THEORIZING REGION: 
LINKS TO ETHNICITY, NATION, AND RACE

John D. Skrentny 
University of California-San Diego

Forthcoming in Sociological Theory

ABSTRACT

The concept of “region” is widespread in the social sciences but rarely theorized. I argue here that region is a multivalent concept similar to ethnicity, nation, and race. Building on the work of Bourdieu, Brubaker, and Griswold, I show that all four concepts can be understood as both “categories of analysis” and “categories of practice.” Moreover, all four have fundamental similarities regarding 1) ontology and relation to space; 2) historical sequences and relation to time; and 3) protean boundaries that may change with social scientists’ research questions. Among the payoffs to this approach can be improved precision and appropriateness of regional boundaries when social scientists use regions as independent or control variables, and greater appreciation for how regions, as categories of practice, are made over time.
THEORIZING REGION:
LINKS TO ETHNICITY, NATION, AND RACE

INTRODUCTION

Given the work that the concept of “region” does in sociology and other social sciences, it remains undertheorized and “a theoretical lacuna” (Mann and Riley 2006:87). This is a problem because lack of attention to the meaning of regularly-used concepts may lead to imprecision in study results. If scholars use “region” in a vague or unspecified manner—whether it be for case selection, as an independent, control, or dependent variable, or even as a simple descriptive for social action--then the interpretation of any findings may be problematic.

Inspired by Swedberg’s (2017:196) implicit call for research on the “nature of concepts and how these should be used in actual research,” I argue here that we can develop the region concept if we do not analyze it in isolation (which may imply it is unique), but instead compare it to three other concepts—ethnicity, nation, and race. More specifically, I argue that region, like ethnicity, nation, and race, is a multivalent concept. I focus on two meanings here: “Region” is both a folk category that people use in the social world (including as an administrative category in formal institutions), but also an analytical category that social scientists use to understand the social world. Put another way, region is a category of practice and a category of analysis (Bourdieu 1987; 1991), and exploring both can yield important insights into the meaning and

---

1 This research has benefited from audience comments at Cornell University, Harvard University, Stanford University, UCLA, and the University of Michigan, as well as support or suggestions from Bart Bonikowski, Rogers Brubaker, David Fitzgerald, Paul Frymer, Francisco Javier Moreno Fuentes, Peter Goureivitch, Wendy Griswold, Jeff Haydu, Mara Loveman, Juan Diez Medrano, Tom Medvetz, Natalie Novick, Juan-Pablo Pardo-Guerra, Minh Phan-Ho, Jeff Sallaz, Karina Shklyan, Mitchell Stevens, Kristin Surak, and reviewers for this journal.
utility of the region concept. By comparing region with ethnicity, nation, and race, we see how all are concepts that categorize people.

In the pages that follow, I first briefly explore how social scientists have used and defined region, focusing on use of region in general interest sociology journals and the work of cultural sociologist Wendy Griswold. Second, I show what it means to say that region is a multivalent concept by exploring the related concepts of ethnicity, nation, and race primarily through the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Rogers Brubaker. Third, I look more deeply into the nature of the region concept, and show similarities with ethnicity, nation, and race on three key dimensions: the lack of ontological status to the “group” of people denoted by the concept and their relationship to space; the centrality of time and historical sequences to category coherence; and the ways all four concepts have protean boundaries that may change with social scientists’ research questions. I close with takeaways for social science theory and methods, and key areas for an agenda for the theoretical exploration of regions.

WHAT DO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS MEAN WHEN THEY USE “REGION” IN RESEARCH? Social scientists have commonly deployed the region concept since the founding of the field of sociology. Outside of the field of human geography, however, sustained attention to what regions are—even simple definitions-- and how they matter are very rare.

The word “region” comes from the Latin, regio (meaning “direction” or “district”), by way of the Old French regere, which meant “to govern” (Cooke and Leydesdorff 2006). However, most contemporary social science uses of region distinguish the concept from legal jurisdictions that have their own governments (e.g., cities, provinces, countries). The people social scientists understand to be in a region may have some formal, institutionalized
organization, but in contemporary social science, whether in sub-national or supra-national classifications, they will rarely participate in a full set of governing structures with a monopoly on the legitimate uses of force, systems for taxation, social security, etc.

