

# Trading Identities.

Neomedievalism and the Urban Future.

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***Forget the nation state. It is the city that will make history. In the neomedieval era thin identities will blossom under thick, traditional ones. As a result regional cooperation of metropolitan areas will prove more effective than central planning. Tired of national identity? Time to forge your own.***

### Introduction

...→ The Middle Ages have for the last centuries been used as an object of fear and contrasted with the benefits of modernisation delivered by ever stronger nation states. But this modernisation narrative of the nation state has been challenged in the last decades. Globalisation has not only brought people in the world closer together, but has also challenged established certainties. Especially the project of the nation state of national integration and national development has been challenged by globalisation. After the period of national integration we are now entering a period of renewed fragmentation, questioning the taken-for granted dominance of national territories. This has sparked a renewed interest in the Middle Ages, an era in which the nation state was not so dominant. This essay focuses on the changing role of cities in the New Middle Ages. It discusses not only how cities and their urban networks tear the traditional fabric of the nation state apart, but also to what extent urban networks and regions can play an important role in new forms of network based economic, political and civic integration in the future.

The dominance of territory as an integrative framework was connected to modernity but is now challenged and transformed. Spatial fragmentations are linked to the growing importance of an ever increasing number of urban networks crossing the traditional boundaries of the nation state. The declining importance of the fixed national territories and the growing importance of cities has some similarities with the Middle Ages. Against this backdrop, a role of the cities can become crucial not only as the current drivers of economic development, but also as the future forerunners of the new forms of civic bonding. This is because the cities can build on a sense of community within their boundaries to organise and coordinate networks between cities and their surrounding regions. Certainly, the multitude of partially overlapping networks around cities cannot be controlled by a central political power, but it can be partially coordinated through some form of a shared identity based on dialogue. This does not mean that networks replace national territories as the main integrative force. It does mean, however, that the relation between networks and territories change. The focus of

development, regulation and identification shifts away from the clearly demarcated national territory to cities, urban networks and urban regions deprived of clear borders.

All this resembles in some aspects the mediaeval period before the emergence of the nation state. Of course, neomedievalism does not imply an expected return to the Middle Ages. Rather, it calls for a renewed interest in how spatial diversities can be integrated through urban networks operating partially outside national territorial frameworks and hierarchies.

### **The nation state between the Middle Ages and neomedievalism**

The idea of the nation states as the basic building blocks of the world has dominated politics since the Middle Ages. The fragmentation, which was characteristic for the Middle Ages did not disappear entirely, but the dominant political discourse focused on territorial consolidation externally and internally. Reality changed, however, much slower than political ideologies. What is interesting, many academics these days narrow the nation state down (as a political reality) only to the period just before and after the two world wars<sup>1</sup>. Peter Taylor<sup>2</sup> makes a useful distinction of how the role of cities has changed over time. During the heydays of the nation state cities were contained in their functioning, they were subjugated to the centralising nation state. Before that cities were rampant at least when they were not controlled by a central empires like the Roman or Ottoman empire. The European cities in the Middle Ages were rampant in the sense that they were relatively free from the political constraints of weak territorial rulers. Cities could develop their own small and large scale trade networks, thus integrating their surrounding region and sometimes extending them to larger parts of Europe. The crisis of the nation state releases the cities from the yoke again and returns to them the opportunities to more independently shape their future and experiment with the new forms of cooperation.

1 S. Halperin, 2013.

2 P. Taylor, 2013; P. Taylor, 2014.

### **The internal and external territorialisation of the nation state**

A political drive towards the state and national sovereignty has spread over Europe and the Americas since the American and French revolutions, and since the decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century it followed to the rest of the world. As a result, the world became increasingly divided into national territories. This was linked to the idea that the modernisation of each national society would free people from “the cloisters” of the Dark Middle Ages and lead them into a bright future spearheaded by the USA<sup>3</sup>. Territorialisation was an important aspect of this dominant western version of mod-

3 W.W. Rostow, 1960.

ernisation. The economy was capitalistic, but regulated within the national territory by nation states through the creation and regulation of a national market. The differences and inequalities within the national territories were – after the Second World War – subject to welfare state policies (aimed at homogenising the economic differences in the national territory). Not only internally, but also externally, the national territory was used by the nation state to regulate society. For example, the nation state regulated foreign trade through border controls.

Apart from the economics, the politics also became territorialised. Externally, national sovereignty was to be protected by international relations backed by national armies. Internally, the sovereignty of the people was linked to democratisation focusing on citizen rights for people living within the national territory.

