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# *Everyday Cultures* Working Papers

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BUILDING THE REGION  
Culture and Territory in the  
South West of England

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## **About the author**

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## **Editorial Presentation**

In this issue of *Everyday Cultures* Bernard Deacon discusses his pilot research project developed in 2001 with funding from the National Everyday Cultures Programme (NECP). The title of his paper is: 'Building the region: culture and territory in the South West of England'. The title reflects the ongoing process of regional cultural development linked to the active political process of creating regions.

How is the discourse of region constructed in the everyday of the regional institutions? What are the consequences of this discourse for the regional project? How does this discourse relate to other discourses in the region? The paper is concerned with the south west of England since 1997, at the time of the election of the (New) Labour government. The analysis is based on interviews carried out with officers at various levels and in different bodies of government, political parties, and with activists. Documentary evidence is also used.

Deacon explores how ideas of 'region' are a feature of the spatial ordering in a 'top down' process. Yet, he shows how institutions produce images of space in an ordinary way, as certain images about the region become shared assumptions among the professional policy-makers. A particular version of the everyday is enclosed and framed, giving a version of the region and its culture. Within this framework, Deacon considers how cultural meanings can in themselves produce social action. He finds tension between a regional image (as imaginations of place) and a regional cultural identity (made up of a series of local hierarchical identities). While officers locate the regional community in a particular space, they exclude other sectors, for whom the everyday images of leisure, tourism and selected aspects of 'quality of life' have no meaning, like, for example, those living in rural poor areas.

This research contributes to the NECP concern with understanding the roles of politics in cultural practices and the economy, focusing on the role of ordinary everyday conceptions of policy makers in the production of 'cultures'.

I want to express appreciation for the work of Peter Redman, Peter Hamilton and in particular Tony Bennett, in their involvement in different phases of this project

**EBS**

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## **Building the Region: Culture and Territory in the South West of England**

Bernard Deacon

### **Abstract**

This paper takes as its starting point the establishment of a number of 'peak' regional institutions since 1997, part of a new English regionalism. It then unpacks the discourse of the region as it is adopted in the everyday practice of professionals and policy-makers in south west England. Using interview and documentary evidence from actors located within these regional institutions, the paper identifies how this community of policy-makers and professionals articulate images of the region. This is contextualised as part of a re-structuring of scale in the south west, where the region is 'under construction'. Of necessity, the imagery of the new regional discourse excludes other communities and political claims at other scales. Nevertheless, as the discourse rolls out from its originating community it can be, and is being, questioned and re-appropriated, leading to ambiguous and paradoxical outcomes.

## In search of the region

As part of New Labour's regionalist project the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in 2001 affirmed the desire of the British Government to:

*Equip all regions and communities with the means to build on their own distinctive cultures, know-how and competitive advantages. This must be a bottom-up approach; the role of central Government must be to ensure that all regions and communities have the resources and capability to be winners. (DTI, 2001: para 3.3)*

The DTI made the common assumption that regions have 'distinctive cultures'. Somehow, within this assumption, 'regions' and 'cultures' correlate. But, instead of assuming that regions have cultures and looking for cultures within the regions, I propose that 'regional' cultures in England are more an outcome of the process of creating regions. Furthermore, making use of the concept of the everyday helps to shed new light on this process. Rita Felski (1999-2000) has defined the 'everyday' in terms of time, space and modality. The everyday involves routine, repetitive use of time, a special kind of spatial ordering and taken-for-granted habitual modes of understanding. In the following pages I will pick up on the feature of spatial ordering to argue that ideas of the 'region' are being produced within the everyday. However, this is not the everyday of the general mass of the people who inhabit the regional territory. For this process is far from being the 'bottom-up' approach imagined by the DTI.

On the contrary, taken-for-granted ideas about the 'region' and 'regional culture' are created within a top-down process of regionalization. Agents located in what I shall term the institutions of the new regionalism have a key role in this. To some extent this approach collapses the distinction made by Lefebvre (1991) between 'representations of space' – the formal images of space developed by professionals – and 'representational spaces' – the everyday ways in which space is understood and experienced. Instead, I am suggesting that the images of space produced within the institutions of the new regionalism are themselves produced in everyday, banal ways. For that community of professionals inhabiting those institutions certain images of the region become part of a set of shared assumptions. This community thus encloses and frames one particular version of the everyday (cf. Jordan, 2002). Within it habitual and repetitive discussion produces taken-for-granted assumptions about both the region and its culture.

Stanyer (1997) has pointed out that a close examination of the concept of 'region' deconstructs an apparent picture of 'rational analysis' and dissolves it into 'contradiction, moralising and pious moralising'. He rightly alerts us to the 'logical demons' that prowl through the regional debate and to the constant struggle over the meaning of 'region'. This allows him to deconstruct the notion of a 'seven county' south west English region. However, he assumes that, because there are 'essentially contested claims neither the centre nor the areas will be able to affect the other's opinions' (p.95). Because 'regions' do not exist in any non-linguistic sense, Stanyer seems to assume that the regional debate has little meaning. This position is untenable as it ignores, first, the way actions at one scale impinge on another scale and, second, the role of institutions with different access to power at those differing scales. More crucially, it underestimates the way that meanings can in themselves produce social action even though there may be considerable slippage between the language of 'regions' and the referent being summoned by this language.

