

# Culture, Identity and Regional Development in the European Union

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## 1 Introduction

### *A new development paradigm*

In the discussion about Europe's future, regions have been attached an increased importance during the last decade. European regionalism of the 1990s has been described as modernizing and forward looking, in contrast to an old regionalism, characterized by its provincialism, and by a social or cultural agenda where claims for "rights to roots" were central.<sup>1</sup> The European Union defends neo-regionalism as a means for democratic improvement, just like the Assembly of European Regions (AER) has described the regions as "pillars of democracy".<sup>2</sup>

One of the most significant attributes of the new regionalism is the advocacy of what Michael Keating is calling a "new development paradigm".<sup>3</sup> This paradigm is introducing the notion that regional development should be achieved, not by government subsidizes or by special grants for the periphery, but by way of the efforts of the region itself. Regional variations in development are no longer primarily explained with reference to structural conditions, such as differences in accessibility, demography, trade and industry. Instead, "soft factors" such as culture, civic society, identities and attitudes have been attributed an increasing importance.<sup>4</sup> Like in the Swedish County Östergötland, several regional organizations claim that it is "people's enterprising spirits, ways of thinking, attitudes, forms of social intercourse, norms and values" that is deciding whether a region's growth potential will be realized or not.<sup>5</sup>

The origin of the "new development paradigm" can be traced back to several sources. Robert D. Putnam's study of Northern Italy, where the degree of civic spirit was told to explain variations in economic development, is repeatedly mentioned as a central academic contribution.<sup>6</sup> Another is Michael E. Porter's work, which describes cultural homogeneity as advantageous for the establishment and the success of private enterprises.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, policy makers from the "four motors of Europe" – Rhône-

Alpes, Baden-Württemberg, Catalonia and Lombardy – have been very successful in influencing the political debate. These regions belong to what Christopher Harvie has called the new regions or the "bourgeois regions", characterized by sophisticated technology, environmental awareness, local democracy and a culture and civil society that combines "the intimate and the cosmopolitan".<sup>8</sup>

This article intends to employ a more critical perspective on European neo-regionalism in general and the "new development paradigm" in particular, through a discussion of some administrative regions in northern Europe. My intention is to point out some of the problems that are woven into a policy which aims at generating development through identity policy and by stressing the cultural particularity. It is my contention that these problems become clearer when this discussion is confronted with theories of nationalism and the construction of the nation state. My main aim with this article is not to present a solid exposition any of the regions mentioned, but to show how the "new development paradigm" turn out at a regional level. I also intend to question whether the accustomed division between old regionalism as ethno-cultural and the new regionalism as more civic is appropriate.

Next, I will utilize some examples from several administrative regions, mostly Swedish ones. Yet, the two regions subjected to the major part of my research are Norrbotten in Northern Sweden and Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania in North East Germany. The regions differ from each other in several aspects. Norrbotten is a county and Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania a state within a federation. Hence, their respective legal authorities differ in terms of reach and status. However, both regions have a relatively weak economy and a peripheral position in common. None of them is usually mentioned in discussions concerning regionalism, no matter if it concerns the old ethno-regionalism or the new European regionalism. Still, they seem to be adopting very much of the neo-regionalist rhetoric.

*New regionalism in peripheral regions? The article takes a critical perspective on the new development paradigm and questions the division between old and new regionalism.*

- (1) Keating, Michael: *The New Regionalism in Western Europe – Territorial restructuring and political change*. – Cheltenham (UK), Northampton (MA, USA) 1998, p. 73
- (2) Assembly of European Regions (AEI): *Declaration on Regionalism*. – Basel 1996
- (3) Keating, M.: *The New Regionalism in Western Europe*; l.c.
- (4) Ceccato, Vania; Persson, Lars Olof: *Forskning för regional utveckling*. Nordregio WP (1999) 1, p. 19 f.
- (5) Ötsam: *Verksamhetsplan år 2001*. – Östergötland 2000, see also *Socialdemokraterna i Norrbotten: Det kan vi göra själva*. – Arvidsjaur 1997
- (6) Putnam, Robert D.: *Making democracy work – Civic traditions in modern Italy*. – New Jersey 1993
- (7) Porter, Michael E.: *The competitive advantage of nations*. – New York 1998
- (8) Harvie, Christopher: *The Rise of Regional Europe*. – London, New York 1994, p. 3
- (9) Anderson, Benedict: *Den föreställda gemenskapen*. – 2nd ed, Göteborg 1992; Hobsbawm Eric J.: *Nationer och nationalism*. – Stockholm 1994; Gellner, Ernest; *Culture, identity, and politics*. – Cambridge 1987
- (10) e.g. Törnqvist, Gunnar: *Renässans för regioner*. – Stockholm 1998, p.15 f.
- (11) cp. Aronsson, Peter: *Regionernas roll i Sveriges historia*. – Stockholm 1995, p. 205; see also Gren: *The new regionalism in the EU*, p. 75; Törnqvist, *Renässans för regioner*, p. 21
- (12) Keating, M.: *The New Regionalism in Western Europe*, l.c., p. 87
- (13) Gidlund, Janerik; Sörlin, Sverker; Gidlund, Susanne: *Ensam hemma – Den norrländska elitens nya syn på regional utveckling*. – Umeå 2000
- (14) Regeringskansliet PROP. 1997/98:1 Utgiftsområde 17 'Kultur, medier, trossamfund och fritid', (Stockholm 1997)
- (15) e.g. Lindeborg, Lisbeth in Tägil, Sven (ed): *Regions in central Europe: the legacy of history*. – London 1999, pp. 53

