

Dietmar Rost, Erhardt Stölting, Tomasz Zarycki, Paolo Pasi, Ivan Pedrazzini, Anna Tucholska, *New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism. Case studies from Poland, Italy and Germany*. Hamburg–London, Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, 2007, pp. 552; vol. 39, series *Region—Nation—Europa*. ISBN 978-3-8258-9656-0

Keywords: strategic essentialism, regional identity, collective identity, regionalism, regionalisation.

This collective work, is a successive, 39th volume of the series *Region, Nation, Europa*, edited under the direction of Heinz Kleger from Potsdam University.¹ The object of this series, the authors point out, is to present the result of works on a—comprehensively approached—phenomenon of Europe, considered from various research standpoints, with the application of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research.

The starting point for analyses in *New Regional and Strategic Essentialism*² has been the question of collective identity, shown in relation to regional themes. The questions of identification with a nation, region or Europe were presented in earlier publications of the series³ but, as the Introduction points out, intensive discussions of the topics produced the determination to look at those from a new perspective. As the authors affirm, they have had two objects in mind.

First—to analyze chosen ways of the public application of collective identification in relation to regionalism and regionalisation. Second—to define the mutual influence of articulation of regional identifications and scientific discourse in Germany, Italy and Poland. In my opinion, these objects have been attained, though in a different way in each of the three cases.

The differences follow from the fact that the author of each part tried to adopt a different approach to the question of regional identity: from the perspective of differences in the understanding of this question in chosen regions (as in the case of Poland); addressing principally the diversity and the many ways of employing the

¹ Professor Heinz Kleger, a philosopher and social sciences researcher, is giving lectures on political theory in the socio-economic department of Potsdam University. Apart from *Region—Nation—Europa*, he is the publisher of the series *Europäische Urbanität—Politik der Städte*.

² The book is an upshot of research conducted in 2002–2003 within the international research project *New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism*, financed by the Volkswagen Foundation.

³ E.g. Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski, Viktoria Kaina, 2006. Hartmut Wagner, 2006.

question of identity in public life (as in the Italian case), and focusing on the analysis of an example when a policy promoting “open regionalism” proceeds from superior authority (as in the case of Brandenburg). The multiplicity of elements making up a regional identity, and the diversity of forms of regionalism are emphasized by the selection of topics addressed in each case study. In successive chapters, the researchers take up questions that are frequently unlike, specific to the issue of identity in each region, like relations between politics and science in the Italian case, or the role of politics on past history as in the case of Brandenburg. It needs to be mentioned that the authors of each case study adopted a similar empirical basis: documents produced by local authorities, public statements or interviews from well-known regional activists by research scholars, results of the work and activities of other researchers connected with a region, or information published by local media.

The idea of presenting the multifarious forms of regional identity is also set brought into relief by the construction of the book, in which more attention has been given to the analysis of each case studies, rather than to comparing them. In the introduction to the publication, written by Dietmar Rost and Erhardt Stöling, one will only find a relatively brief comparison of the manifestation of regional identities at region level, irrespective of their national status, and no such conclusions are set out at the end of the book.

Vital is also the manner of presentation of theoretical foundations that are the primary object of analyses described in the volume discussed. Noteworthy, the introduction only contains a brief presentation of the most important notions employed in the book, like region and regional identity, and the title strategic essentialism. The editor of the volume resorted to the surprising maneuver of offering a brief description of theoretical assumptions early on and discussing them in more amplitude only at the end of the volume, in Part IV. There will the reader also find a comprehensive analysis of discussions on the conception of essentialism. Given this book construction, the assumptions of the work that are the starting point and basis for analysis of cases, only emerge at the end of the book.

One should point out here that the key term of the work—strategic essentialism—has been defined twice, in the introduction and in Part IV, written by Dietmar Rost. Setting forth their conception of this notion, the authors make it clear that they have chiefly relied on works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Diana Fuss. The researchers emphasize strategic essentialism means to them ‘more than just a strategically considered identity.’

It is a strategic use of the idea or phenomenon of collective identity and the sense of separateness, designed to show the existence of a critical view on problems inseparable from ‘authentic’ identity (p. 11). They also accept the risk of the conscious use of a selected tactic when dealing with the idea of regional identity, regarding this as—occasionally—a necessary element in building identification with a given area.