In this paper, I explore the way cultural meanings of the region are produced in the everyday practices of institutions at one regional scale. Cultural meanings 'help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed' (Hall, 1997: 4). Pursuing the cultural meaning of the 'region' in a specific location thus moves us towards an analysis of the discourses involved. Discourse is here used in the sense of a system of representing the 'region'; a set of statements that define the limits and police the boundaries of what is understood as a 'region'. Furthermore, this set of assumptions about what is meaningfully taken as a region has repercussions for the conduct of people, organizing and regulating social practice, ruling in what is acceptable and restricting or ruling out other ways of representing the 'region' (Hall, 1997). This conception approximates to Foucault's concept of discourse, where it is taken to mean a system of knowledge, a way of understanding particular topics. When a discourse sharing the same assumptions and adopting a similar style begins to appear across a range of texts and a number of institutional sites, then it becomes a 'discursive formation'. When it achieves a wide acceptance and becomes the general 'common-sense' way of thinking about a topic, Foucault described it as becoming a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980). Such 'regimes of truth' can have effects on competing or alternative discourses.

In this way discourses clearly interconnect with power, although here our concern is less with the politics of everyday life than the everyday life of (regional) politics. For the institutions of the new regionalism, the agents within them and the discourses they use are enmeshed in a struggle over scale. Swyngedouw (2000) points out how spatial scale is itself a social construction, a contested process. During this process the importance of some geographical scales is reasserted, the relevance of others downgraded and, occasionally, completely new scales created. For Swyngedouw, this 'politics of scale' is the result of the changing geography of capital accumulation, and cultural dynamics have little space in his analysis. However, struggles over scale are also struggles to establish meaning involving competition between discursive formations privileging differing scales.

Here, I pursue this reconfiguration of scale in one specific location, the south west of England. First, I outline the context of the contemporary regionalization process and the new salience of certain peak 'regional' institutions in Britain since the election of the Labour Government in 1997 (for an overview of Government policy on the regions see Tomaney, 2001). I then reconstruct how the discourse of 'region' generally and the 'south west region' in particular is used within the everyday of the regional institutions. This is done through interview evidence from the personnel located in them. This constitutes a core set of data based on nine semi-structured interviews with officers in the Government Office for the South West (GOSW), officers and board members of the South West Regional Development Agency (RDA) and an organizer from the South West Constitutional Convention (SWCC). Interviews were supplemented by documentary evidence from those institutions and from media and central government sources. After identifying the statements made about 'region' and the rules of talking about 'regions', I explore the consequences of this for other scalar discourses. In this context, this specifically relates to the consequences for Cornwall, where another discourse of region exists. The paper concludes by reflecting on the everyday discourse of 'region' produced in the regional institutions, noting that its material and institutional resources are nevertheless constrained by certain limitations. These indicate that potential difficulties lie in wait for the regional 'project', at least as it applies to the south west.

### **The regionalist moment in contemporary Britain**

The Regional Development Agencies Act of 1998 led to the establishment of eight RDAs in England in 1999. RDAs were given control of the Single Regeneration Budget together with the resources of some previous development agencies and are answerable to central government. They were established on the same territorial template as the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs), set up in 1994. These bodies extended the reach of central government into the regions, grouping civil servants from various central government departments (Sandford and McQuail, 2001). Government Offices for the Regions can be seen as having a prefectorial role, acting as agents of central government in the regions, while being sounding boards for opinion in the regions.

A little publicised by-product of the RDAs Act of 1998 was the formation of 'Regional Chambers'. Most of the Regional Chambers quickly re-named themselves as 'Regional Assemblies'. They have powers to become the 'Regional Planning Body' plus a role in scrutinising the work of RDAs. This role is rather vague. At least 30 per cent of their members have to be 'social and economic partners', drawn from business and the voluntary sector. The way these are chosen is not precisely clear although in the south west 'the chamber has admitted to membership only those social and economic partners who can show they are accountable and operate in a regional way' (NEWSCO, 1999: 12). The rest are local government councillors. Regional Assemblies, acting as forums for the discussion of regional strategy, make up a *de-facto* form of regional government, albeit one with little legitimacy and a 'very low public profile' (Sandford, 2001). Nevertheless, the budgets of the Regional Assemblies, while small, are not insignificant. The South West Assembly had an annual budget of £2.6 million in 2001-02 and a staffing, from July 2001, of around 40 (Sandford, 2001). The late 1990s, therefore, saw the emergence of 'peak' regional institutions, sites for the reproduction of discourses of the 'region'. Some have seen them as 'new institutional spaces', actively involved in a 'reordering of spatial scales' (Jones, 1999; Jones and MacLeod, 1999), and examples of rescaled central government intervention in order to orchestrate 'bottom-up' organizations.

