



**HAL**  
open science

# Theoretical reflection on the making of the Alpine region. The role of transnational networks of local actors on regional identity and institutionalization

Cristina del Biaggio

## ► To cite this version:

Cristina del Biaggio. Theoretical reflection on the making of the Alpine region. The role of transnational networks of local actors on regional identity and institutionalization. *Fennia*, 2010, 3rd Nordic Geographers Meeting Special Issue, 188 (1), pp.137-148. hal-02540723

**HAL Id: hal-02540723**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02540723>**

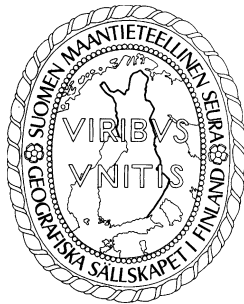
Submitted on 11 Apr 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Theoretical reflection on the making of the Alpine region. The role of transnational networks of local actors on regional identity and institutionalization

CRISTINA DEL BIAGGIO



Del Biaggio, Cristina (2010). Theoretical reflection on the making of the Alpine region. The role of transnational networks of local actors on regional identity and institutionalization. *Fennia* 188: 1, pp. 137–148. ISSN 0015-0010.

The article is a theoretical contribution on the ongoing debate on cross-border regions, regional identity and local networks. It shows how the Alps are being institutionalized and how a pan-Alpine regional identity is built across national boundaries. The aim is to show how the Alpine actors (NGOs, Alpine leaders and scientists, Alpine population, etc.) contribute to what Paasi calls “the institutionalization of regions”. The paper proposes an application of existing theories on identity and regional identity to the Alpine case. The combination of the different theories enables one to better identify the actors involved in the building of the Alps and other European cross-border regions. The proposition of Paasi will be combined with the contribution of Avanza and Laferté on identity, which differentiate the concepts of *identification*, *social image* and *belonging*. The analysis and comprehension of regional institutionalization is advanced if it is broken up into the three components of identity distinguished by Avanza and Laferté. In that way, the role of each component can be underscored and regional actors easily identified. This distinction is particularly interesting in order to capture the processes of region building and multi-level governance currently going on in the Alps. An integrated framework combining the different concepts is proposed. Finally, the paper will show how the Alpine region is part of a more generalised process of renewed regional governance, where European cross-border regions play a central role promoting them as “pivotal spaces of integration” (Sidaway 2009: 749). Furthermore, a final critical point about the participation of the population in this process will be addressed.

Keywords: Identity; Regional identity; Institutionalization of regions; Cross-border regions; Alps; Regional identity; Belonging; Social image; Identification; Transnational networks; Regional governance

*Cristina DEL BIAGGIO, Department of Geography, University of Geneva, Uni-Mail, Bd. Pont-d’Arve 40, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland. E-mail: Cristina.DelBiaggio@unige.ch*

## Introduction

The Alps constitute one of the “largest continuous unspoilt natural areas in Europe”<sup>1</sup>, shared by eight countries. Besides the well-known natural and landscape features, the 1100 km mountain range constitutes the living space of 13 million people, speaking four languages with all the derived dialects.

The fact is that in the last two decades, a considerable variety of transnational networks have been

initiated in the Alps. These are linking different actors and objects as protected areas (*Alparc*), municipalities (*Alliance in the Alps*), small businesses (*NENA*), cities (*Alpine Town of the Year*), scientists (*ISCAR*), touristic resorts (*Alpine Pearls*) and many others. The aim of this paper is not to give results of the research I am conducting in the Alpine countries, but to propose a theoretical understanding of these initiatives. In other words, I intend to answer to the question: which scientific framework can facilitate the understanding of the imple-

mentation of these local actors' networks? Which theories can help to better understand the "making of" the Alpine region?

In particular, I will explore the theory of the "regional institutionalization" forged by Anssi Paasi (1986) and focus on the distinction between "identity of a region" and "regional consciousness". Taking the example of the Alpine arc, the role of identity in the making of regions will be emphasized. The analysis on identity by French-speaking scholars, less known by the Anglo-American-speaking geographers, can add a wider and deeper view on how to understand Paasi's contributions. The works of different scholars (e.g. Avanza and Laferté, Debarbieux, Di Méo), in addition to the ones by Paasi, represent an interesting tool for understanding how the Alps and other European regions are being institutionalized.

I will examine how two Alpine projects can be understood with help of existing theories on regions and identity: the Alpine Convention framework as an example of a "scaling down" state-led initiative, and locally-based networks as "scaling up" proposals for implementing the goals of the Alpine Convention. The aim is to show how Alpine leaders contribute to what Anssi Paasi calls the "spatial socialization" process (Paasi 1996: 8), and to the institutionalization of the Alpine region. I will conclude this paper discussing how the initiatives described above are materialized in regional institutions and how they thus lead to forms of regional governance.

## **The emergence of the Alps under the effect of two socio-political processes**

The first approach, which can be identified as a "scaling down" initiative, emanated from the non-governmental association CIPRA (Commission for the Protection of the Alps) and resulted in an international treaty called Alpine Convention<sup>2</sup>, which came into force in 1995 in the eight countries bordering the Alps. Although not every member has ratified the different protocols of the Convention<sup>3</sup>, the agreement made it possible to sketch a map of the region, thereby, defining its limits. The Alpine region is therefore recognised as being inside the territorial limits outlined by the Convention. And it is precisely inside this area that a new space of action has been created. One consequence stemming from the nature of the Convention, which is an international treaty, is that the actors leading

the process actually come from outside the Alps. Some scholars have noted, not without some criticism, the "colonial manner" (Bätzing 1994: 186) in which the Convention and the different protocols were established. Bätzing pointed out that the Convention was made in Rome, Bonn, and Paris, but not in the Alps.

