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## Foregrounding the region

Anssi Paasi<sup>a</sup> and Jonathan Metzger<sup>b</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Foregrounding the region. *Regional Studies*. This paper scrutinizes the everlasting but transforming significance of the concept of region for regional studies and social practice. After tracing the changing meanings of this category, it highlights one characteristic aspect of the progress of the academic conceptualizations of the region: recurrent iterations of critiques regarding various forms of essentialism and fetishism. The main focus then moves to the conceptualization of the region and the articulation of ideas about what regions substantially 'are' and 'do', and what makes the region a worthy object of attention (scholarly or otherwise). The paper concludes with a discussion about the implications of the perspective on regions developed in the article for the future of regional studies.

### KEYWORDS

region; conceptualization; foregrounding; spatial fetishism

### 摘要

突显区域。区域研究。本文探究区域概念之于区域研究和社会实践的持续存在但改变中的显着性。透过追溯此一范畴意义的改变，本文强调学术对区域的概念化进程中的一个特徵面向：有关各种形式的本质主义和拜物教的重复批评。本文主要的焦点接着移至区域的概念化，以及有关区域实际上“是什麽”与“做什麽”，以及什麽让区域成为值得关注的对象（学术或非学术）的概念阐述。本文于结论中，探讨文中所发展的区域视角对未来区域研究的意涵。

### 关键词

区域；概念化；突显；空间拜物教

### RÉSUMÉ

Mise en valeur de la région. *Regional Studies*. La présente communication examine de près la signification perpétuelle, mais en évolution, du concept de la région pour les études régionales et les pratiques sociales. Après avoir relevé les significations changeantes de cette catégorie, elle met en lumière un aspect caractéristique de l'évolution de la conceptualisation académique de la région: des itérations récurrentes de critiques concernant différentes formes d'essentialisme et de fétichisme. La communication se concentre ensuite principalement sur la conceptualisation de la région et l'articulation d'idées sur ce que «sont» et ce que «font» substantiellement les régions, et ce qui fait de la région un sujet digne de cette attention (académique ou autre). La communication se termine par une discussion sur les implications de la perspective sur des régions développées dans l'article sur l'avenir des études régionales.

### MOTS-CLÉS

région; conceptualisation; mise en valeur; fétichisme spatial


### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Thematisierung der Region. *Regional Studies*. In diesem Beitrag untersuchen wir die unvergängliche, aber veränderliche Bedeutung des Konzepts der Region für die Regionalwissenschaft und soziale Praxis. Nach einer Nachverfolgung der veränderten Bedeutungen dieser Kategorie wird ein charakteristischer Aspekt des Fortschritts der akademischen

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Konzeptualisierungen der Region hervorgehoben: wiederkehrende Iterationen von Kritiken verschiedener Formen des Essentialismus und Fetischismus. Anschließend verlagert sich der Hauptschwerpunkt auf die Konzeptualisierung der Region und die Äußerung von Ideen zum Thema, was Regionen im Wesentlichen 'sind' und 'tun' und was die Region zu einem lohnenswerten Gegenstand der (wissenschaftlichen oder anderweitigen) Betrachtung macht. Der Beitrag endet mit einer Erörterung der Implikationen der im Artikel entwickelten Perspektive der Regionen für die Zukunft der Regionalwissenschaft.

#### SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Region; Konzeptualisierung; Thematisierung; räumlicher Fetischismus

#### RESUMEN

La región en primer plano. *Regional Studies*. En este artículo realizamos un escrutinio del significado sempiterno pero en transformación del concepto de la región para los estudios regionales y la práctica social. Después de hacer un seguimiento de los significados cambiantes de esta categoría, destacamos un aspecto característico del progreso de las conceptualizaciones académicas de la región: iteraciones recurrentes de críticas con respecto a las diferentes formas de esencialismo y fetichismo. Después trasladamos el principal enfoque a la conceptualización de la región y la articulación de ideas sobre qué 'son' y 'hacen' básicamente las regiones, y lo que hace que la región sea digna de atención especial (académica o cualquier otra). Concluimos el artículo con un debate sobre las repercusiones de la perspectiva de las regiones desarrollada en el artículo para el futuro de los estudios regionales.

#### PALABRAS CLAVES

región; conceptualización; en primer plano; fetichismo espacial

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## INTRODUCTION

It has become practically axiomatic in the social science literature to note how 'the region is back' in both academia and wider societal life – in spite of contrasting tendencies related to globalization and all kinds of flows and networks (Entrikin, 2008; Fawn, 2009; Harrison, 2008; Keating, 2004). Debates on the differences between specific regions and the justification of regional divisions have not been merely academic exercises. Countless governmental bodies, committees and planning offices in dramatically variegated political and geographical settings around the world have been involved in such deliberations, with or without academic support, as state and quasi-state governance arrangements continuously remain the major context for both sub- and supra-state regionalization and region-building efforts (Moisio & Paasi, 2013).

As part of the evolution of this wider political landscape, academic scholars have contributed to guiding debates and shaping new rationalities by launching new-fangled terms into discussions on regions and regionalism. Categories such as city-region, mega-region, learning region, creative region, competitive region, resilient region or bioregion, for example, have attached new meanings to the abstract idea of region. The burgeoning plethora of such widely circulated regional-conceptual hybrids in both academic literature and in the language of regional development think-tanks and planning organizations further attests to how academic debates about the nature and characteristics of regions are rooted in complex and contestable social, economic and political dynamics (Barnes, 2011; Bristow, 2010; Paasi, 2010, 2011).

