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## ► To cite this version:

Oana-Ramona Ilovan. MECHANISMS IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF TERRITORIAL IDENTITY IN THE "LANDS" OF ROMANIA. International Conference of Territorial Intelligence, Sep 2006, Alba Iulia, Romania. pp.5. halshs-01003187

**HAL Id: halshs-01003187**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01003187>**

Submitted on 10 Jun 2014

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# MECHANISMS IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF TERRITORIAL IDENTITY IN THE “LANDS” OF ROMANIA

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**Summary:** This paper approaches the mechanisms that worked for building the identity of the “lands” of Romania. The focus is on the significance that identity had and still has in ensuring the sustainable functioning of these regional systems. The case of the Land of Năsăud is discussed in order to support our point of view on this theme.

**Rezumat:** Această lucrare abordează mecanismele care au contribuit la construirea identității „țărilor” din România. Ne-am focalizat demersul asupra semnificației pe care identitatea a avut-o și încă o mai are în asigurarea funcționării durabile a sistemului regional de acest tip. Cazul Țării Năsăudului este discutat pentru a argumenta punctul nostru de vedere pe această temă.

**Key words:** territorial identity, mental criterion, “lands”, the Land of Năsăud, region, limits.

**Cuvinte cheie:** identitate teritorială, criteriul mental, „țări”, Țara Năsăudului, regiune, limite.

This paper approaches the mechanisms that worked for building the identity of the “lands” of Romania. The focus is on the significance that identity had and still has in ensuring the functioning of these regional systems. Therefore, the first part of our paper lists the mechanisms that rendered the “lands” as functional and original areas. The second part of our paper shows (a) the deconstruction mechanisms that we identified especially for the 20<sup>th</sup> century when they were highly obvious and (b) an approach of the territorial identity in relation to sustainable development, that is identity as a factor of stimulating or of hindering the development of a region, of a “land”. The case of the Land of Năsăud is discussed in order to support our point of view throughout this paper.

## 1. MECHANISMS THAT RENDERED THE “LANDS” AS FUNCTIONAL AND ORIGINAL AREAS – CONSTRUCTION MECHANISMS

We would like to clarify the meaning of the terms “construction” and “deconstruction”. When we refer to the construction mechanisms of the territorial identity of a “land”, we discuss the factors that contributed to the creation and fortifying of this identity. “The deconstruction mechanisms” do not constitute themselves into the antonym of the first syntagm, but they refer to the way in which analytic reading (“deconstruction” – with the meaning given by the French philosopher: Jacques Derrida) of the human excellence’s products of a “land” has contributed to the creation, fortifying, and metamorphosis of the people’s identity and that of the places they inhabit. Deconstruction supposes especially the way in which meaning is created through writing. These deconstruction mechanisms were highly exploited during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The functioning of the “lands” and their originality has been created and supported by the appearance of a distinct collective consciousness for each territorial entity included in this type, delimited according to the mental criterion (Coccean, 2004, 2005, Coccean, Ciangă, 1999-2000). That is why, when studying a “land”, one should start from the hypothesis that the mental criterion is fundamental for delimiting it and all the regional entities belonging to this type. Studying a region without taking into account the people and their way of thinking is as if one could study a territorial entity inhabited by “standardized” individuals, the same everywhere, and thus considering that their view upon life is not relevant for the way in which that part of the geographic space has evolved. That is why also *the methodology should be a specific one* and not one that could be applied to all regions, no matter their type. Within this methodological context, the first phase is that of identifying the

construction mechanisms for the mental space of a “land”.

The construction of a mental space of a “land” is realized through the following factors: *physical-geographic factors* (Ilovan, 2005b), *political, social and cultural factors* (discussed starting from the “thresholds” in the evolution of the respective “land”: for example, the impact of the *border* in the case of the Land of Năsăud) (the last ones analyzed by Ilovan, Chitul, 2006) and *the features of the economy along the centuries* (Ilovan, 2005a, 2005c, 2006). Their importance and order may vary according to the “land” chosen to be researched. The order of the above-mentioned factors is valid for the Land of Năsăud. In addition, one should critically analyze *the answer of the inhabitants of the region to the action of the factors, focusing on the people’s vision upon life (attitudes, feelings, values etc.)*, while deciphering identity and otherness. In the end, one should identify *the features specific to the respective mental space during the period of its construction and after it* (Coccean, Ilovan, 2005).

## 2. DECONSTRUCTION MECHANISMS OF TERRITORIAL IDENTITY FOR THE “LANDS” OF ROMANIA

The deconstruction of the identity of a “land” has been realized through *writing and rewriting its history and evolution* by both laic and priests, that is the representatives of the educated ones, thus resulting *a discourse of the elite in the region*, as well as by the peasants (Onofreiu, 2006), in their numerous reports to the authorities. During the last decades, this deconstruction was realized in many tries of *recovering the past and making a radiography of the present* through writings on diverse themes such as: the history of education, of justice, of resource exploitation (e.g. of the forest) etc. in the region and through monographies of the settlements of the respective “land” (Onofreiu, 2006 – for a list of the most important papers and books for the Land of Năsăud). The pride of belonging to such *privileged communities*, as the “lands” were perceived and represented, grew from remembering the ancestors, the most important personalities in the community.

