

# Layering Spatial Identities: the identity discourses of new regions

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## **ABSTRACT**

The number and importance of regions is increasing at the same time as traditional regional identities are undermined through processes like globalisation and individualisation. Local and other administrations increasingly cooperate and create new regions which are too changeable for a distinct collective identity to develop. Still, a clear identity discourse helps administrators to justify their policies; to mobilise local stakeholders; to attract outside resources and to get attention and funding from the central government. This article studies how the identity discourses of these new regions are constructed by administrators and other stakeholders by using elements linked to the identity of more established spatial entities. Especially important are the selective downloading of characteristics from the nations and regions to which they belong and the uploading of specific qualities from the cities and areas within their boundaries. We analyse how in two areas in the Netherlands the identity discourses of new regions have been constructed through the selective association with the complex layers of more established spatial identities nearby.

Keywords: new regions, identity, legitimation, layering, Netherlands

This article studies how stakeholders create identity discourses for new regions through the uploading and downloading of characteristics of more established spatial identities at different scales. We focus on the identity discourses communicated by new regions to legitimise themselves and not on the identification of individuals with 'their' region (Paasi, 2009; 2011; 2012). We view regional identity not as characteristics of a well defined spatial entity 'out there', but as social constructs that are created and reproduced through discourses by stakeholders that become materialised in for example planning documents or official websites. New regions are based on the cooperation between local administrations and often include administrations from other scale levels and other stakeholders. After discussing the proliferation of partially overlapping new regions in the last decades and how these new regions can be legitimised, we focus on the identity paradox: the increasing importance of regional identity to justify regional policies coincides with the decreasing possibilities for new regions to communicate a distinct identity. The paper studies how stakeholders of these new regions can resolve this paradox by using elements of the identity of more established spatial entities in their vicinity in their political discourses. We demonstrate these processes by analysing how in two areas in the Netherlands the identity discourses of new regions have been constructed through the interaction with the complex layers of spatial identities around them.

## **THE RISE OF NEW REGIONS**

The proliferation of new regions is linked to the transformation of the nation state in Europe and the growing importance of global competition. Economic geographers focus on the growing importance of regions to provide companies with the specific conditions necessary to successfully compete on the world market. The importance of regions in the globalising economy has become part of many different but related discourses on post-Fordism (Amin, 1994); globalisation (Held and McGrew, 2000), changes in economic regimes (Schoenberger, 1988), the evolution of regional business networks (Boschma, 2004) and regional competitiveness (Kitson et al, 2004; Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008). Scholars of European Integration focus on the growing role of regions in the European Union which stimulates and subsidises new forms of regional cooperation (Donaldson 2006; Keating 2008). Especially cross-border regions have been extensively studied (Newman, 2006). Others focus on the decline of the traditional nation state. This is no longer seen as a simple transfer of power from the central to the regional level, but as the emergence of new forms of multi-level governance. Hooghe and Marks (2003) stress that the relations between the central and lower administrative levels change in character from hierarchical, to more negotiated relations between different administrative levels and other stakeholders, like business (organisations) and NGO's. Local politics is no longer focussed on fixed territories, but becomes dominated by networks with vague borders in which stakeholders linked to different scales are persuaded to cooperate (Boudreau, 2007).

Local administrations increasingly cooperate in new institutional arrangements to cope with the problems a crisis prone globalising economy generates and the new tasks with which they are burdened with by central state. Decentralisation from the national level and municipal centralisation are important aspects of the rescaling of statehood which together

stimulate administrative cooperation in new regions. These new regions are sometimes based on the amalgamation of adjacent territories, but are increasingly networks, linking sometimes non-contiguous local administrations across different scales with non-administrative partners, like business (organisations) and other organisations of stakeholders. The organisation of these new regions is based more on the cooperation between policymakers of different public administrations and non-state actors in networks than on an administrative hierarchy of fixed territories. New regions frequently cover different policy fields, partially overlap in space and simultaneously lack clear spatial borders. As a consequence, local actors are confronted with many different regions. This transformation and rescaling of statehood results according to Neil Brenner (2004, 10) in a 'mosaics of scalar organization' which cut across the classical nested administrative hierarchies, creating 'splintered political geographies' (ibid, 292) and a 'continued institutional and spatial disorder' (ibid, 296).