The new English regionalism is only tenuously linked to cultural identity. The scale of the eight GORs/RDAs was pre-given, relating closely to the regional template adopted by the Department of Economic Affairs in the 1960s. Yet, some academic commentators still claim that questions of regional identity are central to claims about new regionalism, with regions seen as social constructions emerging out of a search for new forms of identification (Tomaney and Ward, 2000; Tomaney, 2000). It is perhaps not surprising that this view emanates most coherently from academics based in the north east of England. In that region a sense of regional identity appears to match the areal template of the 'new' regionalism (see also Townsend and Taylor, 1975). In other areas this is not so clear. Indeed, the contemporary regionalization process in England would seem less a reflection of new forms of identification and more a result of central government priorities and managerial imperatives.

Therefore, the new institutional spaces of English regionalism do not reflect pre-existing notions of regional identity. Instead they are key sites for the construction of the cultural meaning of 'region' and 'regional identity', moving into the semantic vacuum that surrounds the concept of region in England. The role of the South West RDA as an active player in this construction of a discourse of the 'south west' was, indeed, remarked upon by several of those interviewed in this study and was a prominent part of the early documentary material produced by the RDA (see *Leading Edge* 1, 1999). The RDA's potential for strengthening regional identity and regional distinctiveness and developing a regional image was cited by a GOSW officer who concluded that the region was 'under construction'. An RDA officer also agreed that the RDA agenda was to build up a south west identity while the South West Constitutional Convention activist suggested that the role of administrative structures like the RDA was to help people see their regional identity



more clearly (interview data). As we shall see in the next section, everyday assumptions about the region and its culture have begun to emerge within the new regional institutions.

### **The discourse of the region in the south west**

In 1997 the Department of the Environment, Transportation and the Regions (DETR) concluded that the south west 'lacks a strong sense of common identity or effective regional institutions, and some consultees, principally Cornwall, Devon, Poole and Bournemouth argued for different RDA boundaries' (DETR, 1997). This was echoed by some academics who felt that 'the South West does not constitute a coherent economic planning region' (Gripaios, 1991: 3). Because of its former absence it is no surprise that GOSW and business focus groups in the late 1990s identified one priority to be the creation of a 'cohesive region'. This needed to do more than 'build on its strong local identities' (GOSW, 1998: 11). It had to have an identity of its own. Thus, when the RDA was established in 1999 one of its six 'frameworks for action' was the 'image of the region/regional coherence' (*Leading Edge* 4, 2000).

It was therefore no surprise that the participants in the study in 2001 shared a consensus that there was little regional identity. Regional identity was 'not present' or 'not significant' and even the South West Constitutional Convention activist was uncertain about it. When pressed, three rhetorical strategies recurred. The first fell back onto the arbitrary boundaries of the region and argued that, as this was now governmental decree, the *de facto* region had to be accepted. The second produced claims for the existence of a regional image as opposed to a regional identity. The third admitted the existence of place identities within the region but classed these as 'sub-identities' and accommodated them within an overall image of 'diversity', which was then presented as a strength of the region. Each of these three strategies can be expanded on in turn.

For some, notably the GOSW bureaucrats, the south west 'in one sense has a regional identity in that the Government has defined a boundary' (interview, GOSW officer). That in itself is seen as sufficient to create a form of identity. It was recognized that the 'south west is a figment of the Government imagination', the result of 'rather arbitrary judgement'. However once established, the weight of government approval provides the 'region' with authority and it was noted how local organizations - the Confederation of British Industry, trade unions, the Institute of Directors, the National Farmers Union, higher education and further education - had organized themselves 'to fit our territory, our boundaries' (interview, RDA board member). The government itself is keen not to open the potential can of worms offered by the boundary issue. Nick Raynsford, the Minister for Local Government, recognized in the House of Commons in December 2001 that 'opening up the issue of boundaries could lead to a long debate about precisely where they should be drawn' (*Parliamentary Debates*, 18 December 2001). This is a debate the Government clearly does not want. Despite claims to adopt a 'pragmatic' approach central government's position on boundaries looks to be inflexible. In interviews of personnel across the new regional institutions of England, Elcock (2001: 24) found 'there was general agreement that for practical purposes the GOR regions *must be accepted as given*, although they are not always ideal and may not reflect regional cultural boundaries' (my emphasis). The very arbitrariness of the centrally drawn boundaries rules them out of discussion, this being particularly the case in regions like the south west where there is uncertainty about, and even opposition towards, these boundaries. Clearly, the south west region, like all English regions, is 'under construction', but this is a construction with considerable institutional momentum, backed by the authority of central government and now supported by the resources of the new regional institutions.

