Regional Identities and Alliances in an Integrating Europe: A Challenge to the Nation State?

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Introduction

In general terms, this paper reflects an interest I have sought to develop recently in regional identities in the context of the growing integration of Europe. My approach is basically that of the anthropologist, but I am aware here, more than I might be with other material, that a lot of the ground has already been mapped out by other disciplines (geography, history, sociology, political science, policy-based research). The fact that an adherent of anthropology is looking at this topic also has at least one methodological and one theoretical implication. Methodologically, the question is, how to study regionalism when the traditional anthropological research site is much smaller, the village, or sometimes the urban quarter, the hunting and gathering group, a group of roving pastoralists, etc. One possible solution is multi-locale fieldwork, which, after a fashion, is what the more ethnographic parts of this paper is based on. Theoretically, there is the question of ethnicity, which perhaps anthropology has made a little more its own, but is also how many regionalisms in Europe especially are conventionally seen, both inside and outside academia. I am therefore pushing for the recognition of regional identities in their own right, which may not involve ethnicity as such, this actually being a matter of the majority identity within the nation state in many cases. In other words, I am arguing that the relationship between region and nation state may be segmented as well as bounded. I return to this point briefly below.

Although the main theme of this series of articles and of the seminar series from which they arose is transnational communities, in the present context the existence of these is contradicted at first sight by the conventional notion that regional identities exist entirely within nation-state borders. This has to be qualified in many ways. First, regional identities emerge across borders in connection with irredentist claims to part of the territory of another state. This is hardly a new phenomenon in Europe. Secondly, Europeanization is opening up a path for alliances to be formed between regions across borders (not necessarily contiguously). This, a more recent development, is largely a bureaucratic matter at the moment, but those who are, depending on one's point of view, either most extreme or most forward-looking in this respect are advocating furthering it as an alternative to the nation state. It is these aspects I shall seek to focus on when I come to the more ethnographic part of the article, which, unless otherwise stated, is based on my interviews with local

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government officers in Brussels and the UK. In particular, I will be asking what implications these activities have for the commonly held but equally commonly contested notion that regions and European institutions are conniving together to squeeze the nation state out of existence.

First, however, we need some idea of what we mean by a region, as well as saying something about the context of regionalism in Europe at the present day.

Anthropology and the Definition of Regionalism

The removal of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of communism in eastern Europe has not removed fundamental differences between the two halves of the continent. The gulf that is predicted to continue to exist between them is most usually seen in terms of unequal economic development and the unsteady march of some countries towards multi-party democracy. However, another difference is in the developing nature of the relationship between the nation state and regionalism. While in western Europe attempts are being made to institutionalize collaboration between regional and European institutions in challenging the nation state's traditional monopoly of power, in eastern Europe important regional identities are tending to change into new nationalisms, as old multi-ethnic states break up into their component parts.

This difference may add to the institutional difficulties of expanding European unification eastwards. One exception here is Poland, which has recently reformed its regional structures in preparation for entry into the European Union (EU): regions here are now fewer but larger, and have greater powers, though not amounting to autonomy (Paradowska 1997). As a basically bureaucratic reform, it will be interesting to see what local resonances these new structures have or can acquire in the future.

The failure of anthropologists to pay much attention to recent changes in regionalism reflects both a certain lack of interest in the subject generally and their traditional methodology. Although it is customary to set one's fieldwork site in its regional context as part of introductory matter, Boissevain is no doubt right to argue (1977: 11) that the anthropological tradition of participant observation in small, face-to-face communities does not easily lend itself to studying regional structures. Regionalism is not satisfactorily covered by the tradition of community studies, nor by any simple concentration on the local as opposed to the national or global: local and community identities as such are too small in scale.

This is not to say that regions have been ignored in previous anthropological writings. The popular association of regions with the concept of 'provincialism' as denoting backwardness has been noted (Kaschuba and Lipp 1979: 15). Regions have been studied from the point of view of their

dialectical relationships with constituent localities on the one hand and the national centre on the other (for example, Schneider, Schneider and Hansen 1972, on Sicily and Catalonia). In the 1970s, both Boissevain (1977) and Freeman (1973), among others, complained about the neglect of regionalism in anthropology. However, while Boissevain was advocating studies of the various levels of social process and action that local, regional and national interests and identities were engaged in, the issue for Freeman seemed to be rather one of furthering comparison between different communities, which, if followed through rigorously, would make the region little more than a *Kulturkreis*.