This understanding can be seen in the earliest uses of the region concept in sociology. For example, Weber contrasted West and East as regions (or Occident and Orient) when he sought to explain the rise of rationalism ([1930]2005), and regional strategies have been standard in social science research on modernization and development ever since (e.g., studies of the economic rise of East Asia; Vogel 1993). Studies of development in other social sciences, such as political science, use the region concept similarly, focusing on regions such as “East Asia,” “Eastern Europe,” and “Latin America” (Haggard and Kaufman 2008; Przeworski 1991). Social scientists also commonly invoke subnational regions in the study of politics—consider the longstanding interest in the American “South” (Key 1949) or metropolitan regions (Saxenian 1994). Less frequently, scholars examine regions through formalized institutions, especially for trade or security (see below).

It is difficult in a short space to comprehensively characterize how social scientists use the region concept, but it is possible to make some introductory generalizations about the field of sociology with examples. Though Sociological Theory has not published an exploration of the region concept, a review of the ways that region is used in sociology in the past three years, focusing on articles in leading, general-interest journals (American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology) and in the past few decades of Annual Review of Sociology, shows the most common use of the region concept is as a control or independent variable that authors do not define or explain. This approach is common in regression analyses (e.g., Flores

---

2 Hopcroft (2001) focuses on the “Theoretical Implications of Regional Effects” but does not define “region” or “regional effect.”
and Schachter 2018; Gorman and Seguin 2018; Wilmers 2017) and also interview studies (e.g., Childress and Nault 2018). Researchers may use “off-the-shelf” regional categorizations (i.e., constructed by others, such as the Census Bureau) as independent or control variables or to define comparative cases without interrogating what these particular boundaries might mean for the study (e.g., Logan et al. 2018; Horowitz 2018).

Standing out for an effort to explain regional boundaries is Parigi and Bergemann’s (2016) analysis of voting patterns. Though they do not define what they mean by the regions in their study, in a footnote they explain that they classified some non-Confederate states as nevertheless in the “South” because “prior to the war, they had more economic and cultural similarities with the South than with the North” (p. 517, n. 8). However, the authors do not explain what these similarities were, and why these mattered (and not others) in constituting regional membership.

The lack of justification and explanation for regional boundaries in these studies follows the strategy in articles in the Annual Review of Sociology, a journal devoted to defining the field’s central questions and state of knowledge, which has also avoided theoretical exploration of the region concept. This is true even when “region” would seem relevant to the topic. Logan’s (2012) searching inquiry into “spatial thinking in social science” uses the term “region” repeatedly without defining it. The same is true of Gieryn’s (2000) otherwise insightful review essay, playfully entitled “a space for place in sociology.” A review essay on “regional paths of development,” focusing on “four major third world regions,” lists “Latin America, East Asia, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa” (Gereffi and Fonda 1992:421). The study lists the countries included in each region only in a footnote to a table. The boundaries are thus described, but there is no explanation for inclusion and exclusion. For instance, “Sub-Saharan Africa refers to all
countries south of the Sahara except South Africa” and “East Asia refers to all the low- and middle-income economies of East & Southeast Asia and the Pacific, east of and including China and Thailand” (Gereffi and Fonda 1992:428, Table 1).

None of the preceding is intended as a critique of this research. That these authors do not define region is not surprising given that defining the concept is not as straightforward as common usage implies. A recent effort to explore the concept from the perspective of the sociology of development (Tickamyer and Patel-Campillo 2016) contains a section, “What Is a Region?” that does not define the term, instead showing a multiplicity of understandings, and arguing that the region of Appalachia “provides the quintessential example of virtually every aspect of what makes the term region so problematic” (p. 304).

