

# **GeoJournal Library**

Volume 127

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Tiziana Banini · Oana-Ramona Ilovan  
Editors

# Representing Place and Territorial Identities in Europe

Discourses, Images, and Practices

Foreword by Anssi Paasi

 Springer

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ISSN 0924-5499

ISSN 2215-0072 (electronic)

GeoJournal Library

ISBN 978-3-030-66765-8

ISBN 978-3-030-66766-5 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66766-5>

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# Foreword

## Place, Territory and Identities in a Fast-Changing World

Scientific terms and concepts are, and should always be, under critical scrutiny, in motion and subject to changes. This is critical for the progress in research. Such changes may reflect power relations, major political, economic and cultural events, conflicts and wars, institutional decisions, diverging social practices (nationalism, regionalism, globalization, spatial divisions of labor), but also different interests of knowledge (technical, practical, emancipatory) and philosophical and methodological approaches. They are doubtless also expressions of struggle for symbolic capital that is ever more visible under the condition of academic capitalism and competition (Paasi 2015).

Territory and identity have been, for a long time, keywords in political geography and several other academic fields, such as International Relations Studies, anthropology and political psychology and political sociology. In addition to the term territory, in many of these fields, a wide-ranging spatial vocabulary has been in use. Geographers and psychologists frequently talk about place identity and the politics of place identity, and scrutinize the conceptual and empirical dimensions of this category related to individual and community life. Peng, Strijker, and Wu (2020) have recently prepared a useful, extensive review of research literature to find how far and where scholars have come in exploring the meanings of this idea, particularly in psychological and geographical literature. They show how the literature on this topic has dramatically expanded in various thematic contexts since the millennium.

The ideas of place and territory were ostensibly relatively stable until the 1960–1970s. For Broek (1965), the key dimensions of place resonated with absolute and relative location, i.e., site and situation. The 1970s witnessed the rise of humanistic concepts of place which put human experience, sense of place and emotions in focus, whereas, two decades later, ideas of open, relational places and regions emerged. Critical scholars challenged then the ideas of bounded spaces, regions, places and, ostensibly, essentialist identities that geographers and other scholars had been studying. More recently, a search for a synthesis of and dialogue between territorial and relational spaces has emerged. At the same time, a deep interest in the

concepts of space, place, and territory has arisen, often in the conceptual and methodological framework of narratives, geohistorical formations and spatial transformation (Paasi, Harrison and Jones 2018).

During the last 30 years or so, many academic scholars have been thinking that human interactions and the intensification of all kinds of mobilities, from finance capital to tourists, from immigrants to refugees, from ideas to policies, will change also global spatial patterns based on and constituting territories as well as human spatial consciousness related to such units. Thus, along with these features, characteristically associated with globalization, the space of places would gradually be superseded by a space of flows, and the traditional “slow geography” would thus increasingly turn to a footless “fast geography”. Space of places and space of flows were expressions coined by Manuel Castells (1989) just before the radical political changes took place at the turn of the 1990s. Among the most important transformations paralleling the rise of such dynamic views were the downfall of the sharp political dividing line between the capitalist West and socialist East, the gradual evolution of IT technology, cyberspace and internet (see Lambach 2020, for contested roles of cyberspace and its “territorialization” in the contemporary world). Similar processes were habitually thought to transform the meanings associated with state territory, notion that had been scrutinized by political geographers and political scientists for decades in various states. Indeed, already in 1973, Jean Gottmann wrote, in his *The Significance of Territory*, how the attitude of people to their territory, the basic relationship in geography, was changing in the fast-moving circumstances and required reconsideration. Gottmann noted how territory means different things for actors operating in different social realms such as the military, politics, or law. At the same time as the world was seen to be opening, subsequent horrifying ethno-nationalist wars in the states following the collapsed Yugoslavia and elsewhere displayed the uninterrupted power of socio-political borders and, in many cases, their strengthening. The most recent example of such re-bordering is the ongoing construction of walls around the world that has speeded up after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As sociologist Furedi (2020) has observed, the attempt to change or eradicate conventional borders coexists with the imperative of constructing new ones.

In spite of the tendencies noted above, most researchers regard territory and place incessantly as both significant conceptual tools and social practices which can have absolute, relative, and relational meanings/dimensions depending on the context. Respectively, scholars have claimed, in a way echoing Gottmann’s old guidelines, that researchers have to be prepared to re-consider or re-conceptualize their concepts if needed and to problematize territory’s continual allure (Storey 2020; Murphy 2020; Paasi 2016, 2020).