While adopting the regional template of central government rules out discussion of geographical boundaries as 'impractical', an associated claim about regional viability revolves around notions of an ideal size for regions. According to one RDA board member regional structures have to include:

*Something like five to ten million people. You can't have a 100,000 community expecting to make much impact on anything. On the other hand you can expect five million people to have quite an influence on something. Scotland is run on the basis of five million people. I don't think the Welsh have much hope because they have only got three.*  
(interview, RDA board member)

We were also informed by the South West Constitutional Convention activist that the population of regions should be 3.5 to 5 million. These statements reflect a myth of numbers that has become ingrained within the regional discourse in England. A junior minister in the DETR observed in 1999 that 'every advanced industrial nation organizes itself economically around a population limit of about five million people. If you've got an identity it's helpful, but not a prerequisite' (cited in Teles and Landy, 2001: 118-119). However, as Teles and Landy observe, this claim 'to have "discovered" the optimum size for a devolved jurisdiction appears ... to rest on bureaucratic rather than civic principles. It reflects the technocrat's judgement' (Teles and Landy, 2001: 119). It also serves as a *post-facto* justification for the adoption of the eight strategic planning regions as the basis for English devolution. However, it runs counter to the actual experience of regionalization in the rest of Europe. There, a recent review of the literature concludes that 'a

sense of identity would appear more important than size', while 'there is no precedent internationally that authorities with similar powers need to be of a similar size' (Barter, 2000: 29). Nonetheless, the insistence that a region is defined by a population level of five million remains 'one of the strangest aspects of the current debate' and an 'unquestioned assumption' (Stoker, 2000: 69).

The second response given by participants in this study, when questioned about a regional identity, was to pinpoint certain regional images. While uncertain about the existence of any level of popular consciousness in the region they agreed that the region possessed some common unifying characteristics, even though there was also some awareness that certain of these images present problems for projecting images of economic renewal and competitiveness. When identifying regional images it was observable how the interviewees tended to resort to popular stereotypes. The most frequently mentioned attribute was the 'quality of life' - the south west was 'an extremely attractive place to be... it's a draw, it's a selling point' (interview, GOSW officer). This linked to other concepts. The south west was perceived as 'rural', as having a 'distinct maritime tradition' and as being a place of tourism; 'you think of the south west and you think of sand and the sea' (interviews, GOSW, SWCC and RDA representatives). In recounting these stereotypes our interviewees sometimes mentioned the role of heritage and the past, even 'myths and legends, which are quite important to this region' (interview, GOSW officer). The new regional professional clearly shares some very old popular assumptions about the south west, ones heavily structured by the perceived role of tourism and a romantic trope of travel writing with its roots in the nineteenth century. The 'quality of life' message took its part in the images chosen by the RDA to illustrate its newsletter in 2000 (*Leading Edge* 4). Here, shots of boats and maritime locations (but usually with a leisure rather than a trading connection) and an 'old' picturesque Dorset village were juxtaposed with illustrations of people doing exciting things inside hi-tec and placeless industrial plants and laboratories. Interestingly, people rarely appear in the maritime and heritage images; the latter are background, a photogenic backdrop to economic activities that occur elsewhere, a reminder of the opportunities for relaxation, yachting and leisure consumption on offer to jaded executives seeking a better 'quality of life'. Such images are often incorporated into the advertising material produced by the RDA, material that emphasises the 'Scenic Wonders' of the south west as well as its 'Smart Working/Sure Winners' (*Leading Edge* 3, 1999).

The cultural assumptions of the new regional institutional community of the south west revolve around this central, well established and stereotypical image of 'quality of life'. In 1991 it was claimed that 'the south west already benefits to a considerable extent from its "corporate image" as a region with both man-made and natural beauty' (SWRPC, 1991: 9). However, there is a tension underlying this imagery, between being a competitive region at the 'leading edge' of a European economy open to global capital and technological innovation and being a region of heritage and leisure. At least one person interviewed recognized that an emphasis on the latter could easily tip over into

*A perception outside the south west of it being a fairly sleepy place ... not much happening and Bristol and/or points west are the graveyard of ambition and that people go there and never resurface, have a nice quality of life, everything is taken rather slowly ... That's a caricature but there's probably an element of truth in it. (GOSW officer)*

In this particular instance the stereotype seems to be transforming into an autostereotype, a story people tell about themselves, one that becomes a part of their social reality (Sabel, 1993). Furthermore, it is possible the everyday region of the regional institutions is more dominated by rural, maritime and leisure imagery than are everyday assumptions in the actual settlements, streets and homes of the regional territory.

A third common response of our participants was to stress diversity as a regional strength. Recognising a lack of regional coherence, the RDA has adopted the strategy of celebrating regional diversity. Virtually all those interviewed mentioned diversity as an element of the region. (The emphasis on dealing with diversity in the south west is also noted by Elcock, 2001: 240.) Different 'cultures' within the region were 'not a problem at all. I think it creates a rich diversity which provides a much more interesting background rather than just one culture covering the whole thing' (interview, RDA member). 'The diversity is in itself part of the richness of the whole infrastructure' (interview, SWCC activist). In celebrating diversity and overcoming difference the RDA puts emphasis on 'working together'; this phrase and the word 'partnership' recur frequently in their publications. The everyday discourse is also careful to construct its boundaries. Diversity is hedged within certain limits. This is a diversity that must not be allowed to become 'divisiveness'. A GOSW officer was aware of this danger as 'curiously, one of the unifying features of the region is probably the fact that virtually everywhere people are very parochial'. However, rather than being a 'fact' this is best seen as another discursive component of the south west region and one that results in those subjects of this discourse who raise objections to the regional project being classed as 'parochial' and their objections downgraded.

