

## REGIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS REFLECTION IN CZECH HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Jan Odehnal, M.Sc.\*, Miloslav Šerý, M.Sc.\*\*

\* Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava, Chittussiho 10, CZ-71000 Ostrava – Slezská Ostrava, Czech Republic

\*\* Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Palacký University Olomouc,

17. listopadu 12, CZ-77146 Olomouc, Czech Republic

e-mail: j-odehnal@email.cz; SeryMilos@gmail.com

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### Abstract

The contribution informs about the phenomenon of regional identity. One is able to see the importance of the regional identity for example as an useful tool for creating regional strategies or as ability to shape the individual's position in time and space. The issue of regional identity emerged in Western geography approximately in the 1970s. However, its position in Czech human geography is not embedded sufficiently up to now. The main goal of the study is to evaluate the development of the research of regional identity in Czech human geography.

**Key words:** identity, region, historic land, research, perception, Czech Republic

## REGIONALNA IDENTITETA IN NJEN ODSEV V ČEŠKI DRUŽBENI GEOGRAFIJI

### Izvilleček

Prispevek obravnava pojav, imenovan 'regionalna identiteta'. Na njen velik pomen kaže uporabnost tega orodja pri oblikovanju regionalnih strategij ali pri oblikovanju posameznikovega položaja v prostoru in času. Pojem se je v zahodni geografiji pojavil približno v 70. letih prejšnjega stoletja, a se doslej v češki družbeni geografiji še ni dovolj uveljavil. Glavni namen članka je ovrednotenje dosedanjega razvoja preučevanja regionalne identitete v češki družbeni geografiji.

**Ključne besede:** identiteta, regija, zgodovinska pokrajina, raziskovanje, percepcija, Češka

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the phenomenon of regional identities, which is a specific example of a shared identity of individuals or collective identity. The concept of collective identity draws from classic sociological constructs such as Durkheim's *collective conscience*, Marx's *class consciousness* and Weber's *verstehen*. Cerulo (1997) means that, so rooted, the notion addresses the 'we-ness' of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce.

Manifestations of collective identity can be seen in the conscious inclusion and identification with a particular group and in the voluntary acceptance of these common attributes and similarities. By this process, communities usually define themselves to other societies. One of the possible definitions of regional identity can be supported by an opinion of Žigrai (2000) who writes that the phrase can be understood as a certain intellectual capacity of an individual or a certain set of people to identify with the spatial unit at a particular time. In other words, it is an emotional relationship with a specific area; however, attention has to be paid also to identification with the community inhabiting this area.

It is an integrated spatial aspect of regional identity which attracts the attention of geographers and de facto makes its research relevant. It can be stated that research of regional identity within the framework of geographical research has found its fixed position. Nonetheless, due to a complex character of territorial identity, human geography is not the only scientific discipline which deals with the identification of spatially determined communities. From a long-term perspective it is obvious that territorial identities attract a number of social scientists in the field of anthropology, sociology and psychology (Gupta, Ferguson, 1992; Castells, 2010; Gustafson, 2001). This demonstrates a relatively high level of interest, which raises the issue across the scientific spectrum. For geographers it is moreover interesting for the fact that regional identity is seen as an useful planning tool and a key resource for regional development implemented mainly by civic participation, as it is demonstrated by Raagmaa (2002).

In Czech human geography, the research orientation was until the turn of 1980s and 1990s influenced by the then pervasive political climate, generally affecting also the investigative effort. Making taboos of certain themes caused the late onset of cultural-geographic research (Hampl, Dostál, Drbohlav, 2007), which influenced also the reflection of the issue of regional identity. Even though Czech geography has not paid adequate attention to this subject yet, there are works which can be a basis for the following research into the regional identity.

