Regional identities: quested and questioned


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ABSTRACT

Regional identities are inseparable from other identity discourses and the power relations which drive these discourses. Regional identities are linked to wider debates on sometimes competing and sometimes complementary spatial identity discourses. This chapter focuses on the different ways in which regional identity discourses are linked to discourses on local and national identities. Their diversity shows the changing and disputed nature of regional identity discourses. When circumstances change, regional identity discourses and the support for them can also change. This chapter discusses a wide variety of regional identity discourses of both well-established and newer regions which are linked in positive or negative ways to other spatial identity discourses.

Introduction

The study of sub-national regions was central to geography until the 1960s. The goal was to determine for each distinct and clearly demarcated region on which combination of elements its individual character was based. For each region, geographers studied the interaction between physical layers - like soil and climate - and the social, cultural and political aspects of human activities. The specific configuration of these interactions formed the essence or identity of that region. This academic quest for regions with a deeply rooted identity was questioned in the 1960s by a new generation of geographers who wanted to modernize geography and turn it into a spatial science. The focus in geography therefore shifted from regional synthesis to thematic specialization. Geography then split into many
sub-disciplines, each seeking to generate knowledge that was more generally applicable and policy-relevant to the expanding welfare state (Holman 1995; Johnston and Sidaway 2004).

Towards the end of the 20th century the current validity of this national regulatory framework was challenged by proponents of globalization and especially its neoliberal acolytes. The ensuing debate helped to put the region and identity back into the limelight. Political regionalism became a potent force in regions like Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Croatia. Their claims for autonomy, which were partly based on strong regional identities, rekindled academic interest in regions and regional identities. Regional identity became more important in politics but also in economic geography and economic policies. Many academics and policy makers now claim that through globalization the nation-state has given way to (urban) regions as the provider of an adequate framework for firms to be competitive. They link the competitiveness and innovative capacity of a region with the strength and type of its regional identity. While the location decisions of firms are increasingly based on soft factors related to regional identity, regional administrations and stakeholders try to project an attractive regional identity. Competitive regional identities emulating those of successful regions like Silicon Valley are sought by many regional administrations but are questioned by many academics (Jones and MacLeod 2004; Keating 2013; Brenner 2004; Paasi 2013). The increasing tide of anti-globalization populism also brings these forward-looking regional identities into question and might spur a quest to strengthen more traditional regional identities (Turok et al. 2017, 2). These shifting conceptualizations of regions and their identities suggest that these are social constructions questioned by many different stakeholders, but whose fetishizing and objectification is questionable (Paasi and Metzger 2017, 24). Regions and their identities are constantly evolving social constructions which give meaning to the spatial existence of humans and are linked to changeable political processes. The borders and the size of what people regard as a meaningful region are often contested. Not only the spatial form but also what characterizes the identity of a region are frequently questioned especially during political conflicts over which territory is the most suitable for people to determine their own future.

This point is clearly illustrated by the referenda held in 2014 in Scotland and 2016 in the United Kingdom. That Scotland has a distinct identity is hardly disputed, whereas the character of Scottish identity is contested. Is it a regional identity within an overarching British national identity? Is it one of the four nations which are united in the United Kingdom? Is it a nation without a state protecting its interests? Does the medieval ‘Braveheart’ embody the true Scottish identity? Or is its identity based on ‘Scotland’s future’ as decided upon by the people of Scotland? These and other conceptualizations of Scottish identity are questioned and questioned. The debate on Scottish independence was initially focussed on what bounded or separated Scotland in relation to the rest of the United Kingdom. But it also resulted in a discussion on whether the people in regions within Scotland with a distinct identity, like the Shetland and Orkney islands, should also get more autonomy (Cartrite 2012). Their population voted, unlike the rest of Scotland, overwhelmingly against Scottish independence. They voted, like the rest of Scotland, by a large majority to remain in the EU but on one of these islands, Whalsay, 82% of the inhabitants voted to leave (Shetland News 16/09/2016). People on Whalsay have a strong collective identity. "It’s a very small island and we’re just all together - we are one big family." (Daily Record 25/09/2012). The island of Whalsay is a region with clear borders and its identity is based on a shared history and livelihood. Most of the inhabitants have worked till recently in its flourishing fishing industry (EC 2013; Cardwell and Gear 2013). They form
“a community which has faced and weathered crises whose outcome might have been disastrous. It is in precisely these respects that the fishery and Whalsay are identified with each other in people’s minds.” (Cohen 1987).