Yet what essentially is a region? As Tindale points out (1995: 2), mere size or population level are no sure guides. Defining the word itself is not entirely straightforward, since it may be used of supra- as well as sub-national units: for example, western Europe may itself be described as a region in global contexts. Within Europe, however, a region may be defined as a geographically contiguous area lying in scope between a community (approximating to Tönnies's idea of Gemeinschaft as involving primarily faceto-face contacts) and the nation state. The fact that it is geographically contiguous also suggests that, like the nation state, it is also geographically bounded and lacks enclavization, and although it may have autonomy, it will not be sovereign. A region is often coordinate with an administrative unit, but it need not be, nor need it even be officially recognized. The anthropologist will usually look for its salience among the ordinary population. This is something not all regions have, especially if created by officialdom. For example, Scotland clearly has more significance in this respect than Wessex, hardly more than an advertising slogan in the tourist industry, or Avon, a bureaucratic region set up for the Bristol region. However, bureaucratically promoted identities are themselves culturally constructed and in principle no less suitable for anthropological analysis (cf. Shore 1993a; Shore and Black 1994). It is thus also important to try and produce a definition not just of the region but of regionalism itself as a concept, at least to be able to distinguish it from other concepts with which it is at first sight comparable or with which it may seem to overlap.

For the anthropologist, the most salient of these other concepts at the present time is probably ethnicity. The basic question here is, how far is it justified to subsume regionalism under ethnicity? Certainly many regionalisms are suited to an ethnicity-based approach, such as Basqueland and Catalonia in Spain, Brittany in France, the French- and German-speaking parts of Italy, Wales, Scotland and Ulster in the United Kingdom, Flanders and Wallonia in Belgium, Hungarian parts of Rumania, and Albanian Kosovo in Serbia. Indeed, there is sometimes a tendency to view European regionalisms almost automatically as basically ethnic (e.g. Macdonald 1993: 16 can be read in this way).

However, there are many cases where this would be dubious at best. It is not easy to give simple answers as to why, especially in an academic environment which has had to cope with suggestions that London stockbrokers (Cohen 1974) and the Italian Communist Party (well, nearly; see Shore 1993b) are ethnic groups, counter-intuitive though these are likely to seem. One objection is that such an approach tends to favour sub-groups within a society, thus ignoring the possibility of according ethnicity to majority groups within nation states. Some studies into majority ethnicities in Europe have been carried out in recent years (e.g. Forsythe 1989, on Germany; Just 1989, on Greece), but it is still the case that ethnicity generally suggests a minority standing in some degree in opposition to the national majority. Thus 'majority' becomes equivalent to 'nation', and ethnic relations are largely majority-minority ones—in other words, between those with a state and those without one but still within that state's borders—and characteristically between two identities that are treated as relatively bounded and as absolutely opposed to one another. This is somewhat different from the centre-periphery relationship entailed by regionalism, which, given that the two poles are more likely to share at least some elements of identity, is segmented—that is, the poles may be opposed on one level, while on another the regional pole is clearly subsumed under the national one.

Some examples may make this distinction clearer. In Germany and England—which, urban immigrant minorities aside, both enjoy a high degree of ethnic homogeneity—regional and national identities are not mutually exclusive. Nor are they necessarily so in France and Italy, where majority sub-identities exist in some regions and minority ethnic identities in others. One can be a Norman or Gascon without ceasing to be French: one's regional identity nestles within one's national identity. In Brittany or Catalonia, on the other hand, regional identity may be considered mutually exclusive with national identity: both exist on a level that is directly comparable. Of course, the French state is powerful enough to maintain its sovereignty over all its regions. But this does not mean that it is welcomed in all of them. It may even be resisted. But in the first two cases this cannot be done in the name of ethnic distinctiveness, as in the last two cases it well might be. Another example is Navarre (MacClancy 1993), where local people apparently cannot make up their minds whether they are Spanish, Basque or Navarran, the latter being seen, at least in part, as a regional identity rather than ethnically separate. The wine-growing region of Rioja, not far away, is also in the process of elevating itself to this sort of status.

