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Regional Politics:
On Region,
Nation,
and Regionalization

abstract This paper takes up the conceptualization of region introduced by Imre Szeman in his 2018 article “On the Politics of Region” to consider longstanding tensions between different regions in the Netherlands. While Szeman’s conception opens up new ways of looking at regions, this paper argues that it introduces too

stringent oppositions between nation and region, positing the former as artificial and the latter as natural. Considering the case of the Netherland's 'Green Heart' region through Szeman's region concept, and analyzing how regions are constituted, or what Pierre Bélanger calls regionalization, this paper moves away from an opposition between nation and region.

Ever since the first steps towards a Dutch state were taken in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there has been a tension in the country between the state, claiming to represent the interests of the entire population, and the different, sometimes conflicting, regional interests. Central to this debate has always been an opposition between the richer and more densely populated west, which also houses the national government in The Hague, and the rest of the country. In the seventeenth century, this was figured as a clash between the rich and powerful western province of Holland and the other provinces, who feared that Holland was too dominant in national politics. Today

this opposition can be found along somewhat similar lines in the opposition between the metropolitan west of the country, called the Randstad,⁽¹⁾ and the rest of the country, often simply gathered under the name the *Regio* (region). The problem, so the inhabitants of the Regio are said to argue, is that while the national government in The Hague claims to represent the entire country, they are too narrowly concerned with issues facing the Randstad and thus ignore the "normal, hardworking Dutchmen and women" in the Regio.

In his 2018 article "On the Politics of Region," Canadian energy humanities scholar Imre Szeman detects a similar indifference in North American city-dwellers towards not only the extraction zones that provide the energy for their modern lives, but also, if not more so, to the areas those resources have to traverse. To characterize these areas, Szeman introduces a new conceptualization of region. He argues that it is critical that we start to understand regions, as it is here that the effects of contemporary technologies, energy infrastructures and the forms of governmentality that support them are most acutely felt.

In this paper, I will argue that while Szeman's conceptualization of the region provides a productive



(1) The Randstad translates as edge-city or rim-city and includes the four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht, and their surrounding areas.

new concept, the binary opposition he creates between region and nation, in which he figures the region as “organic” and the nation as an artificial construct indifferent to regions, is too stringent. I will argue not only that the nation and region are deeply entwined with one another, but that regions too are founded in part on a logic of inclusion and exclusion that Szeman exclusively ascribes to the nation. However, Szeman’s argument for moving away from a focus on either the national or the global towards a greater attention to the region is valuable. How might we move towards a politics of the region that, while being attuned to the “full range of relationships that exist in any geography” (Szeman), still gives an account of the relations and conflicts that are proper to it?

To answer this question, I will first work through Szeman’s conceptualization of region in relation to the case of the Randstad/ Regio opposition. After that, I will focus on the Green Heart, an area in the Netherlands that is not easily characterised as belonging to either the Randstad or the Regio, and one that might therefore help us think beyond Szeman’s conceptualization of region by drawing attention to the ways in which particular regions are constituted.

The Politics of Region

Giving an exhaustive account of Szeman’s concept of region is difficult, if not impossible, as anything from the Middle East — with its complex political, religious, and

military conflicts — to the northern habitats of the moose might fit this description. This expansive definition is due to the fact that the in-betweenness of a region is not just a matter of its being in between two other geographical locations, it is also a matter of scale, with region being located between the local and the global. For Szeman, this indistinctness is exactly the point. The power of the concept lies in its insistence that every time we study a particular region, we need to be cognizant of what the appropriate scale is. That is, we need to start looking beyond the grid-like predetermined borders and localities imposed by nation-states.

It is the nation that Szeman opposes the region to throughout his article. He argues that nations — with their abstract apparatuses of state power such as the law, police, military, and borders — divide the world amongst each other with little regard for the landscapes and peoples they separate. While they divide externally, nations homogenize internally with equal abandon, reducing the many identities within their borders to a national identity and all languages to a national language. The nation is made internally consistent. Anything that is left of otherness has to conform to internal divisions between formalized legal entities like municipalities and provinces. In terms of the law, the nation provides this homogenization in the form of citizenship, which promises equal rights and opportunities to those

who share it, even though the benefits of that citizenship might be extremely unevenly distributed. Here, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that Szeman ascribes to the nation appear: the inhabitants of a country are united by their citizenship and thus divided from the citizens of other countries who thus become their constitutive others.

What characterizes region, on the other hand, is the grouping together of certain non-human and/or human actors by way of specific resemblances and relations and their connection to their local environment. As Szeman writes: “every region can be seen as a type of ecology — an environment [...] the subjects that animate it, [...] and the relation between these two.” A region is therefore always a region *of* something; there is always a subject animating it and giving it a particular character, be it a religious community or a type of forest. As a result, regions are never the singular occupant of a given stretch of land. They overlap and interact with other kinds of regions.