## 2 Conceptualizing the region

### *The region as a construction*

Recent theories about nationalism have refined our understanding of the nation as a social and political construct. Benedict Anderson's description of the nation as an imagined community, Ernest Gellner's interpretation of the nation as an outcome of "the Nationalist Age" and Eric J. Hobsbawm's understanding of traditions as inventions could be mentioned as some of the most influential contributors to a more constructionist, less primordial understanding of the nation.<sup>9</sup> However, while the willingness to see the nation as an institutionalized, imagined community has increased among scholars, the region is still frequently described as a genuine community and as a coherent sphere of interests, functions, and identities.<sup>10</sup> The "regional" is not in the same extent as the "national" seen as the result of a political process, but described in terms of folklore and "genuine" cultural roots.<sup>11</sup>

The primordialist understanding of the region, implicating that it is held together by commonalities in culture and identity, is accustomed also by advocates of the neo-regionalist ideology. Indeed, this primordialist approach works side by side with a discourse influenced by strictly economical arguments. Nonetheless, the notion that the European neo-regionalism has overcome the primordial, ethno-cultural understanding of the region is a dubious one.

### *The region and the regionalists*

Just as Ernest Gellner argued that nationalists constructed the nation, we can argue that the regions of today are made and accentuated by regionalists. Thus, political leaders engage in region building in much the same way as an earlier generation engaged in the construction of nations.<sup>12</sup> The administrative regions studied here certainly exist in legal terms. Nonetheless, all the efforts made in order to establish the idea of the region and to rally citizens around it, must be understood as efforts made to turn the existing, administrative region into a so-called "imagined community".

Assuming that regions are constructed by regionalists, we should ask where these regionalists are to be found. By

Janerik Gidlund et. al, "regionalization" is understood as a governmental policy, where an "external" body intentionally generates regional centres of power.<sup>13</sup> "Regionalism", on the other hand, is understood as the policy of forces within the region, aiming to strengthen the status of the region and to improve the networks and the identity of the region.

In one sense, Gidlund's division is appropriate. Regionalization and regionalism are two different political processes. Nevertheless, the desire to strengthen the status of the region, to improve the networks and the identity of the region is not only found among regionalists within the region. The construction and the promotion of the region occur in relation to, and with support by, external actors. Alongside with the European Union's ambition to generate a "Europe of regions", organizations such as the Committee of Regions (COR) and the Assembly of European Regions (AER) have been influential advocates of European regions. And despite the fact that regionalization is repeatedly described as a threat to the nation state, we find e.g. the Swedish government declaring, that the national cultural policy must strive for "the preservation and the animation of the cultural heritage, for the strengthening of the local and regional cultural identity".<sup>14</sup>

These circumstances tell us that regions shall not be regarded as "natural" entities, but as political and social constructs. Moreover, regionalism shall not be seen as an intra-regional affair, but as an ideology that embraces actors from within as well as from outside the region.

## 3 Conceptualizing the identity

### *Questioning "genuine" identity*

A regionalist policy often starts out from the primordialist assumption that regional identities simply exist. Regional identities are frequently described as persistent, deeply structured and potential to utilize for democratic mobilization.<sup>15</sup> The AER considers that "people through historical, linguistic, cultural, social, economic and geographical ties, increasingly identify themselves with their region". Further, it perceives the region as "the expression of a distinct political identity (...) reflecting the democratic will of each region".<sup>16</sup> The COR

has on its part argued for a policy which strives to build a “Europe of roots, not only of concrete and borders”.<sup>17</sup> The Christian Democrats of Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania take an equal primordialist position in their regional programme “Zukunftsoffensive der CDU” arguing that “more and more people in Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania profess themselves to their traditional roots”.<sup>18</sup>

By stressing the actual authenticity of the regional identity, as well as the importance of strengthening the very same, the neo-regionalist discourse on identity is a contradictory blend of primordialism and constructionism. The Mecklenburg-Western-Pomeranian CDU states for example – as an antithesis to the assertion of traditional roots – that “the policy within the federal state must (...) strengthen the identities” and that the profession to the traditional roots is the way “a strong regional identity arises”.<sup>19</sup> The Norrbotten project “The Guide”<sup>20</sup>, run by Norrbotten’s County Administrative Board in partnership with a number of other regional actors, is another example of a policy that aims to strengthen the regional identity. The main aim of “the Guide” is to make “the Norbothnians” even more proud of their county, to spread “a true image of Norrbotten and to strengthen (our) identity”.<sup>21</sup>

