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Unity in Diversity?

The Standardized Diversification of EU Regions

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Abstract: It is argued in this contribution that regional diversification, thus the pronunciation of regional differences and particularities, reflects a global trend of spatial development these days. Within the administrative space of the current European Union, the mobilization of subnational territories has gained special attention, particularly within the framework of the EU regional policy and EU activities fostering “territorial cohesion” through the mobilization of regional agency and multiple development efforts on local and regional ground. This leads to the paradoxical situation that despite all pronunciation of regional uniqueness and difference the regional development strategies are becoming ever more similar and standardized all around Europe. The discussion of this peculiar “standardized diversification” of the EU territory is the central concern of this contribution. Based on a macro-phenomenological research perspective in the tradition the so-called world-polity-approach I propose to conceive of regional mobilisation in contemporary Europe as a “world-cultural” project of social mobilization. This enables us to shed light on the broader cultural foundations and the strong modernist thrust of current processes of Europeanization, which is often overlooked in emphatic images of a Europe of regional diversity.

Keywords: Regions; new regionalism; Cohesion Policy; World Culture; Europeanization; regional mobilization; European multiplicity; Standardization; Regional Diversity

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1 Introduction¹

European multiplicity is often described in terms of “unity in diversity,” not least in official political narratives and imageries. This notion contains the image of an extremely diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Europe of regions and nation states that holds together on the basis of common experiences, a set of common values, and common aspirations. However, while national and regional diversity in terms of political, economic and cultural differences are ubiquitous both within and beyond the current territory of the European Union, the “unity” of Europe is highly disputed (e.g. Biebuyck & Rumford 2012).

In this paper I argue that regional diversification reflects a global trend of contemporary logics and conceptions of spatial development that has also strongly affected practices and patterns of regional mobilization in contemporary Europe. In fact, the mobilization of sub-national territories has gained special attention all around Europe, and in particular within the framework of the EU regional development policies and EU activities aimed at fostering “territorial cohesion.” Consequently, despite the expression of regional uniqueness and difference, regional development strategies are becoming ever more similar and standardized. This remarkable “standardized multiplicity” of sub-national regions in contemporary Europe constitutes the central concern of this chapter.

Thus, departing from classical assumptions of the so-called world-polity approach put forward by John Meyer and colleagues from Stanford University, I propose to conceive of regional mobilization in contemporary Europe as the expression of a larger cultural transformation of established modes of social government and social mobilization. Based on this assumption, I argue that sub-national territories in contemporary Europe are fundamentally shaped by relatively universal models of social development and by globally standardized practices of expertise and professionalism. This contributes to a huge structural homology of regional development strategies all around Europe, and at the same time to the promotion of a new regionalism that fosters sub-national sources and resources of social change and “development.” The chapter starts with a short portrayal of the role of regions in European history and the rise of a new wave of regionalism in the past few decades. Subsequently,

¹ This chapter largely draws on my research monograph that was published in 2012 under the title “Mobilizing Regions, Mobilizing Europe: Expert Knowledge and Scientific Planning in European Regional Development” (Büttner 2012).

limitations of conventional interpretations of this “new regionalism” are discussed, after which the major features of the macro-phenomenological world-polity approach are briefly introduced. This section also contains a depiction of the major cultural-cognitive foundations of the “new regionalism” and a short outline of the institutionalization of world-cultural models in the so-called “Cohesion Policy” of the European Union. The final remarks underline the analytical surplus of culturalist interpretations of regional mobilization, highlighting the normative and performative implications of scientific models and scientized practices.

2 The standardized diversification of regions in contemporary Europe

Europe has always been a continent of extraordinary cultural diversity and multi-faceted local traditions. During medieval times the continent was mainly shaped by smaller territories, small independent cities and a multitude of smaller counties and duchies inhabited by a huge variety of different tribes and ethnicities (Braudel 1996). However, with the expansion of central state administrations and the rise of nation states during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many counties and independent regional territories lost their autonomy and distinctiveness and were incorporated into the larger territory of nation states or degraded to the status of provinces of larger empires. During the era of nation-building, “national identity” was vigorously promoted and strongly fostered in opposition to persisting regional identities and political movements (Anderson 1983; Therborn 1995; Bartolini 2005).