The distinction is admittedly challenged in some cases. Regionalism in Alsace and Lorraine owes much to the traditional German speech of their inhabitants, which in most other cases would be taken as a mark of an ethnicity separate from that of the dominant French. Nonetheless, both regions have long regarded themselves as French. More usually, however, when members of a majority ethnicity in one country become stranded in

another country because of an international border, a distinction can be made. German regionalism can be considered non-ethnic in Bavaria, ethnic in northern Italy. The lack of fit between ethnicity and some regionalisms is also shown by the fact that not all ethnic minorities compose a region, an entity which obviously requires geographical contiguity. Urban ethnic minorities, which are frequently dispersed, escape the category, as do populations still recognized as of immigrant origin. Thus Finns in Sweden, Portuguese in France, Spaniards in Belgium and Turks in Germany do not contribute to European regionalism, nor do immigrant communities whose origins—and therefore ethnic reference, at least in part—lie outside Europe. Although Britain, France and Germany all have significant immigrant minority populations of the latter sort, each prospectively with its own political agenda, dispersal across these countries' cities, residential intermixing with more established populations in the same cities and urban conditions generally combine to prevent any regional identity from emerging. In any case, while acknowledging ethnic distinctiveness, immigrants may not feel that this is incompatible with a British, French or German identity.

Regional identities may also cross national boundaries as well as falling within them, perhaps then being divided into what, in the present context, might be called sub-regionalisms. A particularly interesting example is the Franco-Provençal linguistic region. Franco-Provençal cultural and linguistic movements claim the existence of a region that covers not only that area, but also south-west Switzerland and eastern France as far as the environs of Lyons. Although these are areas which a French nationalist would probably consider the Francophone Alps, adherents claim distinctiveness from both the French and Italian national languages. One element, the Vallée d'Aoste in north-west Italy, is officially an autonomous French-speaking region within the Italian state. Unofficially, however, it can be seen as part of this much wider Franco-Provençal regional identity, embracing neighbouring countries. This dilutes its own regional particularity, while potentially strengthening its position vis-à-vis Rome by virtue of its belonging to a cross-border regionalism of wider scope. Of course, this multiple identity is subject to contextualization and there are dialectal differences within the Franco-Provençal area itself, but the various levels of identity are real to local people nonetheless (field enquiries, 1994). Not all apparent examples qualify: for example, in Catalonia there is little demand for uniting the French part with El Principat, the Catalan region over the border in Spain, which now enjoys considerable autonomy (see O'Brien 1993: 112-13).

Regionalism and Bureaucracy

But regionalism is not only a popular movement—it can also be a bureaucratic instrument. National governments may regionalize administration, without this implying anything about popular regional identities, a good example here being the UK and, latterly, countries like Ireland and Greece, which have practically had to invent regions and regional structures to handle financial assistance disbursed by the EU. Regional and local bureaucracies may support these moves, but they may also seek to draw some of their legitimacy from local identities. And where these do not exist, bureaucracies may seek to create them. This rather resembles nationalist ideas in the nineteenth century—which contemporary regional and local identities now see themselves as challenging. This may happen in a rather piecemeal fashion, reflecting the personal views of individual bureaucrats rather than settled policy. The real point from the anthropological point of view, however, is that bureaucracies are just as capable of generating meanings, identities and the symbols that support and express them as any other collectivity. Anthropologists have only recently begun to catch up with this insight, much of the progress coming from the study of European bureaucracies (e.g. Shore 1993a; Shore and Black 1994).

European regional policy actually antedates the Treaty of Rome of 1957. Milward traces its origins to a compromise solution for dealing with the restructuring of the Belgian coal industry in the Borinage, in the south of the country, in the days of the European Coal and Steel Community (1994: 111-18). Although this move was at first strongly resisted by France, the Borinage became such a test of ECSC resolve that its identification as a region had to be aided with a bit of mystification. In Milward's words (ibid.: 115): 'The efforts of geographers, sociologists, historians and economists in the early 1960s, once regional development plans had been launched, to describe and define the unique regional nature of the Borinage are an exercise in academic pedantry.'

Nonetheless, although always subordinate to welfare policies, especially employment policy, the idea of regional policy caught on among bureaucrats and politicians alike. For today's EU bureaucracy, indeed, regionalism remains a policy question bound up with relative economic disadvantage. EU policy is to achieve as much infrastructural uniformity within Europe as possible, so that competition can take place on an equal basis. The regions are seen as the key to this policy, the argument being that, otherwise, those with the worst infrastructure will lose both investment and labour. Regional policy is also justified in political and cultural terms, which can seem contradictory, depending on which official document one reads. Thus on the one hand it is seen as a way of preserving Europe's diversity (ECUK 1994: 3), and on the other as encouraging European solidarity through economic convergence (CEC 1984: 9).