As we can see, “roots” and “ties” are frequently used metaphors when regional identities and cultures are to be described. My point of departure is that all identities require that they be established in contrast to “the Other”.<sup>22</sup> In a global context, Edward W. Said has argued that the concept of “the Orient” has had the role of “the Other” for the Western World.<sup>23</sup> Authors like Stuart Hall, Michael Billig, and David Harvey have pointed out that ethnic minorities or racialized groups recurrently constitute “the Other” in a national discourse.<sup>24</sup> When searching for “the Others” of the region, Michael Keating notes that “being Scottish was in some senses opposed to being British”.<sup>25</sup> In these circumstances, it appears important to further investigate the roles of the self and the other in the regional identity discourse.

### *Politicizing of identities*

The “new development paradigm” starts out from the assumption that a strong regional identity and a distinct regional culture facilitate regional economic development. Like in Northern Swedish City Umeå, numerous regional policy documents state that “a strong and distinct regional identity (...) is an important requirement for growth within the region”.<sup>26</sup> Such of assumptions have paved the way for a policy that aims to turn the regional populace into an integrated group with an internal solidarity and a common identity. Apart from Norrbotten and Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania, several regional bodies plea for a policy that strengthens the regional identity. Finnish Nyland and the Swedish Counties of Scania, Värmland, Västerbotten, and Blekinge are just a handful of examples where these notions can be found.<sup>27</sup> The immense trust in interconnectedness between identity and development has made regional identity politics highly acceptable.

In social theory, identity politics have been understood as part of an emancipatory politics of opposition.<sup>28</sup> Marx’ ambition to transform the working classes from being a class in itself to a class for itself can be seen as an example of identity politics with such ambitions. The 1960s and 1970s women’s liberation movement, which “turned the personal political” can be conceptualized in the same way. Simultaneously, however, identity politics can be seen as an attempt to gain loyalty and to create legitimacy for predominant structures of power. The generating of a national identity is now widely understood as such.

As the critique of the primordial understanding of regional identities provides the theoretical basis for this article, regional identity politics should be here regarded as a means for legitimating a regional power structure, rather than as just a means for regional emancipation. Furthermore, the documents analysed within my study are prepared by leading regional, national and European organizations, implicating that they ought to be seen as an exercise of power.

(16)  
AER: Declaration on Regionalism . – Basel 1996

(17)  
COR: Bring cultural diversity to the European debate. – Brussels 1999, DCP/99330en

(18)  
e.g. CDU: Die zukunftsoffensive der CDU, Politik gestalten – Mecklenburg Vorpommern voran bringen. at www.cdu-mv.de, 2001-11-06

(19)  
ibid.

(20)  
‘Vägvisaren’ in original.

(21)  
www.bd.lst.se/infoproj/  
intro.htm, 01-09-08

(22)  
Hylland-Eriksen, Thomas: Kulturterrorismen – en uppgörelse med tanken om kulturell renhet. – Nora 1999, 2nd ed., p. 19

(23)  
Said, Edward W.: Orientalism. – Stockholm 1993

(24)  
Billig, Michael: Banal nationalism. – London 1995; Hall, Stuart: Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices. – London 1997; Harvey, David: Class relations, social justice and the politics of difference. In: Place and the politics of identity. Eds.: Keith and Pile, p. 63

(25)  
Keating, M.: The New Regionalism in Western Europe, p. 90

(26)  
e.g. Umeå Region Stad och Land – hand i hand, Lokalt Utvecklingsprogram för Umeåregionen 2000 – 2006. – Robertsfors 2000

(27)  
AER: Declaration on Regionalism. – Basel 1996; Nylands Förbund: Nylands Utvecklingsstrategi – Nyland i Europas elitliga (Nyland 1998); Skånes regionfullmäktige: Skånsk Livskraft. – Skåne 1999; Dalarnas Länsstyrelse: Med förenade krafter mot år 2007, Gemensam strategi för Dalarnas län. Falun och Borlänge 1996; Vision Västernorrland, Vision 2005 med perspektiv mot år 2010. – Västernorrland 2001; Stevrin, Peter; Uhlin, Åke, Tillit: Kultur och regional utveckling. – Karlskrona 1996

(28)  
Bondi, Liz: Locating Identity Politics. Eds.: Keith, Michael; Pile, Steve. In: Place and the politics of identity. – 2nd ed., London, New York 1996