While the region concept has mostly escaped sustained theoretical attention, there is important work by Wendy Griswold that explores region and related concepts from the perspective of cultural sociology. In her (2008) study of regional literatures and the reading public, Griswold goes far toward developing the concepts of space (emptiness, where things happen and “take place” [p. 5]); place (“human accomplishment,” “socially produced and socially productive” in that it can influence behaviors, thoughts and feelings; p. 4), and region. This last concept, in her view, is “less a geographic fact than a social convention” (p. 12) but has some “geographic specificity,” and is a way to categorize people who have something in common. “Regionalism” is a “recognized association between culture and place,” while a “regional culture” is enacted when people know the culture, produce it, and pass it down (p. 11). When passively shared, regional cultures are in a weak form, and when self-conscious, emotionally charged, and asserted as distinctive, they are in a strong form. Regional cultural objects, in Griswold’s view, become regional through local content, creator intentions, and/or
institutional processes (media or marketing forces framing cultural objects as regional). Notably, Griswold also compares region to other concepts, including ethnicity and nation (and also gender, religion, age, class and sexual orientation), asserting that they are all ways of categorizing people and useful because they provide to others information regarding what a person is like (Griswold 2008:12).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT REGION IS A MULTIVALENT CONCEPT?

Griswold has done much to develop the region concept in sociology, notably emphasizing the idea that region should be understood as a concept that people use to categorize themselves and others. The argument for the region concept’s multivalence, however, uses as a starting point the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Rogers Brubaker. Each in similar ways identified the multivalence of a series of related concepts, including ethnicity, nation, and race (e.g., Bourdieu 1987, 1991; Brubaker 2004; 2009; 2010).

Bourdieu’s contribution was, first, to draw attention to the importance of symbolic power to accomplish, through categorizations and other organizations of perceptions, the making of social worlds. In doing so, he also argued for a multivalent understanding of these categorizing concepts (Bourdieu 1987, 1991). Specifically, he saw a distinction between these practices as they occurred in everyday life—categories of practice or “folk categories,” which Griswold focused on-- and the ways social scientists used such categorizations in research. The social science approach is to use categories of analysis to understand the world, with no expectation that people in the world use the categories at all or in the same way.

Like Griswold, Bourdieu was also interested in how the folk categories of practice could themselves be the subject of study: They were enacted by people in the world through actions,
reinforcing the categories’ world-making propensities, and rendering individuals into groups that people then saw as objective and real, such as ethnic groups, or relatively new ones (e.g., senior citizens). Sociologists could then work to understand this process of group making (Bourdieu 1987).

Brubaker and his colleagues developed these ideas in a series of articles, some collected as a book (Brubaker 2004). They focused primarily on what they saw as flawed social science that denoted “groups” as entities with ontological status, especially ethnic groups, national groups, and racial groups. All were important and related to identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), but they were not actual things in the world.

Following Bourdieu, Brubaker also embraced the notion of categorizing concepts as multivalent in that they were categories of analysis and categories of practice. He argued that using these concepts as categories of analysis helped make sense of the world—but social scientists needed to understand clearly that the categories themselves had no independent existence. Even when there are group-making practices to be studied, ethnicity, nation, and race nevertheless should be approached as elements of the sociology of cognition and as phenomena related to beliefs and perceptions (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004).

Brubaker and colleagues’ contribution most relevant to this analysis of region was an elaborate argument, derived from the idea of multivalence, regarding pitfalls that social scientists should avoid when using ethnicity, nation, and race in research. The first major concern, they argued, related to the issue of ontology: Social scientists needed to be aware of the tendency toward reification when studying these subjects (Brubaker 2004; Brubaker 2010). When they reified ethnicities, nations, and races as “groups,” they slid easily into other assumptions in their research that were problematic and not supported by data—specifically, that the “groups” not
only existed as material objects, but also as material subjects. They were internally homogeneous, with agency and interests, and they existed in the world with clear, discrete boundaries (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004:45).

Also relevant to the study of region, Brubaker and colleagues emphasized ethnicity, nation, and race as phenomena of time. Put another way, scholars should not assume that ethnicities, nations, and races are “static, substantial entities” because the categories are “fully dynamic and processual” (Brubaker 2009:29-30). There may be “moments of intensely felt collective solidarity” where groupness is something that “happens”—or might not happen—to create successful mobilization or “conspicuous violence” (2004:12). Examples are the triggers that lead crowds to engage in ethnic, nationalist, or racist rioting, lynching, etc. In this view, ethnicities, nations, and races can be categories of practice that emerge and develop over time.

