Killing the regional Leviathan? Discussing deinstitutionalization and stickiness of regions

Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of debordering and deinstitutionalization of regions. It approaches territories as processes and borders as multilayered social constructs. The paper utilizes some key ideas on institutionalization and sees regions as 'Leviathans' that are entities 'thick with things', both human and nonhuman. Through ten focus group discussions the paper discusses particularly the sense of belonging and how a region 'holds onto' both human and nonhuman actants even after it loses its status in the legitimate regional structure. Due to this stickiness, it is concluded that deinstitutionalization is never complete in a sense that all regional consciousness would disappear entirely. After their administrative status is removed, regions remain in a state of in-betweenness: not quite fully existing, not quite fully extinct. This makes the concept of deinstitutionalization highly contested and one that eludes easy definitions. However, it is useful to understand deinstitutionalization as a process that turns regions into palimpsests or sets of assemblages that vary in time. Relatedly, regions that are officially deinstitutionalized can endure in 'penumbral' form, and can remain meaningful for their inhabitants for a long time.

Keywords: deinstitutionalization, stickiness, actant, border

Introduction

Contemporary regional geography has highlighted the emergence of many new regions as a result of new regionalism (Keating 1998), unusual regionalism (Deas and Lord 2006), geoeconomization of state spaces (Moisio and Paasi 2013) and other processes of regional restructuring. Typical to these concepts is the notion of competitive regions and, more generally, the idea of regions (or more precisely city-regions) as engines of growth. As a result, geographers, along with political scientists, economists and other social scientists, have stated that 'borders of one sort or another are now dispersed a little everywhere' (Axford 2006, p. 170). Accordingly, Deas and Lord have mapped over 140 new 'non-standard regional spaces' in Europe alone. This means we are surely currently witnessing a 'regional mess', as Frisvoll and Rye (2009) point out. Despite the current 'relational approach' on spaces suggesting that many borders are in fact becoming increasingly soft or porous, the number of borders demarcating regions by whatever criteria is at the same time greater than ever (see e.g. Deas and Lord 2006, Harrison and Grove 2012).

Simultaneous with their emergence, the institutionalization of new regions has been studied extensively from various angles, yet most typically by emphasizing the interplay of institutionalization and identity-formation in processes in which soft regions are created and eventually 'hardened' (Paasi 1986, Jones and Macleod 2004, Metzger and Schmitt 2012, Terlouw 2009). However, less is known about what happens when regions are deinstitutionalized, a process that happens in tandem with institutionalization. Although new regions are often institutionalized not to replace but rather to complement old ones, debordering practices nevertheless do happen and some old regions 'disappear from maps'. We feel that this aspect of regional transformation is understudied and needs further conceptual and theoretical work in order to gain a better understanding of how regions not only become but also go. We thus posit that regions as processes should be studied beyond the point of their 'full' institutionalization, including deinstitutionalization practices as well. Relatedly, and more importantly, we think that at the same time as we acknowledge that regions can become deinstitutionalized as officially recognized administrative spaces, more focus should be put on what makes regions 'sticky', i.e. why they do not necessarily cease to exist as

cognitive sociospatial entities that people identify with. In other words, deinstitutionalization is a complex, fuzzy and contested concept, and definitely something that requires additional study and discussion.

This paper studies the deinstitutionalization process in the context of current discussions on territorial and/or relational ideas of hard and soft spaces. The article focuses on the experiences of debordering and deinstitutionalization, and studies if and how a region transforms during and after the deinstitutionalization process. The key research questions stem from the need to reconceptualize the understanding of deinstitutionalization, and are: 1) what happens to regions and collective ideas of region when their legal borders (i.e. administrative status) are removed, and 2) how should deinstitutionalization be understood in relation to institutionalization of regions or to regions-in-becoming.

Theoretically, Anssi Paasi's ideas about institutionalization and deinstitutionalization (e.g. 1986 and 1991) as well as Jonathan Metzger's (2013) conceptualization of regions as 'Leviathans' that hold onto many things are utilized and refined. Through these, together with the contemporary key ideas of soft and hard spaces, the paper seeks to contribute to discussions that underline and call for a better understanding of territories as processes and borders as multilayered social constructs. By studying the multilayered border and its deconstruction, the paper also touches upon some key ideas on actor-network and assemblage theories. Towards the end of the paper the idea of penumbral region is presented as a possible alternative to understanding deinstitutionalization simply as a softening of hard space.

The case of one municipal merger in western Finland is used to illustrate the deinstitutionalization process. The relatively small municipality of Nurmo (with about 12,000 inhabitants at the time of the merger in 2009) was amalgamated with the regional center Seinäjoki despite heavy resistance from Nurmo's side. Resistance had in fact been strong for many years: the first serious effort to effect a merger was made in 1992, but failed due to strong resistance from Nurmo (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013). As a case, Nurmo is a rather typical, relatively rural municipality (with a healthy tax base) that faces external pressure to merge with the regional center and thus form a new, more competitive and functionally streamlined municipality, in line with the ideas of the contemporary planning and development paradigm that underlines economies of scale.

Regions and their deinstitutionalization

 'Region' is slippery concept, understood differently in different times. Traditionally regions were approached as formal or absolute 'natural' units that were given a specific territorial shape through the production of maps. In a similar vein, 'regional' has been understood at times simply as a distinct scale between the 'local' and 'national'. More recently regions have been examined as products of social practices or as historically contingent processes, focusing for example on their institutionalization. Regions have thus become increasingly regarded as non-scalar social constructs produced by social actors in social practices and discourses. Stemming from this approach, poststructural/relational conceptions have emphasized regions as historically contingent processes, emphasizing 'becoming' instead of 'being' (Paasi and Metzger 2016; Jones 2016). According to Jones (2016) the current phase of 'new new regional geography' includes an element of disbelief in regions, as 'thinking space relationally' envisages a world without regions in which networks and rhizomatic flows dominate the new spatial politics. This approach emphasizes regions not as absolute or fixed administrative units but as 'fuzzy' and highly malleable spaces, and has its origins in economic geography.