The premise that regional identity plays a key role in such referenda is undisputed, but what the relevant region is and what constitutes its identity is contested. It is not only the spatial form and character of regional identities that are disputed but also the importance that different groups attach to a specific regional identity. Horizontally, regional identities compete with other, sometimes overlapping, regional identities. Vertically, the relations between regional identities and spatial identities at other scales are also subjected to political debate (Bauman 2004; Confino 1997). Time also affects these identity discourses. They change by adapting to changing political, social or economic circumstances. In addition the positive or negative attitudes to changes over time are important elements of regional identity discourses (Terlouw 2017).

This chapter seeks to clarify the disputed and constructed character of regional identities by examining ways in which regional identity discourses are linked to other spatial identity discourses. The focus is on the different ways in which regional identities are used as arguments for or against particular developments, in effect creating different regional identity discourses in relation to other regional, local and national identities. Analysing these scalar linkages, the chapter shows the different ways in which regional identities are used in constantly evolving debates on spatial identity and societal change. But before delving into the cross-scalar relations of regional identities, it is pertinent to discuss how identities are formed and transformed in order to make sense of shifting notions of belonging and difference.

From individual identity to different identity discourses on regional development

Identity conceptualizes which elements (n-1) characterize an entity (n) and how this relates to others (n+1). Individual identity gives meaning to the relation between the individual (n) and the communities to which one belongs (n+1) in relation to the different character traits a person possesses (n-1). These identities are not fixed, they are fluid. Life experiences shape and change an individual’s identity, especially while he or she is acquiring new characteristics and has to deal with new challenges in maintaining relations with others. People adapt their identity to make sense of this strained and changing relation between their individual uniqueness and their collective sameness. Individuals try to comprehend these frictions by constructing a more or less coherent life story (n) which tries to make sense of their acquired characteristics (n-1) and their changing relations with others (n+1). These life stories or identity discourses not only change over time but also incorporate visions of change. Besides individual characteristics (n-1) and the relation with others (n+1), past (t-1) and future (t+1) changes of identity are also part of a given identity discourse at a specific moment in time. Identities are based on life stories about who I was, who I am, and who I want to become. Identity is a story created, told, revised and retold throughout life. Identity is not only about sameness and difference but also about stability and change (Verhaeghe 2014; Ricoeur 1991; Bauman 2004). Groups (n) also have identities which likewise make sense of the even more strained and changing relation with yet larger entities
(n+1) based on a selection of their components (n-1). “... ‘identity’ is revealed to us only as something to be invented rather than discovered; as a target of an effort, ‘an objective’; as something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect through yet more struggle.” (Bauman 2004, 15-16).

Regional identity is not a fact but 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.” (Paasi 2013, 3).

Like any other kind of identity, regional identities not only position a certain region with reference to other ones but also in time, to the past and the future. A regional identity discourse is also a kind of life story about the formation of a regional identity through history and about its hoped or feared future development. Laments about the ‘good old days’ and the perceived decline of spatial identities are pervasive elements of the discourse (Terlouw 2017). Paradoxically, the sense of loss propels identity into the political debate. The current phase of liquid modernity undermines established identities and thereby, ironically, enhances the importance attached to these threatened identities (Bauman 2004, 13-46). The intergenerational continuity of communities is an important aspect of their identity. Anthony Giddens (1991) has stressed the importance of the reflexive awareness and discursive consciousness of identities in dealing with existential anxiety. This results in the continuous incorporation of how one has to deal with new threats into their identity discourses.