Overall then, in the absence of a clear regional identity, the everyday discourse of the south west region has been constructed around the three elements of central government assumptions about optimal regions, stereotypes of the regional image that stress environment, scenery and 'quality of life' and the celebration of diversity as a strategy for containing intra-regional difference. In doing this the discourse focuses on images rather than identity. Indeed, to some

extent, the regional image cohering around a politically and economically driven project of regional construction is seen as separate from cultural identity. When identity is recognized, it exists at different levels. Thus an RDA board member, while expressing some personal reservations about the top-down creation of a 'great regional identity', nevertheless, insisted that the south west region had an 'amazing regional identity'. However, in elaborating on this position, the regional identity turned out to be a 'series of [local] identities,' a position restated by a GOSW officer as 'different tiers of identity'. The word 'tiers' implies a hierarchy of identity and this serves to remind us how an everyday regional discourse of the south west will have consequences for imaginations of place at other scales.

### **Constructing the 'sub-region': the region, scale and Cornwall**

MacLeod and Goodwin (1999) argue that there has been a failure to problematize the issue of scale. Instead of taking the spatial context for granted they call for a multi-scaled analysis. As they state, there is always a plurality of possible strategies and scalar fixes and the outcome of the creation of institutions of governance is always open to contestation and struggle. As we have seen, there is now a powerful set of bureaucratic interests entrenched at a 'regional' level. Those interests and the resources they marshal are helping to reproduce a particular 'regime of truth' in respect of English regions. As this discourse embeds itself in the everyday practices of the regional institutions then other scales are defined in relation to it. One of our interviewees, in discussing what he saw as the strong cultural identities within the region, described the identities of people in Cornwall and in Devon as 'regional' identities (interview, RDA member). More usually, and perhaps increasingly so as the regional discourse establishes itself, this scale of cultural identity is now viewed as 'sub-regional' identity (interview, GOSW officer). Furthermore, what happens at this 'sub-regional' scale is then defined as a problem of local government rather than one of regional governance. This discourse may then be uncritically reflected in writings on regional governance. Thus disputes in the South West Assembly have been viewed as resulting from a 'lack of regional coherence which caused many of its early meetings to be taken up with *local concerns*' (Sandford, 2001: 3). The ordinary assumptions about what is a region that are reproduced in the new regional institutions thus effectively appropriate the term 'region' for one scale only. In doing so they act to exclude other potential regions and other regional 'communities'.

In many, even most, localities this may not be perceived as an issue but in one part of the 'south west' region it is very much a live issue. In May 2001 the South West Constitutional Convention (SWCC) was launched, demanding an elected assembly for the south west. While the steering group for this initiative includes five MPs, two MEPs and a number of Liberal Democrat and Labour local politicians (minutes of SWCC steering group meeting, 5 April 2001), the SWCC claimed just 200 supporters (BBC Radio 4, 17 May 2001). The SWCC, like the other five constitutional conventions, is dominated by a relatively small group of regional actors, concentrated in the political sphere. However, at a different scale a Cornish Constitutional Convention had already been launched in the previous year. Unlike the others, this Convention set about the task of collecting a petition of support for an elected Cornish Assembly and succeeded in raising 50,000 signatures during 2000 and 2001. The petition was duly presented to central government in December of 2001 (*The Guardian*, 15 December 2001). Indeed, in a debate on regions in the House of Lords on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2001 the only speaker from the south west, Baroness Rendell of Babergh, spoke in favour of a Cornish Assembly. Here, apparently, is a classic case of a top-down project of regionalization (the south west) colliding with a region based on an existing sense of cultural identity (Cornwall).

Supporting this interpretation, a leading member of the Cornish Constitutional Convention (CCC) claimed in an interview in this study that 'if a region is ultimately going to be founded on democratic accountability [it] has to relate quite clearly with the people's identification with a place'. From the perspective of this Cornish 'community' the south west can never be a 'culturally coherent' unit because of the 'distinctiveness' of Cornwall, a factor 'which sets it apart'. The role of cultural identity in underpinning a region is given much more centrality here than it is in the south west 'regional' discourse. Awareness of a strong sense of identity relates, for some Cornish Constitutional Convention activists, to a well-established discourse (in Cornwall) of Cornwall as a historic nation. In our interview with the Cornish Constitutional Convention activist the 50,000 people who signed the petition calling for a Cornish Assembly were reconstructed as '50,000 people in Cornwall who have said Cornwall is a nation'. In fact the petition made no mention of Cornwall's status, whether region, nation or county. Yet, the existence of a hybrid sense of identity that draws from Celtic and national imaginings strengthens demands for a devolved assembly (for the origins of this see Deacon, 1998; Payton, 1992). But this is a demand for devolution to a scale that does not fit the regional discourse. Proceeding with the latter and building what are seen as remote institutions of governance will merely 'reinforce a sense of dispossession and disempowerment and will translate into persistent obstruction with possibly some degree of civil disobedience' (interview, CCC activist).