For decades, *Regional Studies* has functioned as a medium for a critical discussion around such terms (e.g.,

Crawshaw, 2013; Jones & Paasi, 2013; Pike, 2007). Linking in with this tradition of critical enquiry concerning the labelling of particular aspects of the world as 'regions' and the backgrounds and consequences of such practice, the key task of this paper is to discuss various ways of *foregrounding the region*. In linguistics 'foregrounding' refers to the practice of distinguishing a concept from the surrounding words or images. The main discursive vehicle for achieving this effect with regards to discussions about regions is naturally through the deployment of the 'key-word' *par excellence* of such debates: the concept of region itself (cf. Williams, 1983). The present paper takes a manifest interest in how this concept has evolved and been mobilized over the past decades by scrutinizing the variegated meanings that have been attached to it in academic research. Thus, its main focus is to trace and review *conceptualizations* of the 'region', that is, how scholars have articulated and justified ideas about what regions substantially 'are' and 'do', activities that have continually enacted the region as a worthy object of attention (scholarly or otherwise).

The paper particularly focuses on the *metageography* or *spatial imaginary* of the research field (e.g., Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015; Murphy, 2008). As argued by Murphy (2008, p. 9), metageographical conceptions are important because they play a powerful role in organizing and shaping understandings of the world, and therefore, by extension, also influence action (cf. Faludi, 2012). Our approach to the topic is guided by a broadly defined pragmatist sensibility. Partly following Barnes (2008), a pragmatist approach to concepts is understood here as calling for an attentiveness to the situated definition of terms within partially connecting (or not) communities of practice and epistemic communities, and to investigate the

drivers and outcomes of conceptual innovations. Further, it implores the researcher never to assume that there is one 'correct' way of defining a concept, which would somehow capture the essence of its supposed object. In line with such a sensibility, within the context of the paper, the conceptual history of the region is understood not as a step-wise progression towards some form of essential truth about what the region 'really is', but rather as attempts at grappling with spatiotemporally located intellectual, political and social challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the arguments put forth in the paper rest upon a conviction that it is impossible to understand academic struggles between competing conceptualizations of the region in a productive way if one treats them as somehow separate from the wider political and social 'career' of the region-concept and without recognizing that academics are by no means the only ones who sometimes creatively, sometimes unreflexively (re)conceptualize regions. Undoubtedly, spatial concepts such as 'region' to some degree function as contestable totems for academic fields and other spheres of professional and political practice, and the act of their perpetual redefinition is simultaneously an illustration of academic struggle over symbolic capital/prestige and a powerful mirror of wider societal, often state-related developments and concerns (Paasi, 2011). Such power struggles recurrently involve the caricaturing and denouncement of one's predecessors or contestants competing conceptualizations as problematic, naïve or unscientific. In recent decades this has in the academic debate over the nature of regions often played out as consecutive series of accusations of *essentialism* or *fetishism* between various schools/traditions of regional studies. From the heat of such denunciations, it becomes apparent that contrasting conceptualizations make a difference through producing diverging *ontological politics* (Mol, 1999).<sup>2</sup> In relation to this, it is particularly noteworthy that contemporary understandings of the 'regional world' to some degree universalize the notion of the region and blur the conceptualization of regions with that of basically all other key spatial categories such as territory, place, scale or network. This 'ontological slipperiness' of the concept of region within contemporary geography and regional studies is further evinced by how it is excluded from Jessop, Brenner, and Jones's (2008) elaboration of a possible framework for defining the relations between these other key concepts of geography. As a consequence, there appears to emerge a need to ask – perhaps provocatively – if regional studies as a discipline becomes less relevant in a world in which 'regions', as they are currently understood at the research front of regional studies specifically and social theory generally, on the one hand appear to be everywhere, but on the other hand appear to lack any form of attention-grabbing specificity. The question arises: what difference does it make, in such a world, to insist on defining certain relational entities as 'regions' – and why is this important?

In order to fulfil the ambitions set forth in this introduction, the paper proceeds in two steps. The first part of the paper provides an – inevitably brief – investigation into the *conceptual history* of the academic understanding

of the idea of *region*, which must also be understood as part of a wider social history (Koselleck, 2002). The historical exposition serves to demonstrate that the transformation (or rather, the perpetual rethinking) of the concept of region is by no means a new tendency, but how the pace of invention and reproduction of spatial keywords nonetheless seems to be accelerating (Agnew, 1989; Barnes, 2011; Harrison, 2008; Paasi, 2011). After this the modus of enquiry is shifted to a manner more akin to *conceptual pedagogy* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) to discuss the implications of one specific aspect of the evolution of academic conceptualizations of the region, namely, the recurrent waves of criticism regarding various forms of essentialism and fetishism, that is, the supposedly erroneous assignment of coherence and agency to things such as regions. This debate is then turned somewhat on its head through the posing of the question if, in a relationally complex world, there is any way to conceptualize anything without risking falling prey to some variant of this critique. Perhaps conceptualization always entails a form of fetishism, and the interesting questions to ask rather come to concern the situated consequences of adopting specific ways of 'carving up' and putting labels on various aspects of the (regional) world. The paper then wraps up with a discussion of some of the implications of the perspective put forth in the paper for the future of regional studies as an academic discipline.

