Towards a more open Regional Science: a behavioural approach

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Abstract
The regional scientist, like all researchers in social and economic sciences, finds himself faced with a complex world where he has to find order in the chaos. Regional scientists in this new scientific world can use behavioural approaches to understand regions, not only as rational economic places, but as social places with their history, culture and lifestyle. This paper studies the foundations of a behavioural approach in regional science, to advance our understanding of cultural regions, and the way they are organized and valued by the local people. Lived regions are mirrors of our societies, and before planning any action in space and time, regional scientists have to understand the way people live and work in their places.

1. Human dimensions in regional science

Since its foundation in the fifties, the field of regional science has been on the move, which is normal for a new evolving field. Following an initial period of mathematical modelling and pure regional economics, contemporary regional science is increasingly dealing with the real world and its complex social, economic and environmental problems. Regional science had a tendency to emphasize economic processes at the expense of the relative exclusion of social and human dimensions: "people tend to be treated as inanimate objects, rather than as beings capable of thoughts, feelings" (Bailly, Coffey, 1994, p. 6) with their irrational perceptions and behaviour.

This essay, voluntarily short to deal in a clear way with the substance of regional science, represents a personal exploration of the behavioural evolution in the field, using basic and fundamental social sciences quotations. The issues involved are sufficiently important to contribute to the growing debate about the role of human dimensions in regional science especially in non occidental countries, where researches deal with a strong local culture. This lack of human perspective has been an issue for the past three decades: from Hägerstrand's famous sentence, "regional science is about people" (1989) not just about locations, to the proposal by Thomas (1977) to substitute the term "space-society" to "space-economy". Thus I consider, as Jensen (1991), regional science to be not just a science of space, but a science of human practices in space, including mental representation of space.

2. Subjectivity and complexity

The overall effects of exposure to the diverse influence of society and their cultures have to be considered by regional science. I propose the emphasis should be placed on three major elements:

— the society and its environment and its physical and human components, as experienced by people through their learning processes and lives
— societal ideologies, giving meanings to places and the sense of place, as felt by people
— the components of mental images, linked to culture, social status and individual character-

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istics.

Without these three elements, well studied by constructionist researches (Bailey and Stough, 2008) we cannot understand the search for regional well-being and quality of life. Convergence studies can show the gaps in regional development but not the feeling "good or bad" of the populations. Quality of life is not a fixed concept but a progressive construct built through learning processes. A region carries symbolic meanings, societal, cultural, and environmental; regions are defined by society and its dominant ideologies, leading to a feeling of good or bad quality of life, different from place to place, and from time to time.

The regional scientist, like all researchers in the social sciences, finds himself faced with a complex world. Should he want to find order in the chaos, he will have to accept four precepts: subjectivity, complexity, probability and ideology instead of rationality, simplicity, causality and positivism. A region is an existential place with subjective connotations, such as topophilia and topophobia. It is not a collection of empirically observable objects and events, but rather is the repository of meaning. Human beings are regional actors and places are their living life space. This pluridisciplinary approach, integrating human geography, behavioural sciences and sociology, gives regional science its true function, to be able to overlap and integrate these different fields to understand better the regional worlds.

For example the study of movement in a region cannot be reduced to the geometrical relationship between two sets of points, it has to include topological concepts such as separation-association, order-position-connectedness, and the representation of landmarks. Every mental space is organized in accordance with three aspects: structural, functional and symbolic. The structural aspect, highlighted by Lynch (1960), allows us to grasp the way in which environmental structures are used by people in their spatial practices. The functional aspect deals with the space-time constraint, accessibility and activities of places. The symbolic aspect, often forgotten, reveals spatial representations and the relations between humankind, society and place. This threefold distinction allows us to consider a region as a mirror of our societies, with its positive locations, its landmarks, and its values. Each region thus exists with its functional properties (activities, buildings), its symbolic properties (valued environments) and temporal properties (historical and projective). The integration of these properties allows regional scientists not only to do regional studies, but by adding valued environments, to do a global sensile, we could say humanistic, regional science.