Diminishing identity and the fear of its further decline constitute a widespread narrative in the regional identity discourses of the population in well-established regions. These discourses of fear and decline contrast with those of administrations which hope to improve the economic performance of their region. Many of these policy discourses focus on regional competitiveness and stress the importance of specific characteristics of the region for its success. The administration thus creates new future-oriented and externally directed identity discourses. These are, however, difficult to align with the well-established traditional regional identity discourses which are common among the population. These old types of regional identity have been institutionalized and thickened over generations in a territory. On the other hand these new forms of regional identity are much thinner; they are more susceptible to changes and challenges through their relations with the outside world. Table 1 gives an ideal-typical overview of the types of elements used in thick and thin spatial identity discourses. Elements of thick spatial identity tend to be backward-looking, placing value on the whole region and its population. They focus more on bonding within a region. Elements of thin identity focus more on bridging between regions. Thin spatial identities are more forward-looking and place value on the effectiveness of specific, mostly economic policies. Thin spatial identities are more functional and linked to sectoral policies, special interests and stakeholders, while thick spatial identities are more integrative. Thin spatial identities are thus created around a few - often economic - characteristics, while thick spatial identities embrace a broad range of cultural, social, political, landscape and economic characteristics. Thin spatial identities are more changeable. Their spatial form and meaning can be adapted to changing circumstances. They are less grounded in static territories with a fixed meaning but more responsive to the changing position of a region in larger networks (Terlouw 2009; Bauman 2004: 13-46; Antonsich 2011; Sack 1997; Jones and MacLeod 2004).
Table 1 Aspects of regional identity discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>Ranging from traditional thick:</th>
<th>to future-oriented thin:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spatial form</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Territorial</td>
<td>Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Institutionalized</td>
<td>Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>Administrators and specific stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Broad and many</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Defensive</td>
<td>Offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historically oriented</td>
<td>Future-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Old</td>
<td>New</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scale focus</td>
<td>Local and National</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
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(Source: Terlouw 2009)

Regional identity discourses related to other spatial identities

A key characteristic of regional identity discourses is that they position a region in space. A region is positioned horizontally with respect to other regions and vertically with reference to the nation to which they belong (n+1) and the localities which they enclose (n-1). These horizontal and vertical relations can be based on positive associations or on negative oppositions. Identities are always linked to processes of inclusion and association (‘us’) and processes of exclusion and distancing (‘them’). Table 2 depicts the positive and negative associations between spatial identities. It shows six different ways in which regional identity discourses are linked to other spatial identities. These are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

Table 2 Positive and negative relations in regional identity discourses across scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Nation (n+1)</th>
<th>Region (n)</th>
<th>Local (n-1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nation (n+1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Regional identity against national identity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Region (n)</td>
<td>Regional identities as part of a national identity</td>
<td>Conflicts</td>
<td>Similarity complementarity</td>
<td>Local resistance identities against regional identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local (n-1)</td>
<td>Regional identities protecting local identities</td>
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Local resistance identities against regional identity

Regional identities tend to compete with local identities. People identify more easily with the local community they live in than with the more abstract and distant region (Terlouw 2017). The local community has a strong basis in the shared interests of living close to other people (Amin and Thrift 2002; Massey 2005). Sharing a local space in daily life generates more shared interests and experiences than living in a region could do. Although the daily life of almost all individuals extends beyond the place where they live, reaching into the wider region, their activities and networks intersect more often in their place of residence than in a region. Members of a local community share a residential setting, but many of them commute to different workplaces in the wider region. The same is true for recreational trips and visits to family and friends. All these networks and experiences fan out from the same place but do not create a clear delimited region. Not only what the relevant region for identification is, but also what characterizes it are less clear for a region than for a place. Regional and local identities also consist of various elements. Social characteristics of the local community are the key ingredients of local identity discourses, while regional identity discourses tend to focus more on spatial elements like buildings and the landscape (Terlouw 2017). Local identities are based largely on shared experiences in daily life, while regional identities depend more on forms of organization and communication linked to political processes (Paasi and Metzger, 2017).

Local identity discourses are frequently used when local autonomy is threatened by regional cooperation or municipal amalgamation. The incompatibility and uniqueness of their local identity is stressed by accentuating the thick identity elements which set them apart from others, notably their territorial borders, history and cultural differences. Their local identity thus thickens into a local resistance identity discourse (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013; Zimmerbauer et al. 2012). The local population tends to protect the thick local identity. Meanwhile many administrations and business interests want to promote a thinner regional identity discourse in order to strengthen the economic competitiveness of the region. Those fearing the loss of local autonomy question these kinds of regional identity discourses. While local resistance identity discourses emphasize the differences between their local and the regional identity, they also question the importance of this thin regional identity. The population’s weak identification with the region is frequently cited and compared with the strength of its local identification. Also questioned is the relative importance of the planned administrative region compared to other, sometimes competing and partially overlapping regions (Terlouw 2017).