## WHAT REGIONS ARE AND DO: CONCEPTUALIZING 'THE REGION'

It was for a long time typical in the practice of the newly institutionalized regional geography to search for formal regions (labelled as natural and later geographical regions) on various grounds (nature, culture, coexistence of various elements) and ultimately put them onto maps.<sup>3</sup> Distinguishing and isolating such regions from each other was a crucial part of this activity. Regions were understood to be products of research process whether they were seen as 'really existing entities' or 'mental devices' (cf. Blaut, 1962; Minshull, 1967), and the purpose of studying them was generally conceived to be the production of maps that gave a specific territorial shape and name to a region in the wider regional matrix. In practice, both approaches depended upon a 'bordering' process carried out by the researcher, but there nonetheless existed a deep ontological division between the two approaches that has stayed with regional studies ever since. This chasm runs between basically a naturalist–realist ontology, on the one hand, and a more pragmatist sensibility, on the other. The first of these considers there to be an underlying 'natural' or at least 'real' object, the region, which can be uncovered through analysis, i.e., correctly picked out and 'traced'. From this angle the interesting question is, 'are we getting it right or wrong?', and the answer will be ultimately decided by the quality of the analysis. The other proceeds from a completely different implicit question: is there some utility and relevance to labelling and treating certain aspects of the world as 'regions'? Kimble's (1951) answer

was critical: regional geographers may be trying to put boundaries that do not exist around regions that do not matter! For many other representatives of regional geography the answer was much more positive, while being typically contestable (Agnew, 1989; Harrison, 2008).

After the Second World War a new ambition to control, manage and plan regional systems emerged. Capitalist urbanization and industrialization and the related concentration of population and the economy created uneven development and urban problems. Systematic approaches to economic, urban and transport issues accentuated functional/nodal regions, relative location and interaction – an idea that had been emergent in geography already before the war (e.g., Walter Christaller in Germany) (cf. Barnes, 2011; Paasi, 2011). The rise of regional science and the quantitative revolution entailed a search for abstract spatial patterns/forms, which were treated as logical, geometric realities, underlying and to some degree separate from the contextual meanings of social life. The traditional regional geographic inwards-oriented language of unity/particularity (manifesting in such terms as synthesis, uniqueness, holism, whole, totality, organism, personality, etc.) was rejected by regional scientists. Spatial-analytical approaches instead purposely distanced their network-based kinetic functional conceptualization of the region from any form of inwards oriented, holistic regional thinking (Haggett, 1965).

The rise of critical regional studies soon led to responses against the objectivist and often strongly positivistic character of quantitative regional science: on the one hand, it was seen to be blind to power dynamics and, on the other, to fail properly to take into account the subjective nature of human experience. Based on these two different points of critique, the proponents of Marxist and humanistic approaches revitalized the studies of regions, the former problematizing regions in relation to uneven development (Massey, 1978), the latter highlighting the significance of regional identities and spatial experiences (Buttimer, 1979). The key agency in the making of regions in Marxist accounts is the accumulation of capital, which is related to uneven capitalist development. Massey (1978), for example, suggested that the analysis of uneven development should not start from any prespecified, fixed regionalization of space but rather investigate the patterns of capital accumulation, from which geographical analysis must then produce the concepts in the terms of the spatial divisions of labour. Massey's sensitiveness to history led her to develop the famous 'geological metaphor': the development of spatial structures can be viewed as a product of the combination of 'layers' of the successive activity (Massey, 1984, p. 118). Hudson (2002, 2007) in particular has developed Marxist political economy approaches further in the analysis of the production of places/regions.

### Regions as social constructs

Marxists and humanistic views provided a critical stepping stone towards so-called 'new regional geography'. This was a heterogeneous set of theoretical approaches where *social practice* was seen as the key 'source' of regions, in contrast to the preceding 'discipline-centric' perspective in which

geographers produced definitions of regions and regional divisions as a result of their research process. By bringing together various strands of critique against quantitative regional science, and further adding influences from simultaneous developments in social theory and philosophy, scholars accentuating the structuration of practice and power relations in space-time advanced new views on regions and moved attention to individual and institutional practices/discourses that mediated agency and social structures. A region was now seen as an 'actively passive meeting place of social structures and human agency', which is 'lived through, not in' (Thrift, 1983, p. 38), a historically contingent process (Pred, 1984), or a process of institutionalization where certain territorial, symbolic and institutional shapes emerge as part of the transforming spatial division of labour (Paasi, 1986). For some scholars the effort to advance regional geographies inescapably claimed new philosophical/methodological solutions to the problems of context, causation, ethnography and narrative. They saw realist philosophy particularly useful for developing new critical regional geographies (Sayer, 1989; cf. Agnew, 1989).

Geographers increasingly regarded regions as *social constructs* that were produced/reproduced by social actors in and through variegated social practices and discourses. The region is thus not thought to be 'constructed' or 'discovered' by scholars, but is rather apprehended as the outcome of contestable 'region-building' or regionalization processes. Rather than just geographers themselves, actors such as politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers or voluntary associations were thought to assume key positions as activists and advocates in the process of articulating the meanings and functions attached to regions. In relation to these, the role of the scholar becomes that of tracing and documenting the unfolding of such processes and the roles of actors/social relations through which regions become, transform, achieve meanings and may ultimately become deinstitutionalized. Within this 'New Regional Geography' literature, agency and power relations involved in the construction of a region are generally considered to extend both inside and outside of such regions as processes, constituting and opening the region towards a wider institutional matrix of economic, political and cultural relations. However, important questions, such as who or what it is that 'constructs' a region or what this construction means in terms of social practice or power relations, often remained unanswered or were answered in partial, contradictory ways (Paasi, 2010).