On the other hand, this "scaling down" process is accompanied by numerous other initiatives that are more local in nature. Since the 1990s, a variety of transnational networks were initiated in the Alps, which are linking different actors such as businesses, municipalities, protected areas, cities, ski resorts, and so on. If CIPRA played an important role in stimulating the birth of these networks, the involvement of local leaders is central to the success of their initiatives. The aim of these networks, i.e. the implementation of the Alpine Convention's principles at a local level, is to mitigate one of the major criticisms of the treaty, namely that it is an "ineffective paper tiger" (Balsiger 2007: 5).

The result of this "pan-Alpine activism" (Debarbieux 2008b: 40) is the evolution of an Alpine regional identity for collective action<sup>4</sup> through an "ecoregional institutionalization" process (Balsiger 2007: 4). The prefix "eco" can be understood in two different ways: on the one hand the Alps can be seen as a natural, mountain region; on the other hand, the initiatives undertaken in the Alps, thanks to the input of the Alpine Convention, aim at the creation of a territory "under the umbrella of sustainable development" (Balsiger 2007: 4), a concept which is constantly used by the Alpine actors (Debarbieux & Rudaz 2008: 504). In that sense, the Alpine region emerges, as highlighted by Debarbieux, under the double effect of collective actions which refer to these representations (Debarbieux 2008b: 52). More generally we can say that "a transalpine identity has emerged to reinforce the regional institutional architecture" (Balsiger 2007: 5). Norer, with an enlightening German word, speaks about a growing "Alpenbewusstseins"<sup>5</sup> (2002: 5) based on the shared representation of nature, among other things.

The authors quoted in the last paragraphs refer to different notions to capture the contemporary evolution occurring in the Alps. They use the concepts of "institutionalization", "identity", "representation", "region". In the following chapter I would like to discuss these concepts and how they are related in order to build a theoretical framework capable of uncovering the processes de-

scribed above. The goal is to know if (and how) the Alps are undergoing a “regional institutionalization” process, in the manner that Anssi Paasi describes it, which is “a sociospatial process in which a territorial unit emerges as part of the spatial structure of the society concerned, becomes established and identified in various spheres of social action and consciousness, and may eventually vanish or deinstitutionalize in regional transformation” (Paasi 1991: 243). In that sense, regions cannot be considered as frozen and static, but instead as a “consequence of a complex process of reproduction, production and creation of space” (Raagmaa 2002: 56) under the effect of changing social relations (Gilbert 1988: 216). In that way, there is a connection between the “spatial” (region, the French *territoire* and place) and identity. This link will be explored in the following paragraphs by using the concept of “regional identity”.

## Identity and *territoire*<sup>6</sup>

It is widely assumed in the scientific community that regions are socially constructed (Bourdieu 1980; Murphy 1991; Allen et al. 1998; MacLeod 2001; Fall 2003; Gonon & Laserre 2003; Debarbieux 2004a; Debarbieux 2004b; Balsiger 2006; Häkli 2008; Debarbieux & Rudaz 2010). Therefore, the focus in regional studies must be placed on the process of “contingency and becoming” (Painter 2008: 343). Regions and regional identity are in that sense both “resources for, and the outcomes of, human action”. Or, as Paasi writes, “regions are simultaneously both products and constituents in social action” (2002b: 200). Referring to Paasi, there is a link between identity and social action, since, as he points out, regions and regional identity are social facts that can generate action, as long as people believe in them (2002a: 139). Thus, the building of regions has to be considered as a dialectical process. On the one hand, it contributes to social action and, on the other hand, it is a construct built by social practices and discourses. Therefore, a strong link of co-construction between identity and places can be emphasized. In fact, one cannot look at identity only as an individual or social category, but rather, it should also be acknowledged as a spatial category (Paasi 2001: 10).

In that sense, as the French geographer Di Méo argues, the *territoire* forms the visible and readable figure of social identity, because it can be mapped

and its limits can be drawn. It is therefore the tangible object of an immaterial social reality (Di Méo 2002: 178). Di Méo, in the same article, adds that identity leans on cut and delimited *territoires* for a precise purpose. Identity uses *territoires* as an efficient bond of social groups. Following Di Méo, the *territoire* gives to identity a material consistency made by signs and symbols which are inserted in objects, things, landscapes and places (Di Méo 2002: 175). For this reason, identity cannot exist in individuals, but develops, grows and changes with social interactions (Pohl 2004: 12918). As Pohl suggests, the culture, tradition, landscape, and history form regional identity, and are also part of it. In the Alps, the distinctiveness of the Alpine territory, its landscape and its topographic specificities seem to be powerful engines for collective action, which, in turn, helps to build a common identity. Working together with the goal of protecting the mountain *territoire*, local actors share experiences and know-how through their networks, but also common representations of Alpine nature and society. Thanks to this shared identity, they act to construct the Alps as they imagine them: a *territoire* shaped by sustainable development.

## Searching for alternatives for the “identity catchword”

The concept of “shared identity”, as pointed out by numerous authors in recent decades became a “catchword” (Häkli 2001: 115), something “indefinable” (Bray 2002: 14) or “ambiguous” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 2). So, how do we truly grasp it? Instead of discussing here the relevance of the concept, I propose a way to capture it, by using three notions coined by the sociologists Gilles Laferté and Martina Avanza. In their proposals, partly a response to Brubaker’s famous article “Beyond ‘identity’” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000), Laferté and Avanza suggest looking at identity distinguishing three senses of it: *identification*, *social image* and *belonging*. I will answer, presenting their theory, the following questions: how can these three concepts help us understand the Alpine process? And how can they be linked to the notion of *regional* identity?

