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Theorising Regionhood

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Major publications include :

Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, *Positioning Theory* (Blackwell, 1999)

Brigid Gavin and Luk Van Langenhove, 'Trade in a World of Regions', in : G. Sampson and S. Woolcock, *Regionalism, Multilateralism and Economic Integration* (UNU Press, 2003)

Hans van Ginkel, Julius Court and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *Integrating Africa* (UNU Press, forthcoming)

Nikki Slocum and Luk Van Langenhove, 'Integration Speak : Introducing Positioning Theory in Regional Integration Studies', in R. Harré and F. Moghaddam (Eds), *The Self and Others* (Praeger, forthcoming).

This paper argues that, notwithstanding the different meanings attributed to the concept of region, and notwithstanding the different ways in which regional integration manifestates itself, there is a meaningful essence to 'region' and 'regional integration'. By introducing the neologism of 'regionhood' as well as a metaphor from psychology on what constitutes regionhood, a social constructionist approach to regions is outlined that should constitute a firm basis to a truly interdisciplinary study of regionalism and regionalisation.

Next to the concept of 'state', the concept of 'region' plays also an important role in understanding how the world is geographically, politically and economically organised. But it is a polysemous concept : it has different meanings as 'region' can refer to geographical space, economic interaction, institutional or governmental jurisdiction as well as to social or cultural characteristics. And whatever meaning attributed to the concept, somehow there always seems to be a reference to some aspect of territory.

Regions are studied in different disciplines and from different angles. Within the field of international relations, there is a vast literature on regional integration focusing on supra-national regions. The integration of the region of Europe into the European Union has also given rise to a wealth of specific publications on 'Europeanisation'. And then there are the many studies focusing on economic and political regional policies within countries, not to

forget the geographical literature that focuses on territorial characteristics of geographical areas.

Not surprisingly then, the number of definitions of regions is great and according to the field of research, definitions will differ and even contradict. And definitions of regional integration, abundant as they are, also presuppose a definition of the notion of region. This conceptual vagueness has consequences for the theoretical and empirical quality of the research. Without a clear view of what constitutes a region, it becomes difficult to analyse what regional integration is and how that is realised. It becomes equally difficult to understand what the relation is between for instance the development of Europe as a region and the development of the Europe of the Regions.

On top of this all, there is now a growing number of scholars that adheres to reflectionist and social constructionist view of regions. Especially in the field of international relations it is now *'bon ton'* to state that regions are human constructsⁱ. And this should account for the different meanings allocated to the concept of region. In my view, the social constructionist approach as manifested within regional integration does however not suffice to tackle the problem 'what is a region ?' One, because it is not enough to state that a region is a social construct and that therefore different actors will produce different 'definitions' of a region. Secondly, because the social constructionist approach in regional integration is really nothing much more than some lip-service paid

to an approach that is now well developed in other fields such as sociology, psychology and linguistics.

Social constructionism goes back to the seminal publication of Berger and Luckmannⁱⁱ. Ever since, a variety of social constructionisms has emergedⁱⁱⁱ but in essence, all claim that every human and social phenomenon is not something innate or immutable but shaped and even created through social discourses. As such, social constructionism sees knowledge itself as being contingent upon social relations. One of the applications of this approach has been the relation between discourse and the ‘construction’ of nations and states^{iv}. In line with this, there seems to be a general awareness that discourse matters in understanding regional integration, but few scholars study how and why discursive processes matter. This point has been eloquently made by Smith (1999) when stating that the current literature on social constructionism in international relations is “*more united on what is being rejected than on what is being proposed*”^v. For this author, social constructionism is more an approach than a theory. Indeed, and it is an approach not within international relations but also within psychology and sociology where it is used in studying different aspects of reality. But this social sciences body of knowledge and insights seems never to be used by those who study international relations and world politics !

