

## Fixed Links and Vague Discourses: About Culture and the Making of Cross-border Regions

By Birgit Stöber

### Abstract

It has been en vogue for official bodies to focus on 'culture' as a strategic factor for the development of spatial entities such as cross-border regions in the making. This focus places high expectations and a strong belief in the power of 'culture'. In this paper I will argue that in region building processes the focus on 'culture' is often due to an overriding wish to develop an economic well-functioning region. Moreover, it seems like 'culture' is used as a tool to distract people from a critique of bigger infrastructure projects that such developments entail. In order to strengthen these arguments, the paper will focus on two examples from Northern Europe, the existing Danish-Swedish Øresund link as well as the planned link between Denmark and Germany across the Femernbelt. In the course of the paper, focus will be on central bodies or actors that are taking up the issue of culture within a regional context. Hence, the concept of governance, particularly that of networked governance structures as well co-governance will be briefly discussed. All in all, the paper shows the 'fragmented complexity of agency and the multitude of actors related to region building' (Paasi 2010:2300).

**Keywords:** Culture, region building, governance, Øresund, Femernbelt

## I. Introduction

Culture can be considered a strategic factor contributing to the development of the Baltic Sea Region in several aspects as a value in itself, as a factor of the region's development and as a factor for developing and building society's identity, both at the national and the transnational level. (European Union 2010)

The starting point for this paper is the observation that the planning and building of new physical infrastructures often is accompanied by top-down steered, complex regional and cultural discourses. Building a bridge or a tunnel does not only mean a faster handling of traffic, often these constructions also evoke official narratives on human connectivity, cultural potentials and coherent regions.

In the introductory quote 'culture' is described as strategic factor for the development of the artificial mega project Baltic Sea Region, which places high expectations and a strong belief in the power of 'culture'. It seems to be en vogue to focus on 'culture' as a tool and strategic factor for the development of spatial entities. That we can see not only in the official documents of the Baltic Sea Region program (see above), but also in a wide range of official EU documents as well as in national party and policy programmes both in the UK, Scotland, Denmark and other countries. In this paper I will argue that in region building processes the focus on 'culture' is often due to an overriding wish to develop an economic well-functioning region. This tendency gets even more intensified in the context of the recent focus on 'the cultural economy as driving force in many urban and regional economies' (Pratt 2009:272). Moreover, 'culture' often seems to be misconceived as a 'soft instrument' for social engineering. Another observation to discuss in this paper is that a heightened focus on culture in region building processes often occurs where/when politicians need more leverage to convince the resident population of the meaning and necessity of bigger infrastructure projects.

In this context, there are a couple of questions that occur such as: Do we need these regional and cultural framings, even though the linking between a concrete infrastructure and cultural/regional discourses might not necessarily be conclusive? Who benefits from such discourses?

In order to strengthen and elucidate these arguments and finding possible answers, this paper will focus on examples from Northern Europe. While the fixed Danish-Swedish Øresund link will be mentioned, the planned fixed link across the Femarnbelt between Denmark and Germany will primarily be focused on. These two cases, the Øresund case and Femernbelt case, have some similarities and some definite differences. Both cases are connected to Denmark and are part of a wider European transport project; officially they are also part of the Baltic Sea Region, but they are placed in two very different areas, the first in an urban, densely populated area, the second in a rural and structurally rather weak area. But in both cases, we can see a strong link between the physical link and an official regional and cultural discourse.

The paper starts with a brief reflection regarding the question of strategic development and region building through culture and creative industries. Thereafter follows a brief presentation of the case of Øresund region before focusing on the Femernbelt region case with its central bodies and actors that are taking up the issue of culture within a regional context. Here I draw on qualitative interviews with decision makers, people actively involved in cultural life and other relevant people located in Northern Germany and Denmark (see Stöber 2011).