A final concern relates to the boundaries of the concepts. At issue is both the boundaries that set each concept apart from each other, and how boundaries of subcategories within each concept were to be understood. The concepts of ethnicity, nation, and race were not clearly distinctive, and the factors social scientists use to distinguish the concepts (criteria of membership; transmission of membership; fluidity of membership; importance of physical or visible markers of membership; and importance of language, religion, and culture, among others) are not singularly associated with ethnicity, nation, or race (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004:48; Brubaker 2009). This meant that boundaries between the concepts and subcategories within them were unstable and shifting, showing a protean quality that depended on the researcher’s use and strategies.

More specifically, the ambiguity in definitions and boundaries of ethnicity, nation, and race can lead to shifts depending on scholars’ particular research questions. This point is
important, and because it is less straightforward than the concerns about ontology and time, it is useful to illustrate it with examples. For example, Alba (2018) shows how the U.S. status as a “majority-minority” society depends very much on how persons of mixed minority-white parentage are counted. Social scientists’ choices regarding inclusion of mixed-race individuals in racial categories are also likely to significantly shape results of studies on inequality because darkness of skin can affect life chances (see Hochschild and Weaver 2007 on African American ancestry; Gómez 2000 on Latino backgrounds). Whether aware of it or not, researchers using ethnicity or race as variables inevitably make choices regarding the boundaries of racial or pan-ethnic categorizations, and deciding, as Davis (1991) provocatively asked decades ago, who is black.

As categories of practice, ethnicity, nation, and race also show shifting boundaries. Social scientists have long seen white ethnic identification as optional and changing (Waters 1990), and responses to U.S. Census race and ethnicity questions are not reliable (Skerry 2000), supporting the idea that identification with particular pan-ethnic categories can change over time (Nagel 1995). The counting strategies (boundary placement) regarding minority status discussed by Alba can have significant implications in the real world of practice and policy (Mora and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017). Nation boundaries also show shifting and protean qualities at the individual level (Ong 1999) and through state policy (Skrentny et al. 2007).

REGION AS PART OF THE ETHNICITY/NATION/RACE FAMILY OF CONCEPTS

The foregoing showed that ethnicity, nation, and race could be studied together as “a single integrated family of forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political
contestation” (Brubaker 2009:22). Could regions be added to that family of multivalent concepts? Despite the common practice of studying regions or using the region concept separately from these other multivalent concepts, a strong case can be made for region to be included in this so-called family.

First, it is important to note that Bourdieu (1991) believed that regions were similar to other categorizing concepts—a point that geographers have also acknowledged (Agnew 2013; Paasi 2003). Bourdieu argued that—similar to ethnicities, nations, and races—regions can be the basis of identity, either chosen or externally ascribed. He also maintained that there was nothing “natural” about regions, and that what is thought of as natural in regional classifications is “to a great extent the product…of a previous state of the relations of power in the field of struggle over legitimate delimitation” (Bourdieu 1991:222). For Bourdieu, the criteria for both regional and ethnic identities were mental representations, acts of perception, or self-interested strategies of symbolic representation. Similar to ethnicity, regional group-making was performative, with regional boundaries enacted discursively. All four concepts thus share multivalence—they are both categories of practice and categories of analysis, used to categorize people in the world.

Griswold (2008:12) also saw region as a categorizing concept similar to others, at least as a category of practice. She argued, “People use cognitive schemas to categorize one another—gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age, class, sexual orientation—and region is one of these primary classifiers.” Asking people to categorize themselves according to any of these is an attempt “to elicit categorical information so as to make some rough guesses about what the other person is like.” While not linking her theorizing about regions to Bourdieu, Griswold’s work suggests that region is similar in important ways to other categorizing concepts.
Leaving aside Griswold’s linking of region to gender, religion, age, class and sexual orientation, I focus here on the ways regional analysis shares similarities and pitfalls that Brubaker and colleagues have identified for ethnicity, nation, and race, regarding 1) ontology and relationship to space; 2) relationship to time; and 3) unclear, protean borders or boundaries.

*Regions, ontology, and the relationship to space*

Similar to the ways that social scientists can reify ethnicity, nation, and race, we also see social scientists reifying regions when they use the concept as a category of analysis. This would occur when researchers unreflectively adopt folk categories of practice, do not explain what they mean with region names and choices (thus appearing to assume we know and understand the boundaries of their named regions), and attribute internal homogeneity and agency to regions.