Although overcoming internal territorial barriers and taming particularistic regional assertiveness was one of the primary aims of emerging European nation states, the transformative and all-encompassing force of nation-building has not led to an entire abolishment of regional structures or loss of regional identities anywhere in Europe. Many regions and provinces managed to preserve some degree of political autonomy and assertiveness, though in varying degrees from one European country to another, mainly depending on particular cultural traditions and the ethnic routes of the regional population. Thus, there are many different histories of regionalization in Europe. The reasons for the persistence of regional traditions, regional cultures, and regional political institutions are manifold. In some cases regionalization constitutes an expression of regional assertiveness and strong regional identification, and in other cases regional structures were introduced in order to make state admin-

istration more efficient and to strengthen the authority of central governments (Keating 1998 and 2004).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, a new wave of regionalization has flourished on the European continent (Le Galès & Lequesne 1998; Keating 2001; Paasi 2009). Old territorial and cultural identities have been revived, and in some countries without extensive regional traditions new regional identities have even been created. Moreover, it has been observed by analysts of the more recent upswing of regionalization in contemporary Europe that a new “model” of regional development policy has started to take shape (e.g. Keating 2001; Paasi 2009). Thus, there is a strong drive towards “institution- and capacity-building” at sub-national levels of government, with a new emphasis on “multi-annual” and “strategic” development planning. In many places and areas all around Europe “science and technology parks,” “science-business-transfer centres” and “business incubators” have been set up in order to foster “innovation” and “cross-fertilization” amongst various business sectors as well as between business and sciences. Beyond that, municipalities and regional authorities also actively develop their particular “cultural heritage” in numerous dimensions, such as the material and the less tangible forms of “regional culture” and “regional traditions,” aiming to foster the “tourist attractiveness” of particular areas as well as the “social cohesion” of regional populations and the overall “standard of living.”

In short, sub-national regions have become more visible and more pronounced during recent decades. At the same time, nonetheless, it can be noticed that sub-national areas have become more a focal point of development activities and that the strategies regional authorities choose are based on relatively similar principles and models of regional mobilization. In fact, a huge approximation of regional development strategies has occurred despite a great deal of regional divergence. This is considered here as the paradox of an increasing “standardized diversification” of sub-national territories in contemporary Europe.

3 From governance to diffusion—limitations of existing views on regional mobilization

The resurgence of sub-national territories, and especially the rise of regions as responsible agents and motors of development, have mainly been studied from two analytical angles: (international) political economy and multilevel governance approaches. The first strand of literature addresses the globalization of market competition, and especially the “new geog-

raphies" (Krugman 1991) and new forms of economic value-creation brought about by intensifying global integration of markets in the past few decades (Cox 1997; Keating 1998; Hudson 2001; Brenner et al. 2003). It has been observed, in this context, that increasing globalization of economic activities and chains of production has by no means led to the disappearance of "place." On the contrary, places and regions are affected differently and local institutions and social structures can be decisive factors for the success or failure of economic development (Saxenian 1994; Ohmae 1995; Storper & Salais 1997; Asheim 1997; Amin 1999; Cooke et al. 2004).

The latter strand of research, the multi-level governance approaches, aim to account for the transformation of government in times of increasing transnationalization of political decision-making and the emergence of new political actors, new political arenas and new fields of interest formation at various levels of society and their complex interplay (e.g. Marks et al. 1996; Scharpf 1999; Kohler-Koch & Eising 1999; Hooghe & Marks 2001). In this context, an increasing "Europeanization" of regional policy in the area of EU Cohesion Policy has been observed (Hooghe 1996; Gualini 2004; Leonardi 2005). It has been explored how and to what extent new European institutional rules and regulations contributed to the empowerment of sub-national actors alongside national institutions (Börzel 2002). It was also shown that EU Cohesion Policy fostered the emergence of decentralized structures of regional government, even in countries and contexts without stronger regionalist or even federalist traditions, such as Ireland or Great Britain and especially in the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bache 2008; Büttner 2012).