One could notice a dilution of the discourse on identity in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (during the communist period) and after 1989 as compared to the beginning of that century because of the more urgent economic needs and the result of the migratory movement for work abroad of many rural inhabitants of the regions (Ilovan, 2005a). This was in addition to the social and economic changes and, implicitly, those of mentality which the entire Romanian society underwent.

## 2.1. Methodological proposal – priority of the mental criterion in regionalisation

In order to deconstruct the mental space of a “land”, that is the territorial identity, we suggest *studying the relation between subjectivity and reality* (this can be done by analytically reading the answers to a questionnaire for the inhabitants of the respective “land” about themselves and the same for those outside the region about it and its inhabitants) and *the features of the specific mental space along the centuries and at present*.

*The relevance of the mental criterion for establishing the limits of a region* is obvious only after analysing first the other types of limits for the chosen regional entity. For instance, for the Land of Năsăud, the analysis of the physical-geographic limits, of those induced by the historic events and of those related to the economic activities bring important pieces in the puzzle of the way in which the limits of the “land” according to *the mental criterion* were born and thus giving arguments for its *priority within the regionalisation process* (Cocean, Ilovan, 2005).

The permanence and the evolution of the “land” itself (e.g. of the Land of Năsăud), as well as of the most of the “lands” of Romania (except the Land of Amlaş and the Land of Vrancea, as they both disappeared – Cocean, 2005, Stahl, 2002) is a proof of the important role that the feeling of belonging to a certain community had for the evolution of such regional entities. Their metamorphosis and the influence of diverse factors for the inhabitants’ unity having the same values and observing behaviour rules that are easily recognised are witnesses of the sustainability of these regions along the centuries.

## 2.2. Methodological proposal – relevance of the significance of limits for a “land”

In order to discuss the role of the mental criterion in regionalisation and thus that of identity, one should discuss the *limit* concept. Therefore, a part of this paper focuses on its analysis, on its meaning and importance for the study of the lands of Romania. In this context, our approach targets to answer to the following question: „*Which is the relevance of the concept of ‘limit’ when researching the ‘lands’ of Romania?*”. This question must be asked not only in Geography as a whole, but also in its branch, Regional Geography, whose object of study is *the region*.

Starting from this generous premise, the regionalist finds himself permanently in the position when he has to give a ‘verdict’ when establishing the limits

of a territorial system. These limits have the role of making easier the bringing into the light of the regional features according to multiple criteria. During this delimiting process the geographer, as a specialist, and his subjectivity guides him when choosing a governing criterion (e.g. functionality, economy, the mental criterion etc.).

Therefore, the problem of delimiting a region and especially a “land” type one is an actual one with every new approach of the respective territory and also because of the *metamorphosis* of the “lands” as time goes by. Thus, every new study reveals an up-to-date hypostasis of the analysed space. But why *especially* for a “land” type one? Without defining once more what a “land” is (see Cocean, 1997, 2005), it is enough to take into account the complexity of meaning for the concept of *limit* in the case of such a region.

Through the study of the meaning and functions of *the limit* one may build a *reading pattern* for any of the seventeen “lands” of Romania. The limit underlines the mechanisms through which a community carrying certain originality may be individualised, as well as the role of the region’s relations with the exterior when consolidating itself as a functional and sustainable system as its existence proved along the centuries.

The limit does not frame only *an inside* (intra muros) that is different from *an outside* (extra muros). The filling of the frame given by the limit is to be realised both by the individual and by the community he belongs to. The limit does not only have *the function to separate, to isolate, or to underline the differences*. On the contrary, its most powerful function is that of *being a bridge, a strip witnessing the transition to the outside, to the Other, that of relating different entities* (territorial and individual or collective ones etc.). Moreover, transition is a proof of the man’s inventiveness of *discovering in the Other his own self and at least one more feature*. Usually, this new feature is perceived with fear, intolerance, always with curiosity, sometimes with the opening for compromise (e.g. accepting the foreign rule in order to reach a higher level of development).

By understanding *the functions* that *the limit* has (both of separating and relating), the research of the “lands” becomes easier, the access being ensured also by the interdisciplinary approach of certain concepts (Pascaru, 2005) (geography, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology etc.) and may be better understood due to this.

In the appearance and the fortifying of “lands”, despite its traditional place, the limit existed in order to be stepped over. Only by stepping over the

*spatial and cultural limit*, could the boomerang effect be felt: coming back to their origin and fortifying their identity in contrast with what the *outside* revealed. Stepping over the limit was not a one way process. Moreover, the *intrusions*, according to their magnitude and manifestation led to fortifying the unity of the inhabitants and thus the survival of the “land” itself.