The main objective of this text is to evaluate the development of research of regional identity in the Czech Republic, paying the particular attention to contemporary activities. Partial objective is to identify potential specific aspects of regional identity, if they were emphasized in existing research. Attention will also be paid to the spatial context of the existing research due to the effort to define possible specific areas of the Czech Republic, to which the attention was paid in the context of an empirical research of this issue. Evaluation of research of European identity and its position in Czech society will not be omitted.

## 2. REGIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT OF WORLD HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Space and its specific qualities, is reflected in the identity of every individual or community (Chromý, 2009, p. 110). This fact implies that an essential part of complex identities of individuals constituting communities is also a regional identity which is quite an old idea. The Finnish geographer Paasi (2003, pp. 475–477) understands the regional identity as an idea, which has been implicit in geography for a long time. The first application of the concept is provable according to him by traditional approaches to the issue of regions, which are understood as primordial, while the unity and harmony of regions with their inhabitants is emphasized.

Regional identity and the identity of places then represented an important category for an intellectual movement called humanistic geography. The authors connected with this movement did not see the region only as a category used for registering of objects and processes for which humanistic tradition geographers blamed their positivist-oriented predecessors. Instead, they emphasized the need to understand regions as entities, to which people attach various significances and to which they establish a relationship. Subsequently they identified the regions with processes, by which individuals or communities transform the unlimited space and generate space for their everyday life, and perceived them as a source of identity of people. On this basis, people are able to perceive and distinguish themselves from others.

One of the first people who devoted themselves to the study of territorial identities was the Canadian geographer Edward Relph, a leading authority of the humanistic tradition in geography. In his influential book *Place and Placelessness* (1976) he focuses on the explanation of identification of people with places. According to him, this is realized by people's identity, which he subsequently divides into two categories: identity of place and identity with place. The identity of place is understood as a perennial stability and unity of place that makes it possible to differentiate from other places. It is then generated mainly by three components: physical environment; activities, situations and events; and individual or group substances, which are created by people through their experiences with the place. The identity with place is then defined by the concept of *insideness*. Its essence is the degree of interconnectedness, relationship and involvement, which individuals or groups have in relation to certain places.

American geographer of Chinese origin Yi-Fu Tuan, another leading authority of humanistic geography, and the author of this term, ranks territory and place among the five topics (geographical knowledge, territory and place, crowding and privacy, livelihood and economics and religion), which generally arouse geographers' interest (Tuan, 1976). The space becomes a place when people give it a meaning. This is reflected by naming the places and identifying with them. Usually people identify with some places more closely than with others and therefore they attach more importance to them. Tuan (1974) speaks of a sense of place. These subjective attitudes are produced mainly by perception of the place and what experience people have with the place. Places are also an important source of identity of individuals, through which they can identify themselves in relation to others.

With its positive influence, the place can reinforce the individual's identity, sense of safety and confidence. These abilities of a place Tuan labeled as *topophilia* and its most important determinant is a stability of the place, from which originate the above mentioned effects. He talks about a special place representing home. As the opposite to topophilic places he defined *topophobia*, which in humans causes fear, anxiety, and a feeling of danger.

Supporters of feminist geography also understood spaciousness as an important element in the process of identity formation (McDowell, 1993). They advocate that places or regions are crucial for social-classes, gender, sexuality, religious or ethnic affiliations. These characteristics and relations are important criteria for exclusion and inclusion of individuals and regions in the process of social construction of communities and their places, while what is significant for this process is the effort to homogenize the constructed place. In other words, the concrete regional identity (which besides identification with the territory lies also in the identification with the community inhabiting the region), can define the nature of other aspects, whether sexual, gender, cultural, religious or linguistic, creating together forms of collective identities.

For this reason an individual may define himself against communities, which orientation is different from the orientation prevalent in the community with which one shares a particular region and with which he generates a territorial identity of the region. The contribution of feminist geographers to understand the development of regional identity formation evaluates Nash (1997, p. 108) by arguing that feminist work on the relationship between national, gender and sexual identities has explored the ways in which they are mutually constructed in geographically, historically and culturally specific manners.