In the past, the EU's official delimitations of regions were clearly influenced by this exclusively economic perspective, often ignoring, and thus potentially conflicting with, popular notions of regionalism. Thus of the seven regions into which France is divided, the depressed Pas de Calais is singled out, while, for instance, Normandy and Burgundy are ignored. The Netherlands is split up crudely into north, south, east and west, while the Republic of Ireland forms a region of its own (CEC 1991). In England, the putting together of Dorset and Gloucestershire, of Hampshire and Buckinghamshire, and of Lincolnshire and Derbyshire into the same regions hardly seems justified in terms of local identities (ECUK 1994: 21). In Germany, the EU admittedly follows the *Land* system, but this is itself historically the result of numerous compromises with local identities. Clearly, most of these definitions ignore the claims of both history and popular identity on a regional level.

However, it has since been recognized that the cultivation of other, more identity-related aspects may actually reinforce the implementation of policy. As a result, the idea of a 'Europe of regions' has now entered into bureaucratic thinking in Brussels itself (Shore 1993a; Shore and Black 1994: 291, 294-5; they are sometimes called 'meso-level governments' [Mazey 1995: 79]). This is partly a response to the fact that where regional conflicts with national centres were formerly bipolar, regions are now increasingly in a position to play off Brussels against the national centre. Shore's and Black's experience was that bureaucrats in Brussels were quite conscious of this possibility and even prepared to collude in it, though their idea of popular regionalism still appeared to be mostly that it is ethnic. This was also apparently a private or at least discreetly held position, which if bruited too loudly would give plenty of ammunition to Eurosceptics everywhere.

Non-official and official regional associations

However, regional initiatives actually have a quite long history as means of countering nationalism, one which antedates, and was originally independent of, institutional attempts to unify Europe through the EEC and its successors, though as ideas Europeanization and regionalization have long been intertwined too. As Harvie suggests (1994: 4), 'Regionalization, the chopping up of problems into manageable areas, has now given way to an aggressive regionalism.' However, he adds: 'A regional "movement"—as opposed to "regionalization"—requires public participation' (ibid.: 10). If early attempts to promote regionalism and give the idea institutional expression across boundaries came from some of the regions themselves, it must be admitted that at first this was largely a bureaucratic movement. The first association to be founded, in Geneva in 1951, was the Council of European Municipalities, which became the Council of European Municipalities and Regions in 1984 (see CEMR n.d.), its most visible expression being the town-twinning phenomenon. The Assembly, originally Council, of European Regions was set up much later, in 1985, as a response to the first conference of the European Parliament with the regions of the then European Community (see AER 1993).

These two bodies are official, in the sense that they involve representatives of duly constituted local or regional governments, but non-official at the

European level, since they were not set up with the intention of representing regions formally and institutionally: they do not, in other words, enjoy a formal status equivalent to the European Commission or European Parliament. Such bodies do exist, which, although they may be struggling for proper recognition, formally enjoy official status as institutions of European integration. There are two principal fora, one which comes under the auspices of the Council of Europe, the other under the EU. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe is responsible for the Council of Europe's many activities in local and regional government. Today, however, local and regional politicians' hopes are much more focused on the EU body, the Committee of the Regions, established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and set up in 1994. The COR has only an advisory role, but with a right to be consulted in an ever-increasing number of policy areas, a key one being social cohesion. This especially is recognized as a matter for regional competence, through the regions' large role in administering the structural funds (i.e. aid disbursed by Brussels to regions with specific developmental problems), and it is linked to the principle of subsidiarity (basically, that administrative functions should be delivered by the lowest level of administration consistent with effectiveness, this supposedly increasing democratic accountability). The COR also has the right to issue opinions on other matters, including legislative proposals on which the parallel Economic and Social Committee has been consulted, can do so on its own or the Commission's initiative, and may meet on its own initiative.

Although an official body with some autonomy, the COR appears to be hampered as a democratic body by the arrangements established for it. This is partly due to its purely advisory role, a restriction made despite calls for it to be a second chamber of the European parliament. These calls originated within Germany, and the original idea for COR is said to have come from Bavaria, a German Land with a high degree of identity and self-acquired autonomy. However, there is no provision, merely an expectation, that representatives should have democratic credentials (in the sense that they are at least elected representatives of the authorities they represent on the COR). Ambiguity here led the former Conservative government in the UK to attempt to wriggle out of this provision by appointing unelected civil servants and members of quangos to it, though this was eventually defeated in the House of Lords. Another indication of that government's desire to retain control is that representation in the UK was based not on local authorities as such, but on planning regions, whose local resonance was limited, to say the least. Other countries appear to have been more prepared to play the democratic game, and the vast majority of representatives have been elected to the bodies they represent in the COR. However, the appointments themselves are made by national governments, representation being calculated on a national basis, according to a state's population. Although the involvement of UK representatives in COR plenary sessions is actually reckoned to be among the best (Regions and Cities of Europe 6, Jan. 1996), this reflects local frustration with central government in the UK rather