### Relational/poststructuralist conceptions of region

One highly significant methodological (and ontological) question that arises in the wake of previous developments is whether 'social construction' denotes the *process* of constructing regions or some ready-made *products* of such construction (cf. Hacking, 1999). This issue is crucial for regional studies since it raises a critical methodological question regarding the relation between *history* and the region, i.e., whether the region is understood in terms of 'being', that is, a fixed entity or neutral background/

medium for social processes, or something that is perpetually 'becoming' as part of these social processes, i.e., is itself a process.

Echoing Pred's (1984) and Paasi's (1986, 1991) early works, several scholars now conceptualize regions as historically contingent processes that are 'becoming' rather than just 'being', and thereby querying the relevance of ever painting a synchronic 'still life' of a regional configuration, without taking into regard the wider relational arrangements in time and space as well as the power relations that uphold, perpetuate or transform this pattern. They further argue the need for considering the potential (or rather, highly likely) prospect that the present configuration may just be but a snapshot, a temporary stabilization (of lesser or greater duration), of one specific moment in a 'coming together' of heterogeneous trajectories of change (Massey, 2005). Contemporary academic interest in regions, following this kind of rationality, can be labelled as a relational-topological approach that is often nourished by post-structuralist thinking which has inspired much of the regional research agenda since the late 1990s. Some scholars have been keen advocates of relational approaches (Allen, Cochrane, & Massey, 1998) and understand regions as entities shaped by social relations and networks made up of complex linkages and flows with a specific territorial reach. From this viewpoint also boundaries are results of networking and connections (Murdoch, 2006; Painter, 2010). Rather than being a neat fixed level in a nested scalar hierarchy, the relations sustaining the region are understood to stretch far beyond its imagined territorial and scalar borders in Euclidean space. Other scholars have offered often sympathetic critiques of straightforward one-sidedly relational views (Harrison, 2008, 2013; Jones, 2009; Metzger, 2013; Metzger & Schmitt, 2012; Varró & Lagendijk, 2013).

To many commentators, the pertinence and relevance of regions and regional geography has been fundamentally challenged as a consequence of transforming socio-spatial and power relations and the ongoing, sometimes radical, reorganization of social, political and cultural spatialities around the world – sometimes collectively referred to as 'globalization' (cf. Scott & Storper, 2007). In response, some scholars have sought to rethink, for example, the global regional geographies of the world system of production (Taylor, 1988), while others accentuate the need to trace the changing regional worlds of distribution, often in the context of the new geopolitics of city-regionalism (Jonas, 2012). Another group has taken a more overtly politically engaged position and suggests that the opening of borders is a major challenge for a progressive (social) science and politics (Massey, 2005): most (con)temporary regions 'stretch' in space so that their social contents/relations are networked across borders. Such networking modifies and reconstitutes regions/borders, and gives rise to a complex, dynamic topology where distance and proximity fold in numerous ways (cf. Allen, 2016).

Some relational geographers go further and contend that to talk about bounded regions is a misconception of the networks and flows that actually exist and which are unduly 'reified' under the label of 'region'. Hence, talking about regions as bounded entities blinds one to this act

of reification, since '[a] given actor-network is not confined to a finite, homogeneous territory demarcated by clear-cut boundaries; rather it carries the potential of infinite expansion due the unproblematic incorporation of all the kinds of actors, however different, the network may mobilize' (Pedersen, 2009, p. 140). However, many commentators have called for the need to move beyond the territorial/relational binary that has characterized such debates (Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Cochrane & Ward, 2012; Harrison, 2013; Varró & Lagendijk, 2013). Painter (2010), for example, suggests that 'territory' and 'network' are not incommensurable or rival principles of spatial organization. For him, territory is primarily an effect – and such a 'territory effect' can best be understood as the result of networked socio-technical practices. Hence, the current resurgence of territory or region can be seen as itself a product of relational networks.

Of course the 'real-world' problem is – and this was sometimes perhaps underestimated during the early period of relational thinking – that while in some cases boundaries are quite insignificant, in other cases they are more persistent and make a difference. A certain boundedness is often a 'fact of practice' since many regions are actually *territories* deployed within the processes of governance, and are made socially meaningful entities in processes characterized by multifaceted power relations. Recent research on the changing forms of regional governance has highlighted the traversing and interrelated character of the 'territorial' and 'relational' rather than seeing them as separate or even opposite ontological realms (Cochrane & Ward, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2010). It is therefore crucial to scrutinize the territory/network constellation as embedded in social practice (planning, governance, politics) rather than assuming an abstract ontological rupture between the territorial and relational. The functions of borders should be understood contextually in relation to social practice in order to reveal their possible constitutive roles in the making, management and control of territorial spaces and social action (Paasi & Zimmerbauer, 2016). Respectively, regional planning, for example, operates more often with 'penumbral' rather than fixed borders: the former can be at the same time meaningful in some planning-related social practices and rather meaningless in some others. Thus, one has to ask how the region performed in relation to some entities and relations rather than other, at what time and place this occurs, and by whom such performativity is mobilized (Metzger, 2013). To learn from this, one needs to study how these relations play out in practice, where different conceptualizations of space in general, and regions in particular, have no problem of sitting beside one another and co-mingling, untroubled by academic tribulations and claims about their supposed mutual exclusivity (Metzger, 2013).