Although a world without regions and borders is presumably a step too far, as a result of the relational turn regions have become understood as markedly 'softer', to say the least. This means that particularly within the context of spatial politics, economics and planning, regions are conceptualized as new emergent spaces of governance that are often non-statutory or informal results of hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance and development processes. They are spaces that also represent an in-between phase in the process of becoming fully institutionalized, or alternatively towards deconstruction. In that sense, they are neither fixed nor entirely fluid, either (Allmendinger et al. 2015; Othengrafen et al. 2015), but rather represent "fluid spatial imageries in successive waves of creating and remaking spatial imaginaries in the process of region building" (Haughton and Allmendinger 2015, p. 1). As Jones (2016) puts it, the new new regional geography seeks currently a way to reconcile regional geography with a territorial/relational world. This is to say that while regions appear as highly networked, fluid, relational and temporary entities, we should not ignore the continuing allure of territory but instead look at the interplay and commensurability/incommensurability of relational and territorial. In the context of this paper, this is to say that although regions are less often conceptualized as administrative territorial units, administrative spatial units are nevertheless highly relevant regions and deserve to be discussed, too.

Although there is no single reading of a 'region', in this paper the concept is used in a broad and non-scalar fashion, where relationality refers more to a given region's relations with other regions than to its fuzziness or softness. Moreover, this paper embraces the tradition where regions have been seen as evolutionary and procedural institutions[1]. Thus, supporting the notion of Jones (2016), we foreground the process of their making and remaking. To start, it needs to be acknowledged that regions emerge as a result of many processes that can be understood as performative. This means that regions become made through 'speech acts' that are loaded with political power-structures (Metzger and Schmitt 2012). In this paper, speech acts are regarded not so much as illocutionary acts of requesting (i.e. an attempt to get the respondent to do something) (see Cooren 2000), but instead as an assemblages of acts, actions and actors creating 'scenes' that may rupture or complement the given (hegemonic) spatial order (see Huysmans 2011). Viewed in relation to Paasi's well-known theory of institutionalization (Paasi 1986), speech acts are understood as communicative actions consisting of various symbolizations of the region, but also could and should be understood more broadly as processes of bordering and legitimating the region through institutional structures such as education, regional news(papers) or simply through region-based organizations such as development agencies, regional councils or the like. Thus, institutionalization of regions is a mix of often contested processes of bordering, ordering, symbolization and legitimization of a political space. The approach chosen here emphasizes that institutionalization is a process in which regional consciousness arises and region becomes evidently part of an official regional structure. Institutionalization is hence not just a spatial phenomenon but one that happens in time and has multiple historical trajectories.

Metzger's idea of region-building stems from Paasi's theory, although he sees institutionalization only as a third phase in a process that he calls 'regions-in-becoming'. According to Metzger (2013), regions-in-becoming start with the emergence of a regional public, which is followed by the stabilization of a regional public (through the formation of a regional stakeholder community and singularization of the proposition for regionalization) and lastly institutionalization through the formation of regional spokespersons and the delegation of the proposition to more durable sociomaterial forms. While not fundamentally different from Paasi's theory, Metzger emphasizes the role of the actors who are legitimized to act as designated common

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[1] This approach has some of its early roots in the first and the second generations of the French Annalist School, in the works of such authors as Paul Vidal de La Blache in geography and Lucien Febvre in history. See Riukulehto 2015, 8-11.

spokespersons with the right to act as the voice of the region. Furthermore, Paasi's idea of symbolization is underlined by drawing on the actor-network theory and by stating that regions emerge as relational assemblages composed of both human and nonhuman components and that the propositions for regionalization are increasingly stabilized through more durable sociomaterial forms than discourse. Thus, while relational in the sense that institutionalization of regions occurs in relation to other regions, regions institutionalize durably through non-human and human agency within the region.

Particularly interesting, and we think also useful in conceptualizing deinstitutionalization in this paper, is Metzger's idea of understanding the process of regions-in-becoming as the birth of a kind of Leviathan. Refining the ideas of Callon and Latour (1981), who in turn were inspired by the work of Thomas Hobbes, Metzger (2013, p. 1372) outlines the Leviathan as an actor "made to act by many others but also acting back on them". Furthermore, the formation of the Leviathan, a monstrous animal, entails processes in which collective interests are formed and stabilized; and once stabilized, it is 'thick with things', that is, all sorts of heterogeneous materials beyond mere language and discourse. Thus, when regions become institutionalized, they do so through actor networks consisting of human and nonhuman actors. This tends to increase the stickiness of regions, as the non-human agency makes the region potentially more durable (Metzger 2013). With respect to human actors, it is noteworthy that certain people or regional institutions become the spokespersons of regions through (often complicated) power relations. This means that they are legitimized by the surrounding community to speak of the region and for the region. Being a legitimized spokesperson is thus a contextual and contested position. Put differently, the multitude of alternative voices cannot be entirely muted, as the Leviathan may have many talking heads.

Similarly, both Metzger and Paasi emphasize that regions are social constructs that exist in language and discourse, though Metzger in particular emphasizes that regions are 'glued' by other types of matter as well. Both authors also state that regions are constituted relationally in such a way that they may be bounded and territorial, but rather than being container-like, they exist in relation to other spatial entities and have a kind of semi-autonomous role. We think that it is precisely this aspect that creates the notion of regional identity as a collective sense of belonging and differentiating us and them. It also underlines the fact that the two perspectives, the territorial and relational notions of space, are in fact deeply interrelated, and the focus can be on borders and relational thinking at the same time (cf. Haselsberger 2014, 19).

Surprisingly, the theorizations of regions as processes largely cease at the point at which regions are fully institutionalized or 'solidified', that is, when they are truly and unquestionably part of the legitimized regional structure. Metzger states that the "Leviathan can even afford to mutate in parts, to slowly change shape, and shift nuances at the edges without falling apart", but he does not take this idea further or explain what happens if the Leviathan is lethally wounded. Similarly, Paasi has touched on deinstitutionalization only slightly (Paasi 1991), stating that "institutionalization is a sociospatial process in which a territorial unit emerges as part of spatial structure of the society concerned, becomes established and identified in various spheres of social action and consciousness, and may eventually vanish or deinstitutionalize in regional transformation" (p. 243). In a similar vein, studies on soft spaces have focused on new, emerging (planning) spaces, such as Atlantic Gateway or Baltic Sea Region (Haughton and Allmendinger 2015; Metzger and Schmitt 2012), and relatively few have discussed how the (old) hard spaces possibly soften in relation to deinstitutionalization process.