For example in the Netherlands the vast majority of the inhabitants of Goedereede opposed the amalgamation of their municipality with three others into a large regional municipality uniting the whole island of Goeree-Overflakkee. They feared losing their local autonomy and their ability to protect some key characteristics of their local identity, mainly touristic entrepreneurialism and religious sentiments. They associated these characteristics with their distinct history. Opponents of amalgamation denied that the island was a region with a distinct identity. Some even went so far as to suggest that a centuries-old dam
connecting the two parts of the island should be cut through, thereby restoring the medieval situation of two separate islands. Another way they questioned the regional identity of the island was by disputing its relevance of the island as a relevant region compared to other regions. They stressed that they had more in common with other coastal touristic places on other islands than with the rural inland communities on the island of Goeree-Overflakkee (Terlouw and Hogenstijn 2015).

**Regional identities protecting local identities**

Regional and local identity discourses can also reinforce each other. The identity discourses of well-established regions tend to value the regional mosaic of similar local identities. The Dutch province of Brabant, for example, has a strong and widely recognized regional identity. Its small towns and snug villages are important elements of its regional identity discourse (Van Gorp and Terlouw 2016). On the other hand local identity discourses also place value on being part of Brabant. For instance in a radio interview with the mayor of Tilburg, which is scheduled to host the official festivities to celebrate the King’s birthday in 2017, the mayor invited people from the rest of the Netherlands to visit Tilburg while it was such a niceBrabantian town, with Brabantian hospitality and Brabantian conviviality (NPO 2016)). In this interview he mentioned the name of the region, Brabant or its adjective Brabantian, more often than the name of his town itself, Tilburg.

The formation of new regions does not have to result in the formation of local resistance identities that bond the local population against the outside world. Regional identity discourses can also be used to bridge local differences and collectively promote their interests. Especially when the local administration is not seen to effectively protect local identity and promote local interests, local support can grow for stronger regional cooperation or municipal amalgamation. The region is then used as a vehicle to protect local interests and identities (Terlouw and Weststrate 2013). Especially when the gap between the population and the administration is already wide and the dominant spatial identity discourses and administrative borders are divergent, a regional identity discourse linked to the scaling-up of the administration can gain support. Contrary to local resistance identity discourses, the local identity discourses do not thicken. Rather they become thinner and focus more on those similar or complementary elements in other identity discourses which are regarded as important for the future development of the region in its relations with others. These new regional identity discourses tend to be thin but can become more rooted by incorporating elements of thicker and more established local identity discourses through the layering of these different identities (Terlouw and van Gorp 2014).

To return to the example of municipal amalgamation on Goeree-Overflakkee, whereas the measure was opposed locally by the population and administration of Goedereede, it was strongly supported by the business community. This emanated from a growing awareness that the lagging island economy can only be improved by concerted action. The business community took the lead in formulating economic policies and promoting and communicating a new regional identity through island marketing. They used the attractive characteristics of the landscape and some thick identity elements linked to the local communities on the island to project a new and appealing regional identity to the outside world (Terlouw and Hogenstijn 2015; Terlouw 2016).
Similarity and complementarity between regions

The identity discourses of different regions can strengthen each other. This is the case for new regions with a thin regional identity but also for well-established regions with a thicker regional identity. Regional administrators and politicians compare themselves with institutionalized regions, often to legitimize their claims for similar rights and privileges. Sometimes administrators from different regions even cooperate to collectively promote their interests. Through organizations like the Committee of the Regions, the Conference of European regions with legislative power, the four motors for European associates, regions cooperate to collectively promote their interests in the European Union. Within countries such organizations abound.

Stakeholders in well-established regions frequently use very similar regional identity discourses. Having a distinct history visible in their regional heritage and a distinct landscape within stable borders are important elements of most regional identity discourses. Regional historical associations and regional heritage agencies propagate these elements in similar ways in conjunction with regional administrations. Their publications echo the old-fashioned way in which regional identity was conceptualized in human geography until the 1960s. Previously regional identities were seen as facts to be uncovered by systematic study of the kind of livelihoods humans had developed over time by using their physical environment in their very own way, thus creating a mosaic of distinct regions (Holman 1995; Johnston and Sidaway 2004).