In this paper I will try to deal with the problem of defining regions in such a way that it can help in advancing the development of theories about regions and regional integration as well as in pointing to researchable problems. Such theory building in the field of regional integration studies is much needed, as noted by Hettne and Söderbaum : “ (...) *the overall puzzle to explain, understand, predict and prescribe the emergence, dynamics and consolidation of regionalisation (....) in world politics remains only partly resolved. This is mainly explained by the lack of adequate theory*”^{vi}. Also, this exercise should help in tackling the issues of actorness as applied to states and international entities. And finally, I believe that the conceptual and theoretical framework developed, contributes to a shift from a social constructionist approach to a truly social constructionist regional integration theory. Checkel’s observation that “constructivist theorising is in a state of disarray”^{vii} is in my view still valid and I see the present paper as a contribution to his call upon constructivists to “*theorise the varying processes through which social construction occurs*”^{viii}.

In the following section, the concept of *regionhood* will be introduced as well as a metaphor that can guide our thinking about regions. Next the concept will be developed by discussing four basic interdependent characteristics of regionhood. Finally, the consequences of this conceptual space for the study of regions are examined. In building such a theoretical framework on regions around the neologism regionhood, I was inspired by the ideas of the Belgian

psychologist J.P. De Waele on *personhood*^x. Actually I am using his theory on personhood and identity as a *metaphor* for thinking about regions. To the extent that persons, states and regions can all be regarded as entities with a power to act, such a metaphor should not be too strange. After all, corporations for instance are in legal theory also metaphorically compared with persons. A so-called “legal personality” is said to be able to govern property, go broke or even be criminally indicted. Metaphors have been identified as powerful tools for advancing scientific knowledge, also in the field of the social sciences^x. Metaphors can be used as iconic models that are representations of certain aspects of reality. A distinction can be made between paramorf and homeomorf models. In the latter case, source and subject are the same (for instance a map). In the former case, the source differs from the subject. An example of such a paramorf model is an electric circuit as a model for a hydraulic network. So, I am using persons as a paramorf model for regions. Of course, every metaphor, every model has its limitations. Thinking about regions *as if* they were persons surely not allows to explain everything about regions, regionalisation and regional integration. On the contrary, but I do think it can further our thinking about the basic characteristics of what constitutes a region. The regions/persons metaphor should not be interpreted as a plea for reducing the social structure of regions to persons ! I am not advocating methodological individualism, only a non-reified view on regions.

Regionhood

In the English language the suffix ‘-hood’ refers to what distinguishes something from something else. So for instance, the psychological concept of ‘personhood’ is used in discussions to point to individuality and personality. Although much conceptual confusion exists about those terms (and related ones such as individual, self, persona ...), there seems to be a consensus that a person is what each human being, given suitable biological and social conditions, is generally supposed to be^{xi}. Personality is the term that should be used to designate individual persons and personhood is what distinguishes persons from non-persons. I would like to use this as a simple analogy when speaking about regions : *regionhood is what distinguishes regions from non-regions. And also : a region is something that every area on Earth can be, given suitable historical, geographical, economic, cultural and social conditions.* In analogy with the concept of nationality, this could be called regionality. Table 1 outlines this metaphorical space.

Insert table 1 about here

Such a concept of regionhood can be used to explain that regions are both a part of physical reality and the result of a process of social construction. The question then is of course what will define the conditions of regionhood ? Before tackling that question, I first want to contrast my so far simple and open conception of region with some existing ones.

Let's take for instance Joseph Nye's classical definition that defined an international region as '*a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence*'^{xii}. Obviously, this definition excludes many areas that are considered regions as it focuses on states as the building blocks of regions. And what about the 'geographical relationship' ? Is there such a relationship when Mediterranean countries are members of a regional organisation called NATO ? Can one call the countries around the '*Mare Nostrum*' as one region? Similar exercises can be done on other definitions. The problem will always be that given the polysemous meaning of the concept, each defining criterion will exclude existing regions from the definition. Also, most definitions are conceived from a single disciplinary point of view which limits its universal application^{xiii}. Hence, as noted by Schultz et al : "*The problem of defining regions attracted a significant deal of attention during the first wave of regionalism, but the results yielded few clear conclusions*"^{xiv}.