### **THE LEGITIMATION OF NEW REGIONS**

This coexistence of multiple new regions in the same area undermines the legitimation of state power. Especially the lack of proper representation and popular acceptance is seen as a democratic deficit which undermines the legitimacy of the administrative cooperation in new regions (Boudreau, 2007; Brenner, 2004; de Vries and Evers, 2008; Teisman, 2007). These concerns are based on Max Weber's views on the legitimation of power based on popular acceptance. David Beetham - a leading political philosopher and political theorist on the legitimation of power - argues however that legitimacy involves more than the belief of the population in the legitimacy of a political system; legitimacy is not the result of public opinion, but is based on the correspondence between the political system and social norms (Beetham, 1991, 8). According to Beetham, legitimacy is based on the coherent but changeable combination of three dimensions: legality, expressed consent and justifiability. Legality refers to adherence to the established rules of acquiring and exercising power. The expressed consent of the population with the power structures in society is either mobilised, through oaths and the participation in mass events, or results from elections. Justifiability is based on social norms on the source of political authority and the purpose of government. State power "must derive from a source that is acknowledged as authoritative within society; it must serve ends that are recognised as socially necessary, and interests that are general." (Beetham, 1991, 149). Justifiability is not only based on the source, but also on how regulation serves a shared communal interest. This socially specific defined common interest should be met by an adequate and efficient performance of the political system (Beetham, 1991, 70, 86). This common interest is linked to the values and identity of that community. "(T)he legitimation of power rules is not only the development and dissemination of an appropriate body of ideas, or ideology, but the construction of a social identity by a complex set of often unconscious processes, which make that identity seem 'natural', and give the justifying ideas their plausibility." (Beetham, 1991, 78).

Beetham's approach helps us to understand the importance of regional identity in the legitimation of power at the local level in this current era of rescaling and the creation of new regions. Even during the heydays of the nation state, municipalities were important for the regulation and policing of social life, the representation of local interests, and the provision of public services (Flint and Taylor, 2007). The legitimacy of especially smaller

municipalities is undermined by the growing number of tasks they are not equipped to perform. The rescaling of statehood combines therefore the decentralisation of responsibilities to the local level, with the centralisation from the local to the regional level through municipal restructuring or by their cooperation in new regions (Brenner, 2004). This increased efficiency justifies both types of administrative restructuring, but it undermines other dimensions of legitimacy. Through municipal restructuring established political systems are profoundly changed which undermines their legality as they do not yet have 'established rules of acquiring and exercising power'. It is also difficult to legitimise municipal restructuring through the expressions of popular consent. Although the population in the restructured municipality will elect a council, municipal restructuring is often contested. Established local communities frequently use a local 'resistance identity' to oppose the amalgamation of their municipalities (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013). The one size fits all territorial frame of an amalgamated municipality is also not necessarily the most efficient size for all policies. The consolidation of these new territorial boundaries however hinders the cooperation with other municipalities.

The cooperation of municipalities in new regions can achieve similar economies of scale and scope in a more flexible way. New regions can be created to address specific problems and different policy problems can be addressed by different new regions. This leads to a layered administrative landscape of multiple coexisting and partially overlapping new regions. This can be justified by the specific spatial shape of the problems they address, but the legal framework on which the mostly informal cooperation in these new regions is based is more problematic. The creation of new regions contradicts the established territorial rules of acquiring and exercising power. The lack of direct popular elections for the new regions also undermines their legitimacy.

New regions created for the provision of public services are easier to legitimise than new regions which coordinate policies. All inhabitants profit from the economies of scale and scope realised through the cooperation of municipalities in the provision of public utilities, like for instance waste collection. A collective interest is more difficult to distinguish when the management of new regions formulates and implements policies which have diverse consequences for different sections of the population. Governing bodies of new regions can justify their policies by either using an external source of knowledge based on for instance national policies, or by using the internal source of the values and identities of established communities (Beetham, 1991, 69-75).

## **REGIONAL IDENTITY DISCOURSES AND THE LEGITIMATION OF NEW REGIONS**

Regional identities are now regarded as crucial for the legitimation of the policy choices of new regions and the mobilisation of support for these policies (Bell, 2010; Cox, 1999; Habermas 2001; Paasi 2012). These regional identities are mobilised for political purposes. As Paasi (2012,3) puts it: "Rather than as an empirical entity defined in terms of its inherent qualities or as the product of the identification of its inhabitants, regional identity is understood [...] as a social construct that is produced and reproduced in discourse. The discourses of regional identity are plural and contextual. They are generated through social practices and power relations both within regions and through the relationship between regions and the wider constituencies of which they are part." . The political discourses of new regions use many different types of regional identities linked to many different spaces