Setting forth the theoretical foundations of their work, the authors also caution the reader that the notion of strategic essentialism applied in their research will be used as a heuristic conception. The adoption of this premise is expected to facilitate the presentation of the many ways and means in which regional identification in social world

can be articulated, emphasize the authors. The authors have certainly achieved this aim, in that important new topics of regional identity discussion have been pointed out.

The authors of *New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism* analysed three examples of discussions on regional identifications, which occurred or are still on in various parts of Europe: in Poland (Part I), East Germany (Part II) and Northern Italy (Part III). Under discussion have thus been areas which saw important administration change a few or more than a dozen years earlier (Poland and East Germany), or a region whose future, character and role in the changing reality are a topic of vital debates today (Northern Italy). Noteworthy, when emphasizing in the Introduction the multiple interpretations of the notion of region and dimensions of regional discourse, the researchers do focus on regions as definite areas forming concrete administrative territories within each state: voivodships in Poland, regions in Italy and a Land in Germany. But in their analyses they also take into account notions like Euro regions and interregional or interstate cooperation, and their impact on the way regional discourse is conducted.

Let me begin the presentation of case studies of Poland, considered in Part I. The authors of this part of the publication, Tomasz Zarycki and Anna Tucholska, are analyzing changes in the perception of regionalism and regional identity following the 1999 administration reform, in three new voivodships: Silesian (Śląskie), in south-west Poland, near the border with the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the neighbouring voivodships—Świętokrzyskie—in central Poland; and Warmińsko-Mazurskie, in the north, at the opposite end of Poland, bordering on Russia. Even the choice of two regions geographically close to each other, and a third so distant from them, is puzzling. The authors failed to substantiate it clearly enough.

Scrutinizing the descriptions of each voivodship one can only conjecture that specific examples have been chosen according to the ‘strength’ or ‘weakness’ of voivodships, gauged according to criteria like each region’s awareness of separateness, activities of regional organisations, or the importance and role of historical traditions in the regions (p. 44). And it follows from remarks in the Introduction that the authors’ emphatic intention was to show a ‘diversity of contexts and regional identity projects’ (p. 12). These arguments are hardly satisfactory. The strategy adopted in the Italy section with its analysis of two neighbouring regions, and in the Germany section focusing on just one land, Brandenburg, is clearly more lucid to the reader.

The first voivodship to be presented is Silesia, regarded by the authors as an example of a territory where regional identity is a priority. Silesia is depicted as a region with rich and longstanding traditions, a strong sense of the separateness of its culture, language and ethos, promoting the idea of Silesian nationality, but also trying to promote modern regionalism. As follows from research done by the authors, this region is a showcase for the strength and potential of regional organisations and social life actors struggling for regional identity in a unitary state. Those very elements provide the basis for subsequent conclusions that there is a ‘sturdy’ Silesian minority, the authors of Part I show.

Against this backdrop Świętokrzyskie Voivodship is shown as a region where the phenomenon of regional identity is only just surfacing. That voivodship, an heir to

Świętokrzyskie province (even though its borders do not precisely match with its predecessor's), is considered a successor to a region traditionally strongly attached to Polish polity and consequently labelled as 'one of the most Polish regions.' For all its historical traditions, identification of this territory with the region up to the 1998 administration reform was not, paradoxically, a priority to citizens of what is Świętokrzyskie voivodship today, argue the authors of Part I. It was only a changed map that made them discover own regional identity and trigger one of the most active movements for preservation of the voivodeship. The reform rekindled interest in ancient traditions of the region and prompted the need for new symbols to enhance Świętokrzyskie's uniqueness and distinctness. Also in this example, the authors come to the noteworthy conclusion that with the region being rather unobtrusive when compared to other voivodships, and with no politically independent intellectual elites or social actors active there (unlike in Warmińsko-Mazurskie or Silesia), regional identity is developing slowly, mainly promoted by regional leaders connected with political parties.

The regional identity of Warmińsko-Mazurskie citizens, which according to Part I can be defined as 'elitist,' is different from those mentioned above. Unlike in Świętokrzyskie Voivodship, where civic impulse, activated by local people of distinction connected with political parties, was crucial in discovering regional identity, in Warmińsko-Mazurskie this role was played by local intellectual elites cooperating with non-governmental organisations in most cases. It was they—in the opinion of Tomasz Zarycki and Anna Tucholska—that set themselves the task of building new regional identity in contemporary Warmińsko-Mazurskie citizens according to the idea of multiculturalism and reinterpretation of the communist past of a region that continued as part of Prussia's territory as long as the end of World War II. But as of today, these efforts are important to just a small group of intellectuals, an 'elite,' and fail to win major support of the present citizens of the region, who settled there only after 1945, the authors believe. According to the authors, this 'elitism' and the absence of a more impressive bulk of supporters to rally behind 'movements for the defence of the region' is the distinctive quality of Warmińsko-Mazurskie region.