Perhaps the only exception to this is the theoretical concept of regionness that has been introduced by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) in the context of the so-called 'New Regionalism Approach'^{xv}. These authors seek to describe regionalisation as process in terms of levels of regionness, i.e. the process whereby a geographical area is acquiring regionhood. Regionness thus implies that a region can be region 'more or less' as the level of regionness can both

increase and decrease. Hettne & Söderbaum describe five generalised levels of regionness, that define a particular region in terms of regional coherence and community :

Level 1 : regional space

A regional space, or 'proto-region', is identified as a primarily geographical unit delimited by more or less natural physical barriers and marked by ecological characteristics. In such a territory, people develop a kind of trans-local relationship.

Level 2 : regional complex

A regional complex, seen as the real starting point for a regionalisation process, emerges through increased social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups. The constituent units become dependent on each other as on the overall stability of the regional system.

Level 3 : regional society

A regional society, or de jure or formal region is characterised by the appearance of a number of different actors apart from the states (such as markets, transnational companies, ...) that move towards transcendence of national space, making use of a more rule-based pattern of relations.

Level 4 : regional community

A regional community is an active subject, with a distinct regional collective identity and institutionalised or informal actor capabilities. It is characterised by a mutually reinforcing relationship between the 'formal' region (the community of states) and the 'real' region in which a trans-nationalised regional society also has a role to play.

Level 5 : region-state

A region-state or regional institutionalised polity, is a hypothetical entity constituted out of a voluntary evolution of a group of formerly sovereign national communities into a new form of political entity.

These five levels are for Hettne & Söderbaum to be seen as five phases in the process of 'becoming' a region. This concept is most interesting, because it presents a flexible definition in contrast with the existing one-dimensional and static definitions of regions. But it does not really help in how to distinguish a region from a non-region. It only describes what I would call the regionality, not the regionhood. Also, I find it difficult to accept the quasi-teleological aspect of the concept of regionness : becoming a region is presented as almost a natural and unavoidable process.

Hettne & Söderbaum also seem to imply that any given geographical area on earth can have only one dimension of regionness as it can be only more or less

one and only one region. In my view regionhood is indeed ascribed to territorial units but one well-defined physical area can be ascribed several different types of regionhood at the same time ! The case of Belgium is a nice example : the city of Brussels can be regarded as a region with regionhood properties (there is actually a government of what is called the Brussels Capital Region) but meanwhile Brussels is also part of the Flemish and French Community (two languages based regions in Belgium with again their own government). Brussels is also capital of the Kingdom of Belgium and sometimes also regarded to be the unofficial capital of Europe. And Brussels also belongs to the Benelux-region and so on. So the same place is part of different territorial entities that all haven regionhood properties, albeit in different ways !

In my metaphorical space, Hettne & Söderbaum have described the developmental processes that lead to regionality. Just as there is a biographical development that results in persons having distinct personalities, one can say that there is a historical evolution – expressed in stages of regioness – that accounts for the distinct regionalities one can observe. And it also accounts for what Schulz et al. (2001;p. 252) noted : *“the less regionalized a ‘region’ (or geographical area) actually is, the more difficult it is to define it^{xvi}”*. But this still leaves open the issue of regionhood !

In sum, I have not been able to find in the literature precise definitions of what a region is. Neither did I come across the notion of regionhood, which seems for me essential in distinguishing regions from non-regions. I think this must be related to a wrong starting-point : the definitional attempts usually start from specific content-related issues (such as trade-relations) or from given territorial characteristics. As such each defining effort immediately blocks when applied at another level of scale or at another type of context. The only way out is to focus on the formal characteristics of regionhood and formulate them in such a way that they can be applied to diverse types of regions.

Basic Characteristics of Regionhood

The next step is thus to identify the basic characteristics of regionhood. In my view, there are four (complex) basic characteristics, the existence of which constitutes the necessary conditions of regionhood. I leave it open for the time being whether they can also be considered jointly as sufficient conditions.

These four characteristics are :

- (i) the region as a system of intentional acts in the international and national arena;
- (ii) the region as a 'rational' system with statehood properties;
- (iii) the region as a reciprocal achievement;
- (iv) the region as a generator and communicator of meaning and identity.