## VARIETIES OF FETISHISM (AND THEIR CRITICS)

The conceptualization of the region is certainly not merely a 'what it is' problem in regional studies or even in social

practice, but also pertains to the perhaps even more vexing question of ‘what it does’ (cf. Agnew, 1989). Is the region to be understood as a prime mover of action, i.e., does it have ‘agentic capacities’, or is it conceptualized as ‘merely’ mirroring other, supposedly more primary powers? This conundrum concerning ‘what regions do’ invites one to revisit debates about *spatial fetishism* that were opened up by critical geographers a long time ago, and then to look at some fresh alternatives.

The term ‘fetishism’ has, in a generic sense, been used in social science to denote some form of misattribution of agency, which in the broad Marxist tradition of social science has also been associated with the notion of ‘reification’: an obfuscation of the relations that produce or sustain a specific entity or arrangement. In Marxist traditions of social science, this has primarily been discussed in terms of *commodity fetishism*, whereby the social relations that enable the production of a specific market goods become hidden from view when the product is inserted into market-based systems of exchange. This in turn generates relationship between goods that only become comprehensible in narrowly economic terms, i.e., as relative economic values, thus obscuring the social relations of production of the goods in question. *Spatial fetishism*, in turn, refers to an understanding in which the relations between social groups or economic classes are interpreted as relations between areas, as if one region (one section of ‘space’) would be, for example, exploiting another region or ultimately that a given social structure would be determined by spatial relations (Anderson, 1973; Urry, 1985). For Gregory (1978), the ‘fetishism of area’ refers to thinking of regions as entities that can interact with other regions, as if they constitute a world apart from society. Such fetishism also characterizes the discourse of competition between states, willingly used by politicians in their rhetoric.

Critiques of fetishism take various forms. For Marxists spatial fetishism reifies what in reality is the product of capital/class dynamics. For humanistic geographers it reifies what in reality are psychological–linguistic ideas that subjects employ to orientate themselves in the world. What unites these streams of critique is that they all disapprove of the direct or indirect attribution of agentic capacities to space or spatial entities such as regions in relation to the organization of social relations and meaning. They further point to how such fetishism often obscures the making, becoming and performativity of regions as results of societal power relations, struggles and ideologies. This complexity is an everlasting challenge for critical scholars and, as Soja (1989, p. 6) states:

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.

The key message of these commentators is that while regions seem to act and do things, in reality it is *other* forces, often among this group of authors assumed to be those of

capital, that matter – and what are recognized as ‘regions’ are merely the material and/or ideological–fictitious reflections of such processes. Consequently, statements such as ‘the region does this or that’ or ‘it is in the interest of the region’ thus obfuscate the real interests and actors, e.g., of economic classes.

### Fetishizing in regional practice and research

Who are, then, those criticized for generating spatial fetishism today? The recent resurgence of the region has led to a situation in which the region is increasingly taken for granted as a (bounded) setting or background for diverging social processes. It has been suggested above that this occurs not only in academic fields but also in regional media, education, planning and governance. To give some examples, in strategic regional planning it is characteristic to represent regions as actors that make decisions, struggle with each other or promote themselves (Bristow, 2010; Pike, 2011). In the media, regions, nations or cities are portrayed as partaking in a ‘struggle’ and ‘beating each other’ in economic issues and cultural achievements. Regional actors increasingly try to transform regions into products that are marketed as attracting packages to individuals, families or businesses that are seduced to regions in various roles: as tourists, workers, employees, etc. Marketing/promotion everywhere uses such strategies in fetishizing the region/place.

Another form of fetishizing can be labelled as a ‘pre-scientific’ understanding of regions, wherein the region is taken for granted as a mere neutral background of social issues, discounting the political history and institutional biography of any region (Paasi, 2010). Such understandings are partly due to the position given to region in contexts such as governance, planning and regional development and is fed by different interpretations of the real-world needs for regionalization processes. The consolidating forms of governance in the European Union have markedly advanced such an understanding. One central medium was the creation of the European Union’s NUTS (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) region system, i.e., the authorization of spatial units that are used at various spatial scales as the basis for the creation and maintenance of statistical information on ‘regions’ and that standardizes a nested understanding of what are the European regions. The NUTS system was established by EUROSTAT in order to help governance, management and the ‘harmonization’ of the spatial practices in Europe. Formally, the ‘Europe of regions’ thus consists of given administrative regions represented in official statistics (Bristow, 2010; Paasi, 2010). The NUTS classification is powerful in ‘objectifying’ European regional spaces: it defines regional boundaries, and has been the base for the allocation of European Union structural aid.

In academic circles, the aforementioned forms of policy-related or ‘lay’ fetishisms to some degree constitute easy targets. However, things get more sensitive when the sharp edge of critique is instead turned towards one’s own academic colleagues. Nonetheless, every new school of regional geography in one way or the other has criticized

its predecessors of some form of essentialism or fetishism. In one of the most recent recurrences of such critiques, Suorsa's (2014) review of almost 100 articles on regional innovation systems research demonstrates that the conceptualization of region is typically marginalized in such studies; innovations systems are more often than not seen to be located in regional settings that are taken for granted. Christopherson and Clark (2007) have explicitly criticized the representation of regional units as 'actors in themselves' in economic geography, and Asheim (2009, p. 174), for his part, criticizes fetishizing the idea of 'learning region' and states that 'regions cannot learn, only firms and organizations can' (cf. Cumbers, Mackinnon, & McMaster, 2003; Hassink & Klaerding, 2012).