Only one of the new regionalist personnel interviewed explicitly referred to this claim to Cornish nationality; significantly this was an RDA officer with close links to Cornwall. He concluded that the question of a Cornish Assembly



might ‘help sort out the too many tiers of local government’, thus defining the Cornish issue as one of local government within a regional framework. This is one of the ways in which the regional discourse has consequences, acting to construct Cornwall and the discourse of Cornish regionalism in a particular way. For instance, when the Office for National Statistics (ONS) agreed to recognize the right of people to write ‘Cornish’ in the ‘other’ box of the ethnicity question of the 2001 Census the RDA did not support this in practice

*It [the RDA] did not offer the money to market that to the Cornish, i.e. to encourage the Cornish to write Cornwall in the box because I think that is just tipping over the balance from being distinctive to being divisive because I think it will be perceived as at least uncomfortable by those who are not Cornish living in Cornwall. (interview, RDA officer)*

Diversity was not celebrated in this instance and the ability of the RDA to define what is diversity and what is divisiveness was backed up by its power over resources.

The power of the new regional institutions does not always work in this clear-cut way, preventing certain actions. More discursively, potential tension can sometimes be retrospectively re-written as examples of harmonious regional cooperation. During 1996 the ONS reported to central government that if the European regional map were re-drawn to uncouple Cornwall from Devon then, because of its low GDP per head, Cornwall would become eligible for Objective 1 structural funding from Europe. This reflected a long-running demand in Cornwall for such funding since the early 1990s, a campaign led by Cornish and nationalist pressure groups and backed by the then Liberal Democrat MEP. In early consultations on the proposal it was noticeable that a large majority of supporting statements came from this same quarter, together with some from sections of local government in Cornwall. At the same time there was little or none reported from the existing ‘regional’ bodies (ONS, 1997). However, it became clear during 1998 that Cornwall was likely to become a Level II European region and thus qualify for Objective 1 funding. At that point even those local Liberal Democrat and Independent councillors who had previously refused to support such a move, which they saw as undermining their preferred strategy of an institutional merger with Devon within a Devon and Cornwall ‘region’, belatedly but rapidly jumped on board. Simultaneously, one of the first acts of the new RDA in 1999 was to support the campaign, which was by then all but won. This history has been subject to an interesting re-writing in the new regional institutions. It is now cited as an example of something that united the region ‘at a political level, making common cause to get ... a new European programme for Cornwall’ (interview, GOSW officer). The role of Cornish pressure groups and political organizations in keeping the demand alive and campaigning in the initial stages of consultation is thus written out. The history, which, instead, focuses on the regional role in pressing the Cornish case, positions Cornish-based institutions as passive players in the process. Contrasting with the official narrative, the behind the scenes tensions around this event were alluded to by an RDA officer:

*It’s a mute point I think as to whether a Cornish culture and identity is helping to foster a regional governance in the sense the RDA might wish it or whether it is actually fostering separate identity as many in Cornwall would wish ... The whole issue has been given a further twist with Objective 1 in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly where the EU recognizes Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a separate region within Europe and that is in a sense in flat opposition to the RDA’s position ... it doesn’t particularly help this building of a regional identity from Cornwall up to Gloucestershire and across to Dorset, to have the European Union recognizing Cornwall as a separate region.*

Such tensions are rarely explicitly or publicly expressed.

If one way of dealing with the conflict posed by the Cornish identity is to co-opt tensions into a discourse of regional harmony and consensus, another is to construct the demand for a Cornish Assembly or a Cornish Development Agency as divisive and separatist. Clearly they are so from within the everyday south west regional discourse. Viewing Cornwall as just one of the seven counties of the south west rather than as a special case invariably leads members of the regional elite to worry that ‘giving’ power to Cornwall will lead to a domino effect as ‘Devon will want the very same thing and so will Dorset. So what do you gain at the end of the day’ (interview, RDA member). The same person argued that those demanding Cornish-based institutions ‘want to put themselves in a cage. You cannot divorce yourself from this world economy that you live in, you can’t live in a separate situation’. However much those arguing for a Cornish Assembly use the language of cross-border partnerships, inclusivity and openness, they are constantly forced to respond to such accusations of ‘separatism’. Some are keenly aware of this. Thus Andrew George, MP for St.Ives and a prominent supporter of the Cornish Constitutional Convention, claimed in the House of Commons that ‘Cornwall will have far greater clout, in a wider world, if it were recognized as a distinct place rather than subsumed into a large sanitized region for which it had no feeling’. However, he felt it necessary to reassure his parliamentary colleagues by both preceding and following this statement with an assurance that ‘Cornwall does not want to cut itself off’ (*Parliamentary Debates*, 18 December 2001).