Both strands of research have contributed to a deeper understanding of the economic and the political conditions of regional mobilization in the past decade and of the dispersion of state authority and governance capacity across various spatial levels. From a sociological point of view, however, the prevailing multi-level perspective, or rather the clear-cut distinction of discrete actors and institutional arrangements at various spatial layers of society, is not sufficient. For if we take the more recent insights of research on globalization and transnationalization really seriously, and in particular the idea of the spatial transcendence of ideas, artifacts, exchanges and interactions (Appadurai 1997; Urry 2007; Mau 2010; Mau & Büttner 2010), we cannot adhere to the idea of static spatial distinctions and territorial arrangements: "Ideas associated with discrete 'levels' need to be replaced by a notion of spac-

es interpenetrated by the global, local and national, in the context of which the conventional idea of inside and outside, domestic and international, no longer holds.” This was vigorously pointed out by Gerard Delanty and Chris Rumford (2005, 136) in *Rethinking Europe*, their ground-breaking plea for a new sociology of Europeanization. Thus, instead of reifying clear-cut distinctions between “inside” and “outside,” or “above” and “below,” Delanty & Rumford claim that we need an account of the extent to which “global” processes interact with more static territorial arrangements.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged in existing research that practices, institutional principles and models of regional development “... have been diffused through EU Structural Funds programmes, academic publication, consultancy and interregional cooperation” (Keating 2001, 219). However, there is no account in existing regional research that captures these various forms and channels of diffusion. Most of the existing accounts of diffusion are predominantly governance-centred and presuppose the agential character of regions, or rather regional governance structures, as well as clear-cut regional “interests.” Thus, they mainly conceive of diffusion as a process which is confined to procedural rules and expert networks within state bureaucracies. However, no existing account systematically considers the fundamental cultural-cognitive foundations and the multi-faceted trans-regional institutional context of diffusion, which accounts for the astonishing structural homology of regional development strategies despite regional multiplicity and divergence.

Hence, we need an approach that transcends the prevailing actor-based governance-centred perspectives and accounts for the trans-regional context of diffusion which structures regional interests and actorhood. This is the major concern of macro-phenomenological research perspectives in the tradition of the so-called world-polity approach. They shed light on the broader cultural conditions and the epistemic foundations of the increasing structural homology of social entities regarded as, and that regard themselves as, “actors.”

4 Regional mobilization from a macro-phenomenological perspective

The macro-phenomenological research perspective has been put forward in the past thirty years by John Meyer and colleagues under the label of “world-polity studies.” This perspec-

tive is “macro-phenomenological” in that it builds on both the classical phenomenological assumption of an all-encompassing *social construction* of reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966) and on Max Weber’s famous macro-sociological assumption of an increasing *cultural significance* and *legitimacy* of formal-rational models of social organization with the breakthrough of modernity (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Thomas et al. 1987; Meyer 2010; Krücken & Drori 2010). At the centre of this perspective is the assumption of a massive worldwide diffusion of “world culture,” the overarching cultural umbrella of contemporary and ever more globalizing modernity. Accordingly, all modern actors are seen as being constitutively shaped by this particular cultural account which significantly determines what modern, purposeful social actors think, aspire and believe in (Meyer & Jepperson 2000).

On the basis of this analytical perspective the current phase of regional mobilization in Europe can be conceived as a broader cultural phenomenon and not “just” as an outcome of economic powers or politics. And instead of assuming fixed actor-identities and interest-formation on various spatial levels, even in opposition to one another, we are able to focus on cultural and institutional conditions that are shared by agents and carriers of “world culture” *across* space, and which strongly contribute to the formation of interests, expectations, perceptions and self-images of regions as “modern” social actors (Büttner 2012).

In order to comprehend how the diffusion of world culture is conceptualized from this particular research perspective, one has to acknowledge the huge cultural significance of sciences in modern times and, more particularly, the practical repercussions of scientifically grounded standards and models on the conduct of everyday lives. Hence, although “world culture” is conceptualized as a cultural system that largely transcends particular local contexts, it is not as detached from social practice. On the contrary, it entirely develops and expands within society, namely within the expanding institutions and practices of scientific reflection, and in particular in connection with all types of “professional” practice. The sciences constantly analyse social reality and produce interpretations and images on the nature and coherence of social life, and some of these scientific interpretations gain broader political and cultural significance (Drori et al. 2003; Drori & Meyer 2006).