to legitimise themselves. Before discussing the relation between the many different and layered spaces in the identity discourses of new regions, we need to discuss the different types of regional identities used. The traditional assumption is that regional identities are based on fixed characteristics of bounded regions which set them apart from other regions. But more recent academic views undermine this essentialist perspective and stress the relational, fluid and multiple character of regional identities. They are no longer seen as a 'thing out there' which can be objectively measured, but as adaptable narratives used to exercise power (Paasi, 2012). Although the traditional essentialist academic perspective on regional identity is discredited, many inhabitants still feel strongly attached to particular traditional regions. These 'spaces of regionalism' of inhabitants have a clear territory with distinct history, which sets them apart from the 'regional spaces' or new regions of the rescaled state (Jones and MacLeod, 2004). Traditional regional identities are frequently used as 'resistance identities' against the 'legitimising identities' used by dominant institutions (Castells, 2010, 8; Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013). "Legitimizing identity seems to have entered a fundamental crisis because of the fast disintegration of civil society inherited from the industrial era, and because of the fading away of the nation-state, the main source of legitimacy." (Castells, 2010, 70). This is especially the case for new regions which are too unsettled and fluid to establish a collective identity, unlike firmly established administrative regions, such as provinces and especially nation-states. The identities of new regions are much thinner and forward-looking than the 'thick' backward-looking identities of traditional regions and regionalisms based on the shared history of a regional community. Thick regional identities value the region as a political goal in itself, while thin regional identities are more based on a utilitarian legitimation of the effectiveness of especially economic policies. Moreover, thin regional identities are more functional and linked to sectorial policies and special interests, while thick regional identities are more integrative. Thin regional identities are thus created around a few, mostly economic characteristics, while thick regional identities cover a broad range of cultural, social, political, environmental and economic characteristics. Thick and thin regional identities are Weberian ideal types which do not exist in their pure form, but are always combined (Terlouw, 2009, 2011). To justify their actions stakeholders will have to link especially the thin policy based identity discourses of new regions to more traditional collective identities.

## **THE LAYERING OF SPATIAL IDENTITIES**

As new regions are part of complex layered political environments, they have to relate their identity discourse to many others. The elements used in the identity discourses of these new regions are principally linked to the more established spatial entities and their thick identities in their surroundings. Elements can be selected from smaller local communities, from (partially) overlapping regions, or from larger regional or national communities. This results, as our case studies will demonstrate, in complex and changing relations between these communicated spatial identities which forms more a kind of 'breccia' (Bartolini, 2011) - a coarse grained sedimentary rock made of stone fragments and cemented together by finer material - rather than a layer cake with the nation as the icing on top. However, to deconstruct the way in which the communicated regional identities are linked, we use a scale metaphor as depicted in Table 1. This scalar spatial hierarchy with the typology of the relations between the different scales is an analytical Weberian ideal type, which gives a

conceptual model for analysing the complicated relations between the communicated spatial identities analysed in our case studies. Simple and clear abstractions can help us to better understand the complex and messy reality. Table 1 is based on a simplification of the relation between the properties of different levels of analysis (Hoekveld and Hoekveld-Meijer, 1994; Lazarsfeld and Menzel, 1961). The characteristics of regions are not only fixed to the regional level, but are also constructed from its elements and its being a part of larger collectives. These spaces are not neatly hierarchically nested, they frequently overlap and intermingle. The regional identity discourses of newly created regions are based on the selective use of characteristics of other, related spatial identities. Table 1 distinguishes between negative opposition and positive associations. The importance of negative oppositions or ‘othering’ for the construction of spatial identities has received a lot of attention in the last decades in human geography (Cloke and Little, 1997; Sibley, 1995; Wilton, 1998). However, positive associations are also important in regional identity discourses, especially for those new regions which try to mobilise support for new policies and to justify their policies (Boisen et al, 2011; Calhoun, 1994; Donaldson, 2006; Zimmerbauer, 2011). These positive and negative connotations not only focus on neighbouring regions, but can also cross scales. The resultant layering of new regional identities can be based on its elements (uploading), or on the larger collective to which a new region belongs (downloading). For instance, the innovative identity of high-tech regions is strengthened by using images of science parks (uploading) and by using national characteristics, like the Dutch mercantile spirit or German craftsmanship (downloading). This selective layering of identity can skip scales when the identities at those scales are not in line with the desired identity of the new regions. Many communications of peripheral border regions focus therefore on their ‘Europeanness’ rather than on their marginal position in their nation state. Scalar relations are very important for the legitimation of the policies of the management of new regions. The established legitimacy of the national government and municipalities with their elected councils is tapped into by downloading and uploading some of their characteristics in the identity discourse of new regions.