What is more, identities also became territorialised. Nationalism not only unified the population within the territory of a nation state, but was also used to mobilise the population militarily and otherwise against other nation states. These economic, political and cultural territorialisation were aspects of the modernisation of society aimed at moving it away from the Dark Middle Ages.

It is important to stress that this development towards a world formed by nation states reflected more the development of the dominant political ideology – faithfully followed by mainstream academics – than the physical reality of international economic flows and power relations. The nation state was conceptualised as a container of relations, but this was more an ideal than reality. Hence, it is not astonishing that its assumptions have been increasingly questioned over the last decades. According to John Agnew this dominant conceptualisation of the nation state falls in the territorial trap of viewing states as unified territories, societies and actors<sup>4</sup>. It suffers from the statism of an assumed spatial congruence between society, economy and politics within the same borders. Such state-centrism suffers from three main factors: the spatial fetishism of reifying social space as static and unchanging; from the methodological territorialism of assuming that all social relations are organised within a territory; and from a methodological nationalism of assuming that the national scale is the dominant level of social developments<sup>5</sup>. Despite the multitude fissures and divisions within a nation state and despite the fact that crucial relations transcend the borders between nation states, a state imagined as a national community is an important political construction.

“The nation” has always been something of a normative ideal. “The idea of ‘identity’, and a ‘national identity’ in particular, did not gestate and incubate in human experience ‘naturally’, did not emerge out of that experience as a self-evident ‘fact of life’. That

*International system is undergoing a crisis. A totally new Time-Space will soon emerge thereof*

4 J. Agnew, 1994, p. 53-80.

5 N. Brenner, 2004; D. Delaney, 2005.

6 Z. Bauman, 2004, p.20.

idea was forced into the *Lebenswelt* of modern men and women – and arrived as a fiction. It congealed into a ‘fact’, a ‘given’, precisely because it had been a fiction”.<sup>6</sup> But it is an important fiction which is crucial in the legitimation of power of the nation state.

7 K. Terlouw i J. Weststrate, 2013, p. 24–35.

Leaving the nature of the nation state aside, it is evident its emergence transformed the role of cities . In the Middle Ages cities were important political players, not only as city-states, but also as key political actors within the mediaeval territorial states.<sup>7</sup> However, with the advent of the nation state their political role was reduced to that of a

*Thick identities are rather backward looking, as opposed to thin identities, which are future oriented*

8 P. Taylor, *op. cit.* 2013.

municipality implementing policies decided by the nation state. Economically they were still the centres of innovation, but their economic power and transnational linkages were regulated by the nation states and curtailed by their policies of territorial integration and homogenisation.<sup>8</sup> Cities were still the cultural centres, but were controlled by nationalistic policies.

In the Middle Ages, however, cities – especially larger trading cities, like Amsterdam, Cologne, Barcelona and Wroclaw to name but a few –were dynamic entities that thrived not only thanks to external relations, but also thanks to the dynamics of interaction between the communities coming from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. This cultural, urban diversity was smothered by the nationalistic policies of nation states.

### **The crisis of the nation state and the urban future**

In the last decades the economic, political and cultural projects of the nation state are being challenged by the developments, through which cities emerge as key players. Economically, cities are considered as better suited to provide the best innovation and business climate than the cumbersome nation state. Cities can give business the necessary specific tailor-made business climate giving entrepreneurs the necessary edge to be successful in the global competition. This trend is already visible, and will get stronger in the future. Cities can profit from this specialisation, while they are part of large global networks. For instance, the automotive and consumer electronic industries in Wroclaw not only sell their products on the European market, but are also a part of European manufacturing networks. These urban networks are becoming increasingly unbound from the nation state. This will in turn result in economic fragmentation and different specializations of the cities as well as increasing inequalities within the cities themselves.

The decline of central control by the nation state frequently leaves more political space for cities to organise their own urban region. Attention is now shifting from the urban network of large cities to larger entities – that is to say to metropolitan regions. This process will contribute to the creation of an even more complex and layered assemblage of networks. Within the metropolitan region, its internal networks including smaller cities and rural regions will increasingly contribute to the competitive potential of the whole region. But also the connections between whole metropolitan regions will form clusters of urban networks across national borders. Many metropolitan regions, including Wroclaw, already cooperate on the European level to learn from one another’s experiences in order to further strengthen their position in the future.<sup>9</sup> Cities thus not only increasingly become part of international urban networks, but they tend to organise their surrounding regions.