Below, each of these characteristics will be explained and discussed in some detail. While doing so, other issues and problems such as properties of statehood, sovereignty, multi-level governance will be dealt with as well. The fact that I am using these four characteristics is to push my metaphorical comparison further : those are also the characteristics that are said to be constitutive of personhood^{xvii}. Needless to say that in doing so I am not implying that regions are to be considered as some kind of persons.

It may sound strange that I do not include a geographical reference into these characteristics. Obviously, there is always a geographical correlate to regions, but – however necessary that geographical basis is – it is not constituent of regionhood. In terms of the metaphor used one can compare this with the human body : without such a body there is no personhood and personality possible and the body will certainly influence one's personality. But the human body is not a sufficient condition for personhood...

Regions as a system of intentional acts in the international arena

As a first characteristic of regionhood, I would like to advance the notion of regions being an actor. Hindess has defined an actor as “*a locus of decision and action where the action is in some sense a consequence of the actor's decisions*”^{xviii}. In that view, for an entity to be an actor, that entity must have means of formulating and of acting upon decisions. Who then can be an actor ? Individuals for sure,

but also organisations, such as governments, trade unions, etc. Sibeon calls this social actors (as opposed to persons as individual actors)^{xix}. For Hindess, taxonomic collectivities like “society”, “classes”, “black people”, are not actors. They are collectivities that cannot do anything or be held responsible for anything as they “*have no identifiable means of taking decisions, let alone of acting on them*”^{xx}. Of course, such taxonomic entities may exist simultaneously with related social actors that do have powers to act.

In such a non-reified and anti-reductionist conception of actors, regions are in my view to be regarded as social ‘actors’ in the international system. In other words, regions need to have actorness properties : they exist as entities in the system of international relations and/or in a national context when and if they (i) have a certain degree of autonomy (intentional acts) and (ii) have the power to engage in some sort of purposive action. Bretherton and Vogler^{xxi} have identified the following five issues as properties of actorness :

- a shared commitment to a set of overarching values and principles;
- the ability to identify policy priorities and to formulate coherent policies;
- the ability to negotiate effectively with other actors in the international system;
- the availability of, and capacity to utilise, policy instruments; and

- a domestic legitimacy of decision processes and priorities, relating to external policy.

In order to qualify as a region, the above-mentioned issues need somehow to be present. As such considering a region to be an actor implies that there are acts performed. One can picture the totality of acts related to a region as a complex and hierarchically organised system of intentional acts. By this I mean that for instance the region of the European Union is characterised by a set of institutions and rules such as the European Commission and the Maastricht Treaty that has implications for a diverse set of policy sectors such as monetary integration, financial services, electricity, air transport and so on. For each of these policy sectors, the actorness of the European Union as a region however differs. In some cases, such as the EMU or some environmental policies, the decision rules are highly specified resulting in coercion at a high level. In other cases decision rules are less specified (telecom for instance) or only suggested (rail transport for instance) and this results in less powerful adjustment systems^{xxii}.

Considering regions to be a system of intentional acts, and thus an actor is not in line with the classic Realist approach in international relations nor with public law approach who both claim that only states qualify as actors, because only states can make treaties, join international organisations and also because regional organisations, while having perhaps some actorness properties, always

have a role subordinate to those of states. Following Hindess^{xxiii} I think this viewpoint is wrong and one should not consider a state as an actor. Within states only governmental departments and other social actors have the power to act. And on the other hand, international organisations such as the U.N. and at a regional level such as the E.U., do have recognised legal status and as such they undoubtedly qualify to be a social actor.

So am I claiming that while States are not to be considered as actors, regions on the other hand do qualify as an actor ? No, I am only saying that just as states, regions need identifiable social actors in order to have regionhood properties. This might look surprising; so let's try to illustrate this with an example. Take the Kingdom of Belgium, this country is recognised as a sovereign state, it is part of several regional integration schemes such as the Benelux and the European Union and it is also a so-called federal state with several regions such as Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. By claiming that the Belgian state is not an actor I want to avoid using the concept of state as a reified concept. The Belgian Federal Government qualifies as an actor and so do the different regional governments. But is the notion of for instance 'the Region of Flanders' then not also not a reified concept ? I do not think so because one can consider the actorness of the regions in Belgium as a *conditio sine qua non* for their existence. So Flanders – the concept exists for centuries – was not a region for many years as it lacked any social actors until the Belgian state became federalised.