Table 1 The layering of regional identities

Scale	Positive association	Negative oppositions
Collective	Downloading of positive general characteristics	Antagonism towards negative general characteristics and centralisation
Neighbours	Cooperation and aligning with similar and strong regions	Opposition towards 'other' regions
Elements	Uploading of positive local elements	Exclusion of unwanted elements

## CASE STUDIES

The emergence of new regions is a common phenomenon in many traditional Western nation states, like Canada, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy, France, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Boudreau, 2007; Brenner, 2004; Fürst, 2006; Keating, 1998; Loba et al, 2009; MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Paasi, 2010 ; 2012). These new regions are part of new and complex forms of statehood, but are rooted in 'differing state traditions' (Keating 1998, ix) and in distinct local historical patterns or 'geoinstitutional frameworks' (Brenner et al, 2010). The Dutch situation, where municipalities cooperate on average with 27 different organisations (Pröpper et al, 2005, 79), is very illustrative of the complicated layering of disjointed new regions which has developed over the last two decades (de Vries and Evers 2008; Teisman, 2007). We selected two different constellations of new regions. The first concentrates on the *Bollenstreek*, an agricultural area at the West coast of the Netherlands, roughly midway between Amsterdam and Rotterdam. This is a good example of how both new regions and their related discourses on regional identity transform over time. It shows the adaptability of regional identity discourses to the changing political situation from the threat of unwanted urbanisation to the opportunity to profit from new neo-liberal competitiveness policies of the central government. The changing relation between identity layers in political discourses demonstrates the changeability of the meaning of the same elements and characteristics. The second constellation of regions focusses on the province Brabant in the Southern part of the Netherlands, where we analyse the identity discourses of two interrelated new regions: *Het Groene Woud* - a 'rural' landscape in the centre of Brabant - and *BrabantStad* - a network of the largest cities in Brabant. This shows the interaction between the regional identity discourses at different levels. The increasing linkages between the identity discourses of *BrabantStad* and *Het Groene Woud* reinforce each other. It also shows how the downloading of elements of traditional regional identity of Brabant to *Het Groene Woud* not only legitimises that new region, but also transforms the traditional identity of Brabant as a whole. Thus the first constellation of regions focusses on the development over time, whereas the second concentrates on the complex spatial layering of and the interaction between the identity discourses of new regions. We accordingly hope to contribute to a better understanding of the role of identity in political discourses and to put flesh on the analytical skeleton presented in Table 1 as "The challenge for research into regional identity is therefore to extend its comparative focus." (Paasi, 2012, 11).

We use what Paasi (2012, 3) described as a "geo-historical, multi-layered approach" . We start each case study with an historical overview of the development of the regional settings and the institutional development of these new regions based on academic and other general sources. The identity discourses of these new regions are then studied using the communications of these new regions (in policy documents, brochures, on websites, in newspapers, etc.). We limit our analysis to the communicated identities and how these are linked to different layers. The identities analysed in these different case studies are not 'out there', but are part of a developing political discourse. This paper thus not investigates the level of popular support for these identity discourses, but limits itself to the communicated identities of new regions. We study how in these different communications of new regions identity is claimed, and not what their identity is.

## GREENPORT DUIN- EN BOLLENSTREEK

The *Greenport Duin- en Bollenstreek* is a new region in the West of the Netherlands. A Greenport refers to an agribusiness complex which the national government considers to be important for the global competitiveness of the Dutch economy, just like the Mainports Schiphol/Amsterdam airport and the Rotterdam harbour (VROM, 2006). The national government stimulates the development of Greenports by easing planning regulations, improving infrastructure and stimulating cooperation between companies to innovate. Local stakeholders within the *Bollenstreek* have welcomed this planning concept and absorbed it in their different regional organisations. The *Greenport Duin- en Bollenstreek* is a network dominated by the associations of bulb and flower growers and trading companies, and cooperates with the central government, the province Zuid-Holland, the *Holland Rijnland* region and with individual municipalities. The six municipalities in the *Duin- en Bollenstreek* are furthermore shareholders in a regional development company and have formulated a common spatial policy which is focussed on this Greenport concept (Ecorys, 2006; SDB, 2001; 2003a; 2003b; WLTO/KAVB, 2003; [www.duinenbollenstreek.net](http://www.duinenbollenstreek.net); [www.greenportduinenbollenstreek.nl](http://www.greenportduinenbollenstreek.nl); [www.hollandrijnland.net](http://www.hollandrijnland.net)). Despite this organisational fragmentation all these stakeholders justify their policies by a common view on their region. They all refer to a pact they agreed upon in 1996 as the basis of their cooperation. In this *Pact van Teylingen*, named after the ruins of a mediaeval castle, the identity of the *Duin- en Bollenstreek* is defined as a “region in which the characteristic landscape is to be conserved and beautified. It will be a good place to live, work and recreate, where flora and fauna find their place, a region that will maintain a vital and sustainable floriculture, and will receive a boost in recreation and tourism” (Duineveld and Van Assche, 2011, 85).