Avanza and Laferté define these concepts as follows:

- *Identification* can be qualified as social action where identity attribution is external and practiced on individuals within a social institution,

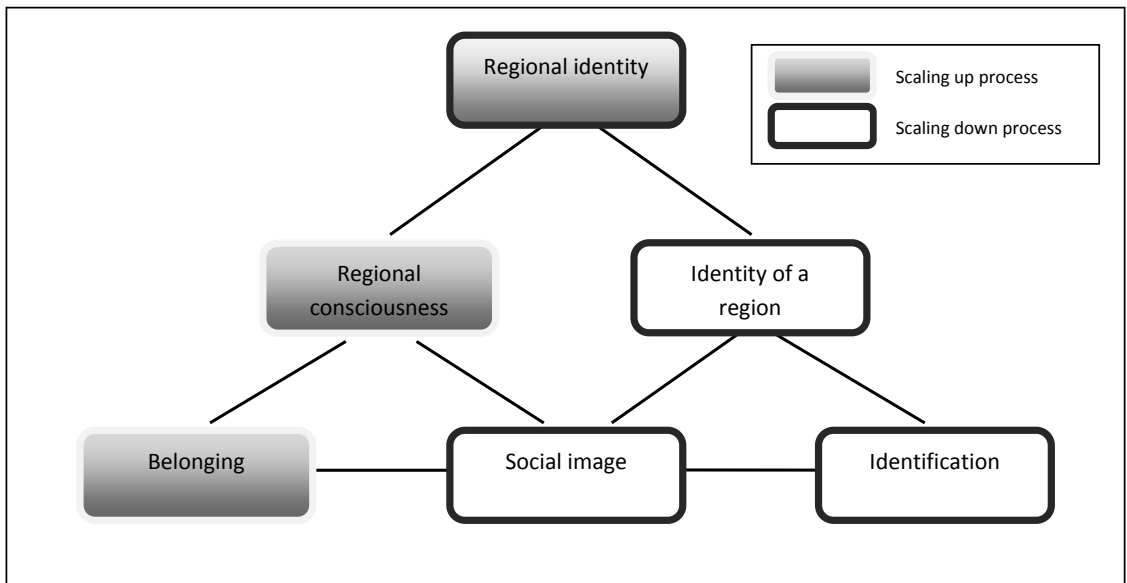


Fig. 1. Regional identity.

following a codified technique (Avanza & Laferté 2005: 144). Notably, the most emblematic actor of the process of identification is the state while attributing categories (Avanza & Laferté 2005: 144). Nevertheless, the authors do not identify the bureaucratic apparatus as the only one capable of classifying persons and societies;

- The *social image* concerns the social production of discourses and symbols (representations), which designates *territoires* and groups (Avanza & Laferté 2005: 143);
- *Belonging* defines the participation of people to the collective “thing” and to the group (Avanza & Laferté 2005: 144).

The distinction of these three concepts of identity is useful if applied to the Alpine case. The combination of Avanza and Laferté’s theory with Paasi’s institutionalization of regions gives a territorial basis to the sociological distinctions of identity made by Avanza and Laferté. For the specific case of the Alps, this helps to clearly identify the different actors (and their actions) involved in the complex process of the Alpine regionalization.

Paasi distinguishes two facets forming the so-called “regional identity” (Paasi 1986: 131–138, 2002a: 146, 2009: 469). On the one hand is *regional consciousness*, which indicates the identifi-

cation of inhabitants within a specific region. On the other is the *identity of a region* which “refers to such features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish a region from others” (Paasi 2009: 469). In that way, and following Paasi, discourses on identity of regions are typically discourses by scientists, politicians, administrators, cultural activists or entrepreneurs, whose aim is to make a distinction between “their” region and that of “the others”.

In order to clarify the links between the two coupled theories (Fig. 1), I propose following this structure and discussing it with the help of the Alpine example. These combined concepts will bring out the different actors involved in the regionalization process and the actions they undertake to achieve it.

As explained in the preceding paragraphs, the *identification* process of the Alpine region was undertaken mostly by scientists (Debarbieux 2008b: 43) and politicians with a “scaling down” approach, notably during the constitution of the Alpine Convention (Bätzing 1994). In the identification process, the Alpine non-governmental organization CIPRA, and the International Scientific Committee on Research in the Alps (ISCAR), both also played key roles. From a theoretical point of view, the concept of *identification* refers to the

*identity of a region* as both allude to the attempt by different actors to objectivise the “self” in comparison to the “other”. If Avanza and Laferté allude first of all to sociological characters, their theory can also be applied to characters and elements used to objectivise regions (nature, topography, culture, etc.), as Paasi proposes with the concept of “identity of a region”. In our case study, the dramatic topographical and microclimatic complexity of the Alps, that set them apart from other ecosystems (Balsiger 2007: 29) is often highlighted. Martin Price (1999: 88) shares the opinion of Balsiger while declaring that the Alpine Convention contributes to the recognition that the Alps are a region with distinct environmental and cultural characteristics.

The *social image* implies a representation of the Alps that promoters of the Alpine initiatives espouse and convey to the broader population. This is clearly linked to the concept of “sustainable development”. This principle is integrated in the Alpine Convention, as described by CIPRA: “The Alpine Convention is an agreement between various countries for the protection and sustainable development of the Alpine region”<sup>7</sup>, and permanently used as reference by the local networks, whose members, “together with their citizens, strive to develop their Alpine living environment in a sustainable way”<sup>8</sup>. As Debarbieux analyses, the Alpine Convention and the actors who identify themselves with it, try to generalize sustainable development at the entire mountain range level. In so far, the image of the Alps that the local leaders share, contributes to shape their *regional consciousness*, in the name of which they act. As confirmed by Debarbieux, these actions are motivated by a certain representation of the quality of the Alpine environment (2008a: 101). Therefore, we can say that there is, indeed, a shared image of the Alpine nature among local actors, who try to steer all human activity in the Alps on a sustainable path (Balsiger 2007: 15). The concept of *social image*, thus, has some commonality with that of *identity of the region*, since it helps, as does the concept of *social image*, to highlight the special characteristics of a particular region which are to be protected. This link between the two concepts is not direct, but mediated through the representation the actors have from the *identity of the region* and thanks to which they implement their actions and projects.