Real and Imposed

Szeman also singles out a type of area that we might colloquially call region but that he insists are “regions in name only.” These areas include the territories environmentally ravaged by global capitalism: areas of pollution, monocultural agriculture, and commodity frontiers. It is remarkable that Szeman calls out these

areas in particular. One of his main motivations for championing this concept of region, is to pay attention to the natural environment in the face of a nation that is indifferent to it. Why then exclude those areas that have been ravaged most by this indifference?

Szeman thus opposes the abstract ideas of national identity and belonging imposed by the nation to, what he thinks are, the multiple, complex, and organic identities of region. Even though these “toxic ecologies” could be described as regions animated by the characteristic of “being polluted,” Szeman’s insistence that they are regions in name only suggests any “true” region for him can only be constituted by dynamics internal to it, or one that is non-human in nature. While he does not explicitly argue that regions are somehow more organically constituted, this undercurrent seeps through in other parts of his article as well. The following quote serves as an illustrative example:

Nations and cities do not seem to pay attention to the demands that multiple ecologies make on them. Regions, on the other hand, are deeply attuned to the realities of the shifting ideas and realities of being there — including the *there* of nations and cities — and spill over and beyond all established political borders (Szeman)

The region is real, what is actually happening on the ground. The nation is an abstract ideal imposed for so long that it now appears to be real even though it is blind to the “demands multiple ecologies make on” it (Szeman). This is why, for Szeman, an attention to region has the power to complicate the sharply demarcated grids in which different nations, provinces, and municipalities are all neatly separated and categorized: the complexity of the region remains outside of the imposed consistency of the nation. The region has the capacity to “rub raw the self-certainties of modern state formations” by showing the realities underneath their imposed abstractions (Szeman).

Randstad and the Regio

When we first consider Szeman’s conceptualization of the region in relation to the Dutch opposition between the Randstad and the Regio, it does indeed seem that an attention to region disturbs the nation’s promise of equality for all citizens within its domain, as the benefits of citizenship are unequally distributed across the nation. For instance, the Dutch national government under Prime Minister Mark Rutte has in recent years shifted public investment from the paradigm of “a distribution of justice” (Fiege, Gosselt and Linders 31) that is, investing public funds in economically or otherwise marginalized or underdeveloped regions, to a model of investing in top sectors, or those areas that

are already highly lucrative and making them even more so. These top sectors are usually concentrated in the Randstad, leading to the neglect of the Regio. “Regions speak the lie of nations,” Szeman rightly argues, as they draw attention to the differences in wealth opportunity, state violence, and more across the multiple regions within a nation.

However, I want to argue, unlike Szeman, that in response to the disparate treatment of regions by nations, regional identities may form or strengthen. If citizenship is an attempt to mask the inequalities within the nation, it has failed miserably, at least here in the Netherlands. While the national government may seem increasingly oblivious to the needs of its regions, people in the regions are acutely aware of this indifference. Fiege, Gosselt, and Linders found as much in a series of interviews with civil servants and other officials throughout the country. One respondent remarked that national ministries are “places where ‘civil servants are dedicated to Randstad-interests’” (Fiege et al. 32). Another mentioned that: “[f]iles from outside the Randstad get less priority [...] The ‘The Hague arena’ keeps the door closed” (32). In response to the national government’s narrow concern with the Randstad, regional authorities increasingly work with other regions, both those within the Netherlands and their direct neighbors in Germany and Belgium.

What we see here is a regional identity taking shape in response to a nation's actions. While, as parliamentary historian Diederik Smit has argued, regional tensions appeared to diminish in importance in the second half of the 20th century, they have regained their prominence in Dutch politics over the past few decades. Now that the national government has moved away from the previous paradigm of justice, those in the Regio, whether public official or pundit, seem suspicious of what comes out of the Randstad. Whilst the neoliberal top sector policy may not seem to be ideologically connected to progressive cultural reforms — such as the movement against the racist tradition of *Zwarte Piet* — for people in the Regio, they both signal a seeming lack of concern in the Randstad for the needs and wants of the inhabitants of the Regio. Regional identities are thus not, as Szeman argues, necessarily opposed to national identities. In fact, they are implicated in a discussion over what that national identity should mean and who is deserving of the attention of a government that claims to represent all. Rather than arguing that the region is something the nation imposes itself on and masks, might it not be more fruitful to also consider nation and region as two separate but interacting ways of understanding the relationship between space and belonging? To explore this question further, the final section of this paper will consider a region in the Netherlands that fits neither in the Randstad nor in the rest of the Regio: *Het Groene Hart*.

The Green Heart

Het Groene Hart (the Green Heart) is a peculiar area in the middle of the densely populated Randstad. The Randstad is named as such as it encircles the Green Heart. The Green Heart, in turn, gets its name from being the more rural center of the Randstad. Neither has very clearly established borders, nor do they conform to formal administrative regions like provinces, instead stretching across North Holland, South Holland, Utrecht, and, in some definitions of the Randstad, the westernmost part of Flevoland, thus including Almere, a large commuter city that is part of Amsterdam's metropolitan area.