Until the nineteenth century, the infertile dune landscape was sparsely populated and represented as a harsh and empty place. In the nineteenth century the inland dunes were dug off to supply sand for the expansion of the cities of the *Randstad* - the string of cities along the rivers and coast rimming the iconic rural Dutch polder landscape. The remaining waste lands were re-cultivated at the end of the nineteenth century. The chalk rich and well drained sandy soils proved suitable for flower bulb growing (Beenakker, 2008; Duineveld and Van Assche, 2011). The *Bollenstreek* thus became the centre for tulip and other bulb production; this gave this region its name and influenced its communicated identity. This was not a rural identity discourse based on a long tradition of agriculture, but based on the modernity of a new type of non-food agriculture on manmade soil and on the decorative use of the flowers produced there. From the Dutch national identity discourse the *Bollenstreek* downloaded the pride of man’s conquest over nature, through the creation of a prosperous landscape and through the use of advanced breeding techniques. The bulbs and especially the tulip became the core of the regional identity discourse, which was subsequently uploaded to Dutch national identity. After the Second World War, the *Bollenstreek* became gradually less important as a bulb growing region and became more influenced by urbanisation from the nearby booming Schiphol airport region and the city of Leiden. In the 1980s, to relieve these urbanisation pressures, the national government planned a large new town on the polluted and degrading bulb fields (Duineveld and Van Assche, 2011; Kloosterman, 2001; Vries and Evers, 2008; VROM, 2007). This caused a divergence between the, up till then, aligned identity discourses and interests of the *Bollenstreek* and the national government. From the national perspective this new town was justified based on the common housing interest of the population of the larger Schiphol



area. It was opposed by the local communities which developed a resistance identity against urbanisation to accommodate the needs of neighbouring regions. They developed a regional identity discourse based on the incompatibility of bulb growing with a new town in their back yards. They also questioned the legality of this territorial incursion and pointed at the lack of popular consent.

The resistance to these plans created a regional coalition of different stakeholders, which resulted in the *Pact van Teylingen* in 1996. Their success was partly based on a regional identity discourse of the *Bollenstreek* which not only opposed large scale urbanisation, but also linked up with different aspects of other more established spatial identities. In opposition to this new town they communicated a specific rural identity of the *Bollenstreek* by downloading national policy discourses on landscape and heritage, and by stressing the uniqueness of the landscape of the bulb fields in the *Bollenstreek*. These local action groups were supported by the municipalities in the *Bollenstreek*. By participating in the resistance to urbanisation these municipalities broadened the scope of their cooperation in the *Duin- en Bollenstreek*, a new region which was initially created to provide public services. The province of Zuid-Holland also opposed large scale urbanisation in the *Bollenstreek* as it identified the region as having a unique landscape whose ecosystem needed improvement through the renaturation of the old bulb fields. This supported the rural resistance identity against urbanisation used by the inhabitants and the municipalities. It also helped those who opposed large scale urbanisation to link up with the stakeholders of coastal tourism, because renaturation of bulb fields would increase the touristic potential of the region. The bulb and flower sector completed this anti-urban coalition. The *Bollenstreek* still houses the main traders, distribution centres and breeding stations which control 80% of world trade in flower bulbs, although only 10% of Dutch bulbs are nowadays produced in the *Bollenstreek*. The *Bollenstreek* is thus at the centre of a large networked agribusiness complex. Although the old bulb fields are no longer important for the production of bulbs, the agribusiness complex needs a lot of room for the expansion of offices, distribution centres and other facilities. The planned large new town would hinder their expansion. This well organised regionally based network of the bulb growing industry communicated an identity based on their strong international competitive position due to hard work, clever innovations and its roots in the *Bollenstreek*. They also linked this to the national level. The tulips and bulbs produced in the *Bollenstreek* form a substantial part of the export of the Dutch economy and are an important national icon which is widely used in representations of Dutch national identity (Beenakker, 2008; Duineveld, 2004; Kamphuis and Volkers, 1995; van Gorp and Béneker, 2007). The competitive agribusiness complex stimulated the development of a regional identity discourse which could download elements of the new national competitiveness discourse focussing no longer on regulating the urbanisation of the Randstad, but on stimulating its economic development and its competitiveness as a world city (Teisman, 2007; VROM, 2007).

Local stakeholder reacted to the urbanisation threat to the *Bollenstreek* by emphasising it had a distinct, non-urban, identity. They not only legitimised their opposition based on territorial integrity, legality and the represented opposition of the population, but they also justified it by linking it to the common interest of the Dutch nation. This not only helped the *Bollenstreek* to avert large scale urbanisation, but also strengthened and transformed the emerging neo-liberal competitiveness discourse of the Randstad. In their communications local stakeholders uploaded those characteristics, like auction centres and

blooming bulb fields, which fitted this competitive identity discourse, but they excluded other elements like dilapidated greenhouses.

