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Political Geography, New Regionalism, and Rescaling Identity

Austin Charron and Alexander C. Diener

Scholars of international relations and the general public alike often take the nation-state for granted as the fundamental unit of territorially divided space, around which socio-spatial identities are constructed. Political geography offers a critical perspective on the nation-state, demonstrating that its command of geopolitical imagination is a contingent historical development, and that alternative territorial constructs—such as the regional and the supranational—are also significant in processes of identity formation. This paper argues increased attention should be paid to the processes of institutionalization and identity formation that take place at territorial scales above, below, and across the nation-state. Moreover, because of political geography’s critical focus on the historical trajectory of the nation-state and its contingent geopolitical role, the paper advocates for the consideration and inclusion of political geographic theory in any critical assessment of nationalism and the rescaling of identities.

Over the past two centuries, the nation-state has emerged as the fundamental territorial building block of geopolitical theory and international relations research. In the parlance of political geography, the nation-state has thereby constituted the very premise of most scholarly and popular “geographical imaginaries.”¹ One important consequence of the nation-state’s cognitive hegemony is a limited understanding of the complex relationships between territory, identity, and nationalism. While the nation-state remains a powerful conceptual force for galvanizing and mobilizing collective identities, its allure often blinds scholars of international relations, as well as the general public, to the equally significant processes of identity construction that take place at regional territorial scales below, above, and across the nation-state.

As the forces of globalization effectively re-scale networks of social interaction, we must remain alert to the rescaling of socio-spatial identities within

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this globalized context. Understanding nationalism and national identities therefore requires scholars consider not only how social identities are tied to the nation-state, but also how territorial constructs at all spatial scales provide institutional frameworks around which social identities are formed. Because they are attuned to the historical processes through which the nation-state ascended to and attained its current status, political geographers stand at the forefront of this imperative to think in territorial and institutional terms that transcend conventional and limited perspectives of the nation-state. The contributions of political geography are therefore vital to any critical understanding of nationalism and rescaling identity.

A crucial task of contemporary political geography is to challenge the hegemony of “modernist state ideals” that uphold (1) the world’s natural division into mutually exclusive territorial units; (2) that the boundaries of these units should conform to the distribution of national groups; and (3) that these units should—and in fact do—function independent of external control.² Political geographic research into identity construction from the perspective of regions and institutions liberates the geographical imagination from these state-based constraints, allowing for critical assessment of the assumptions that permeate thinking about the international system. Essential to this task is identifying and analyzing emerging spaces of identity and interaction, while also considering the ideologies that accompany varied territorial arrangements.³

Territory, Identity, and the Nation-State

The roles of space, place, and territory in identity construction have long been a central theme of geographic inquiry. Identities embody the personal and social meanings ascribed to spaces and places and are essential components of spatially and territorially inscribed social processes and practices.⁴ Territoriality, which Robert David Sack defines as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area,”⁵ is therefore an important aspect of the political aspirations of “imagined communities” often formed around ethno-national identities.⁶

Numerous geographers have examined the relationship between territory and national identity.⁷ However, many of these studies fall prey to what Agnew calls the “territorial trap,” or the over-reliance upon spatiality of the nation-state to frame, interrogate, or explain social phenomena.⁸ Moreover, regarding and accepting nation-states as rigid territorial containers that neatly partition the globe into discrete and exclusive spaces bolsters the emotional appeal of nationalism, which generally conveys a historical legitimacy and presumed permanence of state-centered views of power and territoriality.

The near-pervasive embrace of this perspective traces to economic and social practices that were increasingly associated with the state during the nineteenth century. Business, labor, politics, sports, military, education, and art came to be viewed through the prism of the territorial trap. The new social sciences of economics, sociology, and political science advanced and “scientific-

cally” supported the idea that these things were most efficient and pragmatic in relation to the state. With the church receding as the primary educator of the populace, the modern academy—through government-sponsored schools and universities—served

the nation-state by framing and shaping identities to fit the new religion of the nation (i.e., nationalism). The intense nationalism accompanying World War I, World War II, and the Cold War furthered a general consensus among social scientists that local communities and

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allegiances would gradually give way to national societies.⁹ In critique of this broadly accepted contention, political geography has recently explored how mutually constitutive practices of territoriality and identity construction manifest at spatial scales that do not conform to the boundaries of the nation-state, ranging from the supranational to the sub-regional.