In the course of the paper, the concept of governance, particularly that of networked governance structures and ‘co governance’ will be briefly discussed. All in all, the paper ties in with Pratt’s request ‘to examine the concept of culture, the making of culture, and the governance of culture’ (Pratt 2009:273) and ends with the attempt to answer the questions posed above as well as giving perspective to the regional and cultural discourses.

### **Methodological Thoughts**

This paper explores the vital and complex role to which culture is credited by many different stakeholders.

In order to detect the dominant discourses altogether sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in the years 2009/2010 and analysed by drawing on discourse analytical approaches inspired by Fairclough and Wodak. In the course of the analysis five different overall themes were identified (knowledge and perception of the respective area, the (non)issue of regional identity, experiences with people within the area, expectations and wishes regarding the regional project, the role of culture within society). In this paper the main results that are published in another context (see Stöber 2011) are supplemented with analytical observations and interpretations of print material such as press releases and other publications of relevant institutions and organisations.

## **II. Region Building and Culture**

As argued elsewhere (Stöber 2004) regions can be understood as products of social processes and hence as social constructs. This idea of ‘region as a social construct’ is ‘nowadays almost axiomatic’ as Paasi (2010:2297) writes. However that approach does not mean a charter for ‘anything can be constructed out of nothing’. Rather, Paasi emphasizes the importance of multiple practices, discourses and relations for region building, all with their historical anchorages in cultural, economic, and political contexts and struggles (see Paasi 2010:2298). In other words, as dynamic, material and immaterial manifestations of social processes, regions are never without their own history, nor do they happen in a vacuum. Therefore both history and geography must be taken into account.

In the context of region building processes, ‘all forms of mobility in which things and people interact’ (Paasi 2010:2299) and thus infrastructures of all kind

are vital. These infrastructures can both be of concrete material (bridges, tunnels, highways, wires etc.) as well as of professions and relations. To Zukin (1995) the latter are the 'critical infrastructures' which can be companies, educational institutions, mass media, etc., since they and their members produce the images by which people come to define themselves in relation to others and are key actors in the development of a territorial consciousness.

Furthermore, material culture and symbols are as important as 'politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers, and voluntary associations' (Paasi 2010:2298) as all of them are also involved in the making of regions and 'crucial in the process of articulating meanings related to region' (ibid.).

This theoretical reflection shows the 'fragmented complexity of agency and the multitude of actors related to region building' (Paasi 2010), which leads us to the concept of governance. Following Allen and Cochrane (2007) a regional project can be looked at with the concept of multi-level governance in mind. This concept is 'borrowed from political science and, in particular, from debates generated by the experience of the European Union and, more specifically, the working of the structural funds' (see Allen & Cochrane 2007:1166). The notion of multi-level governance suggests 'that it is not just governments that matter, but also the relationships between, and the interdependence of governments and non-governmental organizations and agencies' (ibid.).

Culture is seen as a location and growth factor (see Quenzel 2009) as well as a tool that promotes cohesion through a common language, which furthers society's development (Matarasso 1997). The strong focus on culture and creativity within regional building processes is also reflected by the large number of transnational projects, for instance the entire Baltic Sea Region, which is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and which has as its aims cross-border cooperation, transnational and international cooperation. Among those are projects that focus on the 'development and promotion of creative industry potentials in medium-sized cities of the Baltic Sea Region' (s. Urban Creative Poles), on the improvement of the innovation potential with a focus on the film industry (s. First Motion), as well as on 'promoting the innovative Baltic fashion industry throughout the Baltic Sea Region' (s. Baltic Fashion - Interreg 1VB BSR), and many more.<sup>1</sup> However, it has been pointed out that there may be larger imperatives behind the motivations for cross-border cooperation, in which 'the real objective for some of the participants in European cross-border region collaboration has been to get access to EU funding rather than to build cooperation' (Keil & Löfgren 2011:6). Also Perkmann (2007) is 'raising the question whether these initiatives exist only because this type of resource is available', but states: 'The evidence suggests this may be the case for some, but certainly not all CBRs in Europe' (Perkmann 2007:868). However, from an American point of view this phenomena is seen as 'a Robin Hood type of programme whereby strong regional

and national economies pay into the fund and lagging regional economies receive these to support redevelopment' (Stough 2010:625).