3. A "bottom up" regional science

Regional science has to deal with these three properties and reconstruct them the feelings and desires of local people, as opposed to the technocratic-fundamentalist approach promoting top down regional development imposed by planning and regional studies. This bottom up conception of regional science allows us to discover, with the local people, new worlds of values and meanings. The analysis of the existential foundations of our regions truly deserves to be called "space-society regional science", able to deal in a new way with urban, environmental, transportation and regional convergence studies.

By working with the people, we can see that our relationship with the region has changed. Before it was local-local; now it is local-global-local. Globalisation made us discover another form of citizenship, in a global world that can be viewed through satellite pictures, a world considering global
problems such as sustainable development. By contrast, the regional perspective is often historical and egocentric, showing the difficulty of maintaining regional values in a global world. Bottom up and experimental researches can be used to study, at the regional level, the evolution of values and to integrate them in regional development studies. To do this regional scientists have to work closer with psychologist and human geographers.

Regional science can no longer be content with a regionally oriented vision. Globalisation and regionalisation are terms of a new dialectic between the general and the specific. Regions belong to a world system with new forms of independence and new rules. But just as this world system has earned its place, demands from people are being made for regional ideologies, drawing inspiration from the regional history and culture. The forging of regional political movements has coincided with the growing power of the world system. There is a high demand for regional citizenship, systems, and for new governance at the local level. This is a new challenge for regional science, as for political science, to build new rules of governance and power, based on regional citizenship, democracy, and culture to avoid the growth of fundamentalism and local dictactorships. With the 2011 “Arab spring” and the social movements in southern Europe, this challenge becomes urgent.

4. Towards a more open regional science

But what is a region? Which spatial pattern should be given preference, and on what scale? The local region, the state, or the continents? New modes of global regulation are emerging, but so are new regional structures. The question of intraregional spatial divisions, and of their geopolitical implications, should be raised by regional scientists. Our primary object of analysis is human behaviour in the regional context. Regional science must be aware of a broad range of human phenomena and processes: economic, cultural, and environmental. Political, social, and psychological factors should also be included in a pluridisciplinary perspective. A more open regional science needs a behavioural form of analysis, such as the study of mental representations.

Another question should be raised: how can regional science include ethical dimensions to be able to evaluate its past proposals and to propose new ones for private and public actions? Regional science values were mainly implicit in its first years, but these values (moral and ethical principles) were linked to the positivist concept of “rational man” used to plan “rational spaces”. Normative models derived for a rational planning, are often outside cultural practices, and are more and more rejected by local populations. All top down models are often seen as hostile by the inhabitants, as we can see in the case of Greece or Portugal and in countries hit by the the Global Financial Crisis.

To quote L. King’s famous paper (1996) “Alternative to a Positive Economic Geography”, the quantitative revolution changed mainly research techniques, but did little to deal with the prevailing value systems, societal, political and cultural. To offer contributions relevant for spatial policies, regional science need to consider social values and societal goals. In 2012 these values are linked to spatial justice, sustainable development, and participative democracy involving all actors. These three values should be central in the new practices of regional science, for a territorial planning integrating people, place prosperity and well-being. For more than 40 years indicators of subjective and objective well being were being developed by research institutes and governments, but as we have shown already in 1981 (Bailly), they are not used for humanistic regional development policies. Regional science, as an interdisciplinary field, should be able to integrate these qualitative and quantitative datas, to look for the people well-being as its research scope in regions.
In making these comments, we are not advocating the abandonment of traditional regional science, but the development of a more open one, influenced by social, behavioural, and cultural approaches. With these fields, we can contribute to a higher regional quality of life for the people and be part of the sciences proposing methods to deal with the Global Financial Crisis at the regional level and the sustainability of regional development.

References