Sociologists may be less likely to do this, but it is common in other social sciences. For example, it occurs in the field of international relations when scholars refer to “Europe” as a thing, and discuss Europe’s “will,” “ability” and “desire” as if it is actor with material substance and agency (see, for example, Kagan 2002). Studies of sub-national regions may have the same problem, such as a study of “innovative regions” that describes regions as things with varying capacities to innovate due to various characteristics—some regions innovate a lot, and others innovate not so much (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2013). One study uses the metaphor of regions as persons, comparing personhood to regionhood, personality to regionality, and considers a region to be “an entity” (Van Langenhove 2013:487).

Of special concern on the question of reification and ontology is the possibility of a material dimension to regions—even if regions themselves are not treated as material things—in the ways that social scientists use the concept. It is possible that even if social scientists avoid the
reification of groupism in discussing regions, they might still ascribe materiality to regions.\(^3\) Katzenstein (2005:10), for instance, argues that “Regions have both material and ideational dimensions,” emphasizing that they are not purely discursive constructions. Thus, social scientists using regions may make reference to a material space or territory, or proximate spaces or territories (the notion that these spaces are populated is typically implied).

This makes some sense because spaces that are far flung and non-contiguous—but nevertheless sharing some socio-political characteristics or particular ties—cannot be said to be a region and the term still have meaning. For example, Esping-Andersen (1990) did not label his categories of “welfare capitalism” regionally because their features did not correspond with contiguous or at least proximate populations, or “geographic specificity,” to use Griswold’s (2008:13) phrase. Similarly, the social dynamics that occur in particular places and that allow regional patterns to emerge, such as the regional literatures described by Griswold, cannot be said to constitute a region unless spatially proximate or occurring in the same territory. In short, regions and material spaces—“real” in the ontological sense—would seem to go together.

However, a comparison with ethnicity, nation, and race shows that the connection of region to material space or land is not distinctive, and on the flipside, social scientists can perform regional analyses without direct reference to any material space. First, ethnicities, nations, and races all have some origin story, some link to a space where in scientific or folk understandings they are thought to have arisen. Thus, “White people” are from Europe; “Scandinavians” are from Norway, Sweden, Iceland, or Denmark; the “Japanese nation” is from

---

\(^3\) Here I am excluding the regional analyses of human geographers, for whom physical territory is a matter of study in unique ways that put space and the materiality of territory centrally in focus. Thus, geographers have debates on the relational and territorial status of regions (e.g., Agnew 1999, 2013; Jonas 2012; Lagendijk 2007; Varró and Lagendijk 2013) that may appear esoteric to sociologists and other social scientists. Geographers may refer to “real differences between part of the world” (Agnew 1999:93) and the “ontology of relational space” (Macleod and Jones 2007: 1183).
Japan. These origin stories are especially salient in genomic approaches to race that link ancestry to space of origin (Duster 2015; Fujimura and Rajagopalan 2011).

Second, though we can point to “Japan” on a map, what is interesting to social scientists are the Japanese people, not the material space we call “Japan.” And similar to ethnicities, nations, and races, it is possible to study regions separate from any original or defining territory. For example, there are studies of black and white Southerners living outside the South (Gregory 2005). A study of “Southerners in the West” (Tolnay and Eichenlaub 2006) deploys the region concept regarding people twice removed from their original territory: They compare “onward” Southern migrants, who first went to the Northeast and the Midwest and then to the West, with those who went directly from South to West, finding higher incomes and occupational statuses among the former. It is easy to imagine studies of other regionally-defined populations, such as “East Africans,” “people from the Rust Belt,” or “Central Asians” regardless of where they reside.

Of course, the names that social scientists use for many categories they denote as ethnic or racial can directly reference regions. For instance, the review essay on “regional paths of development,” discussed above, focusing on “four major third world regions” lists “Latin America, East Asia, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa” excluding South Africa (Gereffi and Fonda 1992:421), roughly corresponds to ethno-racial categories that social scientists commonly use.4 In short, the relationship of region to material space is not distinctive, and for the purpose of the social sciences, regions are cognitively constituted categorizations of people, similar to ethnicities, nations, and races.