The following section presents examples that show a clear discursive interdependence between culture, region building and development processes.

### **III. Fixed Links, Vague Discourses - Øresund and Femern**

In the literature we already find a wealth of discussions on the connection between the bridge across the Danish-Swedish Øresund and the building of a region (see Andersson & Matthiessen 1991; Matthiessen 2000, 2004; Bucken-Knapp 2001; Stöber 2004; Tangkjær 2000, 2010; Löfgren & Nilsson 2010). Whereas the material on the fixed link between Germany and Denmark is rather limited today, that is easily explained by the fact that this infrastructure is still in the planning with the horizon of being finished by the year 2020. Nevertheless, in the existing material (Bredo 2009; Keil 2009; Matthiessen 2011) we already see a strong discourse on the issue of region building, not only related to themes like labour market, traffic and logistics or sciences, but also culture.

#### **Øresund**

Before elaborating on the Femern region project, the following section gives a brief insight into the Øresund region. Since summer 2000 the fixed link between Denmark's capital, Copenhagen and Sweden's third most populous city, Malmö enables people to cross the Øresund either by car or train faster than before. However you define the region, it is 'the most densely population agglomeration in Scandinavia' (Hospers 2006). Since the establishment of the bridge between the two countries the linking between creativity and regional development has been of central importance in the political argument for the Øresund regions development (see Tangkjær 2010). And even before the bridge was established much effort was made to evoke the idea of not only a functional region, but rather a culturally coherent region. In other words, it seemed not sufficient enough only to focus on the establishment of a well-functioning Danish-Swedish labour market within the region, rather, historical and cultural narratives were produced and activated in order to promote the idea of a culturally coherent region. As an example the then Copenhagen Mayor and Malmö Mayor often evoked the common history 350 years ago, when Southern Sweden was part of the Danish Kingdom. In a newspaper essay both Mayors tried to show that 'the Øresund region is not a hypothetical consequence of the Øresund Bridge, but an inherent reunion of what naturally belongs together'.<sup>2</sup>

Also in the Øresund region initial EU funding for cross-border cooperation was given in order to foster sustainable cultural growth. But as soon as the running period was over, most of the projects were closed down. One example discussed in another context more in depth (see Stöber 2004) was the cooperation between

Danish television TV2 Lorry and Swedish television SVT Sydnytt. In 1997 the Øresund Committee initiated several cooperations across the Sound and asked among others these two public service television stations whether they could work out cooperation. Through the Committee the two television stations received European financial aid and were thus able to invest both in their own digital link, which allowed direct communication for each transmission and facilitates exchange of material and the establishment of a permanent regional ‘foreign correspondent’ (Stöber 2004:146). When Interreg-funding expired in summer 2001, the Danish-Swedish cooperation closed down. Today, ten years later, we rarely hear or see any specific news about Southern Sweden in the Danish news except for sports.

However, physical linkage has brought increased travel, trade, and in the case of the Swedish city Malmö, economic growth and new workplaces within the high-end service sector.

A decade after the bridge is built, the operating company Øresundsbro Konsortiet counts around 24,400 commuters who cross the bridge every day to go to work on the other side (see Øresundsbro Konsortiet) – mostly from Sweden to Denmark. And the heavy rhetoric around an ‘identity region’ is nearly vanished, although in recent public opinion polls we can still find the question ‘to what extent do you feel yourself as an Øresund citizen?’ (see Øresundsbro Konsortiet 2010). The answers differed a lot between Danes and Swedes; while 20 percent of the Swedish respondents feel to a ‘high degree’ as an Øresund citizen, only around 8 percent of the Danish respondents agreed on the ‘high degree’ of attachment. Whereas, around 58 percent of the Danish respondents answered ‘not at all’, 25 percent of the Swedish respondents answered the same. These numbers as well as several observations show that the identity issue in the context of Øresund Region does not matter notably and reconfirms earlier studies stating a ‘lack of an Øresund-feeling’ (see Hospers 2006:1029), which can lead to the paradox situation that ‘outside the region the Øresund integration project is widely seen as a “best practice”, whereas it is received with low enthusiasm within the region itself’ (ibid.).