Examining the Warmińsko-Mazurskie case, the authors write at some length about leaders of local authorities and about scientific institutions, with just occasional references to activities of political parties and their leaders, and to what connects local authorities and non-governmental organisations or the press. Prominent in an analysis of regional identity of Świętokrzyskie population, this aspect is mentioned here only sporadically. If presented in greater detail, it would make an interesting addition to topics under examination.

As far as Part I is concerned, the reader will certainly be interested to see—in a chapter on Poland—a new way of handling results of regional identity research by authors like: Bohdan Jałowiecki, Marek S. Szczepański, Tomasz Nawrocki (Silesian Voivodeship), Andrzej Kościółek (Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship), Hubert Orłowski, Andrzej Sakson and Robert Traba (Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship). Achievements and research results of Polish scientists have been used in *New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism* not only as references to earlier research but they

also constitute an essential part of regional discourse under analysis (p. 91 et al). The authors have thus not only achieved a major research object in that they defined interrelation between regional identity and scientific discourse in cases discussed, but they also pointed out the diverse roles of the world of science in building regional identity.

Comparing Part I with other chapters one will notice that regional discourse and the strength of regional identity as presented in studies on Polish voivodeships, are radically different from the examples of Italy and Germany. As seen from studies of all three cases, identification with a given region is strongly influenced not merely by political systems but also factors like history as well as ethnic, cultural and language dissimilarities.

Ways of building regional identities far more diversified than those pursued in Poland and Germany, are presented in Part II of the book, dealing with North-East Italy. The authors of this part of publication, Paolo Pasi and Ivan Pedrazzini, have focused on regional discourse conducted currently in three neighbouring territories: Trentino-South Tyrol, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto. As the scholars emphasize, the different role and strength of regional identities in those regions has been determined by the following factors: complicated history, the presence of language minorities, the nearness of State frontiers and socio-economic dissimilarities. Today, however, of utmost importance are activities of state and self-governing institutions, strongly boosting the identity of the region's citizens, in a marked contrast to the Polish case.

The first of above-mentioned regions, Trentino-South Tyrol, is described as a region with a very complex history, one in which dissimilarities between as many as four language groups (German, Italian, Ladin and Rhaetro-Romanic) have acquired crucial importance. And yet this region was a scene of positive change when ethnic-language were concluded in favour of cooperation based on cultural and language pluralism. The Trentino-South Tyrol example shows a mechanism of change in a region which through institutionalisation of relations between ethnic groups achieved a rapid economic growth to become not only a bridge connecting Italy and Austria, but also a tourist attraction engaged in close cooperation with neighbouring Tyrol, within Euro region.

The borderland region of Friuli Venezia Giulia is another example of the strategy of building regional identity. In this case, the basis for region identification was provided by the 1948 autonomy, designed to economically boost the region then bordering on Yugoslavia. At the turn of the century, when status of the region was at risk (it might have been changed) after its economic and political situation had improved, research workers observed an increased interest in the region's history and multiculturalism and many regional organisations coming to life. In this way autonomy became an autotelic value and a fundamental element of the Friuli Venezia Giulia regional identity.

In this context the Veneto region is presented as specific, with its status of 'ordinary' region in contrast to the other regions; also, no large minority groups live in its territory and it does not border on a foreign state. Here—argue the Italian authors—regional

identity has been based on popular culture, the language and local history, and the region itself is depicted as a combination of openness and respect for tradition. It is also as an example of how cultural and historical contexts and regional identity itself are used in political debate.

The authors of this part of the book take the Veneto case as a starting point to show two ways in which the phenomenon of regional identity, as exemplified by organisation North League (Lega Nord) and the Nord Est project, can be put into practice. The North League is presented as a political movement in progress, promoting its Padania project based primarily on socio-economic criteria; an alternative Nord Est project is shown as a proposal of research institutes, businessmen and media, emphasizing the regional identity potential in promoting and reshaping of the region's image. Both examples show how differently can the phenomenon of regional identity be interpreted and in how dissimilar areas of social life can it be applied.

