provides a novel critical perspective on planning literature and new regionalist studies that typically accentuate non-economic factors (like culture, trust, habits or symbolic capital) as automatically positive elements but often neglect the political dimensions hidden in the production and reproduction of regional spaces and even take such regional spaces as given (cf. Hadjimichalis, 2006).

This article aims to address this gap in research and will both conceptually and empirically study the deinstitutionalization of regions and how regional identities are mobilized in such cases. We will study as an empirical example the rural–urban amalgamation process of two Finnish municipalities, Nurmo and Seinäjoki. We will concentrate on how the resistance to the deinstitutionalization of Nurmo became expressed through an internet interface provided by the ProNurmo activist movement. Such analysis is highly topical, since an unprecedentedly heated debate on the future of municipalities and the pros and cons of amalgamation has emerged in Finland during the spring 2012, after the current government decided to strive for a reform by which the current 330 municipalities would be reduced to about 70. Since a strong opposition

against the mergers emerged throughout the state, our case study provides a particularly timely analysis of an amalgamation that has been completed in spite of resistance and against the will of citizens.

We seek to answer to the question, how were regional identity discourses mobilized contextually as part of wider 'resistance identities' (cf. Castells, 1997). Regional identity discourse may be an important element of resistance for those who struggle against spatial restructuring and deinstitutionalization but also for those who support regional changes. Such discourse usually transforms the past, the current situation and even future expectations related to the region as elements of resistance that are associated with various social practices, values and ideals, such as self-governance/autonomy, rurality, independent service production, or concentration/decentralization, for example. Struggles over identities thus bring together multiple interests, and different factions may use diverging rhetorical and discursive devices and tactics in articulating their interests. In this paper we will focus especially on emotional attachments to an administrative region but will also evaluate more widely the dimensions of identity as anti-merger stimulus. This approach has been somewhat neglected in geographical research; contemporary research agendas tend to link the questions of regional identity and activism with the devolution and centralization processes of nation-states (Jones, 2004; Takahashi, 2009) rather than with the micro-scale integration processes of regions. Thus, an additional aim of ours is to contribute to the emerging geographies of resistance (Pile and Keith, 1997; Jones, 2004) by enriching its scalar agenda.

The prime empirical materials of this study consist of commentaries submitted to the ProNurmo website, hosted by the ProNurmo activist movement during 2006–2007. It had a 'free speech' bulletin board-type sub-page where anyone could voice their opinions and feelings about the municipality merger. This data is thus naturally occurring and enabled unobtrusive collecting measures (cf. Webb et al., 1966), although in order to eliminate the possibility of legal actions the submissions were checked by the webmaster before being made public. The webmaster, one of the ProNurmo activists, confirmed to the authors that all submissions ended up on the bulletin board (telephone interview, 12 June 2012). Altogether 358 texts published between 20.11.2006 and 28.5.2007 have been classified and analysed for this article. Municipal councils accepted the amalgamation in May 2007, which means that this body of data consists of commentaries and statements submitted during the hottest period of the merger debate. The discussion is first contextualized through the report that reviewed alternatives in increasing the co-operation between the respective municipalities (Meklin and Paatelainen, 2006). This was a strategic document directed primarily at the decision makers and it outlined possible scenarios, evaluated the structures of co-operation and concluded by recommending the amalgamation. Moreover, to contextualize our case study in the current national situation and to show the continued importance of merger issue in Finland, a newspaper follow-up analysis (period 1.1.–15.6.2012) was made on *Kaleva*, one of Finland's major newspapers. This material contains altogether more than 150 editorials, articles and opinions, and renders possible a review of how the forms of resistance found in the Nurmo case feature in the current merger debate.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section the conceptual basis is presented. We exploit the analytical distinction between old and new regionalism and the related ideas of regional spaces and spaces of regionalism (Jones and MacLeod, 2004). Then we discuss resistance and project identities (Castells, 1997) and various forms of agency. In the next section the rise of municipality mergers, or 'merger mania' (Sancton, 2000), into a global phenomenon and the societal background of this phenomenon are

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92541>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92541>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)