“New Regionalism” and the Role of Institutions

Since the late 1980s, a number of political geographers have examined the processes of regional identity formation as part of a broader paradigm known as the “new regionalism.” In large part a response to the acceleration of globalizing processes and the rise of supranational organizations such as the European Union, the new regionalism highlights the role of global capitalism in re-territorializing political and economic structures, and thus in creating territorial actors within the global political economy at scales above, below, and across that of the nation-state. Whereas geographers once viewed regions as spaces of ahistorical physical and/or cultural homogeneity, the new regionalism posits that regions are the product of political, economic, and social discourses and practices that are inscribed within multi-scalar and contingent territorial frameworks.¹⁰ While some geographers have challenged this emphasis on territoriality in theorizing regions, conceptualizing them instead as “complex and unbounded lattice[s] of articulations with internal relations of power and inequality and punctuated by structures of exclusion,” this view nevertheless provides room for the formation, adaptation, and rescaling of identities both below and above the scale of the nation-state.¹¹

A central theme in the literature comprising the new regionalism is an emphasis on the role of institutions within shifting territorial structures. The related field of organizational institutionalism offers a vast literature that theorizes the emergence of institutions as a fundamental social process.¹² As W. Richard Scott argues, “institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.”¹³ Similarly, Richard Jenkins

defines an institution as “a pattern of behavior in any particular setting that has become established over time as ‘the way things are done,’”¹⁴ while others have treated social phenomena ranging from religion to language and ethnicity in explicitly institutional terms.¹⁵ Broadly speaking, institutions are therefore the collectivized, codified, and normalized sets of behavior, interactions, policies, attitudes, beliefs, and symbols that provide organizational structure to social existence in historically and spatially contingent configurations.¹⁶

Because institutions are so foundational to social organization, they also play an inherent role in the construction of social identities. Jenkins argues that

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processes of institutionalization are central within any framework of social identity: “Institutions—much like identities, in fact—are as much emergent products of what people do, as they are constitutive of what people do.”¹⁷

Mary Ann Glynn, moreover, suggests, “the process of identity construction becomes the process of institutional bricolage, where organizations incorporate cultural meanings, values, sentiments, and rules into identity claims,”¹⁸ making “social institutions... implicit in meanings of role identities.”¹⁹

Beyond theorization, the vital link between institutions and identities is visible and apparent across cultural and territorial milieus, as a number of case studies demonstrate. Helena Catt and Michael Murphy employ an institutional framework to explain the emergence of sub-state nationalism and national identities across many English-speaking countries,²⁰ while Scott L. Greer highlights the importance of political institutions in discourses of nationality and regional autonomy in Scotland and Catalonia.²¹ Still others emphasize the centrality of institutions in social identity construction in countries such as Mexico, Germany, Belgium, England, Canada, and the Czech Republic.²²

Territorial Institutions and Identity

Political geographers working within the framework of the new regionalism focus largely upon the relationships between institutions, identities, and territory.²³ Their research suggests that scholars and policymakers would be well served to pay attention to the “continued salience of places as settings for social and economic existence, and for forging identities, struggles, and strategies of both a local and global nature.”²⁴ This relates to territoriality’s continued relevance “for living in, assimilating, and making sense of the world.”²⁵

With these points in mind, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift argue that the degree to which territorial entities at any scale become conceptualized as “regions” depends largely upon their institutional “thickness,” or the extent to which territorially-inscribed institutions emerge and become integral to the social, political, and economic experience of a territory. In this context, the authors conceive of institutions primarily as the formal bodies, organizations,

and agencies that are integral to the administrative and economic functions of territory at all scales, such as:

Firms; financial institutions; local chambers of commerce; training agencies; trade associations; local authorities; development agencies; innovation centers; clerical bodies; unions; government agencies providing premises, land, and infrastructure; business service organizations; [and] marketing boards... all or some of which provide a basis for the growth of particular local practices and collective representations.²⁶

It is through such territorial institutions that cultural, political, and economic differences are spatially constructed and reified, and normative locational identities are collectively negotiated and performed. The hierarchical “nesting” of administrative territories—e.g., from the local to the municipal, regional, provincial, national, and supranational—therefore (re)produces uneven topographies of institutional thickness, contributing to a corollary nesting of territorially inscribed identities.²⁷ Within this formulation, certain territorial scales—such as the nation-state—are reified as venues for denser institutionalization than others.

Anssi Paasi condenses mutually-constitutive processes of regional identity formation and institutional thickening with his theory of the “institutionalization of regions.”²⁸ A region’s institutionalization, according to Paasi, refers to “the process during which specific territorial units—on various spatial scales—emerge and become established as parts of the regional system in question and the socio-spatial consciousness prevailing in society.”²⁹ In other words, regions take shape through the construction of institutional networks within a given territorial structure, and regional identities emerge through engagement with these territorially-inscribed institutions. Territoriality creates multi-scalar frameworks of spatial organization and institutionalization, engendering social identities among those embedded within its institutional networks, and imbuing territories themselves with social meaning. This is true whether conceived as regions, states, or something else entirely.

Conclusion

The regional and institutional formations we advocate engaging as topics of research—whether above, below, or across states—therefore contend with nationalism’s hegemonic

sway over discourses of territory.³⁰ The nationalisms to which people are commonly exposed from birth “mobilize a strong but abstract sense of community between distant

strangers and in a way that consolidates their identification with both a common historical inheritance and a shared national space.”³¹ Such realities bespeak

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the continued allure of the territorial state, yet research at other scales of identity formation remains necessary.³² Overt focus on any particular spatial scale of political organization inhibits our ability to grasp the nature and significance of the social and political changes occurring in our time. Moreover, understanding the function and ideological impact of the dominant territorial system of the past century sheds light on alternative or latent forms of political territorial organization that currently manifest in new or formerly suppressed identities.