#### 4 The role of culture

##### *The ideologization of culture*

In many locations, regional development strategies state that culture is important for regional development and economic growth. In peripheral regions, culture is commonly seen as a vital asset when striving to attract people and private enterprises to the region. As culture has become a mainstay in the “new development paradigm”, there is a need for studying how the notion of “culture” is used for political ends.<sup>29</sup>

The discourse on culture within the “new development paradigm” is not primarily focused on supporting artistic activity or to improve the accessibility of culture for the citizens. If anything, it aims at strengthening the feeling of solidarity and symbolic community among them.<sup>30</sup> In a variety of regional political statements, culture is described as “a paste that welds people together (...), having the ability to hold the own village, the city and the “Heimat”<sup>31</sup> together”.<sup>32</sup> The development strategy for the Swedish County Dalarna argues e.g. that “the solidarity among the inhabitants, the awareness of the common denominators and the cultural fixative that is formed by past and present time” is crucial for regional development.<sup>33</sup> In the case of Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania, “Volkskultur”, and the care for regional particularities have been presumed to result in “Heimatgefühl”, identity, and a sound self-confidence.<sup>34</sup> In a book edited by the County Administrative Board in Swedish Blekinge, we learn that “trust is to be found in culture and culture is to be found in trust”.<sup>35</sup> “The trust” is here described as “a part of the mental cultural landscape” and the authors argue that “there are mutual connections between trust, culture and regional development”. Just as “roots” and “ties” are metaphors frequently used when describing regional identities, trust and unity are the presupposed effect of cultural similarity among the inhabitants.

##### *Culture as a business concept*

The dominant notion within the “new development paradigm” is that culture is crucial for how a regional economy is to develop. This is contradicting several studies of the emergence of nations and nationalities, which have pointed out that

the reverse relation is far more important to analyse. Ernest Gellner has stated that in order to understand the emergence of nations and national cultures, it is suitable to make use of Radcliff-Brown's concepts of culture and structure.<sup>36</sup> According to this concept, the structure is a system of relatively stable social positions. Culture is a product of the structure and thereby less interesting to study than the structure itself. The structural conditions that Gellner makes central for the rise of the nation are found in “the Nationalist Age”, i.e. the epoch in which nationalism for the first time both was demanded by the increasing industrial economy and made possible by the capacity to transmit cultural conceptions to the majority of the people.

Just as “the National Age” provided the structures from which the idea of a national culture was developed, the stressing of the authenticity of the region, the celebration of exoticism and peculiarity must be seen in the light of specific economic and political processes. One of these processes is the economic recession that occurred in several peripheral regions in Europe during later decades. The recession was accompanied by several attempts to find new sources of income within the region. As we can see, culture has become a keyword in this search.

For many peripheral regions tourism has become the answer to the question of how their economies should prosper and glow.<sup>37</sup> In seeking for a promising niche within the tourism trade, the concept of cultural tourism has been heralded. The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania has for example regarded cultural tourism as a means of “maintaining the cultural identity of the federal state”.<sup>38</sup> Cultural tourism coincide with the “heritage industry”, which Michael Keating describes as “an effort to exploit a real or imagined past as a tourist attraction (...)”.<sup>39</sup> The economic significance of cultural tourism or heritage industry is considered substantial. Particularly in densely populated areas on the countryside, special efforts have been intensified to make these regions more attractive for tourists.<sup>40</sup> Several rural districts have, for example, developed programmes for adult education, aiming to educate the students for the cultural tourism trade.<sup>41</sup> Hence, culture and history are simultaneously used as commodities,

(28) Bondi, Liz: *Locating Identity Politics*, l.c.

(29) cp. Hylland-Eriksen; *Kulturterrorismen*, p. 23

(30) Gidlund, Janerik; *Regionalisering* l.c., p. 7

(31) Hembygd in original.

(32) e.g. Petersen, Karl: *Kämpa för Norrbotten*. Norrländska Socialdemokraten (NSD) 01-11-06

(33) Dalarnas Länsstyrelse: *Med förrenade krafter mot år 2007*

(34) e.g. Pressemitteilung 166-01 vom 24. August 2001, Grußwort des Bildungsministers Prof. Peter Kauffold anlässlich der Eröffnung des IV. Internationalen Trachten- und Volkstanzfestes des Landes Mecklenburg-Vorpommern am 25. August 2001

(35) Stevrin, P.; Uhlin, A.: *Tillit, kultur och regional utveckling*, p. 146

(36) Gellner, E.: *Culture, identity, and politics*, p. 10

(37) [http://www.kultur-und-tourismus.de/engl/start\\_e.htm](http://www.kultur-und-tourismus.de/engl/start_e.htm), 01-11-29

(38) PDS Mecklenburg – Vorpommern: *Mit der PDS für soziale Gerechtigkeit und Menschenwürde in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*. – Schwerin, 13./14.12.1997