Another way to put this is by referring to the ‘Belgian State’ as shorthand for the different social actors that operate at the level of Belgium as an entity. And equally, referring to the ‘Flemish region’ or to the region Europe is shorthand for the totality of social actors operating at that level.

One more point needs to be stressed with regard to considering regions as a complex and stratified system of intentional acts : the degree of actorness attributed to a region can vary according to the perspective of the assessor. A region such as Europe when considered in a non-reified way, will appear thus as several actors. I will deal with this later when discussing the topic of regionification.

Regions as ‘rational’ systems with statehood properties

The rationality that I consider to be a second necessary characteristic of a Region can be defined as follows : given a framework of values according to which goals are intentionally selected, means – i.e. plans and rules – are optimised according to certain beliefs in order to reach the goals. I am not referring to rational choice theory, but simply to the connection between goals and means that not necessarily presupposes what one would generally consider to be “rational” goals. Applied to the rational behaviour of people, one can illustrate this by stating that a sorcerer practicing magic can be considered to

manifest forms of rationality in so far as he or she is involved in a process of goal-setting, selection of means and realising of goals.

In the Westphalian world-order states qualify as such rational systems. A national state, made up of a set of social actors, can indeed be regarded as a rational system aimed at organising society on different dimensions such as the political, the economic and the social. Such organisation is in line with value systems and beliefs regarding rule of law, democracy, free markets, welfare state and so on. As stated in paragraph 2.1. this does not necessarily imply that states are actors, but they do have social actors inside that operationalise the beliefs and value systems.

This brings me to the issue of statehood. Zürn^{xxiv} has pictured statehood as consisting out of three dimensions : (i) recognition : this is the normative basis for statehood and is largely determined by the principle of sovereignty as attributed by other states and by the degree to which the people within a certain territory recognise the conceptual existence of that state; ii) resources : the material basis of states depend upon their underlying resources such as the monopolisation of force to defend its authority against domestic and external challenges and such as the tax-raising monopoly; (iii) realisation of governance goals : in balance with the acceptance of the force and tax monopoly stands the delivering of public goods and the redistribution of wealth to the people within the territory. All of this can be regarded as a complex process of goal-setting

and achievement of those goals by deploying different means. Applied to regions, this rationality means that regions act to some extent *as if* they were states. It is obvious that regions can have in various degrees some of the above-mentioned statehood properties. States on the other hand always need to have regionhood properties !

The Region as a reciprocal achievement

While in theory every area on Earth can be regarded as or become a region, given suitable historical, geographical, economic, cultural and social conditions, regions will only exist as the result of certain acts performed by certain social actors. But such acts only make sense in a dialogical social context, which means that there need to be other relevant social or individual actors who re-act to a regions acting. Hence my third constituent characteristic of regionhood : regions emerge and sustain through processes of reciprocal achievements.

Consider the following analogy : human beings do not become persons because they have a birth certificate and a given name but because other persons (their parents for a start) treat them as if they were persons too^{xxv}. This is what psychologists call the process of personification : a process of reciprocal achievements, which enables a newborn baby to learn the skills necessary to accomplish acts in a given society and gradually to acquire and express

personality. In much the same way, a region can be regarded to be the result of a process of reciprocal achievements that can be labelled ‘*regionification*’. So, for an entity to be considered as a region, treating it in a certain way is constitutive of its being ascribed that status ... Only if a well-defined stance is taken towards an entity, will it count as a region. Or in other words : regions are the products of processes of regionification. Such regionification is achieved when the capacity for intentional acts is attributed to some entity. But this requires that the ascriber should be a social or individual actor himself (but not necessarily another region). Thus, regions are recognised by other actors such as national states, international organisations, regions, persons...). Or, as Neumann (1999, 115) has put it : *“the existence of regions is preceded by the existence of region-builders”^{xvi}*.