Many of the assumptions on which nationalism is based are also being eroded. Globalisation exposed the impotence of nation states to support their population in face of worldwide economic competition and increased international migration, which undermines the assumed historical ancestry and homogeneity of the nation. The importance of national identities is further challenged by the increased individualisation through which individuals gain more freedom with whom they associate and with what (international) life-style groups they feel connected.

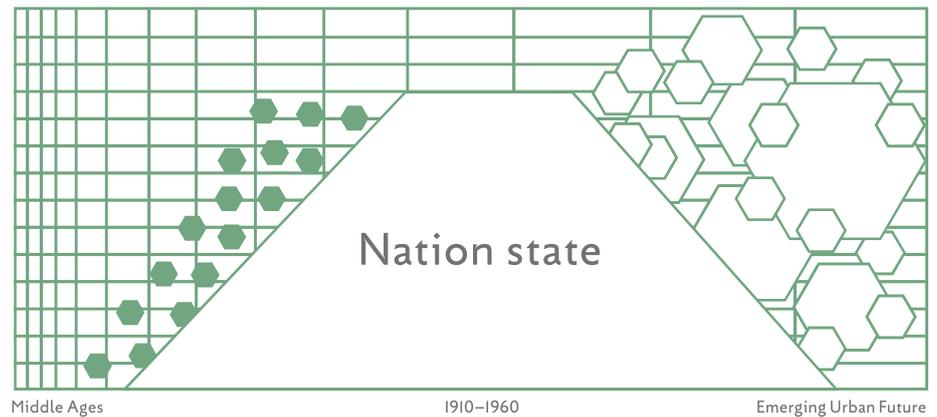
Thus the nation state as a regulator of the national society within its territory is challenged externally by the permeability of its borders and internally by its decline of regulatory and homogenising capabilities. Like in the Middle Ages, cities are becoming

9 Cf. METREX: The Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas.

Aspect	Middle Ages	Nation state	Urban future
Cities	Rampant	Contained	Released
Political authority	Fragmented	Territorial centralisation	Fragmented globalising networks
Economy	Feudalism	National market regulation	Global competition
Urban economy	Market region	National market	Urban networks
Civic ideology	Roman-catholic church	Nationalism	Neoliberalism
Civic identity	Complex layered	Nation	Complex layered

Table I Structural characteristics of the Middle Ages, the age of the nation state and the urban future

Figure 1. The rise and decline of the nation state



more important economically as part of increasingly more complex and expanding urban networks that transcend national boundaries. They also become more important for their surrounding region. This is linked to their increasing political role within the nation state, which is relinquishing many of its centralised regulatory powers. Cities also become more important in more complex forms of identity formation. On the one hand this is the result of the undermining of the conceptual assumptions of the nationalism and the nation state. On the other hand it is linked to the growing importance of cities and their international and regional position. At the same time, the growing importance of cities changes the focus of spatial identity discourses among the people: from identification with the nation, to identification with these complex, layered, emerging urban structure .

The trends that suggest the advent of the future in which cities emerge as more dominant will be further discussed in this essay. Table 1 and figure 1 give an overview of some characteristics of the three epochs: the Middle Ages, the age of the nation state and the urban future.

Figure 1 depicts the rise and possible further decline of the nation state. It shows the preponderance of a finely meshed and territorial fragmented structure in the Middle Ages: in medieval times the borders of numerous flimsy territories constantly changed and were very porous. Later on these territorially unstable areas gradually became even larger.

The municipal and provincial amalgamations of the last decades are in some way a continuation of this trend towards larger administrative territories. All over Europe a decentralisation of power at the cost of the nation state has resulted in pressures towards municipal and provincial amalgamations. The solid stars in the figure 1 illus-

trate the emergence of the prosperous and independent cities at the end of the Middle Ages and account for the fact that their wealth provided the resources for the nation states to emerge. After a period of absorption by the nation state the cities tend to emerge again, but not so much as separate, independent cities, but rather as the nodes in diversified urban networks. The size and the dots of the stars in the figure 1 indicate that the cities are no longer predominantly market towns for their surrounding region, but function more as nodes in the gradually extending and overlapping urban networks. The larger and more solid stars towards the right in figure 1 suggest that in the future these urban networks will possibly become more important and develop into stable political constructions competing directly with the declining nation state. Figure 1 is however dominated by the solid pyramid indicating the homogenising and fixed territorial character of the nation state. The upward slope on the right indicates the trend towards nation state formation, which until recently dominated political and academic thinking. Figure 1 also shows that although the rising trend of nation state is in crisis and its development is now being reversed, the nation state is still a dominant force.