The first impressions drawn from reading and listening to the discourses of local leaders I inter-

viewed, is that they share an image of the Alps as being, on the one hand, “beautiful and extraordinary”, and on the other, particularly “fragile” place. In that sense, the networks are seen as a possible innovative medium to solve “common Alpine problems” and are an important way for “seek[ing] strategic advantage” (Häkli 2008: 475). This leads, as Martin Price emphasizes, to the recognition that various issues cannot be solved through national legislation, and that coordinated regional initiatives are indispensable to solving common problems (Price 1999: 88). The image of a fragile and shared mountain environment makes local leaders act at a transnational level, and thereby to contribute to what Jouni Häkli calls a “politics of bridge”, where “one seeks to appropriate the unifying rather than the separating aspect of the mountains” (Häkli 2004: 65). Although a shared image of the Alps seems to be present amongst Alpine leaders, there is disagreement about the actions that should be lead at the pan-Alpine level, as well as the form that pan-Alpine networks should take. In a previous paper, I called this discord a “dilemma between technical links and political influence” (Del Biaggio 2009: 109). The debate surrounding this question implies defining the role of the networks, the primary objective of which is the sharing of experience. However, certain leaders express their wish, not necessarily shared by others, to go beyond simple exchanges on technical points and to develop a political voice for the Alps that reaches beyond its frontiers to the state level, and even the European Union (Del Biaggio 2009: 109).

The sense of *belonging* involves an analysis, as with the concept of *regional consciousness*, at the inhabitant’s level. Even if my research is not focused on Alpine inhabitants, but more at the leader and network level, the initial results clearly show a lack of involvement by the population in the development of the networks, and in the creation of pan-Alpine institutions. This occurs despite the major pan-Alpine networks efforts to stress the importance of the population’s involvement in their activities. Alparc underlines the “environmental education and awareness-raising targeting the general public” as two key components of its role<sup>9</sup>. The *Charter of Alliance in the Alps* includes a principle called “participation of the population”, which clearly underlines the active role that the population should have in the implementation of the pan-Alpine goals at the local level. So, the question can be raised about the capacity of the

local leaders to pass the pan-Alpine consciousness and engagement to the population. The initial results of my research show that there is a clear gap between the two levels. Specifically, the entire process seems to be firmly in the hands of the leaders (Del Biaggio 2009). This confirms what Häkli discovered in the Pyrenees, which is that the majority of the population living on both sides of the mountain range are still linked to their local political community, and do not see the development of the transboundary region as a whole (Häkli 2004: 65–66). The Alpine and the Pyrenean examples seem to add further credence to the statement made by Sidaway and based on a study in the border region between Spain and Portugal, that different “visions” of the relations between politics and territory coexist (Sidaway 2001: 771).

The first two concepts, *identification* and *social image*, entail a process which can be considered as “scaling down”. In fact, they are in the hands of some scientific and political leaders acting at the pan-Alpine level, promoting actions that should reach the Alpine nature and population. The concept of *belonging* is integrated in a “scaling up” approach, in which the feeling of belonging to a common region, the Alps, should bring people to act in the name of it. The articulation of the three (*belonging*, *social image*, *identification*) represents a useful research approach – one designed to identify the different actors (and their actions) involved in the process occurring in the contemporary Alpine region. It helps to grasp the “indefinable” and “ambiguous” concept of identity and regional identity. Indeed, in the construction of the pan-Alpine region and of the resulting Alpine regional identity, three major actors can be distinguished. They play a specific role in the construction of an Alpine regional identity: the scientists and Alpine NGOs which identify the Alpine region as such; the local leaders and the promoters of the pan-Alpine initiatives who contribute to communicating a certain image of the Alps and its related projects; and finally, the population, which is supposed to act in the name of a pan-Alpine consciousness.

### The crisis of the nested spaces

The combination of sense of belonging, social image and identification applied to the process of regional institutionalization demonstrates how new places, as regions, are imagined and built. In

the Alps, and in other European regions, this occurs while the nation-state seems to lose power in favour of new actors (Agnew 2001: 6; Häkli 2004).

Presently, it is difficult to answer with an unanimous “yes” the question raised by Di Méo (2002: 177): “Do we belong to one social group, to one *territoire*?”, since in the contemporary world every person can have broader social and spatial experiences. In that sense, it is possible to pretend that, as Debarbieux does, spatialities and temporalities are multiple and heterogeneous. The emergence of new actors weakens the pertinence of the so-called “magical triangle” (Debarbieux 2006: 345), which assumes the superimposition between culture, *territoire* and identity. The new and complex combination of actors and spaces makes it impossible to analyse the new modes of governance with the ancient model of the “nested territorial politics” (Debarbieux 2006: 345–352). Instead, we can affirm, as Brenner does, that we are facing “re-scaled territorialities” (Brenner, in Amin 2002: 387), a “proliferation of scales and scalar complexity” (Amin 2002: 387), where “nation-states become less and less satisfactory as units of analysis” (Hannerz 1996: 48). Or, as Chris Rumford summarizes it, society and the nation-state do not inevitably inhabit the same space (2006: 163).