Little is thus known about what happens when regions are merged, become de-bordered and deconstructed, and thereby lose their status in the legitimate regional structure. It is tempting to think that

the deinstitutionalization of a region is simply a reverse process of institutionalization, that is, that the borders and regional symbols gradually disappear, the speech acts are discontinued as the regional spokespersons are unwilling (or delegitimized) to speak or act for the region, and the region holds neither onto human nor nonhuman actants. In this sense, deinstitutionalization would be like peeling an onion layer by layer until nothing is left. Also, we might think that deinstitutionalization is a process where hard spaces become softened through making the administrative boundaries fuzzier or removing them altogether. In that sense deinstitutionalization appears as a reverse process of hardening the soft spaces (Metzger and Schmitt 2012). But is deinstitutionalization really just reversed institutionalization or a process of softening a hard space? Do regions actually disappear and could there be objects or actants they hold onto even after their formal deinstitutionalization? If that is the case, should we conceptualize deinstitutionalization (unlike institutionalization) as a process with a clear start and fuzzy ending or even no ending at all? And if that is the case, should we engage time-geographies in studying how the deinstitutionalization unfolds? By highlighting a case in which an old, well-established region becomes amalgamated, some answers to those questions can be offered. It is therefore now time to go to Finland and to discuss a municipality merger that was strongly resisted.

The contested deinstitutionalization

The Finnish regional system is a mix of old and new administrative units. The most important regional units are the municipalities (*kunta* in Finnish) and provinces or regions (*maakunta* in Finnish). Whereas the provinces mostly coordinate the regional development activities and lobbying for the region, the municipalities have numerous statutory tasks, including healthcare and social services, child care services, as well as providing education, rescue services and road maintenance. Unlike many sub-state regions, the municipalities are also major bodies of local democracy. Municipality councils are elected every four years by the inhabitants and they have considerable decision-making power. Citizens also pay taxes to these units. Due to their many tasks, the municipalities have typically had a strong role in the everyday life of their citizens.[2] Municipalities in Finland are typically also old regions, as most of them were officially established in 1865 when the central government enacted the municipal statute and they were separated from the church[3]. Against this background it is no surprise that municipalities are the regional units people identify with most, as shown by several studies (e.g. Pekola-Sjöblom et al. 2006, Oinonen et al. 2005). As the municipalities have been part of the politico-administrative space for about 150 years and were in fact established some 50 years before Finland gained independence, their deinstitutionalization would ostensibly require more than a governmental fiat to remove the (administrative) border.

Borders have been removed, though, in Finland and elsewhere. The mergers of local administrative units have a long history that extends from the USA to Europe, from Canada to Asia. In England, for instance, the number of municipalities was reduced from 1,349 to 521 in 1960–1975. In West Germany the number was cut from 24,512 to 8,514 during 1959–1978, in New Zealand from 249 to 74 in 1989, and from 815 to 445 in Ontario, Canada during 1960–2004. Recently a number of large-scale municipal mergers have been carried

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[2] In November 2015 the Finnish government made a decision concerning the long-anticipated reform of healthcare, social welfare services and autonomous regions. Responsibilities for organizing healthcare and social services will be taken away from joint municipal authorities and local authorities and given to 18 autonomous regions. This reform will considerably change the role of municipalities as service providers from the beginning of 2019.

[3] The history of local governance extends long beyond 1865, however, as the municipal statute meant that many of the tasks traditionally managed by the parishes were given to the municipalities. Parishes had already existed for about 200 years before the municipal statute was enacted, and the earliest parishes are known to have existed already in the early 14th century.

out in Japan as well. The Heisei Consolidation decreased the number of Japanese municipalities from 3,229 to 1,821 between 1999 and 2006 (Sancton 2000, Hall and Stern 2009, Yokomichi 2011). During the first decade of this millennium the trend of merging municipalities became particularly strong in the Nordic states. In Sweden a radical change took place even earlier when the number of municipalities was cut radically from 2,500 to 279 between 1950 and 1980. Before World War II there were over 600 municipalities in Finland. In 2004 their number stood at 444, and in the beginning of 2016 it was 313.

The most common premise behind the drive for municipal mergers is cost-saving through economies of scale and the simplification of existing government bureaucracies and services (Rausch 2005). Traditionally, many mergers especially in England and North America have been implemented with the aim of rationalizing the administration of city-regions consisting of several small boroughs that have grown to form a single functional region. More recently, amalgamations have often been local responses to the re-scaling of nation-states and the devolution of power, with the aim of creating stronger and more competitive units of local governance. Their purported aim may also at times be better management of urban–rural relations and land-use planning or improving 'regional efficiency' through economies of scale. Thus, amalgamations are not merely technical, administrative acts that reduce the number of institutionalized regional units; they also reflect internationally dominant ideas and state policies. Mergers can be manifestations of wider ideologies, such as neo-liberalism, or simply expressions of the deliberate manipulation of political spaces through gerrymandering, i.e. politically motivated adjustment of electoral district borders (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013).

The municipality of Nurmo was amalgamated with neighboring Seinäjoki in 2009[4] after a very heated debate and strong resistance from the Nurmo side. In fact, 63% voted against the merger in a referendum, a clear message that was superciliously ignored by the Nurmo Municipal Council, who eventually decided by a margin of a single vote (18-17) in favor of the merger (Zimmerbauer et al. 2012). As Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) note, the debate concentrated largely on scales of administration, local democracy and efficient service-production. However, a strong sense of belonging was also seen as a very relevant reason to stand against the deinstitutionalization of the municipality. The willingness to preserve the 'independence' of Nurmo is clearly related to this, and interestingly, after the merger decision was made by the city council, some Nurmo residents emphasized the need to 'perform' the identity of the deinstitutionalized region by continuing to use the symbols of such like the Nurmo pennant. This was considered to be a statement to the world that the defiant residents are from Nurmo (rather than Seinäjoki) and that despite the lack of official status in the regional system, Nurmo still exists (Zimmerbauer et al. 2012).