### Neomedievalism and structural crises in social development

To better understand this current crisis of the nation state some academics make comparisons with the Middle Ages. Some regard neomedievalism as a possible scenario when the centralised territorial coordination of nation states would continue to fragment and urban networks would further increase their significance.<sup>10</sup> This will result in a mosaic of allegiances that are difficult to coordinate. Some expect that collective identities will focus on larger entities like “Europe” or “liberal values”, or “Christian values”, which will provide some integration and bonding comparable to the bonds of identity offered by the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. This process, coupled with a renewed focus on smaller entities like local communities can create new forms of politics, alliances and allegiances.<sup>11</sup>

It is now clear that neo-medievalism interpreted in this spirit does not imply “a return to the Middle Ages”, but calls for a renewed interest in dealing with fundamental crises in social structures. Where do these crises lead to?

According to Immanuel Wallerstein the current crisis signifies the transgression from one *structural TimeSpace* to another. The word *TimeSpace* reiterates the inseparability of time and space for human self-understanding. Following Fernand Braudel’s types of social time (short-term “episodic history”, medium-term “cyclical history” and long-term “structural history”), Wallerstein extends them by attaching a spatial dimension to each one, thus obtaining different types of *TimeSpaces*.<sup>12</sup> The first type, “eternal

<sup>10</sup> H. Bull, 1977; G. Lewicki, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> S.J. Kobrin, 1998, p. 361-386.

<sup>12</sup> I. Wallerstein, 1988, p.289-297; I. Wallerstein, 1998.

TimeSpace”, is characterised by general explanations that disregard the specificities of time and space. This TimeSpace has dominated the social sciences until recently and took the form of the search for general laws of behaviour. Those who operate within this TimeSpace conceptualize social change as eternal progress starting in the Dark Middle Ages. Wallerstein criticizes this search for universal laws, but also seeks to go beyond the short-term analysis of particular events and places typical for the second type: “episodic TimeSpace”. He therefore focuses on the third type – “structural TimeSpace”, which analyses long-term phenomena and qualitative changes of the social system. When a transition from one “structural TimeSpace” to another takes place, one can speak of the fourth type: “a transformational TimeSpace” that – Wallerstein believes – becomes reality right now.

Once, the capitalist world-economy as we know it was a new *structural TimeSpace* that emerged out of the late Medieval crisis of feudalism in Northwestern Europe. A large scale and expanding division of labour based on market competition replaced the coercion-based local division of labour which characterised the Middle Ages. However, we now face a new crisis. Wallerstein compares the crisis of the Middle Ages that gave birth to the modern world-system with its nation states, with the current crisis of the world-system. He claims that what will emerge is a new, yet another fundamentally different *structural TimeSpace*<sup>13</sup>.

13 Ibid.

14 S. Sassen, 2008.

Saskia Sassen<sup>14</sup> also compares the current crisis and the transformation of the nation state with that at the end of the Middle Ages. This can help to avoid what Saskia Sassen calls “the endogeneity trap” that leads a researcher to limiting analyses to the subject studied: “[W]e cannot understand the x - in this case globalization - by confining our study to the characteristics of the x itself - i.e., global processes and institutions”.<sup>15</sup> This means that analyses of globalisation should not be limited to the burgeoning worldwide trade, new communication technologies, the emerging global institutions, the growth of transnational corporations, the growing importance of cities and the decline of the nation state since the 1980s. More attention to both the local scale and a longer time-frame is necessary to better understand globalisation. To avoid the endogeneity trap one must look beyond simple dualities of scale and time. Only studying the different relations between the local scale and many other scales allows us to avoid the scale duality between the national and the global. Studying the periods before, during and after the golden age of the nation state avoids the time duality which contrasts the period of the nation state with the current period of globalisation.<sup>16</sup> It must be highlighted that the nation state is not a kind of primordial condition which is now challenged by globalisation. There were certainly important long distance relations before the period of the nation state. This does not suggest that there are no fundamental changes between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>17</sup> Analysing earlier periods gives a much more nuanced and complex picture than “models of current social change, which are

15 Ibid., p.4.

16 Ibid., p.394.

17 I. Wallerstein, 2000.

typically geared toward isolating key variables to create order where none is seen. (...) Looking at this earlier phase is a way of raising the level of complexity in the inquiry about current transformations”.<sup>18</sup> History is important to understand the continuities and changes of the building blocks on which assemblage the general structure of these periods is based.<sup>19</sup> Each new phase reassembles the constituent elements of the previous period in a new way. To understand globalisation it is therefore important to study the evolution of these building blocks and how they become transformed in different assemblages, like the cities and nation states.<sup>20</sup>