However, even though the critique of spatial fetishism is alive and well within regional studies – and further, one would argue, has functioned as a quilting point for many productive and important academic debates – critics of spatial fetishism are in turn criticized by social constructivists for essentializing and unduly privileging other drivers, such as capital dynamics, in their accounts. Complaints of essentialism are directed against the reduction of multifaceted, dynamic and complex realities to 'one or a few fundamental causes' (Graham, 1990, p. 54). Graham (1990) shows that generalizing accounts drawing on macro-level social or political economy explanations frequently comprise an essentialist element when directly or indirectly highlighting, e.g., capital accumulation, capitalist relations within production, the class struggle, production or profitability as *the* prime drivers of social and spatial change. The same broad critique of essentialization can of course be levelled against claims that firms and organizations, supposedly in contrast to regions, can 'learn' – given that many organizational scholars in turn would argue that they indeed cannot, and that only humans are capable of this. A conclusion which then again in itself would be questioned by social scientists influenced by post-humanist strands of philosophy, who would claim that such a statement would constitute a reification or essentialization of individual 'humans' as some form of autonomous units, which in turn would indicate a failure to recognize that any form of individual subjectivity in effect constitutes a relational arrangement of variegated sets of genetic material, social relations, cultural traditions, ideology, institutions, etc. Situating critiques against spatial fetishism within such a wider contextual frame sheds a light on how these arguments often have been underpinned by problematic un-interrogated assumption that humans (or capital, class, culture) are somehow integral and coherent actors, and in themselves not battlegrounds for various conflicting economic, political, cultural, ideological and biological drives, pushing their action in various directions. From such a vantage point, the positing of *anything* as an actor 'in itself' becomes problematic, and an example of what Haraway (1997) calls *corporeal* fetishism, which entails 'mistaking *heterogeneous* relationality for a fixed, seemingly objective thing', by way of which 'interactions among heterogeneous actors are mistaken for self-identical things to which actions might be applied' (Haraway, 1997, pp. 142–143, original emphasis).

## Problematizing the notion of agency and the relational region

A stable and somehow fixed image of preceding traditions of regional geography seems to have become a caricature for the representatives of newer approaches. Thus, new approaches often accentuate the missing historical reflexivity in their earlier counterparts; complaining about their positing of the bounded character of regions and the fixity and inwards-looking orientation in the previous, supposedly more 'traditional' perspective. They in consecutive turns blame each other of a lack of scientific rigour or varieties fetishism. However, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Graham, 1990), what these critics often appear to be only dimly aware of is that they themselves generally all in turn implicitly lean against something supposedly firmer and 'more real', as a purportedly solid ontological ground that can be used as a leverage point to denounce the 'mere illusions' that are problematically reified by others. All could therefore in turn be criticized for propagating various forms of reductionism, and generating reifications of, if not regions in themselves, then classes in themselves, networks in themselves, capital in itself, etc. – enacting regions as mere reflections or symptoms of these supposedly more 'real' forces. Thus, it could be argued that critiques that only aim at debunking fetishisms do not really serve to foreground the region, but rather to background it; or more specifically, they foreground it momentarily, so that it can then be dismissed as a mere reflection of some supposedly more real, underlying force or agent such as 'globalization', 'capital', etc.

Could there be a way out of this vicious circle of critique, which to an external observer could sometimes appear as a dog chasing its own tail? A way out that does not rely on claiming some solid ontological ground as a basis for knocking the bottom out of others' conceptualizations? At least one attempt at providing such an 'irreductionist' approach is the version of actor–network theory (ANT) provided by Bruno Latour. In ANT, careful attention is paid so as not a priori to 'reify' or privilege any form of force or entity as more primary than another (Latour, 1988, 2005). Rather than taking terms such as 'actors' or 'networks' as given start- or endpoints of enquiry, ANT treat such concepts as practical handles on a world that is in itself always richer than our descriptions of it – but where the use of specific concepts make a difference by performatively bringing together and highlighting certain aspects and backgrounding others (see also Latour, Jensen, Venturini, Grauwin, & Boullier, 2012; Mol, 2010; Paasi, 2008). It plays with the definition of, for example, 'networks' and 'actors', arguing that one often can learn new things about the world by approaching what one normally would call a 'network' as an 'actor', an entity that produces some form of agency; and then also turning this around to analyse an 'actor' instead as a 'network' made up of entangled, mutually affective heterogeneous components, stretching both within and outside of the boundaries of a recognized entity – and where agency is understood to be relationally produced in such networks (cf. Abrahamsson, Bertoni, Mol, & Martin, 2015; Johansson & Metzger, 2016; Latour, 2005).



From the vantage point of such an approach, 'reification' and 'fetishism', i.e., the 'picking out' and 'cutting loose' of singular objects from complex and entangled webs of constitutive relations, and then attributing some form of power of agency to them, become crucial human practices for navigating in a world marked by ubiquitous and wicked relational complexity. This is also the explicit argument made by Law (2015): in an in-itself messy and over-rich world of complexly overlapping similarities and differences, any conceptualization in academic or other context demands simplifications that foreground some sets of relations and attributes while backgrounding other. Humans simply must and do 'fetishize' all the time to get some manageable handles on a relationally complex world of open or semi-bounded systems.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it becomes completely necessary to conduct such simplifications to ever be able to act in the world, or one would be constantly overcome by a sense of overwhelming complexity.