---

4 At the same time, there are folk understandings and constructions of some region-defined peoples as phenotypically or physically distinct—e.g., Southern Italians as darker and/or less capable than those residing in the region of Northern Italy (Foner 2005).
Brubaker argues that ethnicity, nation, and race are properly understood as historical processes, constituted by events over time periods, rather than static things in the world. Shared experiences and historical sequences are what give meaning to these categories—and to regions as well.

There are many examples of the study of regions that show them to be processes that unfold over time. The study of regions as institutionalized forms, developing through time, is perhaps most commonly studied in the field of international relations. Deutsch et al. (1957) discussed the creation of “security communities,” such as the “North Atlantic Area,” where a group of people become “integrated,” meaning they have attained a sense of community and set of institutions that will endure and maintain peace. Adler and Barnett’s (1998a; 1998b) updating of the concept emphasized how security communities develop through time, involving precipitating conditions, the development of trust, identity, and social learning. Though for them the region concept has a social basis that unfolds over time (also see Hettne and Söderbaum 2000), they organized their 1998 volume according to the ways “historical regions demonstrate alternative patterns and dynamics” of security communities (Adler and Barnett 1998a:15-16), identifying (among others) Southeast Asia, South America, and Gulf Arab states as cases.

Such historical approaches to regional institutions are common in the international relations field. Stubbs and Reed (2006:290) describe how states in a definable geographic area develop regional institutions to manage their affairs, and how shared historical experiences in a definable area are key for the creation of regions, noting that in the face of geopolitical threats or globalization, states and their neighbors may find themselves in similar situations and begin cooperating. Katzenstein (2005:22) shows how “state power and purpose” exercised through time led to the creation of security regions (Rio Pact; North Atlantic Treaty Organization
[NATO]; Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO]; the Warsaw Pact; Organization of American States [OAS]; Organization of African Unity [OAU]; and the Arab League) and economic and trade regions (e.g., NAFTA; also see Pempel 2005; Rozman 2004). Regions lacking institutional form are similarly constituted through shared historical experiences and practices: A study discussing “West Africa” argues that “historical and ongoing experiences… fostered a regional identity” and “complex historical development through trade, politics, religion, and culture ensured that their identities and physical location would transcend the artificial boundaries that followed official European colonization” (Halter and Johnson 2014:35, 39). As one political scientist stated succinctly, “A region is a construction, of history and of present-day actions” (Keating 1997:394).

Sociologists have also explored regions as processes developing through time. Related to the international relations work discussed above, Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami (2018) show the region-making that occurred when universities, the Social Science Research Council, and the federal government worked together to create “area studies.” This process defined for national security experts and for scholars the meaning of “Latin America,” the “Near and Middle East,” “Eastern Europe,” and others. These regional categories could then evolve or be roughly maintained through institutional lock-in effects.

We also see sociological approaches to regions-as-temporal-processes in studies of how regional identities become salient. Parigi and Bergemann (2016), for instance, found that when members of Congress from the same region lived together in boardinghouses (a common practice in the early 1800s), their regional identities became more salient, and they were more likely to vote the same way, while living together did not have a similar impact on partisan identities.
Regions understood as historical constructions are also apparent in sociological studies of economic development. Hopcroft (2001:146) argues in relation to European regional economic effects: “the historical legacy of (legal) institutions and the timing and conjuncture of historical events shaped the nature of regional effects and were crucial to development (and other) outcomes.” An explicit recognition of these ideas comes in Mann and Riley’s (2006) study of regional variations in income inequality. They use “historical processes, such as defeat or success in war, colonial invasion and the spread of specific cultures” as causal factors to explain regional patterns (2006:82).

Historical sequences are furthermore crucial for understanding the boundaries of regions in studies of diffusion processes. These may show regionally “channeled learning” (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett 2007) or a “geographical social learning model” where states look to their neighbors for policy information and guidance because neighbors appear familiar and similar (e.g., Mooney 2001). Soule and Zylan’s (1997) analysis of the diffusion of ADC/AFDC eligibility requirements improves on studies that simply use off-the-shelf regional definitions without analysis, such as those from the Census Bureau, by showing how regions are made over time. Soule and Zylan hypothesize a sociological mechanism for why a particular region definition makes sense over time: “we expect that states within the same SSA [Social Security Administration] region will be most cognizant of the actions of other states in the same region due to communications from the regional SSA offices” (emphasis added; p. 752).