Whitehall's enthusiasm for the regional idea. Another fleck on the democratic credibility of COR is that elected members who lose their seats in their local constituencies are not required to resign from COR, and frequently do not do so. As a result, COR has acquired something of a reputation as a refuge for de-elected politicians.

Opinions differ as to how significant the COR will become. For some, it is a stage on the road to a truly federal Europe. Jacques Blanc, on the other hand, its former president but also an ardent defender of the nation state, feels that the latter will continue to be the most important administrative and political division in Europe, and indeed sees regionalism as 'the antidote to separatism' (cited in Tyler 1994). This is quite apart from the frequent perception held by bureaucrats and politicians outside it, that it is really little more than a talking shop for trivial issues, or a forum for ambitious local and regional politicians, or both (field enquiries, 1996).

One other regional element that should be mentioned here is the creation of eight megaregions for and by the EU, all explicitly transcending national borders ('areas of transregional cooperation'; see Europe 2000+ 1995). At present, these tend to be linked to particular policy areas. Thus, for example, the North Sea region, comprising north and middle England, the northern Netherlands and the whole of Denmark, is intended to tackle environmental pollution. Similarly, the Atlantic Arc region, comprising 32 regions in southwest England, the Atlantic seaboards of Spain and France, and the whole of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Portugal, is concerned with such things as unemployment in marginal areas and co-operation over oilspills, though some of those involved also make reference to the 'Celtic' dimension of these regions (Helm 1996: 18). Some of these alliances originated as local initiatives, but they have been adopted by the EU for some purposes, such as transport. This dimension has led to the EU's European Spatial Development Perspective, which, although not binding on member states, lays down the basis for future regional co-operation on this level, explicitly combining regions of different member states. So far, the rationale is again simply to equalize economic and social development between different parts of Europe. However, as we shall see, local authorities are themselves creating crossborder alliances with one another, which parallel this official Brussels development. At either level, democratic credibility remains a problem, and it is hard at present to credit Harvie's suggestion that such alliances 'may in time create an intermediary level of authority, between region and European centre, more relevant than the old nation state' (1994: 60)—certainly in the context of popular identity. Such alliances are not always popular, for example, the Euroregion Slesvig, straddling the German-Danish border, which a majority of local Danes are opposed to, for fear of German domination (Bendixen 1997).

Intra-bureaucratic conflicts: local strategies towards Brussels and national centres

I now shift to providing some ethnography on bureaucratic positions on regionalism as seen by mostly UK regional and local authorities, in Brussels and at home. A first point is that there are clear conflicts in some cases between representations of regionalism at different bureaucratic levels and their attendant policies. This is exemplified by Britain, which Brussels has divided, like other EU member countries, into regions whose definitions are mostly arbitrary in terms of popular identities (CEC 1992: 6). However, the UK office of the EU does not always stick to the boundaries laid down by Brussels: for example, for some purposes London has reduced Brussels's 'Southwest' region, comprising Dorset, Somerset, Avon, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Devon and Cornwall, to the 'West' region, which lacks the last two (cf. ECUK 1994). Similarly, according to another informant, while local authorities in East Anglia wanted a small region consisting of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, the EU UK office insisted on creating an `East' region bringing in Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire too. Moreover, both representations may be modified or even rejected altogether at local-authority level: for example, Dorset, Hampshire and Lower Normandy have a joint office in Brussels, set up in April 1995. This 'region' is thus not only transregional in London's or Brussels' terms (Hampshire is in London's 'South' region, while Dorset is in its 'West' region) but also transnational.