This leaves space for new forms of identities and collaborations. As Keating points out, a renegotiation of identities and the emergence of layered identities is possible thanks to more porous borders (2003: 11). As Paasi clearly states in a recent article, we are facing a “proliferation of discursively constituted and institutionally materialized and embedded spatial scales” (2009: 467). This is due to, as Paasi shows, increasing “tangled hierarchies”, with different temporalities and spatialities. This allows the Finnish geographer to say that new places, new spaces and new scales of organization are being created, which enable new actions.

In the European context, it is interesting to see that the European Union, thanks to its cross-border cooperation programmes, gave rise to new forms of regionalism, and thereby, to new forms of regional identities (Agnew 2001: 107). As discussed before, it is possible to consider the Alps as being created with help of two types of initiatives, on the one hand the initiatives undertaken by the local leaders and networks and, on the other, the important catalyst of the European Union, as promoter of transnational projects. As seen before, these projects can take a territorial form, with the con-

struction of new places and new institutional contexts designed to better reflect the scale of belonging of the population and its leaders.

I would like to conclude this section with a symbolic quote by Leitner, who conceptualizes the way in which new types of cooperation, not linked to the old territorial units, can give rise to regional governance: "Transnational networks represent new modes of coordination and governance, a new politics of horizontal relations that also have a distinct spatiality. Whereas the spatiality of a politics of scale is associated with vertical relations among nested territorially defined political entities, by contrast, networks span space rather than covering it, transgressing the boundaries that separate and define these political entities" (Leitner, in Jones et al. 2005: 417). In the following section, I will give more details on the potential links between territorial projects detached from nested spaces (as networks) and regional governance.

### **The materialization of regional identity in institutions and governance**

As we have seen, regional identity can be a useful tool to further understanding the Alpine regionalization process. In the following paragraphs the emphasis will be placed on how these identities are likely to materialize in an institutional form. In other words, I will answer the following question: what can we expect from these new territorial and institutional reconfigurations? A good answer is given by Gordon MacLeod (1998: 840), who comments on the theory of regional institutionalization, saying that in the contemporary world, the theory of the institutionalization of regions may provide useful elements in order to understand the emergence of particular socially cohesive territories, their institutionalization and their establishment as specific sites for political governance. Thus the region has the opportunity to become a space of political governance, where regional identity could play an important role, since it is the basic component for the creation of new spaces of identification and belonging. Regional identity can materialize in new institutionalized regions, or, as Balsiger underlines it with the Alpine case, in "new forms of expression for democratic legitimacy and accountability" (Balsiger 2007: 5).

Anssi Paasi, in his regional institutionalization's theory, emphasizes four steps of the process that

allow territorial units to pass from the stage of "regions on paper" to "regions of social practice" (Paasi 2002b: 200). In that sense, it seems plausible to formulate the hypothesis that the Alpine region is following this same path. As we have seen, the "territorial shape" can be identified by the Alpine Convention's boundaries, the "symbolic and conceptual shape" can be recognised in the importance given to the value of sustainable development. Moreover the Alpine region is developing an important structure of institutions, as is evidenced by the establishment of networks by local actors. This is confirmed by the observations of Bernard Debarbieux, who thinks that the different Alpine initiatives bring about a "process of political institutionalization, in particular under the form of lobbies, which aim to influence deliberative and democratic processes in the name of a legitimacy acquired with help of widely shared social identities" (2008a: 101). As discussed before, the question of whether we can speak about a proper "establishment of a region" as part of the "spatial structure and social consciousness of the society" (Paasi 1991: 246) is still open. This might be possible in the future, if the Alps, as other cross-border regions, are able to turn from "regions in discourses" and "on paper" into "regions as social practice" with concrete effects on the daily life of people (Paasi 2002b: 200).

An institutionalized region, as I just described it, also has important affinities with the idea of governance. This is particularly true in an European context where it is possible to think in terms of "multi-level governance" (Perkmann 1999: 665) and where local actors' networks and cross-border regions play an important role. Following Jessop, governance can be defined as ways in which disparate but interdependent social agencies are coordinated to achieve specific social objectives, so that one can define the field of governance studies as concerned with the resolution of (para-)political problems in and through specific configurations of governmental (hierarchical) and extra-governmental (non-hierarchical) institutions, organizations and practices (Jessop 1995: 317). This definition can be successfully applied to the Alpine institutions, which are clearly defining a collective goal, which is to build a space of Alpine "transnational regional sustainable development" (Balsiger 2007: 15), following a "model of multi-actor cooperation" (Balsiger 2007: 33; Debarbieux 2008b: 40).

In the specific case of the Alpine region, the role of reticular initiatives seems particularly impor-



tant. The existing Alpine networks have been created thanks to the initiative of CIPRA, with the aim of finding specific tools to implement the Alpine Convention (Balsiger 2007: 28). Thanks to financial support from INTERREG programmes for the so called "Alpine Space", the networks could realize a considerable number of projects<sup>10</sup>. With these programmes, the European Union tried to promote cross-border cooperation inside Europe, and in doing so, "a move towards new forms of rule" (Keating 2003: 2) came into existence. O'Dowd highlights the fact that INTERREG programmes allowed the transnational regions to assume a pioneering role, so that regions considered peripheral can now be seen as the heart of a new European space (O'Dowd in: McNeill 2004: 155).

Networks of local actors seem to have played an important role for the re-negotiation of collective identities: "Co-operation projects as INTERREG have helped redefine borders as complex zones in which multiple identities can be expressed and negotiated" (Bray, in Keating 2003: 12). But, what is a network? A good way to further understand the reality of networks is captured in the following definition by Balsiger: "[Networks are] ties between actors on the basis of their common relationship to 'events'. Events can include actual joint participation in events such as social gatherings or professional conferences, or co-membership in organizations or coalitions" (Balsiger 2006: 12). Balsiger proposes a link between networks and what he calls "events". These allow the involved actors to share common interests and are likely to last over time. To push the implication of actors in a longer scenario, it is possible to say, as Vertovec (2001: 573) does, that "some networks are marked by patterns of communication or exchange of resources and information along with participation in socio-cultural and political activities". The impression is that Alpine leaders promote two kinds of actions: on the one hand they promote socio-cultural activities and projects, but, at the same time, they embark on a project that is eminently political.