(39) Keating, M.: *The New Regionalism in Western Europe*, p. 84

(40) [http://www.kultur-und-tourismus.de/engl/start\\_e.htm](http://www.kultur-und-tourismus.de/engl/start_e.htm), 01-10-23

as central means to launch a positive image of the region and as something that can strengthen both the identity and the profile of the region.<sup>42</sup>

Keating has argued that the increased interest for regional history indicates that the interpretation of the past is an important element when defining the cultural particularity of a region.<sup>43</sup> A good example of how history can be used as a resource in asserting the “authentic” and “natural” qualities of a region, is the publicly published book “The visible history of Norrbotten”.<sup>44</sup> Here, the Deputy County Governor of Norrbotten is declaring that culture and relics of culture are essential for our future, for our identities and our willingness to take responsibility for the community. The text ends up with an exhortation: “We, the Norbothnians, must learn to be proud over our millennial history”. In Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania, the Hanseatic past is, in like manner, frequently used as a symbol for internationalism, trade, and openness.<sup>45</sup> This is representative for how history is used within the “new development paradigm”. The region’s history is not only used to prove a long and glorious past, but also to further the modernization and globalization in the present and the future.<sup>46</sup>

### *The power of defining*

As the authentic and the particular have become commodities, they are turned in to objects for identity constructing – supporting and profit calculating policy. However, constructing the genuine is of course a contradiction in terms. If the genuine is supported and thereby influenced by politics, it simply ceases to be genuine and unaffected.

That the regional culture is considered worthy of protection by regional, national and European actors, makes it important to ask what is included in the concept of “a genuine regional culture”. The much talked of regional genuineness is not just out there for us to discover. Rather, it is under continuous construction and we need to ask by whom this genuinity is defined.

In theory, the celebration of a specific regional culture could embrace all cultural life within the territory. The empirical material, however, suggests something else. In the Swedish County of Scania for

example, a regional parliament document is advocating the need for “taking responsibility for those values in Scania, which we want to defend and preserve for generations to come”.<sup>47</sup> The document is arguing for the preservation of the Scanian “culture, history and common value-system, that is to say our Scanian identity”. Here we learn that if a cultural pattern is to be regarded as properly Scanian, it must be firmly rooted in the Scanian history.

Even when the intention is to portray the region as multicultural, the rhetoric is predominantly homogenizing. In several policy programmes from Norrbotten, multiculturalism is understood as a mixture between “the three cultures of the region”, namely Samis, Swedes, and Finns.<sup>48</sup> In the Swedish national budget for 2002, the Social Democratic government is granting an appropriation for so-called “Regional Consultants for Multiculture”. The argument has been that the population outside the bigger cities seldom get acquainted with the “cultural manifoldness that the immigration of later decades has brought the society”.<sup>49</sup> The respective counties are supposed to be the responsible authority for the consultant, but the government will cover a maximum of fifty percent of the costs. In Norrbotten, the responsible County Councillor is arguing that this effort is of little interest for the region. “We are not a big immigration county and therefore I am not willing to launch this activity right now”, she argues.<sup>50</sup>

The line of argument above could be analysed from a number of perspectives. Incidentally, we can note that the share of foreign citizens in Norrbotten is smaller than the national average. Yet, the difference is no more than 1.6 percentage unit.<sup>51</sup> The reasoning above reveals a viewpoint that multiculturalism primarily is an interest for “the multicultural”, i.e. the immigrants. Still, the discussion around the Regional Consultants for Multiculture brings a debate to life that normally is hard to find in Norrbottnic policy documents. Non-Nordic immigrants of recent decades are seldom included in the Norrbottnic multiculturalism. The exclusion, however, does not manifest itself through direct xenophobic or demonical descriptions of immigrants or “new” ethnic minorities, but rather through a regular neglect.

(41)  
e.g. [www.kulturturism.com/kurser\\_doku.htm](http://www.kulturturism.com/kurser_doku.htm), 01-10-21; [www.geijerskolan.se/Kulturturism/kulturturism2.htm](http://www.geijerskolan.se/Kulturturism/kulturturism2.htm), 01-10-21; <http://ljudal.naturbruk.org/kulvux.htm>, 01-10-21

(42)  
e.g. Löfgren, Lennart: Satsa på turismen. GT-Expressen, 1999-08-22

(43)  
Keating, M.: The New Regionalism in Western Europe, p. 84

(44)  
Lundin, Kerstin (ed.): Norrbottens synliga historia: Norrbottens kulturmiljöprogram. – Luleå 1992

(45)  
Flohr, Dieter: Die Hanse – auf den Spuren unserer Vorfahren in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Ein Porträt. 2. Aufl., Rostock 2001

(46)  
Keating, M.: The New Regionalism in Western Europe, p. 85

(47)  
Region Skåne: Utvecklingsprogram för Region Skåne. – Skåne 1999

(48)  
e.g. Marklund, Kari: Landshövdingen hälsar välkommen. [www.bd.lst.se/lh\\_stab/ta.htm](http://www.bd.lst.se/lh_stab/ta.htm), 01-11-23