Informants differ, however, as to its rationale. For one, in the home base in the southern UK, it was to push the credentials of these three authorities as a common region and explicitly 'to express this unity'; it was also thought to be good to be close to sources of information on EU policy and the local effects it will have. In the Brussels representative office itself there was more caution, this 'region' not being represented as having an identity of its own or as being more than a co-operative arrangement to obtain information and funds from Brussels and to lobby there. In the jargon of the EU, additionality (i.e., the principle that EU money should be additional to, and not replace, national funding) is at least as important as subsidiarity. There was no pretence at avoiding or circumventing Whitehall or Paris—which was regarded as a common misconception. In any case, there was much less money to be had direct from Brussels than from, or through, London or Paris. However, having an office in Brussels was seen as important in ensuring that what there was came one's way, and it was cost-effective. The history of this particular alliance was also represented as casual and unplanned, arising out of links that Dorset and Hampshire had each developed independently with Lower Normandy concerning information exchange in particular. More recently, the Isle of Wight has also joined, though, with high unemployment and living costs, it is a more disadvantaged area. This was not seen as a problem, so long as conflicts over funding could be avoided: thus there was no such conflict between Hampshire and Dorset, since they were eligible for different pots of money to some extent, even though both benefited from

KONVER (the EU programme of assistance to areas formerly connected with defence).

The Devon and Cornwall regional office was set up in a similarly ad hoc fashion, initially by Cornwall County Council in conjunction with Plymouth City Council, with Devon County Council coming on board later. Although there is not a structured alliance with French regions as with the previous case, the links between Cornwall and Brittany, and between Devon and Calvados, were seen as important. This was despite the rivalries between Cornwall and Brittany over fishing—though real, they were centuries-old, and not seen as an impediment to the development of co-operation generally. Again, the rationale for having a joint representative office was to ensure the release of funds to local authorities that might otherwise go elsewhere, even outside the EU, for example to eastern Europe, even when release of such funds would be to London in the first instance. There was no such hint of using the office to push for regional identities as such, which, given Cornwall's separate identity as England's very own Celtic fringe, may be hard to sustain for domestic reasons. This is despite the alleged genesis of the alliance in a comparison with the Scottish Highlands and Islands—another peripheral region with severe and persistent economic problems.

The difference of perspective within the first alliance may be thought to reflect relative closeness to Brussels and respective PR agendas: what local authorities are keen to justify to their constituents is made to seem less compelling in the hot-house environment of European institutions. However, I am more inclined to think that the difference in this case may have been basically personal. The North of England regional office in Brussels, for instance, is seen as having a definite political agenda for regional autonomy in the form of a regional assembly, which it is concerned to lobby for as much as anything else. In the case of Devon and Cornwall, there seems to have been more convergence between the Brussels office and the home base than in the case of Dorset and Hampshire.

To return to Dorset, it seems especially keen on joining with other regions in bodies such as the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions; the Association of European Regions, which is not confined to EU states; the Five Region Protocol, which links five regions in five countries in western Europe; and the Atlantic Arc Region, set up to raise the profile of Europe's neglected Atlantic coast (Dorset County Council n.d.: 21-6). The Association of European Regions, for example, is intended 'to strengthen the representation of the regions within European institutions' (ibid.: 22), as well as acting as a channel of communication to Brussels, by-passing national centres. It is seen as playing a similar role as the Association of County Councils in the UK itself, which acts as 'a conductor of comments from County Councils to the Commission' (ibid.: 21), similarly circumventing the national government in Whitehall. As far as Dorset is concerned, co-operation between regions quite consciously has a political dimension as well as being a matter of, for

example, improving infrastructure or trade links. The Atlantic Arc is frankly described as 'a political lobby' in the official brochure (ibid.: 22), which also states (ibid.: 21): 'Co-operation with other bodies is essential if Dorset is to get its opinion accepted in Europe. The fact is that the Commission will take more notice of several authorities working together than it would of one.'

Such initiatives may certainly be encouraged at higher levels. However, alliances formed by local authorities on their own initiative often cross regional boundaries as seen by Brussels or national centres. While not necessarily being designed to oppose or defy the latter, they can be regarded as a flexing of local muscles, in which local authorities take advantage of Brussels' support for regional initiatives while at the same time producing solutions that fit purely local circumstances. This procedure has become known in UK local authority circles as the 'Whitehall bypass', though it is not invariably seen as relevant or desirable even within those circles. Nonetheless, an indication of the fact that many regions are themselves keenly aware of the possibilities that European integration may afford them is that nearly fifty from across Europe had established permanent offices in Brussels by 1992 (CEC 1992: 2), and 130 by 1996 (Helm 1996: 18). Not all are secessionist or autonomist, nor, like the English counties of Essex and Lancashire, are they necessarily regions in any normal bureaucratic acceptance of the term (Tindale 1995: 4). However, there is an increasing tendency in some quarters to define all sub-national identities and institutions as regional, including local and urban ones.