It is clear that Nurmo was institutionalized to a point where it had an unquestioned status in the official regional structure. It was an old region that was strongly identified with and there were regional spokespersons who opposed the amalgamation strongly and worked to re-institutionalize Nurmo when it was threatened with deinstitutionalization. Throughout its long history, Nurmo became much more than a top-down local administrative unit: it was well conditioned to hold onto many things, like its symbols, that had been produced and reproduced for about 150 years. Using Metzger's (2013) terminology, it was without a doubt a regional Leviathan, a relationally constituted semi-autonomous macro-entity that acted

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[4] In 2009, a total of 32 municipality amalgamations took place. A total of 99 municipalities were involved in these mergers.

through the nurturing of many, yet it simultaneously fed many actors, too. This means that as a 'region-fully-institutionalized', it was an entity made by and partially made up of humans: a macro-actor in itself. As Metzger (2013, p. 1372) puts it, such a region is a motley conglomeration thick with things, an assemblage of "speech acts, legal code, emotional attachments, concrete, bricks, railway tracks, fiber-optic wire, planning documents, and so on".

Figure 1. Nurmo and other municipalities that were merged with Seinäjoki between 2005 and 2009 (map drawn by the authors

The underlining thickness of things and Leviathan-like entities of human and non-human actors motivates us to further examine the idea of 'stickiness' of region and border alike. Here, the idea of the multilayered border is particularly useful. The model proposed by Schack (2000, see also Giaoutzi et al. 1993) distinguishes within a border 1) a social layer, 2) a legal layer, 3) an economic layer, 4) a political layer, and 5) a cultural layer. Following the ideas of actor-network theory (Law and Hassard 1999), the different layers can be conceptualized and emphasized quite simply as 'actants'. Although making a privileged distinction between human and non-human actors is controversial, it is nevertheless useful to note that relevant actors or actants might include literally anything: human beings, animals, computer programs or a piece of legislation, for instance (Rutland and Aylett 2008). The actants contribute significantly to the stickiness, but they are also "things" upon which the stickiness lies. Stickiness, in turn contributes to the inertia of regions: actants that are laden with regional manifestations and identity discourses maintain the idea of territoriality and at least certain layers of borders, and as long as those actants continue to exist, the idea of the region will not disappear. Thus, the stickiness, or the inertia of regions, has much to do with the

practices that reconstitute the idea of bounded space. They are speech acts in the broadest sense, and many of them are destined to symbolize material artifacts.

One fruitful conceptualization of region in this context is to approach it as an assemblage. Following the definition of Allmendinger et al. (2014), assemblages are understood here as "complex and unique configurations of global and local factors that blur the binary nature of structure and agency, near and far, social and material" (p. 2704). Relatedly, and highlighting an approach inspired by art theory, we emphasize assemblages as pastiches, montages or collages. This underlines their constitution as ensembles of part-private, part-public actors, agencies, partnerships and intermediaries that bring together 'regional' spatial assemblages consisting of local, regional, and central institutions (Allen and Cochrane 2007).

According to Anderson et al. (2012), the use of the term assemblage is linked to the broader relational turn and enables a foregrounding of "ongoing processes of composition across and through different human and non-human actants" (p. 172). This means that the idea of Leviathan resonates well with the idea of regional assemblages, through actor-network theory in particular. As a result, the relationality of spatial entities becomes emphasized: they are emergent "from relations and/or take place in relations", as Anderson et al. (2012, p. 172) state. However, this notion should not be seen as pitting relationality against territoriality, but instead as illustrating that (spatial) entities are formed in relation with other entities, taking shape as they are made and re-made in and by actor-networks.

These theoretical approaches help us to study deinstitutionalization not only as a process that is to some extent contrary to institutionalization, but also as a process that touches some (if not all) layers of borders and regional actants, which, as mentioned, may be human or non-human. Thus, by asking what 'things' the deinstitutionalization touches upon and what it does not, we can draw a picture of a Leviathan that possibly survives (after it has been wounded) albeit in a vastly different shape what it was at its strongest. By understanding deinstitutionalization this way, that is, as a result of a process whereby some (but not all) layers of the border are deconstructed and some (but not all) human and non-human actants gradually disappear, we can study the stickiness by finding out which things Nurmo held onto during and after the deinstitutionalization.

Research data

The research data was created in ten focus group discussions, with a total of 128 informants. Discussions were organized in the main villages and residential areas of Nurmo by two of the authors of this article in 2012. The main topics of discussion were the informants' sense of belonging and Nurmo as home. Home was studied in its broader meaning of *Heimat*, as a question of belonging somewhere. The main topics discussed were 1) How do the inhabitants of Nurmo see their homey sites and landscapes, and 2) What are the key factors and deeper structures of their home with respect to historical and geographical perspectives. The emphasis was on personal experiences. Everyone has a specific, unique perception of their home(region) that has been built and is continually being built from personal experiences. Home is a personal relation to both history and geography simultaneously In short, home means the totality of the things amongst which an individual feels at home. (See Riukulehto and Suutari 2012, Riukulehto and Rinne-Koski 2015)

The empirical data was collected by using the ethnographic traditions of home research (ibid.). More specifically, the elicitation interview method was utilized. The method is based on elicitation and aims to encourage the participants to discuss the topic in a natural and comprehensive way. The advantage of the

method is that the conversation proceeds on the participants' own terms, focusing on what they regard as important in relation to each stimulus given. Unlike in a traditional survey or interview, in an elicitation interview the researcher's role is not to steer the conversation. In our case, the discussion was paced by a set of stimuli that were presented one by one. The stimuli were simple pictures, questions and words concerning for example sense of belonging, meaningful places and changes pertaining to home. Special focus was directed to informants' interpretations of significant places (geographical interpretation) and events (historical interpretation). A third group of interpretations can be found in stories that are collectively preserved in society. In addition to the discussions, the participants were given a mental imagery task in which they were asked to choose one of two short story variants (a positive or negative future scenario for their home region) and asked to write a short essay based on the stimuli of the scenario.