The stakeholders in new regions frequently engage in similar regional identity discourses. For new regions emphasizing economic development, stakeholders tend to develop regional identity discourses which include associations with successful regions. The success of Silicon Valley in California has generated a multitude of regional identity discourses projecting the idea that they are or will be similarly successful, given a similar clustering of industries and knowledge institutions in their region (Brenner 2004; Keating 2013). The Netherlands now has a several such clusters: a Health, Shipping, Food, Energy and Metal Valley. The basis for these new Dutch ‘valleys’ lies in cooperation between municipalities, research institutions and the private sector. Their regional identity discourses focus on stimulating regional development by creating linkages similar to those on which the success of Silicon Valley is based. Their similarity - be it real, potential or imagined - with successful regions is a point frequently raised by the stakeholders to attract outside resources from private investors and especially from the central government.

Complementarity is also used to position a region as part of a mosaic of regions, whereby unique individual qualities are considered part of a larger whole. For instance the regional identity discourses of these Dutch ‘valleys’ revolve not just around their regional strength based on their specialization but also around their complementarity, which strengthens the competitiveness of the Dutch economy as a whole (VDM 2016).

Conflicts between regions

Competition with other regions is another common theme in regional identity discourses (Boisen et al. 2011; Terlouw and van Gorp 2014). Many of the conflicts between new regions that are embedded in regional identity discourses may be traced to the overlap between
competing regions and rival claims for which region and regional identity discourse is the best way to represent the identity and interests of regional stakeholders. Regions compete with each other on who is, or will be, the most successful in promoting the interests of their members. New regions with new borders and new regional identity discourses constantly emerge in reaction to the perceived shortcomings of older regions (Brenner 2004; Frey 2005). One example is the western urbanized core of the Netherlands, which has successively been conceptualized as a world-city, four city regions, two metropolitan regions and part of a larger Delta-metropolis (VDM 2016).

Regional identity discourses frequently stress the differences from neighbouring regions. Besides ascribing negative characteristics to the ‘other’, regional identity discourses of established regions also refer to their borders. Over time people living in the border areas can shift their affiliation from one region to the other. In the Netherlands, for example, the border between Twente and Salland has shifted. Twente, the more urbanized of the two, has developed a regional identity discourse based on its record of industrial innovation and its residential and landscape qualities, while Salland has remained a declining traditional agricultural region. The villages just over the border from Twente profit from the economic development in Twente and attract its residents. To protect their regional identity, municipalities along the border in Salland have drawn up policies that encourage building new houses in a style befitting the Salland region. To facilitate this new housing policy, they provide a style guide with modern versions of the traditional Salland farmhouse (SSE 2013). In other cases it is not the fluidity but the stability of the regional border that strengthens regional identity. The distinctiveness of Scotland is symbolized by the borderland heritage of castles whose narratives are part of Scottish identity discourses (MacLeod 1998).

**Regional identity against national identity**

Sometimes the ‘other’ in regional identity discourses is not a neighbouring region but the nation-state to which it belongs. The main opposition is then not directed horizontally at other regional identities but vertically against the national identity. The most conflictual spatial identity discourses question having ‘only’ a regional identity and stress that they also have a national identity. This ‘nation without a state’ narrative is widely used by those who appeal for secession of their region from their nation-state (Flint and Taylor 2007). In peripheral regions many associate nation-state formation with economic, political and cultural subordination. The perceived injustices have fed the regional identity discourses of decline and loss of thick identity elements. Many regionalist movements were started to defend their traditional regional culture and especially their language rights against national homogenization. Later, as in Flanders, the discourses promoting cultural and language rights were extended with arguments initially promoting political and eventually socio-economic autonomy (Béland and Lecours 2008). In Flanders, as in Scotland and Catalonia, regional identity discourses have shifted over the past few decades. The goal of preserving thick identity elements has given way to promoting thinner elements, particularly their own regional economic development potential, bringing the region into direct competition with the nation-state.

The national identity is sometimes questioned by regional actors, but national identity discourses also question the importance and character of regional identities. Traditionally most academics and nationalists see the rise of national and the decline of
regional and local identities as two sides of the same coin. The decline of regional identities since the nineteenth century was welcomed as a step toward breaking down the legacy of medieval society. Those traditional bonds were seen as posing constraints on individuals in their pursuit of modernity, individual freedom, democracy and economic development. Urban and regional identities were seen as relics of the divisive medieval past, which was finally being supplanted by future-oriented modern and integrative nationalisms. Modern individuals were presumed to identify predominantly with their national community (Smith 1982; Paasi 2013; Yack 2012).