Thus, from a macro-phenomenological perspective, “scientization” is regarded as the main force behind the extraordinary global expansion of rationalized organizational structures and purposeful actorhood. For Meyer and colleagues it creates both the demand for and the

supply of ever more “rationalization” and “rule-making” in everyday life (Drori & Meyer 2006, 31). Accordingly, they see the sciences and “modern” scientifically grounded “professions” as the major generators of world-cultural diffusion. Beyond that, however, the world-polity perspective is also sensitive to political dimensions of diffusion, and it also takes processes of institutionalization and the establishment of institutional imperatives seriously: “In some way, models must make the transition from theoretical formulation to social movement to institutional imperative” (Strang & Meyer 1993, 495). Hence, apart from the exploration of expert knowledge and scientific discourse, a macro-phenomenological analysis is also particularly sensitive to processes of “authoritative institutionalization,” meaning the inscription of certain world-cultural categories and models into more explicit regulative institutional rules and policy programmes. Consequently, the following discussion of the cultural foundations of the rise of a “new regionalism” deals with both an exploration of the emergence of new notions and narrations of regional development and of the way in which these narrations have become institutionalized in the European context.

5 World-cultural models of contemporary regional development practice

When we look at the intellectual foundations of the current wave of regional mobilization, one fundamental shift in the discourse of development stands at the outset of this endeavour—the observation of a fundamental “spatial turn” in social sciences against the backdrop of a fundamental transformation of established modes of economic value-creation since the 1970s. In fact, social-scientific analysts widely agree that the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism in advanced industrial societies at the end of the 1970s marks a new age of economic value-creation, bringing about a new international division of labour, new rules of the economic game and, above all, a new level of economic competition on a global scale (Piore & Sabel 1989; Porter 1990; Amin 1994). While the previous Fordist mode of production was mainly based on integrated mass production and Keynesian interventionist economic policy within nation-state structures, economic activities are now increasingly uncoupled from national markets and former territorial restrictions. It could be observed that the new modes of value-creation depend less on “real” production in “concrete” places than the former Fordist types; and economic profits are increasingly achieved on the basis of largely “intangible” and “placeless” assets such as trade in financial products on capital markets,

revenues from franchises, patent protection, or brand-selling in global (often virtual) “spaces of flows” (Lash & Urry 1994; Knorr-Cetina & Preda 2004).

In this context, it also transpired that individual territories were affected differently by economic crisis and by the new rules of economic production. In fact, it turned out that some areas were hit intensely by a huge economic downturn and a dramatic decline of industries and other areas were less affected by recession, while some areas, such as the famous Silicon Valley in Northern California, or some smaller traditional industrial districts in Southern Germany and Northern Italy, were able to adapt easily to new conditions of economic competition and even profited markedly from increasing globalization. These differences in local capacities of coping with economic changes and new rules of economic competition created a new awareness for geographic space in economics and related social sciences, inspiring a huge number of researchers from various disciplines to explore the conditions of success and failure and to study local and regional conditions of development (for an overview see Storper [1995]). The vast body of research which has emerged since the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s clearly reflects the transformation of common understandings of spatial development and prevailing images of regional development. These days, regions are in fact no longer considered as passive contexts of economic production and business activities. On the contrary, they are considered as vital spaces of economic value-creation, as “key sources” (Storper 1995) and “motors” (Scott 1996) of development in the new economic era. In this context, some scientific vocabularies and scientifically sanctified “best practice” models of regional development have become prominent both in sciences and in practices of regional mobilization. Some have even attained the status of quasi-universal models of contemporary regional development practice and, consequently, have also found their way into mainstream political programmes (Büttner 2012, 78ff.).