After averting this urbanisation threat, the regional cooperation and the regional identity discourse transformed. In 2004 the cooperation network of the municipalities merged with the neighbouring *Holland Rijnland* which has a much more diffuse identity discourse than that of the *Bollenstreek*. Efficiency was an important motivation and legitimation for up scaling this administrative regional cooperation which focuses on the provision of public services like public transport, waste collection, social services, and spatial planning and economic policy. Despite this merger, the municipalities of the *Bollenstreek* still cooperate with the *Greenport Duin- en Bollenstreek* which now communicates a narrower agribusiness inspired thin identity, based more on an expanding agribusiness network linked to the Dutch economy, than on the territorial characteristics of the *Bollenstreek* ([www.duinenbollenstreek.net](http://www.duinenbollenstreek.net); [www.greenportduinenbollenstreek.nl](http://www.greenportduinenbollenstreek.nl); [www.hollandrijnland.net](http://www.hollandrijnland.net)). The case of the *Bollenstreek* shows how a resistance identity against urbanisation can be strengthened by the selective up and downloading of elements of related spatial identities discourses linked to many different stakeholders in the region. The illegitimacy of the new town was opposed by the successful communication of an alternative discourse on regional competitiveness. The success of this resistance identity fostered the emergence of a subsequent regional identity discourse focussing no longer on territorial defence, but on the development of a competitive agribusiness network.

## **TWO COMPLEMENTARY NEW REGIONS IN BRABANT: HET GROENE WOOD & BRABANT STAD**

Our second case study focusses on two interrelated new regions in the Southern part of the Netherlands. Both *Het Groene Woud* and *BrabantStad* were established in the beginning of this century by local administrations in reaction to new policies formulated by the national government. *Het Groene Woud* was identified by the national government as one of the 20 National Landscapes with a specific Dutch character (VROM, 2006). In Brabant the National Landscape *Het Groene Woud* builds on previous but only partially overlapping regional initiatives to conserve the landscape and restructure agriculture (Janssen et al, 2007). *Het Groene Woud* is supported by the province, nature conservation organisations, agricultural organisations, local farmers, local leisure entrepreneurs and municipalities. Their explicit goal is to strengthen the identity of *Het Groene Woud*, in order to develop this area in a sustainable way, by accommodating agriculture, nature and landscape and further increasing the area's potential for recreation (Ontwikkelingsstrategie, 2008, 9).

*BrabantStad* was established in 2001 by the five largest cities and the province Brabant, in order to benefit from the increasing importance attached to urban networks in Dutch national planning. *BrabantStad* presents itself as a strong network which cooperates to further strengthen its international position. "The aim of BrabantStad is to improve the effectiveness of the collective lobbying towards the central government and the EU through a strong network and a strong brand." (Translated from: [www.brabantstad.nl/thema\\_s](http://www.brabantstad.nl/thema_s)). In the next sections we show how the communicated identities of these two new regions complement each other and are related to the overarching traditional regional identity of the province Brabant.

To understand the construction of the identity of these two new regions, it is important to sketch the history and the development of the identity discourses of Brabant. Until the late Middle Ages, Brabant was the most prosperous part of the Habsburg Netherlands with important cities like Antwerp, Brussels and Den Bosch within its borders. This golden age ended during the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648) against the Habsburg rule. The Northern part of Brabant was occupied by the Northern Republican forces during the latter stages of this revolt. Only after the Napoleonic occupation it became a province with the same rights as the other Dutch provinces (Pirenne, 1996; Van Kempen, 1996).