Finally, the understanding of regions as unfolding processes also sheds light on the frequent grouping in sociology of “comparative” and “historical”—institutionalized in the American Sociological Association as the Section on Comparative and Historical Sociology. Regional comparisons in politics that seek to explain persistent patterns and practices, then,
would typically engage work on historical sequences, critical junctures, and policy diffusion (Haydu 1998; Thelen 1999; Wendt 1995).

Regions and protean borders/boundaries

Brubaker and colleagues argued that the conceptual ambiguity inherent in the concepts of ethnicity, nation, and race meant that the boundaries were shifting and protean, and when used as a category of analysis, depended on how social scientists framed their research questions. Similarly, when social scientists study regions or use the region concept in their analyses, the boundaries of the region may change depending on the research question. This may be true whether regions are independent, control, or dependent variables.

Griswold (2008:12) suggested that research questions can shape regional categorizations when she argued that regions “do not simply fit together like pieces of a puzzle,” but that the people living in a particular space can be seen in regions that are nested or overlap, so that “If a Florentine poet were to appear in a ‘regional’ anthology…the ‘region’ could be Tuscany, central Italy, southern Europe, or the Mediterranean.” Put another way, “there are multiple ways of seeing a place” and “’regions’ only exist in relation to particular criteria. They are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered; they are our (and others’) constructions” (Allen, Massey and Cochrane 1998:2).

Therefore, a map of the world based on world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1999) might show regions very differently than Huntington’s (1996) effort at “civilizational” understanding, or regions based on the world’s religions. Bonikowski’s (2010) analysis of global cultural variation makes regional boundaries a subject of study, as he shows that the civilizational
understandings of regions have little predictive value when compared to cultural similarities within former colonial empires.

Cox (1969) provided an early attempt to understand regions as changing with research questions, emphasizing researcher agency when using regions as categories of analysis. He argued that for understanding political behavior, regions were similar to social class in that both could be defined in different ways, and advised scholars to tailor the definition of region to their studies so that within-category variation was minimized and between-category variation was maximized (Cox 1969), similar to Bonikowski’s strategy.

Particularly clear examples of the protean nature of regional boundaries are apparent if we explore possible categorizations of particular nations. Consider the case of the Swiss. For a study of the formal, regional, institution building that created and maintains the European Union, Swiss policymakers would be left out, as Switzerland is not a member despite being landlocked and surrounded by original EU member states on every side. But studies of cultural practices—religion, language, food, lifestyle, politics—would reasonably include Swiss people. However, regional boundaries might also vary even if we change research questions but focus only on formal, regional, institution building: A study of trade practices may put U.S. policymakers in a North American region due to NAFTA, while a study of national security may put U.S. policymakers in a North Atlantic region (with Europeans) due to NATO, and a study of regional variations in human rights protections could put U.S. policymakers with Central and South American policymakers in the Organization of American States. Mexico, of course, may be North American for a study of NAFTA, but Latin American for other studies. Similar to the categorization of the same individuals in different ethnic, national, or racial boundaries
depending on the nature of a study, individuals can be seen in different regions depending on the social phenomenon in focus.

CONCLUSION

A close examination of the concept of region shows that it is similar to other concepts in the social sciences, including ethnicity, nation, and race. All four are multivalent concepts: Social scientists use them as a perspective on the social world—a category of analysis—and people use and enact them in their everyday lives—a category of practice.

I have more specifically argued that all four concepts share similar characteristics regarding ontology, relationship to time, and boundaries. Regarding ontology, all four are cognitive phenomena (modes of categorizing people), with similar relationships to space, where particular spaces or places may be relevant to the categorization in some origin narrative, but the categories, and the people in them, can be studied separately from material space. Regarding time, each category can be understood as an event, or series of events, processes, or historical sequences, that create categorical coherence. Thus, shared experiences through time put people in particular ethnicities, nations, races—and also regions. Regarding boundaries, we saw that all four concepts have a protean quality, where different research questions may shape category boundaries, such that social scientists can differently categorize the same people depending on the research question, and people in their everyday lives may see themselves or others as part of different categories for different purposes. Though we tend to think of regions as spaces on maps, understanding region as a multivalent concept helps illuminate that regional analysis in the social sciences matters because it places boundaries around people, not spaces.
While I have rooted the argument of the multivalence of region in the work of Bourdieu and Brubaker, there are larger takeaways from this analysis that do not require a full acceptance of their work on the cognitive basis of categorizing concepts. Specifically, the theoretical points about the nature of multivalent concepts lead to theoretical and methodological cautions for any social science work using the region concept.