One notion which has become a quasi-universalistic dictum of good regional development practice is that of *flexible specialisation* (Piore & Sabel 1989), which suggests that in times of intensified global competition, all municipalities and regions must define their unique “core competences” and find their niche in the global economy. Another notion which has become particularly popular in the past three decades is the model of *innovative cluster economies*. Without doubt, the assumption that businesses should be concentrated in “clusters” and that innovativeness evolves out of intensified, multi-faceted and fruitful inter-linkages be-

tween science and businesses is currently widely accepted. Initially deriving from economic geography but vigorously proposed and promoted in a stylized and easy-applicable way by the figureheads of business studies at Harvard Business School (Porter 1998 and 2003), it definitely constitutes one of the most prominent world-cultural models of regional economic mobilization of contemporary times.² Likewise, the few successful and exceptionally vibrant business clusters, such as, above all, Silicon Valley in the USA, have even become iconic reference models and prototypes of successful regional mobilization. Once the features of models of “good practice” were specified, they were subject to massive emulation on a global scale.³

The new academic interest in regions, regional social practices, and regional institutions has also widely transcended the narrow disciplinary focus on business studies and enterprise development. Over the past three decades the interdisciplinary scientific engagements with sub-national regions and questions of regional development have produced numerous models and accounts of “good” development practice (Lawson & Lorenz 1999; Morgan 2004; Salais & Villeneuve 2005). Consequently, it is now widely believed in regional research and far beyond that (regional) innovation and overall socio-economic well-being is decisively determined by certain *endogenous* relational, institutional, or cultural factors. Accordingly, the prevalence of open-minded, active and co-operative attitudes based on generalized forms of trust and interactions rather than bonding types of “social capital” are seen as decisive elements of favourable regional development (Putnam 1993; Trigilia 2001).

Furthermore, researchers have also observed *and* evoked the emergence of new political actors, new corporatist arrangements and new forms of policy experimentation at local and regional levels. Consequently, scientific assumptions and interpretations of “good” regional governance have become widely shared world-cultural models and institutional imperatives over the past decade (Benz & Fürst 2002; Cooke et al. 2004; Crouch et al. 2004). Moreover, a variety of alternative concepts and models of regional development, such as models of sus-

² Remarkably, most analytical models of “good” regional practice derive from research on best practice models of economic government at the national level (Porter 1990; Lundvall 1992; Edquist 1997). The major assumptions and rationales of these models have been directly transposed to sub-national settings without any major changes or adaptations.

³ In fact, in reference to the famous iconic role model, many economic activities are situated or promoted in one or the other way in some kind of “valley,” at least in semantic terms. See, for example, the “Tees Valley” in the North-East of England, the “Aviation Valley” in South-Eastern Poland, the “Medicine Valley” in Erlangen (Southern Germany) and many other examples from many European countries.

tainable development or cohesion, were also put forward by numerous scientists from different disciplinary backgrounds and made them subject of multifaceted “regional experimentation” (Morgan 2004; Salais & Villeneuve 2005; Hadjimichalis & Hudson 2007; Barton & Dlouhá 2011). Thus, we can observe a peculiar simultaneous increase and intermingling of two contradictory, or even opposing, aspirations of development in contemporary regional development practice. Along with the rise of sub-national regions both as objects and subjects of development interventions, the aspirations of regional development have extended tremendously, and have been refocused more forcefully both in *economic* and in *non-economic* terms:

Building upon the pioneering experimentalism of the 1980s and stimulated by growing concerns about the character, quality and sustainability of local and regional “development,” the often dominant economic focus has broadened in recent years in an attempt to address social, ecological, political and cultural concerns ... Unequal experiences of living standards and wellbeing between places even at equal or comparable income levels has fuelled dissatisfaction with conventional economic indicators of “development” ... Reducing social inequality, promoting environmental sustainability, encouraging inclusive government and governance and recognizing cultural diversity have been emphasized to varying degrees within broadened definitions of local and regional development ... Often uncertain moves toward notions of quality of life, social cohesion and wellbeing are being integrated or balanced, sometimes uneasily, with continued concerns about economic competitiveness and growth (Pike et al. 2007, 1254f.).

This multiple extension of aspirations of regional development in contemporary Europe reflects a larger and more general shift of governmental rationalities in advanced modern societies, widely interpreted as a reinforcement of the liberal practices of state government (Rose & Miller 2008). However, from a macro-phenomenological research perspective this shift is not just interpreted as the outcome of “raw” material interests or shifts in contemporary regimes of capitalist accumulation, as is usually suggested by materialist accounts of regional mobilization (Rumford 2000; Brenner et al. 2003; Lagendijk 2007; Paasi 2009). Rather, it is regarded here as the expression of the expansion of the scientific discourse of regional development and of the extent to which diverse scientific models become manifest in concrete political practice. In fact, the discovery of the region as the “appropriate” spatial unit for development intervention has contributed to a massive diffusion of modernist aspi-

rations and highly rationalized organizational structures to local and regional grounds. This expansion of “world culture” has taken place both within and independent of official governmental structures. However, it must be noted that especially influential international agents of development, such as the EU and the OECD, have played vital roles in the promotion and diffusion of “world-cultural” models and principles of regional mobilization.