Following Law (2015), the question is how to conduct such conceptualizations, in the form of foregrounding and simplification, in a responsible way – by staying attentive to the effects of one's choices and making oneself conscious of what becomes made important and what is excluded from any particular way of conceptualizing some phenomenon. As a consequence, fetishization cannot be seen as an evil in itself. However, what becomes tantamount is trying to make oneself aware of the practical consequences of any specific mode of fetishization or reification. The interesting question becomes how self-aware one is in doing so and also to stay attentive to the wider implications and consequences of just how one fetishizes or reifies.

What about regions in such a relational world? Social constructivist and poststructuralist approaches to regions have helped engender an understanding of these entities as composite actors, 'made to act by many others' (Latour, 2005, p. 46), where those 'others' lie topologically and topographically both 'inside' and 'outside' the everlastingly reconstructing, material and discursive socio-spatial process that becomes labelled as 'the region', and where variegated actors contribute to producing (often contested) accounts and narratives of such regions as to some degree constituting coherent and definable entities. Work of regionalization and 'region-building' is performed not only by economic, political and cultural/media elites in the production/reproduction of regions and identity narratives, but also in everyday practices and in the work of, for example, regional planners and developers, as well as through such mundane material structures such as transport infrastructures (Metzger, 2013; Paasi, 2013).

Regions are thus envisaged as complicated constellations of materiality, agency, social relations and power; as institutional structures and processes that are continuously 'becoming' instead of just 'being'. They are based on a complex interplay between non-discursive and discursive practices and patterns. Various time scales come together in such processes. Similarly, heterogeneous social institutions such as culture, media and administration are crucial in these processes and in the production and reproduction

of certain 'structures of expectations' for these units. Such structures are the basis for the narratives of identity, mobilization of collective memory, and they also constitute the visible and invisible social 'gel' based on values, norms and ideologies (Paasi, 1991).

So what is the point of the above, fairly extensive, digression into ANT-inspired conceptualizations of the region? Is it to argue that finally the 'right' and 'true' way to represent and conceptualize regions has now been found? Given the previously presented pragmatist sensibilities of this enquiry, any such idea would of course be completely off-hand. Rather, this approach has been recounted in some detail because it productively speaks to an identified weakness in previously dominant ways of conceptualizing regions. Specifically, in this case, it offers affordances for the researcher to extricate her analysis from the previously described fetishism-conundrum. Viewed from the vantage point of these previous debates, this way of rethinking the region may indeed appear to be sensible and pertinent, seeing that it offers a way around an identified problem that previous conceptualizations had trouble negotiating. However, this by no means implies that this way of conceptualizing regions somehow would be a complete, eternal or total solution. As long as the region remains an interesting category of social and scholarly practice, also this approach will with time most certainly be superseded as a consequence of increasingly obvious internal contradictions, and constantly growing lacunae with regards to its explanatory power vis-à-vis the continually evolving worldly processes it pertains to index and relate to.

Just to mention one such obvious and troubling weakness of an ANT-inspired way of conceptualizing the region, it can definitely be argued that in such a very broad and general definition of the nature of regions, what is gained in explanatory power is lost in specificity and context sensitivity. Hence, the question arises what the particular but common attributes (e.g., various institutions, practices, symbols) of the entities labelled as regions really are in contrast to any other type of spatial entity that arguably could be considered to be constituted and held together by similar attributes and mechanisms (cf. Paasi, 1991)? What is it that 'regions' have in common, which at the same time differentiates them from (or links them with), for example, 'nations', 'places' and 'localities'? For at the same time as the radical poststructuralist approaches suddenly enable analysts to label very many phenomena around the world as 'regions' of some kind and extent, the question nevertheless follows: what good does this do? That is, what difference does it make to conceptualize something as a 'region', 'carving it out' and labelling it as such, and not in a different way? This question can, of course, productively be posed in an analytical modality, turned towards, for instance, all the political and professional groups that throw this concept around in their everyday practice and discourse, asking what difference it appears to make in their practice to enact 'regions' in various ways; but the question also has a normative dimension that poses a challenge to regional studies as an academic pursuit.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Academic debates about the development and refinement of various analytical spatial concepts do not only constitute esoteric wordplays. Rather, they are enmeshed in wider societal power dynamics in which the stakes often are high, even if not always directly visible. One such stake, which is fairly obvious, is certainly the fate and prospects of specific academic disciplines – which are dependent on prestige and apparent relevance, leading to funding and influence within and outside academia. Viewed from this angle, it could be argued that the subdisciplines of regional geography and regional studies, building upon the logic of the importance of ‘foregrounding the region’, in this regard are dependent upon a sustained interest in the concept of the ‘region’ and that which it purports to denote. This foundation has been put into doubt by claims set forth since the 19th century, suggesting that the region will fade away along with the consolidating modernity and related state-centric spatiality (Keating, 1998). It is obvious that such predictions have been if not completely erroneous then at least grossly premature (e.g., Addie & Keil, 2015; Parker & Harloe, 2015; Soja, 2015). Part of this perseverance is based on the intimate relation between the state and the region: the region, especially when conceptualized as a sub-state political territory, is a critical constituent of the territorial politics and governance of modern states and its rise into a privileged scale of activity is itself a result of politics, policies and power (Christopherson & Clark, 2007).