After having glanced at the Swedish-Danish border region, we now move southwards where the fixed link across the Belt between Denmark and Germany, the Femern belt link, is planned to be opened in the year 2020. We already see a rhetorical linking between the concrete infrastructure and cultural/regional discourses as well as activities targeted at building a region with a cultural and popular anchorage.



Nevertheless, the official expectations are high: 'The Femern belt connection does not only become a physical connection, but also a commercial, educational as well as cultural bridge that builds the base for a Femern Belt Region.' (see Fonden Femern Belt Development) This statement stems from the Femern Belt Committee that 'has brought together a large number of public and private actors in a multi-level governance network that was highly successful in lobbying and preparing for the construction' (Torfing et al. 2009:297) of a Femern Belt link.

Cultural (policy) governance does not only take place within constitutional institutions, rather within a cooperation of representatives from all three sectors: state, market and civil society.

In the following focus will be on three central bodies or actors taking up the issue of culture within a regional context: firstly, Femern A/S, a subsidiary of the Danish, state-owned Sund & Bælt Holding A/S and the company in charge of the physical construction, which already has experiences both from the construction of the fixed links across the Great Belt and the Øresund, secondly, Femern Belt Committee, a cross-border board of ten German and ten Danish members, among them politicians as well as representatives from municipalities, unions, nature protection and tourism organizations and thirdly, the Danish embassy in Berlin, which has been a strong advocate for the Femern Belt Region.

In autumn 2009, the Danish embassy in Berlin dedicated a special issue of their quarterly published magazine 'Kennzeichen DK' to the project 'Cultural Bridge Fehmarnbelt'. Here we can read:

On the local level the bridge should not only be a traffic artery, but an instrument fostering new regions and neighbourhoods. (...) By experience we know that an intensive cultural exchange goes along with a closer cooperation between people. That again stimulates trade, research and the labour market in general. (see Bredo 2009)

The quote reflects the strong rhetorical link between culture and economic growth supported by activities on other relevant levels too.

Since the end of 1991, Danish and German partners have received financial grants under the EU INTERREG community initiative in order to strengthen cooperation across the national border. These grants have also applied to the cultural sector. One example that can be mentioned is the project 'A Cultural Bridge across the Belt' from 2003. Within the framework of the INTERREG IIIA programme, the project focused on the historical relations between Danes and Germans and consisted of a touring archaeological exhibition. To date, over 70 projects have received financial support from INTERREG I-III A, most of which relate to promotional activities for business and industry, education, the labour market and tourism (see Stöber 2011). One of the newly approved INTERREG projects is that of 'KulturLink'. The three years project is administered by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Lübeck, a self-governing body of the business community in Schleswig-Holstein, in cooperation with Danish municipality of Naestved. 'KulturLink' is a

strategic project that is supposed to build a base for finding, creating and developing joint cultural identities between citizens and cultural actors as well as institutions (...). The idea is to create a 'mental bridge' before the actual traffic link across the Femern Belt – and so use culture and art as driving force for further regional development.[own translation] (Naestved 2010)

It could not be articulated more explicitly: 'using culture and art as driving force for regional development' places a high premium on culture as an instrument and tool in order to reach other goals, namely the development of a weak and less attractive area. This analytical reading became substantially confirmed in the course of a couple of meetings in the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 with responsible staff of 'KulturLink'. Here it was obvious that the personnel equipped with responsibility and EU money<sup>3</sup> did not possess a clear idea of how to approach the complex issue of culture within a cross-border area. Rather, it seemed to be a superimposed task due to official discourses and international tendencies seeing culture first and foremost as instrument within an economical development project (see Pratt 2009). In this context you could be enticed to refer once more to Perkmann (2007) and his remark 'whether these initiatives exist only because this type of resource is available'. But as he also states: 'The evidence suggests this may be the case for some, but certainly not all CBRs in Europe' (Perkmann 2007).