During the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century local elites developed a rather conservative, nostalgic Brabant identity discourse that in part still resonates today. Opposition to the dominant Calvinists from Holland - the political and economic core of the Netherlands – was an important ingredient for the formation of a resistance identity in this predominantly Catholic province. Local elites presented Noord-Brabant as thoroughly Catholic and rooted in a rural society. Small peasants struggling for their daily livelihood on the poor sandy soils were venerated as the bearers of the authentic cultural values characterising Brabant (Van Oudheusden, 1996a; 1996b). This nostalgic image of Brabant as a rural province inhabited by hardworking, but poor peasants, who in spite of all preserve the traditional moral order of the village community, was contrasted to Holland and modernity. The opposition to Holland was based on their direct rule of Brabant during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was presented as an illegitimate occupation by a foreign Protestant state on all three dimensions identified by Beetham (1999): it was an illegal territorial occupation, opposed by the population and hindering the general interest of the population of Brabant and even impoverishing Brabant after its relative affluence of the High Middle Ages. The identity of Brabant was also constructed in opposition to contemporary modernisation as local Catholic elites feared that unbridled industrialisation and urbanisation would bring secularisation (Janssen, 2005; Van Oudheusden, 1996a; 1996b). They promoted a nostalgic, rural identity discourse to guide Brabant into modern times. As a result, industrialisation was dispersed over the villages, which, although being transformed into cities, retained much of their traditional character and sense of community through the influence of Catholic social institutions like schools, labour unions and housing associations (Janssen, 2005). This traditional rural identity discourse of Brabant was partly constructed through the uploading of characteristics of the rural *Kempen* and *Meijerij*, two areas dominated by small-scale agriculture on the sandy soils in the middle and east of the province which coincide partly with *Het Groene Woud*. Detached from much of its political connotations, elements of this nostalgic and backward looking thick regional identity are still used by its inhabitants and the other Dutch to characterise Brabant (Van Oudheusden, 1996c). Brabant is now represented in more vague characteristics as hospitable and Burgundian (in contrast to the puritan Calvinist Holland), amiable and easy going, as exemplified by their enthusiastic celebration of carnival, and with a strong sense of community - one enters the homes of ones friends or neighbours through the unlocked backdoor (BBT, 2008; VVV, 2008).

A thinner economic identity discourse - focussing on emancipating Brabant from its peripheral position in the Netherlands through economic development – was created by local economic elites from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards and complemented the thick nostalgic identity of Brabant. This thinner second identity discourse focussed on emancipation, progress and justified the opening up of retarded rural areas (Van Oudheusden, 1996a). Brabant was to be integrated in the Netherlands on equal terms not only politically and economically, but also socially and culturally. Local elites thus

communicated a distinct identity of Brabant that was linked to different aspects of the legitimization of Brabant as a political system. The old grudge against the 'illegal occupation' by Holland was combined with a clear sense of regional community linked to religion and a rural way of life. This was linked to the popular consent through mobilisation of the population in cultural events and the until recently strong support for a catholic political party. The emancipation of Brabant focussed on the importance of economic development for the common interest of the population of Brabant.

Brabant is nowadays no longer lagging behind; it has become one of the economic core areas of the Netherlands. To further strengthen its economic competitiveness the province and the cities of Breda, Tilburg, Den Bosch, Eindhoven and Helmond established *BrabantStad* in 2001. In *BrabantStad* they cooperate to attract resources from national and European institutions which would further improve their economic competitiveness and attract outside investors. *BrabantStad* is spatially and functionally connected to *Het Groene Woud*, which is increasingly represented as a the green heart in the middle of *BrabantStad*, and its recreational potential and attractive green living environment is used to promote the business climate of *BrabantStad*. The importance attached to *Het Groene Woud* is part of the political discourse of *BrabantStad* which celebrates the diversity and spatial separation between the participating cities ([www.brabantstad.nl](http://www.brabantstad.nl)).

The creation of the new region *Het Groene Woud* is linked to changes in Dutch spatial policy towards preserving heritage and landscapes in order to maintain regional diversification, to prevent further homogenization and therefore to strengthen regional identities (Janssen et al, 2007; OCW, 1999). Agriculture in this part of Brabant also needed restructuring to become more sustainable. In its communications *Het Groene Woud* successfully uploads characteristics from older, more established rural regions like the *Meijerij* or *Kempen* and of well-known local nature reserves like the *Kampina* or *Oisterwijkse Bossen* and at the same time selectively downloads many rural and historical aspects of the traditional thick identity of Brabant. This rural green identity discourse is further strengthened by excluding the neighbouring cities of *BrabantStad* and by detaching itself from narratives of the competitive economy in Brabant ([www.hetgroenewoud.com](http://www.hetgroenewoud.com)). The communicated identity of *Het Groene Woud* reproduces the traditional identity of Brabant, but spatially reduces it from Brabant as a whole, to a specific part: *Het Groene Woud*. The downloading of the policy goals of national landscapes - preservation and possibly strengthening of landscape qualities and sustainable development of these areas - (Janssen, et al, 2007; VROM, 2006) reinforces the focus on countryside, rurality, landscape and nature in its regional identity discourse. Despite its organisational success the population is not so familiar with its communicated identity. Almost all of the 326 inhabitants of villages in or near *Het Groene Woud* questioned in 2008 by students of the Utrecht University knew its name, almost two thirds knew of its status as a National Landscape, but only a third had knowledge of the characteristics through which *Het Groene Woud* presents its identity.