Thus, regions appear to have persistent relevance and allure, both for academics and policy practitioners alike. Then again, understandings of what a region is and does have shifted considerably in the course of decades. The region is today generally conceptualized as a flexible, malleable and mutable object of analysis. ‘Unusual’ regions (Deas & Lord, 2006) appear to pop up everywhere, if one just looks closely enough. This brings a new focus to the practical enactment of various ways of being/becoming a ‘region’ and, for lack of better terms, ‘modes of regionality’ or ‘ways of becoming region’. If there is not anything that is basically ‘regional’, but nevertheless a whole lot of (contested) patterns out there in the world that seem meaningful to be labelled as ‘regions’ for some purposes, and that some groups of people also label as such, what is it that makes them hang together *as regions*? This certainly relates to some degree to the old question of ‘regions in themselves’ versus ‘for themselves’, but also demands the recognition of that there are then innumerable regions ‘in themselves’ out there all the time, criss-crossing in partial connections (Metzger, 2013). So the ‘for themselves’ becomes perhaps an even more pertinent question. This in turn brings back into focus the ‘subject of regionality’: who/what is ascribing regionality to an entity (or even de-/ascribing it as gifted with ‘regional identity’)? And what organizing work are actors performing to make the region become ‘for itself by holding steady, reworking or challenging aspects of their environment (in a very broad

sense, including, for example, social and political environment)? This could be a group of practitioners, a group of residents, politicians, researchers, or any mix of these and others. The interesting thing is, of course, that they can all define this object in different ways, thus generating regions in the guise of often ‘non-coherent’ and ‘fuzzy’ ‘multiple objects’ that are ‘more than one but less than many’, and characterized by a curious ‘fractional coherence’ that is often fraught by frictions and contradictions (Law, 2004; Metzger, 2013).

Such an understanding further demands that academic analyses of regional issues do not only turn attention to when people ‘out there’ (e.g., activists or policy practitioners) are ascribing regionality, analysing why ‘they’ treat/define something as a region in practice, and looking at what difference does this make. It also highlights the need for the academic researcher to interrogate her own role in producing/reproducing ascriptions of regionality in her work, and to ask herself: what difference am I making – how am I intervening in worldly affairs – by doing this? If one recognizes that the world is much more complex than what can be grasped with the conceptual tools available at any given time (Paasi, 2008), and that there are always innumerable ways to analyse and correlate possible conceptual ‘holds’ on the world – what kind of scholarly practice would such an insight call for? To begin with, it would require of researchers in regional studies always to ask questions such as: What difference does it make if one conceptualizes some spatial entities as ‘regions’ or not? What difference does it make to package and enact a set of heterogeneous relations as a ‘region’? What supplement does it add to see something, or rather – treat it – specifically as a ‘region’?

Further, and perhaps somewhat more uncomfortably, it would perhaps also require turning the question ‘what does it do?’ not only towards *regions* and those who enact them within, for example, the spheres of politics and professional practice, but also towards the subdiscipline of *regional studies*. This certainly demands that the regional studies scholar interrogates, with critical (self)distance, her own research practices: in which concrete ways do specific approaches co-produce the objects of their interest? And further, how do they organize attention towards certain issues and away from others? What is being made absent/present in various ways of analyzing regions, and to what consequences? More broadly: what are the explicit or implicit ontologies, epistemologies and normativities of a specific way of performing regional studies? And finally, as well as perhaps also most dauntingly: what are the situated but patterned ethico-political effects of performing the concept of ‘region’ specifically, and regional studies more generally, in this or that way?

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## NOTES

1. This lack of concern with correspondence-based understandings of truth is one of the central components of pragmatist thought, perhaps most succinctly expressed in William James's famous dictum that if 'no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell' (James, 1897, p. 30). That is, even if there were a 'right' or a 'wrong' way to grasp things, how would one ever know when one got it 'right' except by way of intersubjective agreement or pragmatic, experimental testing and application?
2. Our way of apprehending the term 'ontology' is influenced by the so-called 'ontological turn' within science and technology studies (e.g., Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013, 2015). Respectively, one does not approach the subject of ontology in a prescriptive–speculative sense by making claims about the supposed nature of reality, but rather one takes an interest in the study of 'ontology in practice' and its situated effects, that is, the ideas people hold about how the world works and the components that constitute it, and what difference such ideas make (cf. Johansson & Metzger, 2016; Joronen & Häkli, 2016).
3. It is characteristic for historians of geography to trace the differences between various national schools of thought and their views on what regions are and regional geographers do. Such comparison is certainly fruitful (Agnew, 1989; Barnes, 2011). However, the focus of the following discussion is particularly upon contrasts and differences in key aspects of the conceptualization of regions. While one is well aware that the foregrounding of the region has occurred to some extent simultaneously on several interrelated, contested terrains, not neatly in the form of successive rounds of theorization, limitations of space here mean the process will be described in a manner that to some degree oversimplifies the national complexities of the historical unfolding of these developments.
4. Law (2015) does not explicitly use the term 'fetishize', but utilizes the terminology developed by Rittel and Webber (1973) to discuss the 'taming' of 'wicked problems'. However, see Latour (2010) on 'factishes'. Collinge (2005, p. 201) also makes what appears to be a related argument, based on Derrida's notion of the 'spectral logic of the fetish'.

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