(49)  
Regeringskansliet: Förslag till statsbudget för 2002, PROP. 2001/02:1 (Stockholm 2000)

(50)  
Sparmann, Janne: Mångkulturellt nej tack, NSD, 01-12-11

(51)  
<http://www.bd.lst.se/bdfakta/pofor.htm>, 01-12-14

## 5 Launching the region

### *The image of a region*

Important within the “new development paradigm” is not only the internal solidarity based on common identities and culture. Typically, the image of the region is equally emphasized. Policymakers in peripheral regions recurrently consider the public image of the region as being negative or too anonymous. In Northern Sweden, the supposedly negative “mental image of the North among actors in the South” is often presented as a fundamental obstacle to overcome.<sup>52</sup> Just like in the Swedish County Västernorrland, considerable development programmes bring out the importance of “making the region more noticeable and interesting” in a national or a European context.<sup>53</sup>

The image making policy has a lot to do with marketing. The Social Democratic Party in Norrbotten states that “we in Norrbotten must get better at marketing. Marketing of our products as well as of our county”.<sup>54</sup> The party even suggests a special education for these purposes. The image that the Social Democratic Party wants Norrbotten to have, is the image of “a successful region, in which knowledge and competence are the most important characteristics”.<sup>55</sup> The already mentioned project “The Guide”, is one example of a project that aims to spread a certain image of the region. Within the framework of the project, photo contests were held and seminars have been arranged, a “Norrbottnic” screensaver has been distributed free of charge, and the “Larder of Norrbotten” has been introduced, meaning that the “royal chef Werner Vögeli does Norrbottnic cooking on the web”.<sup>56</sup>

Ernest Gellner’s notion that structure is influencing culture can be utilized when studying the attempts to create an image of a region. Regional images are likely to be designed in a number of different ways, depending on the conditions of the region in question. An unfavourable economical situation has repeatedly served as a ground for describing a region as unique and in need of special solutions.<sup>57</sup> And the rhetoric of the peripheral region is often telling us that although the unemployment is higher and the financial situation worse than in other parts of the country, the quality of life is better in the rural region.<sup>58</sup> Cultural particularity or distinctiveness is frequently

presented as an asset for the region. Like in the plan of action for the Swedish county Östergötland, where we learn that “it is inevitable that the activities which we associate with culture, hold a great potential (...) when trying to develop a distinctive identity with the aim of strengthening the image”.<sup>59</sup> In Norrbotten, the “exotic strains” are explicitly described as worthy to value, both for the regional inhabitants themselves and in interaction with “the world outside”.<sup>60</sup>

### *The social capital of the region*

When Norrbotten is promoted, cultural, behavioural or even mental qualities have been mentioned as unique assets of the regional inhabitants.<sup>61</sup> The “mental culture”, “created by the history and the culture of the county”, is regarded as important for how the possibilities within the region are to be developed.<sup>62</sup> Björn Rosengren, then County Governor for Norrbotten, now Swedish minister for Industry, Employment and Communications, stated in an interview that “the most important communication is to be found among the Norbothnians, whom are known for being straight-forward. No one needs to doubt the Norbothnians generosity, stability, and reliability”.<sup>63</sup> The present County Governor declares that “we Norbothnians love our nature and outdoor life of all kinds. We follow the fluctuations of the seasons and make the most of the possibilities of every time of the year”.<sup>64</sup> In a regional development document from the northern Swedish town-district Umeå, we learn that there exists a “common internal culture”, meaning that the people living there are patient, unyielding, careful, and open for other individuals and cultures”.<sup>65</sup>

The celebration of the mental advantages of the regional citizen is, however, not fully consistent. In peripheral regions, we frequently find the idea that the regional citizen is “whining”. We learn that “the municipality is lacking an entrepreneurial spirit” that “envy is awfully deep” and that “Norbothnians in general, and people from the inland in particular, belong to a terribly whining species”.<sup>66</sup> The Norrbottnic culture has been criticized by leading politicians for being guided by an old-fashioned, traditional male chauvinist attitude, which make young women move from the county in even greater numbers.<sup>67</sup> In other regions, we find political development plans stating

(52) e.g. Esselin, Anders: Umeå, en framgångssaga i norr. Dagens Nyheter 00-12-30

(53) Vision Västernorrland, l.c.

(54) Socialdemokraterna i Norrbotten: Det kan vi göra själva. – Arvidsjaur 1997

(55) ibid.