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s there was a shift within cultural geography, which was called the *cultural turn* (Barnett, 1998). Its essence lies in several aspects, from which the most significant element is primarily the turn from the research agenda and the scope of traditional cultural geography represented by the Berkeley School, founded by Carl Sauer. The new cultural geography, as a product of the cultural turn is called, is thematically focused more on its social and symbolic aspect (Valentine, 2001) than on material culture and its physical form. The result is a more intensive approach to concepts such as meaning, lifestyle, identity and representation. Identities, social and territorial, which are due to a new cultural geography in the centre of attention, are subsequently theoretically developed in more detail and more integrated to the subject of study of human geography.

The form of regional identity can be currently seen as the result of a long process. According to Vencálek (1998b, p. 83), an identity is not a permanent, constant or unchanging matter. Like many other social and economic phenomena, also the regional identity of population changes or more precisely develops. This causality led in the last decades to a more attention of historic geographers, who began to emphasize the importance of the regional identity formation process, as well as the importance of their cultural formation (Graham, 1997; 2000). Both of these processes together with a regional history which make the region unique were nine years ago seen (Chromý, Janů, 2003) as little reflected by Czech human geography.

As it was presented in the text above, the issue of territorial identities is reflected in the context of world geography (either explicitly or implicitly) as a traditional affair, which

attracted many other geographical sub-disciplines. What will follow in the text is the story of Czech human geography in connection with the issue of regional identity. Because of the fundamental impact of the political situation in the second half of the 20th century on the social events, the following passages will be divided into two periods of time.

### 3. REGIONAL IDENTITY IN CZECH HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

#### 3.1. The period before 1989

When in the 1970s regions and places began to be examined more intensively as sources of identity of individuals and groups, the matter of regional identity did not reach Czech human geography and even in the following decades it was not different. The reason for this situation was a general character of the former Czech geography, which according to Hampl (2006) showed stagnating features of its development and expressed minimal shifts in research in human geography. There can be identified multiple causes of this unenviable situation. First, Czech human geography was, like many other social sciences, isolated from the world human geography and world science in general. Second, mind barriers created to suit the totalitarian ideology did not allow a whole spectrum of social sciences to do their scientific research and significantly limited the freedom of research. Character of geographical research therefore remained descriptive until the final stage of the communist era when a partial impact of positivist trends occurred. The impact of post-positivist concepts is therefore minimal. The only exception is research based on the behavioral geography, 'infiltrating' in positive way Czech human geography in the late 1980s. In this context it is necessary to mention two studies relevant to the issue of regional identity. One was carried by Siwek (1988), who assessed (using mental maps) the knowledge and popularity of the former Czechoslovakia among the students of geography. Analysis of how students perceived attractiveness of individual regions unveiled the level of identity of individual regions in the country. In the other research, Drbohlav (1989) surveyed regional preferences of the population, which again to some extent reflect regional identity, especially in the context of migration behavior of the population.

#### 3.1. The period after 1989

The events of the late 1980s outlined the future direction of the stagnating Czech geography and at the same time, the change of the social climate offered the Czech human geography new alternatives, which were very limited so far. The removal of international social barriers offered an opportunity to become familiar with the geographies of the former Western bloc and strengthen ties with them. These new interactions provided the Czech geography with a range of new inspiration and a discovery of how far from the then standard of geographic focus of research it was (Sýkora, 1993).

The issue of regional identities did not begin to be more topical in connection to the opening of borders. Thanks to the new social climate people were again, after more than forty years, allowed to declare their nationality. In the census of 1991 more than 99% of all inhabitants of the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia took advantage of this option. In

the results, an interesting trend emerged. A part of the population subscribed to Moravian (13.4%) and Silesian (0.4%) nationality and therefore expressed their affiliation to these historic lands. The first person who reflected on this phenomenon was Daněk (1993). He attempted to identify the causes of observed results and subsequently, the analysis of data from the census of 1991 pointed out the spatial differentiation of the population claiming to be of Moravian nationality. Identification of the population with region of Silesia via claiming the Silesian nationality in the census was much less common. Before 1989, the name of Silesia was intentionally overshadowed and its Czech part was not clearly defined. This caused that the public was familiar with Silesia, but at the same time, it remained a vague region in their eyes.