The participants in the focus groups were encouraged to reflect on their home in all its diversity: the natural and built as well as the mental and social environments. The researchers emphasized that any subject or theme would be relevant to the discussion if it felt relevant to the participant. No specific questions were asked about municipal mergers or the amalgamation of Nurmo and Seinäjoki. The stimuli, however, often made the informants describe and problematize the meaning of Nurmo as they discussed their home[5]. Interestingly, the same stimuli sparked a conversation on a variety of topics at different events. Consequently, the data of each event were different. As a result, we obtained a rich data set, which describes the topic diversely and from various perspectives.

The Stickiness of Nurmo

Despite the fact that the focus group participants were not directly asked about municipal mergers, amalgamations were discussed in one way or another in 8 of 10 focus group discussions. As a result of the merger, some informants felt that Nurmo and its name were somehow lost. This was regarded almost as an insult, particularly if the participant's roots were deep in the municipality.

> "This home village, it is the most important for me, because I have lived here almost all my life, just a short time elsewhere…. But now, it just feels like Nurmo was in a way wiped away".

> "Well it was somehow like a piece of our identity was taken away, when we were merged. So I guess things look different now … how to strengthen the love for you home region? Maybe, I think, the sports clubs our children go to, they are now important … you want them to stay and you support them".

The latter quotation illustrates that transforming spatial structure requires re-positioning of subject and subjectivity in relation to the renewed spatial structure. This does not mean, however, that history will be forgotten, but instead that historical events and spaces become positioned within a broader context. Dealing with the negative feelings is thus a mechanism to (re)create a renegotiated sense of time-space geographies. This can be called identity work.

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[5] Emphasizing home(region) meant that the focus was beyond the scalar administrative structures, and on Nurmo as a lived, meaningful space. Participants were not restricted to discuss other territorial formations, but no questions about these were included. Other studies (e.g. Riukulehto and Suutari 2012) suggest that regional identity, as manifested in Nurmo at the time of the merger, can be understood as 're-scaled patriotism'.

Identity work takes many forms. When asked about recent changes that have changed the informants' sense of belonging and relationship to their home, the changes associated with the name of the municipality were mentioned most often. Respondents considered the disappearance of the "Nurmo" name unpleasant or even as a personal insult. Some of the informants indicated their defiant mood by stating that they would continue using the old names.

> "We're inhabitants of Nurmo, they cannot wash it away. I'm irritated by the attitude of Seinäjoki, by renaming they are trying to wash over that we are from Nurmo. In a roundabout in Kuortaneentie [Kuortane road] the name 'Nurmontie' [Nurmo road] was painted over and the names were taken off. And now they're talking in public about 'Nurmo of Seinäjoki'. Well, I don't mind, but we will keep on being from Nurmo even if it is Nurmo of Seinäjoki".

> "I think we've even put on our children's birth certificates that [place of birth is] Hyllykallio [one of Nurmo's residential areas] or something like that. We'd definitely never put any Seinäjoki there".

Much attention was paid to the street and place names that were changed due to the amalgamation. In all, 33 street or road names were changed in Nurmo, as similar names were already in use elsewhere in the new municipality. In general the discussants understood these changes, especially when the real risk of emergency vehicles getting lost was perceived and the new names were based on local history. However, some resentment was clearly expressed and was not diminished by the justifications or rationalizations about practicalities.

> "There was a road that had the same name as a road in Ylistaro [third party in the municipal merger in 2009]. One had to be changed. We in Nurmo lost".

Related to that, the focus groups widely discussed re-naming and re-symbolization practices, and indicated that preserving the old names was highly important. Many participants were clearly annoyed about the re-naming practices, and stated that although Nurmo no longer exists as a municipality, there is still a place called Nurmo, which should be something more than a village inside a newly established Seinäjoki.

> "I don't get the thing that newspapers are writing about 'Nurmo of Seinäjoki' – – 'in Veneskoski village in Seinäjoki'. Where on earth has Nurmo disappeared? Seinäjoki! Outrageous! That will get one hot under the collar".

Even more passionate was the discussion related to the names of sports clubs:

> "One painful event was the merger of Nurmo Athletic Club and Seinäjoki Athletic Club [local sports clubs]. It was like, it felt a bit like a part of our identity was lost when it became Seinäjoki Region Athletic Club".

> "The one thing I really disagree with is that they ruined the name of the sports club, Nurmon Jymy. It's not 'Jymy Seinäjoki', it's 'Nurmon Jymy'. Change it back immediately!"

When the logo of Nurmon Jymy, a local sports club established 1925, was shown to informants, a discussion about other clubs' name changes was sparked, too. The interviewees regarded the plans to merge the clubs as "hackle-raising". It was reckoned that if after the amalgamation of the municipalities, organizations and clubs in Nurmo were merged with those in Seinäjoki, the institutional basis of Nurmo would become thinner. It was also feared that potential new members would not find Nurmo-based organizations, but rather would join the Seinäjoki ones instead. It was claimed that this tendency was already happening in some organizations, and the informants mentioned the Lions and Rotary clubs as well as some ecclesiastical ones as examples. This discussion illustrates a deeper concern over losing regional spokespersons who promote the local clubs and other similar institutions.

Thus, the formal mechanisms of preserving the names were emphasized, but at the same time the more informal activities such as those of various organizations, associations and other societies had an important role. We argue that this was one of the main reasons why the focus group members were concerned about community spirit and initiativeness: if those ceased to exist, there could be no further active nurturing of the Nurmo identity and consciousness. This resonates well with Paasi's (1986) theory of institutionalization and its idea of three ingredients which serve as the outcome of the institutionalization process: regional consciousness, regional identity and regional activism. Put another way, the practices of re-institutionalization, through formal and informal agency and associated speech acts, are seen to nurture the threatened regional identity and contradict the deinstitutionalization. As deinstitutionalization includes redistribution (and typically centralization) of power, it is of course essential what kind of power and authority the regional spokespersons have to 'rupture the given' in their speech acts (cf. Huysmans 2011).