(56) e.g. [www.bd.lst.se/infoproj/intro.htm](http://www.bd.lst.se/infoproj/intro.htm), 01-09-08

(57) e.g. Frost, Gert: 7 intervjuer om Norrbotten i riksmidia. – Luleå 1996; Gulbrandsen, Kerstin: Norrbotten kontrasternas län – en resa i tid och rum. – Luleå 1991

(58) e.g. Lundkvist, Kjell: Allt fler väljer att lämna storstan, in NSD, 01-06-08; Gotlands Kommun: Gotlands regionala utvecklingsprogram. – Visby 1998; <http://www.tillvaxtavtal.jamtland.se/prog/bakgr.htm>, 2001-12-01

(59) Östsam: verksamhetsplan år 2001

(60) Landstinget, Länsstyrelsen och Kommunförbundet i Norrbotten, Luleå Högskola, Länsarbetsnämnden: Vägvisaren – Så här ska vi göra för att utveckla Norrbotten. – Luleå 1995), p.10

(61) ibid.

(62) e.g. Gröning, Lotta: Kultur stämplas som hobby. NSD 01-09-28

(63) [www.bd.lst.se/infoproj/intro.htm](http://www.bd.lst.se/infoproj/intro.htm), 01-09-08

(64) Länsstyrelsen i Norrbottens län: Norrbotten – Mångfald och Kontraster. – Luleå 1999

(65) Umeå Region: Stad och Land – hand i hand, p. 8

(66) Sundén, Johnny: Fattiga S-kusiner från landet mötes på kongress. NSD, 01-11-26

(67) Sparrman, Janne: Segelström varnar för Törnsmans machokultur. NSD, 01-11-09

that the entrepreneurial spirit in the county is low.<sup>68</sup> All these negative peculiarities – whining, male chauvinism, lack of entrepreneurial spirit and envy – are seen as mental obstacles that need to be removed if the region is about to develop.

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## 6 Action required

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### *The urge for common action*

The “new development paradigm” does not only emphasize identity, image, and culture. It also urges for collective action.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the reinforced identity policy has been described as aiming to turn the region into “a social and political space of action”.<sup>70</sup> The notion that collective action is essential can be observed in Scania, where the new regional policy has been criticized for following the device “concord at any cost”. “Concord. One identity, one region, one political idea”, Pelle Andersson and Jesper Lindau write when questioning the democracy of the Scanian regionalist project.<sup>71</sup> In Norrbotten, the striving for consensus manifests itself in the publication “the Guide”, in which we learn that “No man is an island in the time that will come. The hatchets must be buried and pipes of peace lighted. Now if ever, we need a strong Norrbotten spirit”.<sup>72</sup>

Unity and regional solidarity is the connecting thought of a number of regional development plans. In an article on regional development, the County Governor of Norrbotten argues that it is important to make the most of the social capital of the region.<sup>73</sup> Referring to Robert Putnam’s study in Northern Italy, the Governor argues that co-operation, joint action, and unity are the key words if the county shall keep up with international competition. A similar rhetoric is found in a report written by direction of the Regional Council in Swedish Kalmar County. According to the report, it is of great importance to avoid standpoints that can risk the regional unity.<sup>74</sup>

In many regions, the citizens, the politicians, and the regional capital makes up the collective who is supposed to act for the best of the regions. Michael Keating has elaborated on the concept “development coalition” as a cross-class alliance of social and political actors, which have dedicated their activities to economic growth in a

specific location.<sup>75</sup> Keating, moreover, upon discussing the implications of these coalitions for the local democracy, notes that these special purpose agencies have the possibility to narrow the development agenda and neglect social dimensions of the region.<sup>76</sup>

### *Regionalization as democratization?*

The notion that the regionalization of European Union derives from a public claim for increased regional independence is a vital ingredient in the neo-regionalist discourse. When the COR was established in 1993 as a result of pressures from the German Bundesrat, this was perceived as an indication that “regional consciousness is an important part of the European citizens lives”.<sup>77</sup> Just as frequent is the assumption that global economic restructuring and the changing capacity of the nation states have made the citizens turn to the regions “as the level better equipped to understand local problems and to find possible solutions”.<sup>78</sup> The region is supposed to grant an increased political participation to the citizens, and regionalization has been associated with democracy, pluralism, and stability.

I argue however that instead of interpreting the regionalization of the European Union as a democratic bottom-up project, the relation between the European Union, the regional institutions, and the public should be understood in dialectical terms. Regional policy makers on the one hand have tried hard to improve their influence at a European level. The current political support for developing a “Europe of regions” is a proof of their success. For the regions, a “Europe of regions” involves the possibility to get regional mobilization programmes funded by the European Union. The European Union administration on the other hand, has identified a need to bring the union closer to its citizens and the channels for doing so “have frequently been found at the regional or local level”.<sup>79</sup> The statement from Jos Chabert, President of the COR, that “Europe needs the regions like men need bread!” illustrates clearly this idea.<sup>80</sup>

(68)  
e.g. Vision Västernorrland, Vision 2005 med perspektiv mot år 2010

(69)  
Keating, M.: The New Regionalism in Western Europe, p. 152

(70)  
ibid., p. 85

(71)  
Andersson, Pelle; Lindau, Jesper: Samförstånd till varje pris. Aftonbladet 00-05-13