Whereas the identity discourse of *Het Groene Woud* can refer to the established thick regional identity of Brabant and its characteristic rural elements, the stakeholders involved in *BrabantStad* so far have managed to communicate only a limited thin identity ([www.brabantstad.nl](http://www.brabantstad.nl)). Downloading from the thick identity of the province proves also difficult. As we have seen, the traditional Brabant identity discourse has anti-modern and anti-urban elements and which does not fit cities that wish to compete on a global scale for investments. The only viable connection they make to the traditional Brabant identity is by presenting *Het Groene Woud* as the green heart of *BrabantStad* and a vital aspect of its high

quality living environment. Representations of Brabant needing emancipation seem to have been replaced with communications boasting the successful outcomes of this process of economic development. Its infrastructure, which is well-connected to the rest of the Netherlands and Europe, and its highly educated workforce are central themes in advertising the qualities of *BrabantStad* ([www.brabantstad.nl](http://www.brabantstad.nl); [www.foreigninvestments.eu](http://www.foreigninvestments.eu)). The identity of *BrabantStad* has thus been partly formed by downloading characteristics not from Brabant, but from the Netherlands as a whole, like level of education and command of foreign languages. Despite this uploading and downloading of characteristics and the proud presentation of its economic development, the communicated identity of *BrabantStad* remains very thin and weakly connected to the thick identities of Brabant and its individual cities, which focus in their city marketing on their distinct characteristics (Hendriks, 2011). The newly created region of *BrabantStad* not only lacks the legality of a clear administrative structure and is not legitimised by an expressed popular consent - which is common for new regions -, it even has no clear common interest which can justify its policies. It's only common interest (together against The Hague or Brussels) might easily disappear when one city profits from a major investment.

## **CONCLUSION: FROM LAYERING SPATIAL IDENTITIES TO LAYERING STRATEGIES**

These case studies show that the layering of spatial identities not only helps to communicate identities of new regions based on aspects of better established spatial identities, but also transforms these established identities. The communicated identity of *Het Groene Woud* is based on the downloading and uploading of very traditional aspects of Brabant's identity. As this representation of *Het Groene Woud* becomes more established, it also transforms the identity of Brabant as a whole by transferring many of the characteristics of the traditional image of Brabant to a smaller area within Brabant which excludes its cities. *BrabantStad* appears to be less successful. The diversity and competition between its participating cities hinders the construction of an identity through uploading. Downloading is more based on skipping the scale of Brabant and linking up with very general Dutch characteristics. In the *Bollenstreek* the different elements combined into a coherent identity linked to a common goal: the defence against the common enemy of large scale urbanisation. After successfully averting this threat its regional identity discourse now shifts from a thick territorial to a thinner identity based on its agribusiness network. *BrabantStad* cannot mobilise different stakeholders through such a defensive strategy, while it has no clear enemies. It competes with the Randstad, but also the participating cities in *BrabantStad* compete with each other to attract private investors and public funding for urban projects. It is difficult to strengthen the identity discourse of *BrabantStad* in opposition to the Randstad, while Brabant as a whole is a much stronger established competitor which has a stronger and thicker identity than *BrabantStad*.

These case studies stand for a plethora of cases of new regionalism where local stakeholders do not resist national spatial planning but take certain new concepts on board. The very different reason for local cooperation and region formation however result in quite similar processes of selective layering. The stakeholders involved in these new regions can profit from the lack of an established identity by selecting those elements of related spatial identities in their communications which justifies their political choices. Defensive and offensive layering of spatial identities are two important strategies linked with different

dimensions of legitimacy. Linking their identity discourses with established thick regional identities helps the administration of new regions to mobilise the population to block unwanted developments by presenting them as illegal outside threats which undermine the traditional character of the area and are not justified by the interest of the community. When in contrast, the management of a new region wants to promote new developments, the actors involved in these new regions can justify their policies by selectively adopting elements from other spatial identities to communicate and construct a future oriented identity. These identity discourses of new regions can be more manoeuvrable than those based on entrenched thick identities. These thinner future oriented identity discourses are constructed by selectively downloading elements of the dominant spatial identities. The identity discourses of new regions frequently claim that those characteristics which are important for the dominant overarching spatial entity are concentrated in their area. This downloading is often combined and strengthened through the uploading of those characteristics from their constituent parts which fit the political discourse of the dominant overarching spatial entity. Thus while downloading focusses on limiting important characteristics to the new regions, uploading focusses on expanding some characteristics of its parts to the new region as a whole. This selective downloading and uploading not only constructs identities for these new regions, but also transforms the perceived identities of the more established overarching regions and constituent parts, by giving extra attention to those elements used in the layering of identities. Layering thus not only helps the construction of identity discourses for new regions, but also transforms more established identities.

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