With respect to the previous point, it cannot be said with certainty whether the discussants linked the sports clubs directly to the politico-administrative municipal structure, or if they instead were expressing their thoughts about the home region and activism on a more general level. Thus, although a sports club name is a symbol of a municipality (and thereby attached to an administrative region), the activities of the club may not have much symbolic value in terms of reconstituting identification with the municipality as such. However, sports clubs do have value in organizing one's life in a meaningful way, and they provide experiences which in part create the idea of the home region. Thus, when participating in the activities of sports clubs, people do not necessarily feel that they are part of institutionalized municipal structures, but members of clubs that may represent communities meaningful to them (Riukulehto & Suutari forthcoming). Nevertheless, in those cases too sports clubs can serve as building blocks for sociospatial identities. As generally known, the matches between neighboring clubs tend to be the most passionate ones, which indicates that sports clubs are linked with identities, and that these identities are both spatial and temporal: spatial in the sense of separating local from non-local (or home team vs visitors) and temporal in the sense of consisting of personal and collective experiences (i.e. of historical consciousness in the form of memories and narratives) (Ricoeur 2000, 51–52; 148–149; 480–490).

In addition to the old names, preserving at least some of the old symbols was regarded as highly important. For instance, disappointment at having the Nurmo train station pulled down was brought out, for the station had been something the discussants had been able to boast about to neighboring Jalasjärvi and Peräseinäjoki residents who did not have one. Thus, saving the station would have had symbolic value for the collective identity. There was also concern as to whether the statue of an anvil, which is based on the Nurmo coat of arms, would be removed from a roundabout. However, the coat of arms was not considered

that important in general. Instead, the discussions touched on things that were considered more meaningful symbols of Nurmo. These included the local church, the surrounding flatlands and fields and the river. The church was mentioned as a building and as an institution that represents stability and safety in a turbulent world.

> "An old, beautiful building [local church] that brings back lot of memories from childhood … especially the occasions at the end of school spring terms".

One of the most intriguing findings regarding the stickiness of the region was related to the preservation of unique foods and food combinations. There is a large food processing factory that makes a sausage famous in the region. It was clearly a singular actant Nurmo holds onto.

> "It is definitely serious stuff. If *käriste* [grill sausage] would disappear from the face of earth, I wouldn't know what to do".

We observed a detail that most people from elsewhere would likely find insignificant but was highly important to the inhabitants of Nurmo. Discussions of food led to school catering and the contested combination of spinach pancakes and minced meat sauce, which is the norm in schools in Seinäjoki. Traditionally in Nurmo the pancakes have been served with a sweet gooseberry jam, but after the merger it was changed to minced meat sauce. The change was described as "shocking" and particularly the high school students of Nurmo opposed it strongly. As a result, the sweet jam was preserved in Nurmo. This admittedly marginal but still revealing occasion was raised in several focus groups.

The aforementioned is also noteworthy because Nurmo and Seinäjoki have essentially been culturally and functionally integrated for a long time and notable differences in food customs would not be expected. It was thus the administrative municipality border that ultimately created this difference, supposedly through different procurement procedures in school kitchens over a long period of time. Schools do not therefore offer spatial socialization only in the classroom but also (albeit probably unconsciously) at lunch by serving unique foods and food combinations. There were, naturally, also some other dishes that were regarded as being typically indigenous to Nurmo, such as 'kropsu', 'salla', and 'klimppivelli'[6]. Although considered local, these dishes are eaten outside Nurmo, too, and served on special occasions wherever traditions are cherished and maintained.

Transforming regions, borders and identities

Regions hold onto many 'stabilizing' things, yet it must be emphasized that their existence fundamentally demands a regional consciousness which feeds into a sense of belonging. Thus, the stickiness is inscribed in a collective consciousness and awareness which are, of course, kept alive through stories, names, symbols, food and other speech acts discussed in the previous section. As seen in other cases of mergers, identification with a region that no longer has official status in the regional structure can remain strong or in fact strengthen due to the need for (re)definition of 'us' and 'them', i.e. insideness and outsideness (Zimmerbauer and Kahila 2006, Leinamo 2004). Here, the identity layer of the border becomes emphasized in the sense that Nurmo, and being from Nurmo, is defined largely by what Nurmo is not: it is not Seinäjoki

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[6] *Kropsu* is a big pancake made in the oven, *salla* is a beetroot salad and *klimppivelli* is a local gruel.

and certainly not Lapua (another neighboring municipality, the original mother parish). The discussions evidenced a clear division between us and them, between belonging and not belonging, which was reframed in rather aggressive articulations.

> "Inhabitants of Lapua [neighboring municipality] are pretty chippy. They are just like that. They should be beaten up [informant smiling]".

The aforementioned words illustrate the fact that the deinstitutionalized region can, and according to the interviewees should, exist as a distinctive space that people can identify with, and hence possess a collective sense of belonging. This indicates that administrative boundaries or political frontiers, once marked out, have substantial inertia and thus a tendency to persist. However, the inertia of regions does not necessitate that the meaningful places, landscapes and buildings would never change. The interviewees did not expect that their local, 'homey' landscape would not transform, but it was accepted instead that Nurmo will be different in the future, as it is likely to become more urban. This in turn would affect the social cohesion of the region, as it was felt that a sense of communality would be lost. Yet, it was hoped that the landscape would not change too drastically and that a degree of rurality would be maintained, as well as its attendant peacefulness and traditional communality. These things are not necessarily unique to Nurmo, but are emblematic of rural spaces, institutions and traditions as well as landscapes and mindscapes in general.

> "The sense of communality will begin to vanish, and it gets harder to get services. There will be more construction sites and old housing will be pulled down to make space for new ones. The awareness of Nurmo municipality will start to disappear as the idea of the bigger city-region replaces it".

It appears that changes in municipal structure compel a contemplation of other spatial scales and their meanings, too. Processing the spatial change was described in the written part of the focus group work. Most of the respondents chose a positive story variant and the essays had a rather positive tone, partly due to the fact that the focus shifted more onto the idea of the home region rather than the municipality. The participants wrote about how the sense of belonging to the home region would strengthen, and even that the possible forthcoming municipality amalgamations will not undermine this sense. Consequently, people get accustomed and adapt to changes in the administrative spatial system.

> "Probably a couple of years will go like this, but after ten years or so no one will think the merger is an issue anymore. When a new generation takes over, they won't think about it anymore. For them it has always been like it is now".