Indeed, these international agents of development disseminate a whole range of information on regional development and regional reform. Through outlining common standards for regional reform, institutionalizing transnational channels of exchange or publishing reports, rankings and huge amounts of statistical material on regional development, they create transnational linkages and new discursive fields in which states, and—ever more frequently—regions and other sub-state units can locate themselves and compare their own situations in relation to other similar political units.⁴ Thus, they contribute vigorously to the establishment of transnational “social fields” (Bourdieu 1998) within which knowledge, experts, practices and even financial resources on regional mobilization diffuse rapidly and massively on a transnational scale. This facilitates the mutual perception of similarities and differences amongst similar social entities from formerly rather un-connected social environments, which is one of the most important conditions for the rapid and massive transnational diffusion of world-cultural models (e.g. Meyer & Strang 1993). And with the establishment of a common “Cohesion Policy” at the European level in the late 1980s a whole range of standards, principles, procedures and practices of regional mobilization have been institutionalized as “institutional imperatives” and absolute conditions *sine qua non* in European regional development practice.

6 EU Cohesion policy as a catalyst of pan-European regional mobilization

Introduction of the EU’s Cohesion Policy in 1989 has established a new pan-European multi-level system of regional mobilization based on a number of unitary organizing principles and standard procedures, such as subsidiarity, multi-annual planning, participation, partnership, or good governance (e.g. Hooghe 1996; Rumford 2000; Leonardi 2005; Molle 2007; EC 2008a). Initially introduced as a complementary side-project of the establishment of the Eu-

⁴ See http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index_en.cfm for a look at the activities of the European Commission in the field of regional policy, and <http://www.oecd.org/regional/> for an overview of OECD activities.

European Single Market in order to counterbalance potential market-failures, the Cohesion Policy has become one of the largest EU policy areas in terms of annual spending next to agricultural policy. In fact, since its introduction in 1989 more than EUR 700 billion has been spent on projects of spatial and regional development all over Europe. This accounts for more than one third of the whole EU budget (EC 2008a). Furthermore, in the past decade the Cohesion Policy has gained even more importance in political terms as a means to support the integration of new member states into the existing institutional structure of the European Union, and to spread the strategic goals of the renewed Lisbon agenda to cities and regions all over the EU territory (EC 2005a, 2005b, 2007 and 2008b).

The strategic guidelines and funding priorities of Cohesion policy mirror, in an ideal-typical way, the major standards and models of contemporary development thought that were outlined in the previous section. Thus, the Cohesion Policy is aimed at strengthening the “innovativeness” and “competitiveness” of European regions by co-financing countless initiatives of regional specialisation, cluster-building and human resource development and by stimulating regional learning and experimentation (EC 2006a and 2006b). It supports the increase of entrepreneurship and knowledge-based industries in areas all around Europe, but also the refurbishment of roads, basic local infrastructures and the expansion of broadband internet connections. At the same time, moreover, it also co-finances numerous projects of environmental protection, social and cultural activation, inter- and trans-regional social exchange and co-operation (EC 2008c and 2008d), and promotes the improvement of the “administrative capacity” of the national, regional and local authorities involved in planning and implementation in order to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of funding. Hence, in short, the EU Cohesion policy strongly contributes to the evocation and dissemination of many scripts and aspirations of contemporary regional development practice which are most prevalent in the development discourse, and it also contributes to this discourse by promoting its own research and respective notions and concepts.⁵ Moreover, in line with the most important credo of the new regionalism, “supporting regions to foster self-support” of local and “regional agency” is stimulated by mobilizing regional actors to get active and work together for the good of their common regional environment (Büttner 2012, 96–101).

⁵ One of the newest “innovations” in the field of concept-promotion seems to be the notion of “smart specialization” that is supposed to link “smart growth” with “sustainable growth” (see EC 2012).