A crucial element in all this is that I see the regionification process as being truly social : regionification will only be constitutive of Regions if it is, or leads to reciprocity. A and B encounter each other as Regions to the extent that A’s regionification of B is reciprocated by B’s regionification of A. This does not necessarily imply a positive attitude between A and B. Regionification can also be based upon feelings of negative identification. Neither does this presuppose a consciousness or intentional act. Regionification can occur unintentionally. But, in any case reciprocal regionification is a collective social achievement, which manifests itself in two forms :

- (i) diachronically as the social production and manufacture of Regions through ‘socialisation’ which, from an initial unilateral regionification process, ushers into full reciprocity.
- (ii) Synchronically as the mutual recognition of the claim to regionhood put forward by interacting regions.

As such it should also be noted that since regions are socially constructed through regionification processes, studying regions (e.g. publishing papers and books about regions ...) is also part of the regionification process ! As quite rightly noted by Hettne & Söderbaum : “(...) *to observe and describe regionalisation is also to participate in the constructions of regions*”^{xxvii}.

The Region as a generator and communicator of meaning and identity

The final characteristic of regionhood is that a region must express meaning towards other social actors and personal actors as well as possessing a particular identity. States, especially nation-states, express an identity as nationality and as such they generate meaning towards social and personal actors. Can one speak of a regional collective identity and how does this relation to personal identity or identities ? The problem in tackling these questions is that catch-call terms like “identity” invite endless debates, characterised by excessive generality. I agree with Stråth^{xxviii} that a regional identity such as ‘Europe’ is an abstraction and fiction without essential

properties. This implies that regional identity has to be related to situations in which – through certain acts – such as identity can be expressed. But, just as one cannot determine a one-to-one relation between place and region, one can neither make a one-to-one relation between a single personal actor and a region! The same person will always be engaged as an actor in interactions with different regions. In much of my day to day life, for instance, I have to deal with Brussels, Flanders, Belgium and the European Union... The question then is how this affects identity.

Risse^{xxix} has introduced three distinct models of regional identity. First, there is the zero sum model where identification with one region comes at the expense of identifying with other regions. In this model one will be less a Belgian as one feels more Flemish... Secondly, there is the layer cake model : people hold multiple identities and it will depend on the social context of interaction which of these multiple identities are invoked and become salient. When the Belgian soccer team plays, one feels more Belgian and when the Flemish tennis player Kim Clijsters plays against her Walloon fellow countrywoman Justine Henin some will feel Flemish or Walloon.... And thirdly there is the marble cake model where also the identities are invoked in a context-dependent way, but they enmesh and flow into each other in such a way that one cannot clearly define boundaries between one's Flemishness, Belgianess and one's Europeaness...

In my view, all three models will occur simultaneously and it will be the situation that determines what type of identity-model applies. As such a region does not “produce” a clear-cut and well-defined identity. To the extent that a region produces intentional acts (through personal and social actors) and is engaged in processes of regionification, it produces as a social actor meaningful texts (e.g. the Maastricht Treaty), symbols (e.g. the European flag), institutions (e.g. the European Parliament) and so on. All these things are perceived by and have effects on a multitude of other personal and social actors.

This is especially true for all the citizens in a region who can or cannot use the regional actor in their building of a sense of identity. One can say that the reflexive constitution of a personal identity will imply also a regionification. Or at the collective level one can refer to this as the emergence of a collective regional identity (e.g. ‘we Europeans’) as a process of self-regionification. A self-regionification alone, without reciprocal regionification will however hardly allow the constitution of a regional actor.

Structural Characteristics of Regionhood

The above-presented formal characteristics of regionhood present elements for a logical as well as historical reconstruction of the kind of structured and functional whole a region is conceived to be. Consideration of structural

aspects is also relevant to the definition of regionhood. These structural aspects are the perceived results of regionification processes. I see three such characteristics that are of major importance. The first is the various degree of unity, which a region is capable of manifesting. Secondly there is the identity of a region as a social actor. Thirdly there is the notion of the delimitation of a region, i.e. of its boundaries.