However, up till now the only concrete KulturLink initiative is a contact between two music schools (Danish Guldborgsund and German Ostholstein) that resulted in an exchange between guitar orchestras in January 2011 and the declaration of more cooperation, workshops and exchange activities in the future.

The wish to develop the Femern Belt Region by means of culture or creative industries is emphasized by different stakeholders. But going through the few available data on the existing creative industries in at least the German part, the industries' potential is limited at the present time. Therefore the Schleswig-Holstein parliament suggests opening up existing support programmes for clientele from the creative industries. Since 2005 cultural policy is part of the Schleswig-Holstein Premier's portfolio; a fact that is presented as an upgrading of cultural policy within the federal state government's general policy. In that context, strengthening the link between culture and economy is emphasized strongly, particularly with the idea of creating new public-private-partnerships and other financing alternatives. In Danish cultural policy the idea of financing culture both with public and private money is strongly implemented already since a couple of years. Moreover, the Danish minister of Culture pays attention to the experience economy, which means a much broader field than creative industries, and its importance for regional and national growth.

Comparing parts of Germany with parts of Denmark policy wise is problematic, since both countries have very different state structures. Regarding the Femern belt area the federal state Schleswig-Holstein has its own Premier, the Southern part of Denmark has no particular representative. In other words, the Schleswig-Holstein Premier has no direct partner with whom to discuss, negotiate and de-

cide. That is a problem, according to German ambassador in Copenhagen, that can only be solved by ‘puzzling out something’ (in an interview with the author). This statement confirms the observation by Keil and Löfgren, who noticed that in cross-border regional cooperations ‘less attention has been paid to the fact that these networks also represents “clashes” of different national politico-administrative cultures’ (Keil & Löfgren, 2011).

However, in early 2011 Copenhagen’s Mayor of Culture and Recreation visited her approximate counterpart, Hamburg’s Mayor of Culture and Media, in order to exchange experiences and expectations for cultural collaboration. At this meeting the Copenhagen’s Mayor of Culture and Recreation stated that ‘culture builds bridges between regions’ (see Femern A/S 2011a). Furthermore she posed that ‘culture should not be an alibi that can be used to promote the Fehmarnbelt Region if genuine cultural collaboration doesn't exist’ (ibid.).

### **The Issue of Public Rooting**

Strengthening public rooting seems to be an important issue particularly in cross-border region building processes. For instance, one of the Øresund Committee’s explicit tasks is according to their own webpresentation to ‘promote integration within the region through culture and citizen participation’.

Also in the Femernbelt set-up the ambition seems to be to include both Danish and German citizens. Femern A/S, which was appointed by the Danish Transport Minister in April 2009 as a result of the ‘act about planning a fixed link across the Fehmarnbelt and associated hinterland infrastructure’, has the main task to be in charge of preparation, investigations and planning in relation to the establishment of a fixed link across the Fehmarnbelt. Although the main field of operation is rather technical the company is also engaged in communication activities such as public meetings, publications and recently a blog communication. In order to include the public in the communication (not the decision!) about the question whether the link between Denmark and Germany should be a bridge or a tunnel, a blog was open for the public for the duration of fourteen days (14-30 Jan 2011). During that time altogether 91 comments were posted that according to Femern A/S should all be sent to the Danish minister of transport. Looking through the comments 68 comments were written by Germans and 13 by Danes and it becomes obvious that the main question about the link’s nature only was of minor interest. Rather the majority of the bloggers communicated their concern, dislike and frustration regarding the infrastructure project in general. The concerns were related to unsatisfactory cost-benefit analyses, to high costs in general, to the potential loss of workplaces, to environmental damage related to the construction works and the general necessity of such infrastructure. As one blogger wrote: ‘the answer to the question is: neither bridge nor tunnel.’ (see Femern A/S)