This is particularly interesting, for it illustrates that from a regional history point of view, region is always an evolutionary process. Although indicative of holding onto many things, the edges of regions 'bleed' across their boundaries into their neighbors' territories due to the fact the regions are to a great extent relational, i.e. socially interdependent. Moreover, areas of immediate belonging and familiarity are often surrounded by labile zones (Phythian-Adams 2007, 7) where identities and regional consciousness become if not more fuzzy, at least more contextual. The following quotation illustrates that as regions bleed or 'leak' into each other, the question of inclusiveness and exclusiveness (along with the identity layer of the border) becomes complicated. The quotation also underlines further that despite the stickiness of regions, they do transform

into renewed assemblages over (long periods of) time. This underscores that region is a process that is both chronological and evolutionary in nature, that is, a process over time, but also one that simultaneously undergoes spatial change.

> "The former Nurmo municipality…. Those who move to Hyllykallio [a residential area adjacent to Seinäjoki], they are pretty much unified with Seinäjoki. There is no identity border between them. When my brother lived in Hyllykallio, he had two kilometers to the Seinäjoki market square. I said to him that you are not Nurmoan, you are Seinäjokian. It is so artificial, that border".

From one group discussion to another a line between being a citizen of Seinäjoki or Nurmo became evident. However, the border itself did not always straightforwardly follow the administrative borderline. Hyllykallio, the most urban neighborhood which formed a functional region with Seinäjoki, was the district where the border appeared most fuzzy. Accordingly, although Hyllykallio was officially a part of Nurmo, some discussants regarded that people living there were not genuine Nurmoans. This indicates that although borders are important in creating us-and-them divisions, and thus in forming collective regional identities, they are simultaneously controversial and contested, especially during a merger process, even to the point that someone living officially among 'us' can be labelled as being in a state of in-betweenness, i.e. not properly belonging to either us or them. The 'identity-layer' of border therefore needs be understood as vague and (re)negotiable, despite the fact that its existence as such is relatively well acknowledged and can be quite clear cut at times. Boundaries are to a large extent contextual and the ideas related to the multilayered border vary in both space and time.

Although borders may transform and become fuzzier, an identification which is based on borders does not always change accordingly. In fact, identification in the sense of belonging and not belonging can strengthen when a border is softened (Zimmerbauer and Kahila 2006). This has much to do with resistance identity (Castells 1997, Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013), and was evident also our empirical data. As stated earlier, some discussants underlined very clearly that they did not want to be Seinäjokians nor did they want their children to be either. However, rather than seeing identification entirely within the context of municipalities and their (administrative) borders, belonging and not belonging was also attached to something else that our case study municipalities represent: the focus group participants emphasized that they did not want to become identified as urbanites, which could be the case if they acquired the identity of Seinäjoki. In similar vein, they did not want the merger wave to be all encompassing: at least some places (regions) should be allowed to remain tiny and rural, since they add to spatial multiplicity and heterogeneity and serve as good platforms for alternative identities and hegemonic understandings of economies of scale.

> "Some people associate us with city dwellers now. Yet we are not urbanites, we are rural".

> "Let's hope that not all of even the tiniest municipalities and villages have to merge in the future amalgamations. There should be at least some kind of independent territory or an area, so that everything wouldn't need to be so homogenous and uniform".

This shows that regions transform in relation with other regions, not as containers. Rural exists in relation to urban, just as Nurmo exists and transforms in relation to Seinäjoki. Thus, bounded does not mean contained just as relational means not non-bounded. Instead, regional spaces may be simultaneously both

bounded and porous, or territorial and relational. In that sense, deinstitutionalization can be seen as distinctively relational: the preservation of a region that no longer has any official status in the spatial system is done by reproducing the 'us and them' discourses, through symbolization in speech acts and other performative practices in which the region is reflected through other regions. Nonetheless, this phenomenon is territorial at the same time: in order to enhance the stickiness, it is typically the bounded territorial units that are manifested in relation to others. It remains to be seen how Nurmo becomes 're-institutionalized' in this way, but clearly there is a desire to keep Nurmo in the collective consciousness. Most likely it will exist in various practices as a kind of 'anti-Seinäjoki' spatial and mental assemblage, further underlining how territories are relationally constructed.

Despite the stickiness of regions, their borders can become relatively meaningless for the inhabitants in many practices. As the quotations above indicate, the coming generations will probably not place much emphasis on the merger. However, this does not mean that the former municipality will altogether disappear from the collective consciousness. In the case of Nurmo, the previously independent municipality will continue to exist as a district of Seinäjoki, with some actants (such as postal code, school districts, statistical area classifications, etc.) that are actively maintained, sometimes even through the official structures that accompany regional activism. Nurmo may thus become a natural part of the larger Seinäjoki area, with distinctions between us and them less passionate and politically charged, yet consciousness and identification with Nurmo will probably persist for decades to come. This notion gains support from Leinamo (2004), who studied five amalgamations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Leinamo noticed that immediately after the mergers there was some concern in the merged municipalities about weakening regional identity, but currently – after over 40 years – there are no such concerns, as the merged regions exist well in multiple speech acts.

Discussion

Our study reveals the vagueness of the concept of deinstitutionalization. It is underdeveloped and eludes easy definitions. In literature, it sometimes seems to refer to the process whereby a region ceases to be a part of the official spatio-administrative structure, but also to the complete disappearance of a region. However, as regions refuse to disappear from the consciousness of people, the latter way of understanding deinstitutionalization is particularly problematic. The stickiness of regions – with the idea of slow and rigid historical structures that often seem unchanged to observers – contradicts the idea that deinstitutionalization is simply the reverse process of institutionalization. Put differently, if we stick to the idea that deinstitutionalization has the broader meaning of the complete disappearance of a region, we should accordingly understand that, as regions stick to people's consciousness, memories, etc., deinstitutionalization can never be complete. Our case study proves accordingly that while regions such as Nurmo face the pressure of deinstitutionalization, and some 'stages' of institutionalization may in fact become revoked, due to their stickiness and the fact that they are embedded in many actants (human and non-human), such regions will not become deinstitutionalized in the sense that they are completely erased from all consciousness. They are thus Leviathans that are highly tenacious and difficult to kill due to their extensive and entrenched socio-cultural distribution, that is, due to their stickiness. This means that a region that no longer has status in an official regional system continues to exist in what Metzger defines as 'speech acts', meaning here all the socio-spatial practices in which the region is performed. These speech acts are not necessarily highly strategic in the sense that they are attached to particularly purposive action (cf. Cooren 2000), but they nevertheless contribute to the regional consciousness and sense of belonging,

and maintain regional inertia through re-institutionalizing discourses. The impact of the speech acts may be diminished, however, partly due to the fact that the actors in these processes typically have less power than the advocates operating in institutionalized positions within the legitimized spatial system.