Obviously, some regions have much clearer boundaries than others. A country or a constitutional region such as Flanders has clear well-defined boundaries. For cross-border regions this is mostly not the case and macro-regions such as Europe have no real borders at all (although the European Union has boundaries, every enlargement process brings up discussion of where the “real” boundaries are). Perhaps much more important than boundaries are the sense of unity and the related identity for grasping what constitutes a region. The social psychologist Donald Campbell^{xxx} has coined the term entitativity to study what turns a mere aggregate of individuals into a social group. The suggested four factors as antecedents of entitativity are common fate, similarity, proximity and boundedness. The more people in a group perceive themselves to share a common fate, to be similar, to be closer and to form a bounded unit, the more likely they will be perceived as a group. One can easily think of entitativity as a characteristic of regions as well. In fact, Emanuele Castano^{xxxii} has used this concept to study europeanisation and multiple identities.

Unity, identity and delimitation of a region are not fixed once and for all. They are achieved through successive constructions and reconstructions imposed by the fact that in any situation at any time, it is never the whole region which is involved, although a region's perceived unity and identity, as well as its boundaries constitute basic characteristics pertaining to it as a whole. Reification of the different social actors involved will be an essential part of that. Consequently, changes instigated by internal causes or originating in situational requirements will inevitably lead to the successive readjustments in the structure of the region.

Studying Regionhood

So far for this metaphorical exploration of regions in terms of regionhood. It has been said that there is nothing so practical as a good theory... What then could be the practical upshot of this theoretical *Spielerei* ? We seem to be currently witnessing the transition from a state-dominated world-order to a world system, in which not only states, but also regions at different geographical scales are major players. In such a post Westphalian world order, regions and also global regimes play, next to states (not instead of states !) an important role in international relations as well as in sub-national governance. This transition gives rise to complex geo-political realities with on the one hand overlapping macro-regions in which states can be members of different

regional integration schemes and on the other hand micro-regions that can be cross-border. Also, regional integration is clearly multi-dimensional as it implies co-operation along a number of different dimensions such as culture, politics, security, economics and diplomacy. As a consequence, regions are becoming increasingly important in understanding the present-day world. But studying regions has been characterised by a number of deficiencies related to (i) the fragmentation of the research over different (social sciences) disciplines and (ii) the absence of unifying theoretical frameworks. I also believe that the empirical basis of much of what is being published is too weak. Case studies are undoubtedly an essential research tool in regional integration studies but it is striking to notice how most of these case studies are performed without any reference to the methods and techniques that have been developed elsewhere^{xxxii}.

As a result, many questions remain and we need to deepen our understanding of the processes that lead to the emergence of regional entities and the role that drivers towards integration and disintegration play in those processes. The basic questions are where, why and how do regions emerge ? How do they function ? What makes them sustainable and what drives regions or states into regional integration processes ? Also we need more knowledge on the role that regions play in identity formation and how civil society can manifestate itself in a regionalised world. And we still need to know much more about the relations between globalisation and regionalisation.

Insert table 2 about here

For this we need to create a strong and coherent interdisciplinary framework for the study of regions and regional integration. It is my belief that the concept of regionhood and its theoretical underpinning as presented in this paper can contribute to the development of such a framework. Table 2 summarises the basic elements of a theory of regionhood. In focusing on the formal aspects of regionhood and using personhood as a source of inspiration, this theory allows to think about regions at different geographical scales within one single theoretical framework. It considers states as a specific example of regions and thus allows re-thinking the old debate about the relations between states and regions. The theory also allows underlining the central role of discourse in the creation of regions. But the theory is still very incomplete and superficial.

Nevertheless, I consider this theoretical framework as one possible way to activate the social constructionist approach in the study of regions as it allows to “attach” different existing social constructionist approaches to the concept of regionhood. In N. Slocum and L. Van Langenhove^{xxxiii} one such an approach called positioning theory^{xxxiv} is used in such a way to better understand the discursive aspects of regionification processes.