Do such identities and alternative forms of political territorial organization constitute legitimate challenges to the modernist territorial system and the nationalist ideal? One might point to the fact that most sub-state and extra-state identity communities seek not a new paradigm of expression, but a place (i.e., territory) of their own within the extant system.³³ We therefore suggest that the political geographic literature regarding the new regionalism and rescaling of identities is required in any consideration of nationalism's modern manifestations.

Notes

¹ Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

² John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 22; John Agnew, "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory," *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1, (1994): 53–80; Alexander Murphy, "Territory's Continuing Allure," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 5 (2012): 1223.

³ Alexander Murphy, "Identity and Territory," *Geopolitics* 15 (2010): 770.

⁴ Murphy, "Territory's Continuing Allure"; Nadia Lovell, ed., *Locality and Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Stephanie Taylor, *Narratives of Identity and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁵ Robert David Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁷ Jean Gottman, *The Significance of Territory* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1973); Andrew F. Burghardt, "The Bases of Territorial Claims," *Geographical Review* 63, no. 2 (1973): 225–245; David B. Knight, "Identity and Territory: Geographical Perspectives on Nationalism and Regionalism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72, no. 4 (1982): 513–541; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); David Hooson, ed., *Geography and National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994); Jouni Häkli, "Cultures of Demarcation: Territory and National Identity" in *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale*, ed. Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999): 123–149; Guntram H. Herb, "National Identity and Territory" in *Nested Identities*: 9–30; David H. Kaplan, "Territorial Identities and Geographic Scale" in *Nested Identities*: 31–49; Michael J. Shapiro, "Nation-States" in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

⁸ Agnew, "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory."

⁹ Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.

¹⁰ Allan Pred, *Making Histories and Constructing Human Geographies: The Local Transformation of Practice, Power Relations, and Consciousness* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Michael Keating and John Loughlin, eds., *The Political Economy of Regionalism* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1997); Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, "Theorising the Rise of Regionness," *New Political Economy* 5, no. 3 (2000): 457–473; John Agnew, "Regions in

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¹¹ John Allen, Doreen Massey, and Allan Cochrane, *Rethinking the Region: Spaces of Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 65.

¹² Dennis Galvin and Rudra Sil, eds., *Reconfiguring Institutions Across Time and Space* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Kerstin Sahlin, and Roy Suddaby, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008); Thomas B. Lawrence, Roy Suddaby, and Bernard Leca, eds., *Institutional Work: Actors and Agency in Institutional Studies of Organizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Patricia H. Thornton, William Ocasio, and Michael Lounsbury, *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure, and Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹³ W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 48.

¹⁴ Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 157.

¹⁵ For religion, see A. Stephen Boyan, “Defining Religion in Operational and Institutional Terms,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 116, no. 3 (1968): 479–498; Gregory J. Levine, “On the Geography of Religion,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 11, no. 4 (1986): 428–440. For language, see Robert F. Port, “Language as a Social Institution: Why Phonemes and Words Do Not Live in the Brain,” *Ecological Psychology* 22 (2010): 304–326. For ethnicity, see Roy Brubaker, “Ethnicity as Cognition,” *Theory and Society* 33, no. 1 (2004): 31–64; Roy Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Maggie Penn, “Citizenship versus Ethnicity: The Role of Institutions in Shaping Identity Choice,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 4 (2008): 956–973.

¹⁶ Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*.

¹⁷ Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 158.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Glynn, “Beyond Constraint: How Institutions Enable Identities” in *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, 424.

¹⁹ Neil J. Mackinnon and David R. Heise, *Self, Identity, and Social Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 74.

²⁰ Helena Catt and Michael Murphy, *Sub-State Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis of Institutional Design* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²¹ Scott L. Greer, *Nationalism and Self-Government: The Politics of Autonomy in Scotland and Catalonia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

²² For Mexico, see Joseph L. Klesner, “Political Change in Mexico: Institutions and Identity,” *Latin American Research Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 184–200. For Germany, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe,” *International Studies Quarterly* 43 (1999): 83–114. For Belgium, see André Lecours, “Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium,” *National Identities* 3, no. 1 (2001): 51–68. For England, see Ross Bond and David McCrone, “The Growth of English Regionalism? Institutions and Identity,” *Regional and Federal Studies* 14, no. 1 (2004): 1–25. For Canada, see David Bourgeois and Yves Bourgeois, “Territory, Institutions and National Identity: The Case of Acadians in Greater Moncton, Canada,” *Urban Studies* 42, no. 7 (2005): 1123–1138. For Czech Republic, see Roger Murphy, “Institutional Reforms and Moravian Identity in the Czech Republic,” *East European Politics and Societies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 559–592.

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- ²⁵ Ibid.
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- ²⁷ Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan, eds., *Nested Identities*.
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- ²⁹ Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness*, 32.
- ³⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
- ³¹ Matthew Sparke, “Nationalism” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory et al. (London: Wiley/Blackwell, 2009), 488.
- ³² Murphy, “Territory’s Continuing Allure.”
- ³³ Ibid.; Alex Jeffrey, “Contesting Europe: The Politics of Bosnian Integration into European Structures,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 3 (2008): 428–443.