This situation later stimulated geographers to carry out a research (Siwek, Kaňok, 2000a; 2000b), which attempted to assess the extent of Silesian identity of the inhabitants of the Czech part of Silesia and locate its core area. The analysis of how the Czech part of Silesia is perceived by the local population confirmed the low level of Silesian identity. Much weaker position in comparison with the rest of the Czech historic lands (Bohemia, Moravia) was also confirmed by research (Siwek, Bogdová, 2007), which was to determine the level of awareness of historic lands and ethnographic and cultural-historical regions of the Czech Republic. The research showed that some traditional ethnographic regions like Moravian Slovakia and Moravian Wallachia are fixed in the public consciousness, the same as the smallest and the least perceived historic land of Silesia.

The change in the society after 1989 had a substantial impact also for peripheral regions and rural areas, regardless of their location within the state. To reach an adequate position of rural areas in the new social conditions, there were attempts to gradually more and more institutionalize the countryside. New programs like Rural Renewal and a political movement Mayors and Independents helped to raise awareness of public towards rural areas and thanks to various other projects like Village of the Year competition the image of the countryside as a place for living a full life started to take shape.

Countryside, however, is not a homogenous territorial unit. People residing in the rural regions do not identify with country as a whole, but with a specific rural region. For the regions of lower order the regional identity is not enhanced only by rural character of the territorial unit, but often it is its peripheral location (Chromý, Skála, 2010; Stockmann, 2005).

Strong regional identity of the local population can be used as a mobilizing factor in the regional strategies, which can later determine the development of a particular region (Chromý, 2003a; Chromý, Janů, 2003). Generally, countryside is perceived as a space. People feel to be at home in a particular area, where they every day move, live, meet their neighbors and where they talk to one another and share their own vision of their region and of the regional community (Kučerová, 2011). In essence, the rural identity exists, however it is manifested only in certain contexts and situations.

The above mentioned aspects, a rural area and peripheral position are largely significant for the Czech borderland. Also the specific historical development of most of the Czech borderland must be considered, especially in the period after the Second World War, during which there was a transfer of autochthonous German ethnic group, which was more or less successfully replaced by a new wave of settlers. This also had impact on the contemporary

form of regional identities of borderland residents. This phenomenon of regional identities first earned attention of sociologists (Houžvička, Novotný, 2007; Zich, 2003), who by way of qualitative methods (biographical narrative) tried to identify the nature of the regional identities of the population of Czech-German borderland. Later also geographers began to be interested in this peculiar dimension of the Czech Republic borderlands. Research activities are then focused on borderland regions which were directly affected by the post-war population exchange (Chromý, Skála, 2010; Kučerová-Kuldová, 2008; Šerý, Šimáček, 2012), and on so called traditional regions, which were not affected (Hubáčková, 2006; Stockmann, 2005).

In border areas also a new way of thinking occurs. A small proportion of the local population is able to identify to some extent with the region within its home country, but also with the region of the neighboring country in the immediate neighborhood, in other words with an established Euroregion. This could be observed in Northern Bohemia region on the border of the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland (Roubal, 2002) or in the Czech part of the *Silva Nortica* Euroregion.

The above mentioned examples of the research in regional identities were focused mainly on the regions of the lower scale and middle scale in the case of historic lands. Not only these regions, but also regions of larger size are essential for spatial identification. Regional identity is multilayered. These layers can be compatible or they may overlap, therefore also the regions hierarchically higher are substantial. A special form of territorial identity of the inhabitants of such regions is the national identity. It has its basis in an united region, where people speak the same language, have common economic and social institutions, government, usually a common faith, common historical origins, relatively identical values, they share their history and historical events, and objects of shame and pride are more or less of the same character traits (Kostelecký, Nedomová, 1996). The continuing importance of this form of territorial identification supported for example Antonsich (2009). In the Czech Republic, interest in the subject of national identity is marginal among sociologists (Seidlová, 2003) and geographers (Baar, 2000).