New actors, or new bodies of actors, chose new scales and new spaces of belonging that are more relevant to successfully promoting their collective action. Markus Perkmann makes the explicit link, already emphasized above, between transnational cooperation and new forms of governance. He starts his article by diminishing the impact of networking on governance, affirming that there is a tendency to "overemphasize cross-border regions

as emerging territorial units equipped with self-governing capacities" (Perkmann 1999: 660). For Perkmann, this kind of cooperation only has a positive financial impact. Although the author is critical about the long-term effects of cross-border cooperation, he underscores an important point that cannot be underestimated and that moderates his initial point of view: "Cross-border cooperation governance is in fact helping to create new opportunities for actors that might change their strategic landscape both on a border, as well as on European level" (Perkmann 1999: 661). In other words, cross-border cooperation can create opportunities for "new spaces and scales of action". Jouni Häkli resumes this idea affirming that cross-border regionalization can challenge the state through the new scalar constructs (2008: 475). Häkli continues by saying that "emerging transnational political spaces can be conceptualized as scales that help actors to skirt the traditional state-centred patterns of networking. Transnational scales, then, are produced and reproduced in processes that set alternative perimeters to networks of cooperation between actors who seek strategic advantage from this cooperation" (2008: 475).

Although Perkmann, in contraposition to Häkli, does not see how transborder regions could challenge the domination of nation-states, he concludes his article writing that "cross-border cooperation is symptomatic of the newly emerging European policy characterized by the operation of cross-level networks encouraged by Structural Funds" (Perkmann 1999: 665). European practices which have been implemented in the recent decades allow us to conceptualize of the European space as a place where a multi-level governance exists, and where political action can be done on new scales, not limited by the traditional historical spatial grid. In that sense "cross-border cooperation has fostered the development of governance disconnected from politics rooted in national territories" (Häkli 2004: 65).

Balsiger sees the same evolution in the Alps, and describes in the following manner, how the Alpine transborder region can contribute to take new forms of governance inside the European context: "The Alpine Convention represents an international initiative characterized by three features that may contribute to theory building and governance reform. The first of these relates to its ecoregional but comprehensive sustainable development scope, the second to its process-based ap-

proach to the framework protocol model of international agreement, and the third to its permeability to nonstate actor influence" (Balsiger 2007: 29). We discussed the first and third features, the second is not central to this paper, as it is more about the way in which the Convention and its protocols were discussed and put into force. What is important to recall is that the combination of these three features enables the Alpine initiatives to participate in the process of institutionalization.

## Conclusion

In this paper I explored the link between identity and *territoire*, giving particular focus to the contemporary debate on the definition of these two concepts. Having discussed how we may think about these two fundamental notions for geography, it is easier to understand the debates on regional identity. A main distinction, suggested by Paasi, was made between the *regional consciousness* and the *identity of regions* included in the more general concept of *regional identity*. The contribution of Martina Avanza and Gilles Laferté on the discussions about "identity", distinguishing the notion of *identification* from the concepts of *social image* and *belonging*, is particularly interesting in order to capture the different actors and processes of regional building and multi-level governance in Europe in general, and in the Alps in particular. The analysis of regional institutionalization gains on comprehension if it is broken up into the three components of identity distinguished by Avanza and Laferté (*identification*, *social image* and *belonging*). In that way, the role of each component in the regionalization process can be identified and the different facets of identity emphasized. Thanks to these concepts, the role of the actors involved in the process of Alpine regionalization were put forward.

The *identification* process and the production of *social image* in the Alpine region were discussed in the paper. The positive role of leaders and NGOs in the implementation of their main project, primarily the application of the principles of sustainable development in the entire Alpine arc, was highlighted. Having identified the area of action (the perimeter of the Alpine Convention), Alpine leaders are acting based on the image of the Alps they wish to implement. The building of different kinds of transnational networks is one of the favoured and uncontested forms that leaders use to

give concrete expression to this image. Although the main objective seems to be clear, some disagreements among the local leaders in how to pursue them were emphasized. This, among other debates, leads to what I called the "dilemma between technical link and political influence".

Concerning the discussion about regional *belonging*, an important question was raised in the paper related to the role of the population in the creation of transborder regions. Häkli (2004: 65–66), bringing examples from the Pyrenees context, declares that: "A vast majority of the population of these border regions remain connected to their local political communities and everyday concerns instead of viewing the development of the cross-border region as a whole". Some preliminary results from the Alps (Del Biaggio 2009) noted the lack of participation by the entire population in the Alpine region and is corroborated by other experts on the Alps (Debarbieux & Rudaz 2008: 513). The participation of the broader population in transborder spaces is particularly important in order to enable the shift from "regions on paper" to "regions of social practice" (Paasi 2002b: 200); or, as underscored with the three conceptions of "identity" coined by Avanza and Laferté, in order to be able to talk about *belonging* and not just in terms of *social image* and *identification* while speaking about regional identity. And if, as Häkli (2008: 477) wrote, "in the long run the success of major political innovations will depend on their appeal among the 'ordinary people'", the path seems to be still quite long before a "new political space" can be observed in the Alps, as long as the re-bordering process is elite-driven.