Similar to the frontiers, *the limit* should be understood as a *transition strip to, as the relation between*. Understanding the limit only as an obstacle or as a fault that cannot be surpassed means not to take into account a well-known case: isolation means stagnation, involution, features that have not been characteristic of the “lands” during the effervescence of their development (especially for the anthropic component). The appearance of the “lands” themselves supposed the existence of certain favourable conditions, such as the *to and from fluxes* of mass, energy, information, persons, and of interest have been the ones ensuring the long-term balance and functioning of the regional system.

Limit – *as the level up to which the natural and anthropic potential can be exploited in a sustainable way*. Having this meaning, the limit becomes singular in the context of the diverse forms that *the relational function* has. For the first time, the limit does not ensure the transition between two places, communities, or individuals that coexist, but it marks the transition between two states: from sustainability, balance, to exceeding the natural and/or human potential and to the dismantling of the regional system (e.g. the Land of Vrancea – Stahl, 2002).

The limit is also a *selection space* that offers the possibility of choice (of *returning* or of *moving ahead*, as well as of choosing between several variants). That is why, many times, the choices in the transition strip have left strong prints on the collective consciousness, have imposed certain social representations, and marked the communities’ mental profile rendering possible the „prognosis” of their reactions according to old patterns, reiterated ones, and having deep roots in the traditional way of life (Mitu, 2006).

*The communication corridors included into the transition strip* are the ones ensuring the viability of the “land”, and the fluxes crossing them have a double role: that of consolidating the specificity of the land in relation to the exterior (no matter the form they take) and also initiating the process of the appearance of the transition space, of the interference one. Thus, *the limit becomes an intermediary that possesses features of both entities, on one side and on the other* (these are real

ambassadors of both entities within an interference space). In this common space, of the limit, the features of both sides are to be recognised, no matter which they are or what they represent (we – the newcomers, I – the Other, profane – Divinity etc.)

Characterising this *transition strip* – the limit – according to all its functions and meaning, the regionalist and especially the researcher of a “land” will realise implicitly a portrait of the studied space (for both places and people), that is he or she will highlight its specificity, its individualising mechanisms, as well as those for its consolidation and development. This way, the universe of the “land” is defined through an *analytical approach of what it is not, of the way it evolved by interacting along the limit and within it*.

In the nearby figure we present the relational function of the limit in the case of the “lands” of Romania (figure 1), together with the explanation for each meaning:

- *The limit as a transition strip* between the space of a “land” and thus carrying a specific print of the people and places from beyond the limit;
- *The limit between the inhabitant of the “land”* (the community, the group) and *the Other* (the intruder, the stranger, the one “brought by the water” as they say in the Land of Năsăud);
- *The limits between the inhabitants of the land*. These are collective limits imposed by unwritten laws, but obeyed because people knew them from their ancestors, from the time they were children. This kind of limit may not be as powerful as before because of the changes brought by the passing of time;
- *The limit between the past* (tradition – for instance the role of man and woman in the household) and *the ever-changing present* (where to?);
- *The limit between profane and Divinity* was frequently erased as man wanted to feel close to a higher power that he talks to, prays to, or meets within a space modelled by the fabulous imagery. At present, mostly secular attitudes...;
- *The limit between the content and the form without content*, especially at present (e.g. commercialising the brand of a “land” through kitsch).

The question rises: are these limit types subordinated to one another? We believe that the answer resides in their complementarity. The analysis of the limits, of the correlations *between*, constitutes itself in a technique through which a “land” is deconstructed and thus its specific features, its singularity are rendered.

## Conclusions

As the role of the anthropic premises in the individualising and evolution of the “lands” has increased, the study of the transition strips and of the regions delimited according to the mental, identity criterion makes the difference between a classic regional research (when the following three levels of the territorial system are studied: the support component, the action and interaction component, and the derived components – Cocean, 2005) and that of the “land” type unit. We consider that the study of a “land” asks for a modelling and adapting of the regional research pattern, for a specific methodology, in order to highlight *the interrelation optimum* (on levels that are characterised by a traditional form of connexion: the physical-geographic one and the human level). This is characteristic of the “land” type region and renders it as a functional and sustainable territorial system.

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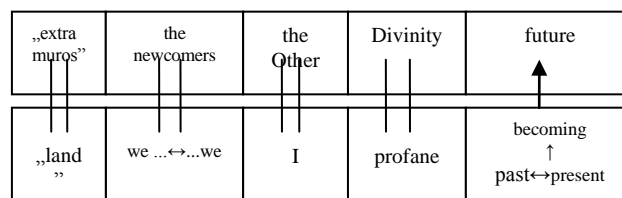


Figure 1. The relational function of the limit in the case of the “lands” of Romania