However, since the 1990s, ever more often bounded spaces and related spatial identities were challenged in academic debates, both in the case of the identity of the territory itself and the identity of the group of people inhabiting these spaces. Arguments in debates have varied. For some scholars, such opening was an inevitable result of expanding economic processes and flows. Perhaps the most extreme thoughts were presented by the Japanese organizational theorist and globalization enthusiast, Kenichi Ohmae, who argued that global changes in IT and mounting economic flows

would lead to a borderless world and to the end of the nation-state (cf. Paasi 2019). Accordingly, the future world, characterized essentially by a borderless business-logic, would become a model for other spheres of social lives, too. Ohmae's utopian images represented a sort of naïve cosmopolitan thinking when he claimed that state leaders should give up their nationalistic passions and images of bounded territorial spaces and to accept and to adapt to the emerging global dynamics. Also, critical political geographers and political scientists advanced widely spread concepts, such as territorial trap or embedded statism, to characterize the all-pervasive territorial logic of state-centrism. They argued that we needed to reject our perennial leaning on states and other political and cultural territories, as well as the common understanding of identities as fixed and immobile features.

A sense of territory and place, and associated identities oscillate at and across scalar contexts and similarly do the mechanisms that mediate such processes at and across scales. Likewise, in spite of the rise of all kind of flows, probably most scholars think that boundaries and identities matter but their mobilization and the power relations and ideologies behind them need to be always carefully analysed. Meyer and Geschiere (1999) have written already a long time ago that the search for fixed orientation points and the re-affirmation of borders is a shared element in people's understanding of globalization around the world and for numerous social groupings from the left to right. Some may involve localist and regionalist feelings, some other nationalistic. They argue that the making of locality is a critical question if one wants to understand globalization's "paradoxical articulation of flow and closure, flux and fix" (p. 3). Yet, this fact has not prevented some scholars from articulating claims for open borders and even no borders, no states, and no nations, claims that go much further than Ohmae's utopian idea(l)s.

This new Springer collection, *Representing Place/Territorial Identity: Discourses, Images and Practices*, edited carefully by Tiziana Banini and Oana-Ramona Ilovan, is a welcomed and rich contribution to the burgeoning debates on the dimensions, functions, and meanings of place, territory, and identity. In a situation where Anglophone thinking and concepts tend to be hegemonic and dominate international debates in geography and other social sciences, it is most laudable to convey new voices, approaches, and research contexts into international discourses regarding geography's key concepts and their use in concrete research.

This collection is useful in many ways. At first, it provides valuable theoretical analyses of key-concepts and their complex relations to empirical research. The introductory chapter provides the reader with a sophisticated conceptual prism for looking through the complex terrain constituted by these key terms. Introduction also offers a balanced, much-needed interchange between the often disconnected continental European and Anglophonic debates regarding these concepts. Secondly, the subsequent, habitually well-illustrated chapters present an exciting collection of case studies that have stimulating topics, focus attentively on different spatial scales and bring into discussion diverse geographical and political contexts and sites from Romania, Italy, Ireland, France, and Poland, for example. Authors often pay attention also to such concepts as collective memory and heritage that have frequently been neglected in the debates on territory. Thirdly, the book is also valuable in terms of

methods and methodologies as well as in displaying the value of versatile textual and visual research materials that can be used in examining representations. The editors also sketch an agenda for future research with an ambitious aim to push the ongoing debates further.

The topics discussed in the book touch upon some of the most burning issues today: how we should recognize in what ways national and local identities matter and transform, and how the relations between locality, state, and territory are created, mediated, sustained, and altered. The book confirms that these spatial concepts and social practices related to them are historically contingent, which implies that changes are also possible in both concepts and practices. Recognizing such transformative potential is often critical for active agency. The themes are also significant for local and regional development schemes. Romano Prodi's Commission accentuated the significance of identities as tools for local and regional development already at the turn of the millennium, but these have not yet been taken seriously enough in planning circles and theory. Just now, we are living in a stage where Covid-19 has forced states to monitor and even close state and regional borders, which has emphasized nationalism in many senses, for instance, the fears of the Other, medical protectionism/nationalism, etc. Will this modify permanently the relations and dynamics between people, place, territory, cities, and rural areas, as well as the processes of bordering at various scales, remains to be seen.

Overall, this book edited by Tiziana Banini and Oana-Ramona Ilovan is a valuable read to both students and more advanced researchers interested not only in the conceptual dimensions of place, territory, and identity but also in how such dimensions can be scrutinized in concrete research work.

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