Since 1990, the Czech Republic is in a new geopolitical situation, and it is integrated into the European structures and therefore the existence of European identity has been accelerated. Opening borders and the increase in a number of contacts with countries of the Western Europe caused that European identity emerges as a new incentive for residents of the Czech Republic. The issues of European identity, Euroregions and processes of European integration are more often taught at primary and secondary schools (Wahla, 1998).

Considerable importance is also attached to European citizenship education, as the need for building a European identity on the common cultural foundations (Vencálek, 1998a). Despite the indisputable presence of the phenomenon of European identity in Czech society (nonetheless to a small extent probably), there has not been done, apart from partial attempts, a consistent research focused on trying to get closer to understanding of the nature of this phenomenon in the Czech Republic.

Finally, the roles of localities are very important as well, because it is at this level where the most intensive everyday social reproduction and experience take place. Relationship of selected local populations with this spatial level tried to evaluate Pokluda (2003) and for

small towns Vaishar (2008). There was a research carried out examining how the sense, importance and image of localities are perceived by its inhabitants, visitors, entrepreneurs and how the identity is created. Research on perception and image is very important because sometimes the images of certain localities can significantly affect opinion, behavior and decisions of its inhabitants and of the population from outside.

Until now, specific studies associated with the selected regions were presented. However, apart from empirical investigation, the Czech human geography was familiar also with the theoretical issue of regional identity (Chromý, 2003b; 2009; Roubal, 2003; Vencálek, 1998b). Several concepts of formative aspects of regional identities were developed, a new theory of regional formation in connection with regional identity, its origin, development and extinction was introduced and the possible form of the structure of regional identity was outlined, as well as the possibility of the impact of contemporary globalization on the nature of regional identity. Relation of regional identities to a specific Czech phenomenon of second homes was not omitted (Fialová et al., 2010).

Regional identity is closely linked to the regional borders, which also fit into the basic theoretical framework of the topic. These boundaries play an important role in shaping regional identity because they help to define the region and therefore help people to perceive 'their' region. As Paasi (1986) writes in his work, the spatial form of territory, which gets its own boundaries during this process, is the first and inevitable step in the evolution of regional identity. The reason is the fact that the region is becoming a territorial unit identifiable in terms of spatial structure. This is evident for example in contemporary Czech regional administrative units, which were established at the beginning of 2000. In some cases (South Moravian Region, Vysočina Region), the development in the delimitation of the border occurred. The areas, which were directly influenced by the change of the regional border and were moved from one region to another, were influenced also in the context of regional identity of its residents (Daněk, 2010). Specific types of boundaries are relict boundaries, those of defunct territorial units, which on one hand expired, on the other may remain in the minds of people. Among these relict boundaries are especially boundaries of individual historical countries, which lost their administrative function. The perception of this type of relict boundaries by population was evaluated in the case of Czech-Moravian border (Toušek, Šich, Vašíček, 1991). A research of the Moravian-Silesian border as perceived by population of Jeseník region was done in the analysis of Šerý and Šimáček (2010; 2012), in connection with efforts to determine its potential function in generation process of regional identity of population of Jeseník region.

Other specific types of boundaries are those having a fuzzy character. It is not a typical line, but rather a transitional area defining regions. Delineative criterion in the Czech surroundings can be, for example, different ethnic conditions (Siwek, 1996). Transitional areas were used (Hubáčková, 2006) also to mutual demarcation of traditional cultural-historical regions.