Historically an area of peatlands, much of the Green Heart's landscape is marked by its being harvested over the centuries. Many lakes formed as a result of these peat harvests and, as they threatened nearby villages and cities with flooding, a large number of them were turned into polders — although some of them, like the *Vinkeveense* and *Nieuwkoopse plassen*, still remain. The resulting polder landscapes and the patterns of allotment specific to the region give the Green Heart a distinctive character, both in appearance and in the type of flora and fauna that can be found there.

If we were to follow Szeman's conceptualization of region here, it would be easy to characterize the Green Heart as a "proper" region, or even as multiple overlapping regions. We find an area with imprecise

boundaries, typified by a particular type of geography, flora, fauna, and local identity. However, if we were to go back in time before the Second World War and ask “an arbitrary passer-by the way to the Green Heart, s/he would probably have answered by meaninglessly shrugging his/her shoulders” (Klooster et al.). That is because the landscape and the sense of regional identity in the area are the result of government planning from the 1950s onwards.

The term ‘Green Heart’ first appeared in a 1958 policy report by Z.Y. van der Meer, in which it was argued that the green center of the Randstad should be preserved as an area for agriculture and recreation. The first formal regulations for the region were put in place in 1960, restricting the building of everything from greenhouses to residential zones. This alone did not result in a strong sense of regional identity, but, as environmental concerns entered mainstream public debates in the 1970s, the inhabitants of the Green Heart increasingly came to see their region as opposed to the polluted and congested Randstad. The restrictions placed on construction in the Green Heart had given the area an even more distinct character from the developing urban area around it. Here again, we see the hegemonic Randstad region used a constitutive other in the formation of a regional identity. This budding regional identity was further bolstered by national and local governments, who started to address the inhabitants of

the region as “those from the Green Heart” and named a number of institutions in the region after the Green Heart, thereby discursively integrating the materiality of the Green Heart into the sense of self and lived experience of its inhabitants.

As Van ’t Klooster et al. argue, the regional identity of the Green Heart is thus partially one imposed by the national government but also the result of a community conceptualizing a difference between itself and the urban inhabitants of the Randstad. Rather than being an “organic” identity opposed to a false identity imposed by the Dutch state, the Green Heart is a region that is the result of material and discursive interventions by the Dutch state and the inhabitants’ adoption and internalization of these efforts.

Regionalization

Rather than only paying attention to the region as such then, it seems that it is also important to consider the way a region emerges, that is, we need to pay attention to what landscape architect Pierre Bélanger calls regionalization. For Bélanger, regionalization is “an operative term that designates the geographic, economic, and ecological process of characterizing and forming regions according to overlapping geopolitical and biophysical boundaries” (368). In other words, regionalization is both an epistemic and ontological process: it ties together a region through practical

interventions by private and public actors in their natural and built landscapes as well as through an increased awareness of the impact of those interventions beyond their immediate context.

Contrary to Szeman's account, the increasing recognition of the region as such — that is, regionalization — goes hand in hand with increasing formal intervention in those areas. This suggests that the region as such is not so much opposed to the abstract logic of the state as it is a nexus of economic, political, geological, and ecological forces. As Bélanger writes:

The deterritorialization of the state/system dichotomy thus opens a lens on urban regions that enters into contemporary society, no longer as subdivision, container, or “territory” [...], but as landscape which “challenges the entrenched geographical assumptions of mainstream approaches to state space (Bélanger 421).⁽²⁾

Following Bélanger's conceptualization of regionalization might allow us to move beyond Szeman's dichotomy between nation and region. If the region is figured as being internally complex instead of being situated within

an overlapping complex of other regions in which the state tries to intervene, the nation is itself an element of a region. The Green Heart is not multiple regions animated by single characteristics such as the peat soil, a “rural character,” or a specific identity. All of these characteristics are intimately connected and cannot easily be separated: in fact, they give rise, and form, in response to one another. An attention to regionalization can thus “cast light on the network of endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) processes at work” in a region (Bélanger 421).

Following Bélanger we can also include those areas ravaged by global capitalism, mentioned earlier, in our consideration of region. Rather than denying its character as a region, we might consider how, for example, a polluted area can give rise to new connections between inhabitants, who then mobilize to transform their region into a more habitable place, all the while still tracking the devastating impact industries have on such ecologies. A more inclusive concept of the region would allow for an analysis that tracks the devastating impact of such industries on the wider region, not as something that is somehow alien to it, but as something that is inherent to it and that has to be managed if we are to create a livable region.



(2) Bélanger is quoting from Neil Brenner et al., “Introduction: State Space in Question,” *State/Space*, Blackwell, 2003.

Conclusion

Regions speak the lie of nations by drawing attention to the unequal distribution of capital and opportunities, as well as to the awkwardness of their imposed borders. However, regional identities and characteristics can at the same time be the result of national policies. Injustice may give rise to communities fighting for their rights; environmental regulations may change the material character of a region. Regions and nations are deeply caught up in one another. To parse out this entanglement of region and nation, we must pay attention to the process of regionalization — that is, an attention to the historical, political, and material forces that interacted to give shape to a particular region. Only in this way will we be able to move towards an analysis and politics of region that, while being attuned to the “full range of relationships that exist in any geography” (Szeman), still gives an account of the relations and conflicts that are proper to it.

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