Cornwall is also constructed in the regional discourse as a 'peripheral part of the region' (interview, RDA officer). This engenders assumptions of remoteness and perhaps feeds romanticized images of difference, of a place where the dominant leisure and maritime stereotypes of the south west region attain their purest and most unadulterated form. For example, in the mid 1990s a director of the Westcountry Development Corporation (WDC), a former Devon and Cornwall regional body based in Plymouth, asserted that 'tribalism increases as you go west' and could be experienced in its full intensity in the west of Cornwall (interview, WDC executive, 1995). Such myths help to secure a lack of visibility for Cornwall, as does the absence of large employers and its diminished institutional 'clout'. In this context only large scale development schemes such as the Eden Project in mid-Cornwall are viewed by policy-makers with any seriousness and succeed in breaking through myths of remoteness, peripherality and tribalism.

### **Institutions, debate and power**

In this paper we have identified a discursive formation of the region, one that is produced in the everyday practices of the new regional institutions. Everyday assumptions of the region that are adopted by key regional actors approximate to Foucault's 'regime of truth'. This discursive formation would appear to have a considerable momentum – part of a 'project to construct a new system of social regulation and collective action, drawing on existing elements in the social structure, mobilising cultural and political symbols for particular purposes and constructing institutions in government and civil society' (Keating, 2001: 220). Thus, in the new regions of England, institutions have a major role in creating and transmitting culture and values and in building the regions, which are not the product of pre-existing cultural identities. Keating's analysis, one in which the new regional service professionals imaginatively create and recreate regions, perhaps overstates the autonomy available to regional 'elites'. For the empirical analysis of the south west of England suggests that, while the regional discourse is sustained by and linked to systems of power, the circulation of that power is in practice hesitant and ambiguous and, indeed, can stimulate other competing discourses (cf. Foucault, 1980: 133).

As we have seen, the south west has been described as the least coherent of the eight English regions (Sandford and McQuail, 2001: 93). This absence of any sense of an 'inherent' regional cultural identity was strikingly displayed in the uncertainty of those key participants in this study when asked to define the regional identity. Unable to identify agreed historical symbols of identity policy-makers in the new institutional spaces of the south west region resort to the well known symbols of tourism marketing. Thus the South West RDA website page 'Introduction to the South West' contains a photo of a surfer accompanied by the text 'one of the most ... attractive parts of Europe. Our coastline, our countryside and our cities, towns and villages are second to none in their enduring appeal' ([www.southwestrda.org.uk/sw\\_region/](http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/sw_region/), 2002). Indeed, this imagery has become habitual and taken-for-granted within the new regional institutions.

How might we explain this? In a study of the governance of north east England Robinson and Shaw (2001: 476) conclude that almost all governing institutions 'both elected and unelected, are run by, predominantly, middle aged (or older) middle-class men'. They point out how the people who run the affairs of the north east are 'clearly not representative of the diversity of the region's people'. As we have seen, the diversity of the south west is supposedly even more marked, an aspect consistently noted by the agents of the new regional institutions. Yet anecdotal impressions suggest that Robinson and Shaw's conclusions apply to the south west just as strongly as to the north east. Regional diversity is not represented in the peak institutions. Moreover, in the south west, it may be the case that a higher proportion of the new regional professionals do not have their roots in the region. This may make them more prone to adopt the leisure/heritage/tourism imagery for a region to which they have been attracted in many cases by those very 'quality of life' factors they regularly invoke.

The new regional 'community' is in some respects therefore a community 'out of space', one located in a particular space but locked into networks that extend well beyond that space. Their class (and perhaps also gender) backgrounds predispose them towards a discourse of leisure or tourism related 'quality of life' because that is the everyday aspect of the regional territory they are most likely to have previously encountered. In inserting this aspect into the everyday discussion of their 'community' they act to exclude other sectors and 'communities' for whom 'quality of life' has little or no meaning. For example, the concentrated urban poverty associated with parts of Bristol and Plymouth and the more dispersed rural poverty of west Cornwall are rendered less visible by this discourse. While the imagery of the new regionalism excludes whole swathes of regional society the relatively closed nature of the new regional community also excludes the majority of citizens from debates about the 'region'.

Barter, in her review of the literature on regionalism, concludes that to reduce tensions during the regionalization process, 'it is essential that local authorities and citizens be involved' (Barter, 2000: 28). While local authorities to some extent have a role it is difficult to identify a public sphere, a space where people can debate affairs, contest meanings and negotiate claims in relation to regionalization (for this concept of a public sphere see Habermas, 1984). Chris Clarke, Liberal Democrat leader of Somerset County Council and first chair of the South West Regional Chamber/