Another approach to regional identity, different from the cases of Poland and Italy, was adopted by Dietmar Rost, the author of *Part III of New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism*; he presents the question of regional identity in reference to just one federal province of Germany, Brandenburg, in the east of the country, near the Polish border and surrounding the capital Land of Berlin. As in the Polish case, an event of key importance to the region served as a starting point for further considerations—the emergence of the Land, in 1990, after the GDR's incorporation into the FRG. The instance of Brandenburg helps follow many aspects of regional discourse held in Germany today and shows how regional identity is built in practice, Dietmar Rost says. Just like in Italy, relations with an ethnic and language minority (here—with the Sorbs) were crucial to regional identity in the making, but economic and demographic crisis, relations with neighbouring Berlin and Poland as well as policies on past history did play a role. Considerably more space than in Part I and II of the book has been given here to analysis of school curriculum and textbooks, media role and activities, discussion of the region's history, activity of cultural and scientific institutions and debate on the Land's past (in particular the role, place and significance of Prussian heritage).

A subsection with its description of xenophobia and the Land combating this plus a fairly extensive analysis of Polish-German cooperation projects within Euro region, introduces a new element of study to the book—it was not handled in earlier Parts. In these two instances, the author shows the advantages of the Land's policy of directives from above (in policies regarding Poland) and what problems if not outright opposition (occasionally) from e.g. rightist organisations are faced by authorities promoting overt regionalism via such directives.

In comparison to above-mentioned examples of Italy and Poland, the Brandenburg chapter dedicates the most space to the role of social sciences and scientists in debate on regional identity. Part III also shows how critical of committing the world of science to such projects are scientists themselves and the whole public sphere, and what

consequences are to be expected from academics' involvement in regional identity projects.

These studies: Italian, Polish and German are followed by Part IV, in which Dietmar Rost presents chosen approaches of social sciences to collective identity, and by discussion of theoretical assumptions of constructionism, essentialism and strategic essentialism. It is also an analysis of theoretical assumptions of researches and discussions that provide the basis for the book reviewed.

Dietmar Rost considers the essentialism-constructionism opposition of key importance to discussion on collective identity. Essentialism is seen here as a conception that regards collective identity as an 'authentic' and natural phenomenon, a constant and inseparable element that cements a community; essentialism enables it to legitimise its dissimilitude and is a mobilising factor. As regards constructionism (also called constructivism or anti-essentialism), it is presented here as an approach whose primary object is to indicate mechanisms and models in construction of collective identity, a phenomenon which is 'artificial' and incidental. The combination of both theoretical approaches is intended to point out the potential and limitations consequent on the application of the two conceptions in collective identity research and in social practice. It is also an attempt to offer an alternative—strategic essentialism as a conception that embodies chosen elements of both approaches and points at possibilities of shaping an 'authentic' collective identity in a conscious way; an attempt complete with conclusions regarding results of practical adoption of this theoretical approach.

The book under review and the researchers' conclusions should be regarded as an important voice in discussion on conceptualisation of the collective identity phenomenon, particularly for its impressive theoretical framework of strategic essentialism. It is noteworthy that the authors are aware of limitations of theoretical assumptions adopted. They show e.g. the dangers of using the phenomenon of regional identity for political purposes, or the risks of practical application, in social life, of findings from the study of regional identity in the strategic essentialism approach. Having considered these case studies one should observe that the question of identity, defined not always as regional but e.g. as local or collective, has already been analysed before in a similar way or a similar perspective. Nevertheless, due to the prominence given to the multidimensional quality of identity built in relation to a concrete territory and to the emphasis laid on the role of context in study of the notions of regionalism and identity of key importance here, supported with topical examples from various European counties, they are among the most interesting subjects addressed in *New Regional Identities and Strategic Essentialism*.

This brief presentation of chosen questions handled in *New Regional Strategies and Strategic Essentialism* does not reflect all of the many aspects of this extensive work, but only gives some idea of its contents. The diverse variants of identity discourse should be nevertheless regarded as inspiration for further research, a contribution to discussion on theoretical assumptions of similar projects.

References

- Karolewski, I. P., Kaina, V. 2006. *European Identity—Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Insights*. Hamburg–London, Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, vol. 36, series *Region—Nation—Europa*.
- Wagner, H. 2006. *Bezugspunkte europäischer Identität—Territorium, Geschichte, Sprache, Werte, Symbole, Öffentlichkeit—Worauf kann sich das Wir-Gefühl beziehen?*. Hamburg–London–Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, vol. 40, series *Region—Nation—Europa*.

Marta Karkowska
Graduale School for Social Research
e-mail: m-karkowska@wp.pl