The most important element of the Cohesion Policy in terms of EU-wide standardization of regional development practices, however, is the so-called *conditionality* which is built into the funding and implementation system of the Cohesion Policy based on a multi-annual strategic vision. The strategic goals of the Cohesion Policy are officially determined and adopted by the European Council, but they mainly derive from policy proposals of the DG-Regio and expert debate on its strategic objectives at the forefront and aftermath of decision-making. Once the strategic objectives are determined in legal terms, they have to be adopted and transposed into national, regional and local development practices by the political authorities in order to be eligible for receiving the financial support of one of the EU's structural and cohesion funds (EC 2005b and 2008b). In this way, the institutional framework of EU Cohesion Policy is central to the rapid diffusion of world-cultural models and practices to regional development agendas all around Europe and beyond.

Thus, many regions all over Europe have started to draft and implement distinct mid- and long-term development strategies in accordance with European visions of spatial development and, more concretely, with major strategy aims and objectives of EU Cohesion Policy (Adams et al. 2006; Dimitriou & Thompson 2007; Büttner 2012, 159–191). Moreover, regional authorities have also become more active in advertising their region to the outside world. Consequently, regional symbols and idioms are currently ubiquitous in TV commercials, life-style magazines and even on billboards at train stations, airports, or bus stops in order to promote tourism and attract new investments. In all these commercials and public self-presentations, which are frequently funded with financial support of EU structural funds, the particularities and uniqueness of sub-national spaces are strongly emphasized. Likewise, Europeans invest in the promotion and refurbishment of the so-called “cultural heritage” of their regions and the modernization of technical infrastructures. In fact, a huge amount of EU funds that are allocated for so-called “least development” areas are assigned for infrastructure development and cultural regeneration in many different dimensions. All these activities strongly contribute to the promotion of sub-national regional cultures and of the image of a “Europe of many different cultures and regions.”

7 Final remarks

It was argued in this contribution that sub-national territories in contemporary Europe are fundamentally shaped by relatively similar models of social development and by globally

standardized practices of expertise and professionalism. It was also shown that there is indeed a high level of “rationalization” of regional development and a strong drive for regional mobilization in the Europe of today. Along with the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, and thus along with the transformation from “organized” to “disorganized modernity” (Wagner 1994), sub-national territories have become the subject of multi-faceted scientific reflections on the nature of development. Consequently, sub-national regions have become more active in development planning. In addition, they have become focal points of numerous and diverse development aspirations ranging from strategies of economic mobilization to more holistic, distinctly non-economic agendas of sustainable, socially balanced and ecologically sensitive development.

Based on a macro-phenomenological research perspective this has been interpreted and discussed here primarily as a cultural phenomenon, rather than the result of deliberate political action or purely economic results. This is the major analytical thrust of the macro-phenomenological research perspective and, in my opinion, its analytical surplus in relation to other perspectives. It helps to shed light on the broader cultural-cognitive foundations of political or economic interests and other forms of “reasoned” agency, and it conveys a culturalist understanding of social change, meaning a perspective that emphasizes agentless factors of change such as scientization, knowledge transfer, institutional diffusion and emulation over agential narrations. However, this does not mean that the macro-phenomenological research perspective is agnostic towards political or economic factors; it simply does not presuppose their predominance and does not take interests for granted (see also Buhari-Gulmez 2010 and 2012). Moreover, the analytical presumption of the normative and performative character of theoretical accounts and best-practice models, and in particular the assumption of the cultural significance of scientific authority, adds an important dimension to the analysis of social transformations in contemporary Europe and the world. Based on this perspective we are able to see to what extent both development planning and practice are formalized, standardized and subject to extensive professional treatment.

Against this backdrop, we are also able to see the distinctive “world-cultural” character of international agents of development, such as the OECD or the European Commission, as platforms of multi-faceted world-cultural diffusion that serve, in this way, as catalysts of diffusion, reinforcing, accelerating and specifying the diffusion of certain “global” standards

and models of development across countries. This encourages local actors to get active and mobilize themselves in the name of progress and future development, and fosters the expansion of “multiplicity” in highly standardized terms. However, this distinctive world-cultural character and the tremendously high level of standardization are often overlooked in emphatic images of regional diversity.

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