Let us examine some more examples involving UK local or regional authorities, showing the extent to which many of these alliances are still policy-based, though arising out of local initiatives. Wales is part of the coalfields group in Europe and also the EU's Interreg II with both halves of Ireland. The Wales European Centre in Brussels claims to have been instrumental in getting the EC to accept the relevance of sea boundaries in this context. Scotland is linked to northern Scandinavian regions, due to common interests in environment and education, as well as with Wales and Aarlberg in Denmark over education in peripheral areas. Essex shares a Brussels office and certain projects with Picardy (France), with co-operation on training, education and tourism. The two are seen as being similar in the proximity of their national capitals, as well as having major industries (automotive, food-processing, electronics) in common, and there is also an arrangement with Thuringia in eastern Germany, which now amounts to a triple alliance, justified with reference to cultural as well as economic aspects of co-operation, and in terms of developing closeness of the local authority in each area to its respective citizens. Generally, there was thought to be a quite strong awareness of Europe in Essex, despite the presence of some Eurosceptic MPs (most famously, Teddy Taylor).

Kent has links with Nord Pas de Calais and the three Belgian provinces, an alliance that has legal status, even though each partner maintains a separate

office in Brussels. In Kent's case, the idea of the office is to counter received wisdom that Kent is relatively prosperous and to obtain its proper share of funding from Brussels. However, there have been problems in justifying the expense of the Brussels office to Kent citizens, who tend to view the EU largely as a source of unemployment (customs officers, freight forwarders, farmers through the BSE crisis etc.). Also, conflict between West Sussex and East Sussex over internal boundaries has prevented both being involved in this alliance as Kent would have liked.

My informant in the Brussels Kent office suggested that counties not on a border, like those the other side of London, were generally much less interested in cross-border alliances. East Anglian authorities have shown little interest so far, though at least Gloucestershire, Somerset, Avon and Wiltshire, further away from any international border, are co-operating on setting up a Brussels office for themselves. Oxfordshire does have ad hoc arrangements with Thuringia, for which it is a channel for obtaining the university's expertise in forestry, and also with Perm (Russia), an area like Oxfordshire of defence run-down. However, the county does not think it worthwhile to set up an office in Brussels, despite now relying on Brussels for some core funding in the areas of education, environment and transport.

On the other hand, the West Midlands Regional Forum, a regional initiative covering 5.5 million people in Warwickshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Staffordshire and Shropshire, has close alliances with German representative offices, though it does not see their rigid structures as a model to be followed. The West Midlands is also in Brussels' Northwest Metropolitan Area, which also includes Dublin, Frankfurt, the Ile de France and the so-called Randstad in the Netherlands, as well as in the Atlantic Arc, being just outside the Centre Capitals region, which stretches from the Ruhr and Paris through Belgium and London but ends at Banbury (Oxfordshire). It was here that I found a stress on the idea of the West Midlands as a region with its own identity, contrasted with the East Midlands, which was defined as lying the other side of Watling Street (an old Roman Road bisecting the region in a southeast-northwest direction). This identity was seen as having an economic aspect, cohesion coming from economic regeneration, but this informant hoped that a sense of popular identity might arise out of it: a bureaucracyled, if not elite-led process and idea, though it was also seen as lying 'fifty years down the road'. On the other hand, the representative of the Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Assembly was more interested in economic regeneration than regional identity, simply saying that what he called 'culture' would have to look after itself, if it was to happen at all. In the case of NE England too, a strong local identity would be seen as emerging after the Assembly had been established. This again was a regional initiative, dating back to 1987, legally constituted, but officially not recognized. This did not matter: so long as there was political uniformity in the region, as there almost invariably is, there was little Whitehall could do to counter this attempt to give the region some freedom of manoeuvre. In this case,

therefore, regional identity is seen as supporting a political programme (in the broad sense) rather than expressing an economic one. The Assembly itself has no alliances overseas, though particular local authorities do.

The making of cross-border alliances is not confined to the UK and may exclude it; as we have seen, it may also incorporate regions outside the EU (see Harvie 1994: 60). A prominent example of the former is the 'Four Motors' alliance between Baden-Württemburg, Rhône-Alps, Catalonia and Lombardy, which certainly sees itself as the model for an alternative way of organizing Europe, with the existence of a legislature as a qualification for joining and a focus on high technology (ibid.: 59, 62). A similar alliance exists between Saarland, Lorraine and Luxembourg, under the impetus of the prominent German Social Democrat politician and former mayor of Saarland, Oskar Lafontaine.