Even if these processes do not concern the entire Alpine population, one should not underestimate a development that could constitute "something" important, not yet defined, for the future of the Alpine territory. The Alps could be an emblematic *chantier*, transforming the Alps from a peripheral border region to a "pivotal space of integration" (Sidaway 2001: 749). In conclusion, with this paper I presented theoretical tools that helped me to recognize how regional identity contributes to the process of regional institutionalization occurring in the Alps. In that regard, so far, it may be easier to answer the question raised by Jouni Häkli about the "possible erosion of the nation-state, the rise of the region, and the uncertain future of cross-border governance" (2008: 476). However, important questions remain for further discussion and studies: what kind of regional governance will

the Alps face in the coming years? Is it possible to say, as Häkli argued concerning Catalonia, that in the Alps cross-border governance means “governing the mountain” (Häkli 2004: 60)?

#### DISCLAIMER

All the translated citations are my own translations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Jörg Balsiger for giving consent to use his draft versions of papers. Thanks to Jörn Harfst and Mathieu Petite for their useful comments. I am also grateful to the two anonymous referees whose comments were very helpful in developing this paper. A warm thanks to Gabriela Velásquez Orner, who kindly corrected my English.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <[www.alpconv.org/theconvention/index\\_en](http://www.alpconv.org/theconvention/index_en)> 20.08.2010.

<sup>2</sup> For an historical overview of the Convention: Bätzing 1994; Price 1999; Norer 2002; Balsiger 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2010, the Swiss Parliament voted against the ratification of the nine protocols of the Alpine Convention by a vote of 102 to 76. This demonstrates that the battle for sustainable development in the Alps has not yet gained traction in all of the Alpine countries.

<sup>4</sup> A special issue of the *Journal Alpine Research* is dedicated to this question (articles downloadable in French and English at <<http://rga.revues.org/index853.html>>, 12.08.2009).

<sup>5</sup> This concept can be translated in English as “Alpine awareness”.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *territoire* is not used here as a specific notion designing the equivalent of the state as used in geopolitics, which denominates the “delimited space of governing” (Giraut 2008: 59–60). The concept of *territoire*/territory has a different history and therefore different meanings in the French and Anglo-American geographical traditions, and I will therefore use, without entering into the epistemological debate, the French term “*territoire*” (“territory”) and consider it in a non-specific way. Unfortunately, there are only French publications at this time on the debate between French and Anglo-American meanings of this concept, among them: Debarbieux 1999; Giraut 2008.

<sup>7</sup> <[www.cipra.org/en/alpenkonvention](http://www.cipra.org/en/alpenkonvention)> 17.08.2009.

<sup>8</sup> <[www.alpenallianz.org/en/about-alliance-in-the-alps](http://www.alpenallianz.org/en/about-alliance-in-the-alps)> 17.08.2009.

<sup>9</sup> <[www.alparc.org/index.php/our-actions/environmental-education-and-awareness-raising](http://www.alparc.org/index.php/our-actions/environmental-education-and-awareness-raising)> 20.09.2010.

<sup>10</sup> For example, for the two oldest Alpine networks (Alliance in the Alps and the Alpine Network of Protected Areas) these INTERREG projects can be mentioned: Dynalp 1 and 2 (<[www.alpenallianz.org/en/projects](http://www.alpenallianz.org/en/projects)>) and the ALPENCOM (<[www.alpencom.org/pages/index.php](http://www.alpencom.org/pages/index.php)>).

#### REFERENCES

- Agnew J 2001. Regions in revolt. *Progress in human geography* 25: 1, 103–110.
- Allen J, Massey D & Cochrane A 1998. *Rethinking the region*. Routledge, London.
- Amin A 2002. Spatialities and globalisation. *Environment and Planning A* 34, 385–399.
- Avanza M & Laferté G 2005. Dépasser la ‘construction des identités’? Identification, image sociale, appartenance. *Genèses* 61, 134–152.
- Balsiger J 2006. Regional identity and resource policy effectiveness: Sustainable mountain development in the Swiss Alps and California’s Sierra Nevada. <[http://www.eui.eu/Personal/Fellows/balsiger/docs/balsiger\\_bc2006.pdf](http://www.eui.eu/Personal/Fellows/balsiger/docs/balsiger_bc2006.pdf)> 15.08.2009.
- Balsiger J 2007. Regionalism reconsidered: the Alpine Convention as a model of earth system governance. Paper presented at the 2007 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change, May 24–26. <[www.2007amsterdamconference.org/papers.htm#top](http://www.2007amsterdamconference.org/papers.htm#top)> 15.08.2009.
- Bourdieu P 1980. L’identité et la représentation. Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l’idée de région. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 35, 63–72.
- Bray Z 2002. *Boundaries and identities in Bidasoa-Txingudi, on the Franco-Spanish frontier*. PhD Thesis presented at the European University Institute, Department of political and social sciences.
- Brubaker R & Cooper F 2000. Beyond ‘identity’. *Theory and Society* 29, 1–47.
- Bätzing W 1994. Die Alpenkonvention – ein internationales Vertragswerk für eine nachhaltige Alpenentwicklung auf dem mühevollen Weg der politischen Realisierung. In Franz H (ed). *Gefährdung und Schutz der Alpen*, 185–204. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna.
- Debarbieux B 1999. Le territoire: histoires en deux langues. A bilingual (his-)story of territory. In Chivallon C, Ragouet P & Samers M (eds). *Discours scientifiques et contextes culturels: Géographies françaises et britanniques à l’épreuve post-moderne*, 33–46. Maison des sciences de l’homme d’Aquitaine, Bordeaux.
- Debarbieux B 2004a. De l’objet spatial à l’effet géographique. Présentation générale. In Debarbieux B & Fourny M-C (eds). *L’effet géographique: construction sociale, appréhension cognitive et*