Perhaps the most basic theoretical point is that region is an important categorizing concept, but it need not and arguably should not be studied in isolation from others. A key methodological takeaway is for researchers who wish to use the concept of region, especially as a category of analysis to understand or explain patterns of behavior or culture, to have clear reasons for choosing particular regions, and especially for their particular boundaries. These reasons should be relevant to the analysis in question, and researchers should not assume that available, “off the shelf” regional boundaries can rigorously serve as meaningful cases, control variables, or explanatory factors.

Another takeaway from this analysis is a call for more social science work on regions as categories of practice. While there are large literatures explicitly on nation-making practices (e.g., Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 1990) and pan-ethnic or race-making practices (Espiritu 1992; Mora 2014; Okamoto 2014; Skrentny 2002), there is less research on region-making as such, and separate strands of productive work are only implicitly on the topic and do not engage each other. If the regional category is important in the social sciences—and its common use indicates that it is important—we should know more about it.

One potentially fruitful avenue of research might compare the sociological dynamics of region to different classificatory identities, including ethnicity, nation, and race, but others as well, such as gender and class. How do regional categories and identities become “locked in,”
and how does regional lock-in through institutions, or in identities, compare with other institutional and identity lock-ins? Relatedly, how do time and historical processes matter for different classification concepts? For example, it may that historical sequences of demographic, economic, and political change impact region, nation, class, etc. categories differently and at different speeds.

Another area of inquiry could illuminate the roles of both elites and non-elites in the making of regions as both formal institutions, and also the unintentional, unself-conscious behaviors and discourses that can also create regions. Griswold (2008:13-14) begins this work by distinguishing between “weak” regional culture that develops from material circumstances and history, and is simply shared by people from the region, and a “strong” version that is assertive, self-aware, identity conscious, emotionally charged, even celebratory—what she calls “regionalism.” Scholars in international relations have made similar distinctions, emphasizing how the strong version becomes a regional institutional structure (Beeson 2009; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000).

Scholars working in a variety of fields have also shown the ways that elite behavior can create regions without overt intentionality. Mearsheimer’s (2014) theory of geopolitics, for instance, relies on the concept of regions, but regions are incidental to the interests of states, and region-making seems to occur as a side effect of other actions designed to ensure national security given conditions that prohibit being a global hegemon. Studies of political economy also show unintentional elite region making that is not necessarily institutionalized formally. Gramsci traced the social situation of Southern Italy to social, region-making practices and power relations—“The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies” (Gramsci 2005:70). Similarly, Dal Lago’s (2005)
comparative study of the American South and the Italian *Mezzogiorno* focuses on people, not spaces (the book is called *Agrarian Elites*) and provides an excellent model of the study of region-making practices—specifically, how agrarian elites in both countries, and their actions as landowners and slaveholders, made the two regions through economic exploitation and opposition to centralizing policies of national governments, despite considerable intra-regional variation. World-systems theory similarly uses the region concept to show region-making behavior that is not formalized and occurs in pursuit of other goals (Arrighi 1999; Wallerstein 1999).

Sub-national regions may also be made by elites or non-elites, intentionally or unintentionally. Some regions may have “functional ties,” such as “network/circulation linkages (transport, migration, trade and capital flows)” (Agnew 2013:15). Subnational regions may also emerge from the commuting patterns of people who live in or near cities (Tolbert and Sizer 1996; Autor and Dorn 2009).

There are already many excellent studies of how regions are made, but without recognition of the multivalence of the region concept and how it fits with related concepts, such as ethnicity, nation, and race, these are lost opportunities to build theory. These studies can be seen as cases of the larger phenomenon of region-making that contribute to understandings of regional boundary placement, region-making scope conditions and propensities, as well as linkages to regions as categories of analysis.
REFERENCES