An example of an alliance across EU borders is the so-called 'Euroregion Nysa' consisting of the border regions of East Saxony in Germany, Northern Bohemia in the Czech Republic and Lower Silesia in Poland. This was founded in 1991, on local initiatives, though the lack of any tradition of local autonomy in these ex-communist states made for a slow start, major decisions frequently having to be referred back to national centres. One focus of this alliance is the city of Görlitz/Zgorzelec, an old German provincial town which now straddles the current German–Polish border, where inhabitants from either side can cross to the other using simply identity cards (so long as they stay in the border zone) and where bus services over the border can be paid for in either currency. More generally, there is co-operation in respect of public services (especially emergencies and disaster relief), promoting trade and tourism, fighting crime, and stimulating culture (Irek 1999).

Conclusion

These interviews and other information show a cline from relative enthusiasm for regional alliances and co-operation with Brussels to circumvent the dead hand of the national centre, to a purely pragmatic view stressing co-operation in obtaining funding and information exchange rather than the creation of an identity as such. Many alliances take place between areas with similar economic or social profiles. Much still rests on the tensions between the local (as distinct from the regional) and the national. However, it is clear that in England itself, while a popular sense of regional identities may remain weak, local identities up to county level can be quite vibrant (cf. Young et al. 1996). Local politicians may be largely motivated by achieving things for their local area, and will follow any strategy that may be in the air at any particular time in doing so.

At the same time, there are distinct limitations to regional co-operation within both national boundaries and Europe. Regions do not only co-operate, they compete, and wealthier regions often support regionalism as a means of distancing themselves from their poorer neighbours and retaining their privileged positions (e.g. the Lombard League). They may even ally with the national centre against other regions. Regional development has conspicuously not worked in some areas, like the Mezzogiorno in southern Italy and parts of Spain and Greece, which are actually falling further behind the European average economically, despite the disbursement of structural funds to them. These regions are therefore in a weak position to make useful alliances: prominent examples, like the Four Motors Alliance, are actually between relatively prosperous regions whose main concern is to maintain that prosperity (cf. Harvie 1994: 6). Another consideration is that local politicians often dislike the introduction of regional institutions, which they see as either competing with their own power as an elected body, or. as in the UK, as representing yet another tier of central government over them.

More generally, although increased autonomy and responsiveness to local identities and demands are on the cards for sub-national units generally, down to the city, there are no indications that the nation states of Europe, who are still the first-line members of the EU, are ready to yield their sovereignty to them. Although the nation state is often seen as having weakened itself through not only union in the EU but also the retreat from welfarism and from nationalized economies, the EU is still based on a series of international treaties between sovereign states, in the time-honoured Westphalian fashion. In addition, even Brussels' directives have to be ratified by national parliaments to enjoy the force of law in each of the member states. Nor is secession impossible, as the case of Greenland (a dependent territory of Denmark, NB) shows: the EU is not to be compared with the USA in 1861. This is true regardless of popular national sentiment as such, which is hostile to full integration in Britain and Denmark, while yielding to a more 'European' identity plus extensive regionalization in, for example, Germany, and also Belgium. The latter has now almost ceased to exist as a nation state because of its extensive devolution of the state's powers and functions to its three new administrative (but also popular) regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels).

Overall, however, many European nation states will still be both willing and able to resist the pace of change towards thorough-going regionalism. It is therefore perhaps no wonder that the more radical thinkers are looking to cross-border alliances to reconfigure Europe by producing nation-state size regions which erase traditional national borders (as in the *Europe 2000+* document, 1995). For the anthropologist, incidentally, this has the interesting effect that centre–periphery polarities become reversed: Britanny is peripheral within France, but quite central within the Atlantic Arc, whose administrative headquarters are located in Rennes (Helm 1996: 18). However, my interviews so far have indicated that this development is some way off, if it arrives at all: it can be difficult enough to find proper regional identities in some parts of Europe, while for officials there are always more pressing

problems to be attended to. But then again, many identities, including national ones in nineteenth-century Europe, as well as many local ones in nineteenth-century Britain (on the latter, cf. Young et al. 1996), have been elite-led or -driven. Also, regions, like nations, are ideas people have sometimes been prepared to die for, unlike the EU itself so far. Most probably there will be no settled situation, but one in which local, regional, national and European institutions and politicians continue to contest power, as they do constantly in other 'federal' systems.

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