We also need to understand that borders are multilayered constructs, and we are on a wrong track if we take deinstitutionalization as synonymous with removing the border. True, a merger of regions means that the border is removed, but it is often only the administrative or the legal layer that is erased, and in fact some other layers, such as social, cultural or identity layers, may simultaneously even be strengthened. This forces us to conceptualize deinstitutionalization in a way understanding it not simply as a practice of debordering. As regions hold onto things and refuse to disappear, and as removing the administrative layer of a border does not mean that the other layers of the border disappear accordingly, we propose a somewhat narrow definition for deinstitutionalization. We argue that it is useful to reconceptualize it as more of a restructuration, one in which some of the institutional basis is diminished (through events and conjunctures) but regions are still 'thick with things' that are material and non-material and contribute to regional identity.

Highlighting the restructuration of space in time underlines the fact that regions are entities that are continuously being de- and re-formed through relations, some of which are more stable than others. In similar vein, and following the ideas of regions as assemblages, it can be concluded that relations and processes – some of which we have addressed in this paper – contribute to the durability of regions through sedimentation, repetition or habit (Anderson et al. 2012). However, as Anderson et al. (2012) point out, durability should not be confused with fixity. Assemblages – as montages or snapshots of ensembles at a given time – consist of processes that either stabilize a region's identity by increasing the degree of its internal homogeneity, or destabilize it through transforming it into a different assemblage (DeLanda 2006). Thus, it is important to understand regions (such as municipalities) as assemblages of human and nonhuman structures and agents who, through various acts, transform regions but simultaneously contribute to their stickiness and inertia and hence make them difficult to erase. Such regions are by default territorial as they are held together by internal cohesion based on distinctions of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, yet due to their interconnectedness and (complex) relations with other spaces, they are relational as well.

Our case study revealed that old, territorial spaces are enduring entities and as such are likely to remain as the basis of collective consciousness (cf. Haughton and Allmendinger 2015). Such spaces have become 'hardened' over time and are difficult to 'soften' into the typical soft spaces that transcend or jar against established regional boundaries and have fuzzy or highly malleable boundaries. Although the administrative border may be removed and some layers of borders clearly become more insignificant over time and in some practices, the deinstitutionalized border does not automatically turn the region into a fluid, open or informal region representative of the neoliberal idea(l)s of 'fast politics' or 'fast economy'. Thus, it would be an exaggeration to say that soft spaces are made by deinstitutionalizing (or merging) old ones, or that amalgamations as such would soften the hard/old regions. Instead, soft spaces are more likely to supplement the spatial structure of old territorial regions as an additional top layer. It is therefore important to understand that different regions and regional systems exist in parallel, and that some regions are sticker than others. Stickiness does not necessarily have anything to do with the size of the region, but depends more on how deeply the region is embedded over time into the collective consciousness through 'discursive tactics and material practices' (cf. Haughton and Allmendinger 2015). This is to say that if the

borders have had significance for instance in terms of inclusion, exclusion and identity, an administrative decision does not nullify all the meanings (or layers) the border entails in terms of territorial thinking.

Thus, old regions with sticky territorial imageries are not easily re-worked into new, soft and emergent spaces of governance: their creation takes more than the amalgamation of two old regions. Similarly, as new spatial imagery is typically based on newly conceived competitive soft spaces that are non-statutory (Allmendinger et al. 2015), old territorial spaces are poor ingredients for that, removed administrative borders notwithstanding. This is not to say that new soft spaces are incapable of becoming sedimented or highly meaningful for their inhabitants over time, but instead to emphasize that new spatial imageries, and eventually new layers of regional consciousness, emerge often on top of the old one(s), creating in many places a regional mess of formal/informal, hard/soft and old/new spatial assemblages.

Instead of viewing deinstitutionalization as a process of softening the hard space, the idea of space as a palimpsest, usually defined as a parchment or the like from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text (Mitin 2007), is useful here. In this conceptualization, being sympathetic to assemblage theory, we suggest that deinstitutionalization needs to be understood as the very act of erasing the writings (i.e. the sociocultural layers of regional consciousness) in order to replace them with the new notions of region, which are often contradictory to the old ones. However, instead of washing away the old texts completely to be replaced by the new ones, we argue that in the context of deinstitutionalization the palimpsest should be understood more as a parchment in which the old texts are only partially erased, leaving only limited space for new texts. By this, we refer again to the stickiness of regions and to the fact that they hold onto many things, making their deinstitutionalization a long (even never-ending) and contested process. In this process, regions that are officially deinstitutionalized in the sense that they are no longer part of the established spatial structure can nevertheless persist in collective spatial consciousness, embedded in many actants and ready to challenge the idea of new regional unity and homogeneity.

To conclude, we propose that the process of deinstitutionalizations turns space into a palimpsest upon which assemblages take place, varying in time. In these palimpsests some of the older texts sediment or disappear, but some continue to exist, often in (and as) new assemblages. Also, some things that are (almost) completely sedimented can reappear if revitalized. As deinstitutionalization is never complete in the sense that all regional consciousness is erased, it leaves regions in a perpetual state of in-betweenness: not quite fully existing, not quite fully extinct. Deinstitutionalization thus turns borders and regions into penumbral forms (see Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016), which means that they manifest contextually, i.e. become activated at both context- and time-contingent junctures, when the proper light is cast from a certain angle. They are thus neither soft nor fuzzy, but appear at times as rather clear cut, albeit only in some practices and only upon teasing out.

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