- configuration matérielle des objets géographiques, 11–33. Maison des sciences de l'homme-Alpes, Grenoble.
- Debarbieux B 2004b. The symbolic order of objects and the frame of geographical action. *GeoJournal* 60, 397–405.
- Debarbieux B 2006. Prendre position: réflexions sur les ressources et les limites de la notion d'identité en géographie. *L'Espace Géographique* 4, 340–354.
- Debarbieux B 2008a. Construits identitaires et imaginaires de la territorialité: variations autour de la figure du «montagnard». *Annales de géographie* 660–661, 90–115.
- Debarbieux B 2008b. Cultures et Politiques dans les Alpes contemporaines : enjeux de société, de spatialité et de réflexivité. *Revue de Géographie Alpine* 96: 4, 37–52.
- Debarbieux B & Rudaz G 2008. Linking mountain identities throughout the world: the experience of Swiss communities. *Cultural geographies* 15, 497–517.
- Debarbieux B & Rudaz G 2010. *Les faiseurs de montagne*. CNRS Editions, Paris.
- Del Biaggio C 2009. The institutionalization of the alpine region: an analysis based on a study of two pan-alpine networks (Alliance in the Alps and Alparc). *Journal of Alpine Research* 97: 2.
- Di Méo G 2002. L'identité: une médiation essentielle du rapport espace/société. *Géocarrefour* 77: 2, 175–184.
- Fall JJ 2003. Planning protected areas across boundaries: new paradigms and old ghosts. *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 17: 1–2, 81–102.
- Gilbert A 1988. The new regional geography in English and French-speaking countries. *Progress in Human Geography* 12, 208–228.
- Giraut F 2008. Conceptualiser le territoire. *Historiens & Géographes* 403: 9, 57–67.
- Gonon E & Lasserre F 2003. Une critique de la notion de frontières artificielles à travers le cas de l'Asie centrale. *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec* 47: 132, 433–461.
- Hannerz U 1996. *Transnational connections*. Routledge, London.
- Häkli J 2001. The politics of belonging: complexities of identity in the Catalan borderlands. *Geografiska Annaler* 83B: 3, 111–119.
- Häkli J 2004. Governing the mountains. Cross-border regionalization in Catalonia. In Kramsch O & Hooper B (eds). *Cross-border governance in the European Union*, 56–69. Routledge, London & New York.
- Häkli J 2008. Re-bordering spaces. In Cox KR, Low M & Robinson J (eds). *Handbook of political geography*, 471–482. Sage, London.
- Jessop B 1995. The regulation approach, governance and post-Fordism: Alternative perspectives on economic and political change? *Economy and Society* 24: 3, 307–333.
- Jones JP, Woodward K & Marston SA 2005. Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30: 4, 416–432.
- Keating M 2003. European integration and the nationalities question. *Politics & Society* 32: 3, 1–20.
- MacLeod G 1998. In what sense a region? Place hybridity, symbolic shape, and institutional formation in (post-)modern Scotland. *Political Geography* 17: 7, 833–863.
- MacLeod G 2001. New regionalism reconsidered: globalization and the remaking of political economic space. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25: 4, 804–829.
- McNeill D 2004. *New Europe: imagined spaces*. Hodder Arnold, London.
- Murphy AB 1991. Regions as social constructs: the gap between theory and practice. *Progress in Human Geography* 15: 1, 22–35.
- Norer R 2002. *Die Alpenkonvention. Völkerrechtliches Vertragswerk für den Alpenraum*, Institut für Wirtschaft, Politik und Recht. Universität für Bodenkultur Wien, Vienna. Diskussionspapier Nr. 93-R-02. <[www.boku.ac.at/wpr/wpr\\_dp/dp-93.pdf](http://www.boku.ac.at/wpr/wpr_dp/dp-93.pdf)> 16.09.2009.
- Paasi A 1986. The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of regions and the constitution of regional identity. *Fennia* 164, 105–146.
- Paasi A 1991. Deconstructing regions: notes on the scales of spatial life. *Environment and Planning A* 23, 239–256.
- Paasi A 1996. Inclusion, exclusion and territorial identities. The meanings of boundaries in the globalizing geopolitical landscape. *Nordisk Samhällsgeografisk Tidskrift* 23, 6–23.
- Paasi A 2001. Europe as a social process and discourse. Considerations of place, boundaries and identity. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8: 1, 7–28.
- Paasi A 2002a. Bounded spaces in the mobile world: deconstructing “regional identity”. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93: 2, 137–148.
- Paasi A 2002b. Regional transformation in the European Context: Notes on regions, boundaries and identity. *Space & Polity* 6: 2, 197–201.
- Paasi A 2009. Regions and regional dynamics. In Rumford C (ed). *The SAGE Handbook of European Studies*, 464–484. Sage, London.
- Painter J 2008. Cartographic anxiety and the search for regionality. *Environment and Planning A* 40: 2, 342–361.
- Perkmann M 1999. Building governance institutions across European borders. *Regional Studies* 33: 7, 657–667.
- Pohl J 2004. Regional identity. In Smelser NJ & Baltes PB (eds). *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*, 12917–12922. Elsevier, Amsterdam.

- Price MF 1999. Towards co-operation across mountain frontiers: the Alpine Convention. *European Environment* 9, 83–89.
- Raagmaa G 2002. Regional identity in regional development planning. *European Planning Studies* 10: 1, 55–76.
- Rumford C 2006. Theorizing borders. Introduction. *European Journal of Social Theory* 9: 2, 155–169.
- Sidaway DJ 2001. Rebuilding bridges: a critical geopolitics of Iberian transfrontier cooperation in a European context 19, 743–778.
- Vertovec S 2001. Transnationalism and identity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27: 4, 573–582.