Assembly, claimed in 1999 that the regional chamber was ‘not a debating point any longer’ (NEWSO, 1999: 12). Yet it is difficult to see exactly when it had ever been a ‘debating point’ outside the rarified atmosphere of ‘elite stakeholding’ groups. Tomaney and Ward point to the ‘lamentably low level of debate within the English regions about the questions that arise from [the devolution of institutions]’ and the lack of ‘civic arenas in which key issues can be raised and debated’ (Tomaney and Ward, 2000: 471). In his research on Regional Assemblies Sandford (2001) also found that ‘there was little attempt by respondents to consider the democratic legitimacy of the present bodies’ (p.14). This blithe lack of concern about the absence of a public sphere in which to legitimate the new regional institutions seems likely to undermine any attempt to create a top-down regional cultural identity. Moreover, it is unlikely to engender positive support for democratically elected regional government, an outcome that may, of course, not be unwelcome to some of the actors who engage in the current locally unaccountable institutions of regional governance. In the absence of accountability, transparency and legitimacy, assemblies in particular find the source of their power ‘via personal contacts’ (Sandford, 2001), thus reproducing the networking basis of quango governance.

However, another source of their power is the regional discourse discussed here. In the absence of other regional discourses in England, this has become the accepted regime of truth, backed by the power of the central state, to which the new regional institutions are accountable. In this way the ‘orderly and sensible progression and debate’ provided by the ‘building blocks of the existing Government Office regions’ offered by Local Government Minister Nick Raynsford (*Parliamentary Debates* 18 December 2001), becomes an ordered debate, ruling out those who have doubts about the geographical basis of English regions. Here, discursive power is seen at its bluntest. Reflecting this, some writers have re-emphasized the role of the state in the process of regionalization (e.g. Macleod, 1999; Lovering 1999). Such a focus needs to be tempered by a realization of the limitations of that power. Teles and Landy (2000: 120) conclude that top-down decentralization on the current model ‘seems unlikely to reproduce anything lasting’. As they point out:

*Identities take a very long time to readjust to new institutional structures, and in that transitional period resentment (or apathetic indifference) at being placed in an alien, unhistorical and unfamiliar political entity is likely to reduce willingness to contribute to public goods. (Teles and Landy, 2001: 120)*

Furthermore, Foucault (1980) reminds us that discursive formations do not just impose themselves upon society; they are productive of new discourses.

This is most strikingly seen in the case of Cornwall. Here, unusually in the English context, an alternative notion of ‘region’ pre-dates the new institutions of English regionalism. This, based on claims to a national and/or ethnic identity, is not easily accommodated by top-down ‘new regionalism’. Indeed, the latter has hitherto attempted to cope with Cornish claims largely by ignoring them. However, the discursive formation of regionalism has made this position increasingly untenable. For rolling out the discourse of a south west region has clarified and stimulated an outburst of interest in Cornwall in the Cornish ‘regional’ discourse. Older national and ethnic imaginings are now being joined by a Cornish ‘regional’ identity. It is this that underpinned the success of the Cornish Constitutional Convention in raising 50,000 signatures for their petition calling for a Cornish devolved assembly. Paradoxically, this remains to date the only unambiguous expression of popular support for devolved government outside Scotland and Wales. This is a case where an everyday sense of regional identity is the basis for a regionalist movement. In addition, this movement may have been actively strengthened by the circulation of the south west regional discourse. Those supporting the process of devolution from the centre have underestimated the effect of their project in regenerating identities at more local scales than their preferred ‘region’. In Cornwall claims to cultural identity are more central to the debate about governance and feed on a more general aspect of everyday life, than ‘popular opposition to forms of public expertise seen as distant and unaccountable’ (Flew, 1997, 100).

## Conclusion

The new English regionalism can be understood as part of a top-down process and analysed as an aspect of macro-structural shifts in society, involving the state and other institutions of governance. Nevertheless, this study reminds us that there is also a micro-aspect to this process. We have seen how the process of institution building is itself deeply, irrevocably *cultural* in the way it produces and reproduces the meanings of the ‘region’. Those located in the corridors of the new English regionalism in the south west are reproducing their own representational space, one that has become a part of their everyday experience, habitual and taken-for-granted. At the heart of this representational space lies a discourse of the region.

This regional discourse nestles in turn within a set of statements established by central government about what can and cannot be debated. In this manner the borders of both debate and region are policed simultaneously. As such a discourse becomes a part of the everyday. It regulates the social practices of organizations within the ‘region’. These increasingly have to take cognizance of the presence of the new regional institutions and of the resources they command.

It also has consequences for those who adopt a different discourse of region at a different scale. They are excluded from the discourse of 'region' as it has evolved within the everyday of the new regional community. However, their existence also acts to undermine and fracture that discourse once it emerges from the community of policy-makers at its core. Within the south west region the existence of an active campaign for devolved government to Cornwall begins to highlight the ambiguous effects of discursive formations. On the one hand, those calling for devolution to Cornwall, a campaign with a history that can be traced back at least to 1950, have had to evolve a strategy that adopts some of the language of the new regionalism and works within some of its ordinary cultural assumptions. On the other hand, the moment of English regionalism since 1997 has stimulated growing awareness of the issues and debate about them within Cornwall, acting upon the everyday in this other territorial community. Therefore, in 'building *the* region' in the south west the new regionalism may still end up helping to construct two regions.

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