As noted in the introduction of this paper, the concept of region is used in many contexts. Wittgenstein has pointed out in his Philosophical Investigations that

one always has to be careful not to slip into the fallacy of semantic essentialism in such a case. It is not because the same word is used in a variety of contexts and in a diversity of ways, that there must be a common, hidden semantic essence that will explain the use of the same word in all these contexts. I hope to have shown that in the case of region (and regional integration) there is a common essence and that it can be developed into a lexicon suited to study regions and regional integration processes as constructed, represented and negotiated in different sorts of discourses. And what is more, states can be regarded as a specific sort of region.

Table 1 : The personhood/regionhood metaphor

- Persons
 - Personality vs. personhood

- Regions
 - Regionality vs. regionhood

Table 2

Table 2 : basic elements of a theory of regionhood

1. Regionhood is what distinguishes regions from non-regions.
 - 1.1. Every area on Earth can be a region, given suitable historical, economic, cultural and social conditions.
 - 1.2. Every singular place on Earth can belong to different regions simultaneously.
2. There are four basic characteristics of regionhood:
 - 2.1. Regions are a system of intentional acts;
 - 2.2. Regions are a 'rational' system with statehood properties;
 - 2.3. Regions are reciprocal achievements of social actors;
 - 2.4. Regions are generators and communicators of meaning and identity to social and personal actors.
3. There are three formal characteristics of regionhood:
 - 3.1. identity
 - 3.2. unity
 - 3.3. delimitation
4. Regionhood is expressed through the regionality of a region:
 - 4.1. Regionality accounts for the many different types of regions that exist.
 - 4.2. A region can acquire regionality at different levels of regionness.

Notes

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ⁱⁱ P. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Penguin, 1996).

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^{iv} See for instance P. Achard, 'Discourse and Social Praxis in the Construction of Nation and State', *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1993), pp. 75-98 and L. Benman, 'Positioning in the Formation of a 'National' Identity', in : R. Harré and L. Van Langenhove (Eds), *Positioning Theory : Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*, (Basil Blackwell, 1999), pp.

^v S. Smith, 'Social Constructivisms and European Studies : a Reflectivist Critique', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1999), p. 690.

^{vi} B. Hettne and F. Söderbaum, 'Theorising the Rise of Regioness', *New Political Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2000), p. 458.

^{vii} Checkel, 'The Construtivist Turn in International Relations Theory', p. 338.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 343.

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^{xi} R. Harré, *The Singular Self : an Introduction to the Psychology of Personhood* (Sage, 1989).

^{xii} J. Nye, *Intentional Regionalism. Selected Readings* (Little Brown, 1968), p. xii.

^{xiii} See for instance L.J. Cantori an S. L. Spiegel, *The International Politics of Regions : A Comparative Approach* (Prentice-Hall, 1970).

^{xiv} M. Schulz, F. Söderbaum and J. Öjendal, *Regionalisation in a Globalising World* (Zed Books, 2001), p. 14.

^{xv} B. Hettne and F. Söderbaum, *Theorising the Rise of Regioness.*

^{xvi} M. Schulz et al, *Regionalisation in a Globalising World*, p. 252.

^{xvii} J.P. De Waele, 'Personality', in : R. Harré and R. Lamb (Eds), *The Dictionary of Personality and Social Psychology* (Blackwell, 1986), pp. 258-60.

^{xviii} B. Hindess, 'Actors and Social Relations', in : M. L. Wardell and S.P. Turner (Eds), *Sociological Theory in Transition* (Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 115.

^{xix} R. Sibeon, *Contemporary Sociology and Policy Analysis. The New Sociology of Public Policy* (Tudor, 1997).

^{xx} Hindess, 'Actors and Social Relations', p. 105.

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^{xxiii} Hindess, 'Actors and Social Relations'.

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^{xxvi} I.B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other : The East in European Identity Formation* (Manchester University Press, 1999).

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^{xxviii} B. Stråth, 'Europe and the Search for Identity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2002), pp. 387-402.

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