Regional identities as part of a national identity

National and regional identity discourses can also strengthen each other. The national identity then crowns the traditional regional identities and unites them by providing a collective path to a better future. Regional identities based on naturally bounded historical regions can then be used to cultivate active national citizens (Paasi 2013, 6). In these discourses regional identities are linked to the past while the nation is linked to the future. The nation and the region are not conceptualized as competing but as complementary.

The emergence of a strong German national identity in the late nineteenth century can be linked to the simultaneous ascendancy of regional identity discourses hinging on the concept of ‘Heimat’. Germany was an amalgamated territory uniting states with very diverse political, economic and social histories. Its unification coincided with the transformation of society through industrialization and urbanization. That was the context of the local identity discourse based on Heimat, which articulated the historical roots of everyday local life. The German nation was conceptualized as a mosaic of different Heimats and the general German culture as rooted in historically grown, specific local and regional identities. This notion of Heimat was used to lay out a distinct national path to modernity in opposition to the direction taken by other, especially West European nations (Confino 1997; Applegate, 1990; Cremer and Klein 1990). “As one of Germany’s responses to modernity, the Heimat idea was a memory invented just when German society was rapidly changing, as a bridge between past and present that looked uniquely dissimilar.” (Confino 1997, 98). The discourses on Heimat and local and regional identities have taken various forms since the end of the 19th century. During the Nazi regime Heimat was reformulated in terms of race, blood and soil. As part of this fascist legacy, the Heimat idea was discredited in the first decades after the Second World War. Then in the 1960s Heimat was adopted by left-leaning identity discourses criticizing West German society for its renewed nationalism, American consumerism and environmental pollution (Confino 1998, 193).

Not only well-established traditional regions but also new regions can strengthen their identity discourses by linking up with national policy discourses. The focus would then shift from the traditional, historical regional roots of national development to the contribution that economically strong new regions could make to the nation as a whole. The effectiveness of the relatively thin identity discourses of new regions depends to a large extent on their association with national policy discourses. This is illustrated by the regional identity discourses of metropolitan regions in the Netherlands. Their economic competitiveness is promoted not only in terms of each region’s individual characteristics but also in terms of how they collectively, through interrelatedness and complementarity, advance competitiveness in the Dutch economy as a whole (VDM 2016).
Conclusion

Besides being social constructions, regional identities incorporate many other kinds of identity. Regional identities are best understood in relation to other identity discourses and the different interests and power relations which drive these discourses. To understand regional identities it is necessary to position them in the wider debates on sometimes competing and sometimes complementary spatial identity discourses. This chapter has contextualized regional identities by relating them to local and national identities. The overview of the various relations between spatial identity discourses highlights the changing and disputed nature of regional identity discourses. As circumstances change, regional identity discourses and the support for them can also change. This point has been elaborated in this chapter by discussing a wide variety of regional identity discourses of both well-established and newer regions linked in positive or negative ways to other spatial identity discourses.

In light of the examples given throughout the chapter, it is clear that regional identity is not a fixed fact linked to a stable territory but a dynamic discourse linked to other discourses on spatial identities. There is ample room for adapting regional identity discourses to different situations and interests. The borders, character, positive associations with others - both horizontally and vertically - are subject to different and changeable interpretations by different actors. As those interpretations are based on different valuations, they are either attracted to or repelled by particular regional identity discourses. Thus the regional identity quested by one is frequently questioned by another. In that sense regional identities should not be seen as a stable rock on which legitimate policies can be built but rather as a slippery slope of inconsistencies and shifting intentions. Although human geographers are frequently asked for advice on these kinds of political conflicts, the ‘true’ identity of a region cannot be determined. The most useful way to study regional identity is to analyse why some quest a particular identity discourse while others question it. Although its malleability prevents regional identity from becoming a key academic concept in geography, its indeterminate and inherently disputed nature pushes it to the foreground of the increasingly messy politics that characterize the faltering nation-state in search of legitimacy.

REFERENCES