Territorial units carry the names. This, seemingly trivial statement, however, conceals a deeper meaning. Paasi (1986) in his model of regional identity formation believes genesis of symbolism associated with a particular region to be fundamental. The importance of symbolism lies in the ability of regional identity to reproduce. As the most important symbol is



then seen the name of the region. The names assigned to spatial units by people are mainly used in daily communication, especially by residents of these units (Zich, 2003, p. 22). The use of a specific name in the communication assumes that the participants understand the name, they know what exactly is hidden under that name, even if the name is different from the official one (administrative, political). The name of a particular place or region then acts as an important tool for identifying individuals, who are not only able to name their region, but also they identify with the community inhabiting the region. In this context, there was a discussion in Czech geography and a dispute searching for a suitable alternative to the political name of the Czech Republic. Nowadays, the widely accepted name Czechia (Body of authors, 1998), which gradually takes root in the official media as well as in everyday speech has its opposition, mainly represented by the late Řehák (e.g., Řehák, 2004).

Bone of contention lies mainly in the existence of three historic lands (Bohemia, Moravia, a part of Silesia) located within the Czech Republic. The debate was mainly about the suitability of the name Czechia and also about the understanding of these historic lands (Chromý, 1997; 2004; Řehák, 1998; Vaishar, 2004), which were de facto abolished by the administrative reform which came into force at the beginning of 1949, even though they survived as a product generated predominantly by a process of social construction of population. According to its critics, Czechia is a name only for Bohemia, one of three historic lands and the other two lands remain ignored. Distinguishing between the terms Bohemia and Czechia is then seen by them as a language convulsion (Řehák, 2007). On the other hand, proponents of the name Czechia argue that a one word name is practical and historic anachronisms should be avoided (Vaishar, 2004). Two-word expressions (Czech lands) referring to the historic tradition of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown generally meet with a negative acceptance.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The issue of the regional identities has been present in the Czech human geography since the mid 1980s. After a gradual familiarization with the topic since 1989, which was completed by the monograph *Protisměry územní identity* (Vencálek, 1998b), there was a further growth in research activities and publishing, reflecting regional identity in a new millennium.

Czech human geographers interested in the issue studied the theoretical basis and background information about territorial identities and spatially defined empirical-analytical researches were done. In case of these researches of the territorial identities one is able to trace a shift from evaluation of identities of hierarchically higher units (in the Czech Republic predominantly historic lands), to lower territorial units. Here, regions with a peripheral character (so-called inner periphery have not yet been taken into account) predominate, core regions are left aside. This may be related to the often mentioned potential (Raagmaa, 2002) of regional identity of the inhabitants to influence the development of the areas they inhabit.

Insufficient, according to the authors, appear the attempt of Czech human geographers to map the forms of Czech national identity. Relying only on the results of censuses, which

might be a basis only for partial standpoints regardless of the last census, when almost 26% of the population refused to answer the question on nationality, is unsatisfactory.

At present (2012) we can already talk about an eight-year membership of the Czech Republic's most important European integration group, the European Union. Besides the already mentioned works, which emphasize the need to include the issue of European identity in educational systems we lack a reliable assessment of the degree of political and socio-cultural integration process of the population of the Czech Republic with the EU. This is the direction in which further research could be heading. There are also other research topics suitable for geographical research. They can deal with the nature and a process of genesis of a relationship between national minorities and regions which they inhabit or with an impact of institutions, national and regional media and sport and leisure activities organizations on the formation and transformation processes of regional identities.

The research of intensity of identification of population with a relatively new regional structure, which works as a self-governing administrative system since 2000, would lead to the cognition of to what extent people accepted the regions, especially in comparison with the former district structure. Reflection on these topics might come in the near future, because we are able to state positive fact that regional identity of particular areas and more comprehensive knowledge of theoretical aspects of phenomenon have become a popular interest of researchers at more and more geographical departments of Czech universities. Regional identity is then a topic of several theses (Department of Geography at Masaryk University, Department of Geography at Palacký University Olomouc) and especially dissertation projects of some post-graduate students, who are currently studying at geographical departments of universities in Ostrava and Prague.

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