This blog is not the only place where indifference, reluctance and even resistance towards the Femernbelt project is communicated. In their newsletter

Femern A/S referred in April 2011 to a commissioned study that informed about an opinion poll regarding the general attitude toward the Femernbelt project. While 46 percent of the people on the Danish side had a positive general attitude toward the project, only 33 percent of the respondents in Northern Germany shared this opinion. On the Danish side 17 percent of the respondents were against the Femernbelt Fixed Link; this opinion was shared by 19 percent of people in Northern Germany. The majority of the German respondents (46 percent) reported having a neutral attitude toward the fixed link.

However, in German regional media the infrastructure project and its political (democratic) anchorage are discussed with a rather more controversial tone<sup>4</sup>. In this broad context, the discourse on culture can be seen as an attempt to smooth ruffled feathers by shifting the focus away from the intrusive, concrete infrastructure project, and the concerns it raises, to a more inclusive, harmless regional project, hence 'this is a case of culture being used instrumentally to achieve other ends' (Pratt 2009:278).

## Summary and Outlook

The paper presents some central aspects regarding the expectations surrounding the use of culture as a strategic tool for region building and development. Examples from the two cross-border regional projects, Øresund and Femernbelt, show a discursive link between the building of a region and culture in a broad understanding. Different stakeholders communicate the wish to develop cross-border regions by means of culture or creative industries. That might partly be due to an assumed zeitgeist - building a region by means of culture and creativity is en vogue, partly in an attempt to deflect from unwished resistance towards the main infrastructure constructions. In that context, it is striking how few people from cultural life or creative industries are actively involved in cross-border region building discourses or activities. The growth effect of culture is less being thought about than talked about. Rather the two cases show a very clear picture of top-down steering with co-governmental elements. All in all, the paper illustrates the 'fragmented complexity of agency and the multitude of actors related to region building' (Paasi 2010:2300) that is particularly characteristic for cross-border regions.

Coming back to the questions posed in the paper's beginning: do we need these regional and cultural framings and discourses? 'We' might not need these framings, since all people I interviewed either already use the areas because of a personal interest and do not care about the official labelling or are rather indifferent to such cross-border regional constructions. What we can see in the cases considered is a concept of culture being presented as an engine of change and growth. Yet it is ill-conceived, as no one can explain how culture as a 'force' is actually going to work in delivering the envisaged future. Meanwhile, public reception to such rhetoric remains, at best, lukewarm. So, who benefits from such cultural-

regional discourses? Based on my interviews and observations these discourses are mostly beneficial for politicians both on regional and EU level, since these might enable them to argue for the necessity of large-scale projects, to raise money (e.g. EU subsidies) and to pave the way for private investors and thus economic upswing. Culture is thus being treated as attractive dressing for underlying economic imperatives.

There is no doubt about the importance of culture for people locally and for the social and cultural development of the region. Culture can be seen as glue and stimulant for the growth process, but should not be misused for the political and/or economic project 'region'.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance CREANET, Cultural Tourism 2011 (Interreg IVA Central Baltic), Kreativ Metropol (Interreg IVA Öresund), Creative Growth, Creative Metropolises, and Creative Cities (Interreg IVC).
- <sup>2</sup> By using a modified version of a quote of former German Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt on the occasion of the fall of the Berlin Wall the two Scandinavian Mayors equated the opening of the Øresund Bridge with events in German history and activated an internationalized, political discourse of unification.
- <sup>3</sup> The EU subsidy accounts for 655 878 Euro.
- <sup>4</sup> Against the background of recent grassroots movements in Germany against major infrastructure projects (see 'Stuttgart 21'), a certain nervousness among politicians can be assumed.

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