(72)  
Landstinget i Norrbotten et. al, Vägvisaren, p. 12

(73)  
Marklund, Kari: Viktigt att förvalta Norrbottens sociala kapital. NSD, 01-12-12

(74)  
Gidlund, J.: Regionalisering och demokratisk legitimitet, p. 19

(75)  
Keating, M.: The New Regionalism in Western Europe, p. 144

(76)  
ibid., p. 146

(77)  
e.g. Gren, The new regionalism in the EU, p. 83

(78)  
e.g. ibid., p. 74

(79)  
e.g. ibid., p. 76

(80)  
Chaberts, Jos: Anförande vid ordförandeskapets konferens “Kommuner och regioner i ett växande EU” (01-04-02)

## 7 Conclusion

The notion that the “new” regionalism should be different from the “old” through its lack of ethno-culturalist elements is defective. As my study shows, the essentialist features within the “new development paradigm” are considerable. Culture and identity have not been abandoned by the new regionalism. Rather, these features have become fetishes with a central position within the neo-regionalist policy.

According to the neo-regionalist logic, common geographical origin is a reason for solidarity. Internal opposition and diversity are neglected and even counteracted due to the eagerness to bring out a common identity. The ambition to institutionalize a notion of commonality works to exclude those who fail to live up to the professed commonality.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the celebration of similarity reinforces significant differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, locality, and race.

Conceptualizing the region as a base for a common identity is problematic for several reasons. The idea that there is something like a regional mentality – regardless if it is best characterized as whining or generous or stable – can easily be compared to 19th century notions of solid national characteristics. These notions have – for good reason – been the target of severe criticism. Furthermore, collective identities imply a common frame of reference, a shared experience that unites the group inwards and distinguishes it from what is outside. However, the social stratification within the region and the society as a whole, makes it likely that different groups and individuals experience their region in different ways. In the peripheral regions mentioned, large-scale unemployment draws a sharp line between those who are experiencing the region as a labour market and those who are excluded from the very same market. Immigration – national or international – means that there are individuals in these regions who cannot find their “cultural roots” there. Since the region is offering different opportunities for different groups and interests, the “regional experience” is not the same for all of its inhabitants.

The call for strengthening regional identity and culture can be analysed through Gerald Graff’s writings on “the Common Culture Paradox”. A common culture would simply be lived and if the culture or the identity

really were common, there would be no use in arguing for it.<sup>82</sup> By asking whose common culture or identity we are talking about, whom “we” and “our” are in this matter, Graff points out the excluding mechanisms in a policy that stresses commonalities related to culture or identity. Every construction of a collective “we” is based on inclusion of those who fulfil the requirements of the group, and exclusion of those that are not seen as suitable as members of the same group.

The requirements for belonging to a national community are often criticized for being narrow and exclusive. According to Stuart Hall, one must “look, think and believe” national, in order to be included in the national community.<sup>83</sup> But if the definition of a national identity is narrow and exclusive in relation to a great part of a nation’s inhabitants, the image of a regional identity might very well be even narrower. In that sense, the strategy of achieving regional development through regional identity policy, comes with some rarely examined implications of exclusion. When asking what it means to be a Norbothnian we will find out that it is an arbitrary category. Theoretically, “the Norbothnians” could be every resident in the County. Yet, the cultural romanticism in the regional rhetoric disregards that. The stereotype image of the Norbothnian is excluding those who does not fit into the template of the right kind of exoticism, the right kind of origin or the right kind of mentality. This is nothing but logical. Without exclusion, there would be neither stereotype nor image or identity.

Irrespective of what success European neo-regionalists will have in increasing the regional awareness among the citizens, regions are already vital parts of the European political landscape. Hence neo-regionalism, as the leading ideological compass in this terrain, needs to be scrutinized from several perspectives. The neo-regionalist policy is an ardent advocate of cultural exclusion and of a consensus policy adjusted to the needs of the market. The idea of regional unity – i.e. the stressing of an assumed cultural similarity and of political concord – does not only evoke differences and excluding stereotypes, it puts fundamental democratic ideals into question. All this makes me draw the conclusion that neo-regionalist ideology is ill-equipped to handle ethnic relations and problems of social marginalization, so prevalent in contemporary Europe.

(81)  
Verdery, Katherine: Whither “Nation” and “Nationalism”. In: Mapping the Nation. Ed.: Balakrishnan, G. – London, New York 1996, p. 231

(82)  
Graff, Gerald: Reason and Common Culture. In: Culture and Anarchy. Ed.: Lipman, S. – New Haven, London 1994, p. 192

(83)  
Hall, Stuart: Rasism som diskurs. Häftan för kritiska studier, – Stockholm 1993, p. 10