19 *Ibid.*, s.13.20 N. Brenner, *op. cit.*; P. Taylor 2013, *op. cit.*; M. Kitson et al., 2004, s.991-999; S. Halperin, *op. cit.*

### Towards a global urban economy

Over the last decades, there emerged a huge literature on the growing importance of cities and globalisation.<sup>21</sup> Cities are now internationally ranked on their performance in the global networks and on their local economic potential. A wide array of indicators is used to measure the relative performance of cities in the global economic competition. For instance, in the ranks calculated by the *Financial Times*, Wrocław tops the list of “emerging cities business friendliness”.<sup>22</sup> Improving urban economic performance and the position in these rankings is increasingly linked to policies that improve the global economic position of cities.

21 FT 2014.

22 I. Gordon, 1999.

Indeed, urban competitiveness has become an important topic in policy discourses. However, academics tend to be more sceptical to this idea. Some point out that urban competition is hardly global, but rather limited to nearby cities.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, especially economic geographers stress that it is not cities or regions, but firms which compete with one another.<sup>24</sup> However, so far the discussions about urban competitiveness are dominated more by policy concerns than by academic investigation. One can say that “the policy tail is wagging the analytical dog”<sup>25</sup> as the policymakers everywhere have jumped onto the urban competitiveness bandwagon.<sup>26</sup> Hence, an urban development industry has emerged which transformed these analytical concepts into ‘policy facts’. As a result, cities and urban regions are affected by globalisation and regional competitiveness regardless whether these are real, but because they are acted upon.<sup>27</sup>

*The power of the cities keeps growing. Great metropolitan regions will soon have their say*

23 M. Kitson et al., *op. cit.*

24 G. MacLeod, 2001, p. 809.

25 M. Kitson et al., *op. cit.*, p. 991.

26 A. Lagendijk i J. Cornford, 2000, p. 210.

27 M. Purcell, 2002.

Unfortunately, the assumption that a whole urban community benefits from the increased competitiveness of a city suffers from the same methodological problems as the national community. Such assumption is rendered false when applied to national community, (which was already discussed above) due to the territorial trap that as-

28 K. Terlouw and J. Weststrate,  
*op. cit.*

sumes congruence between territory and community. The concept of an urban community suffers from similar problems: according to Mark Purcell the growing focus in political debates on urban interests falls into “the local trap” i.e. assumption that there exists something like a singular urban community that has shared, common interests.<sup>28</sup> As a result of such thinking, cities tend to be reified just like territories and their constructed, man-made character is ignored.

One can develop Purcell’s thought by saying that the focus on the shared interest of urban communities in globalising networks falls into “a nodal trap of urban competitiveness”. What is this trap? It takes the form of an unjustified assumption (similar to the one from territorial trap) that there is an assumed homogeneity of interests within the urban community between the elite and the rest of the population. The city in this approach is treated like a territory, reified into an unchanging homogeneous unified actor.

Certainly, this nodal trap to an extent differs from the territorial trap, as it does acknowledge that well-being of the political communities in a city is fundamentally related to its linkages with other cities. Moreover, it focuses not on a single scale, but

*In fact global players value their own global networks more than local city networks they operate in*

on both local and global scales. In spite of this, the idea of “the urban competitiveness for the urban community” still falls in a nodal trap, because it assumes that the members of diverse global, non-local networks share more interests with their urban neighbours within

a city than with their own networks involving many cities. Such way of thinking is oblivious to the fact that the urban neighbours of the global actors in fact participate in different global, national, regional, or local networks. It is for instance assumed that the local branch of a bank has more common interests with local building firms, than with the other branches of that bank. In other words, the node is assumed to be more important than the network and that clustering of nodes coming from different global networks in a city creates a common good for the entire urban community. This overrides (or better: conceals) the common interests of the urban elites collaborating in their global networks.

Obviously, as to policy making, a shift from succumbing to the territorial trap to succumbing to the nodal trap is a danger that must be avoided. How to do it? In the Middle Ages people learned to deal with multiple loyalties and identities. But in the Middle Ages it took centuries with many conflicts to work out some ways to deal with these complexities. Unfortunately, the increased frequency of social change in the twenty first century does not give us so much time to work out new ways to deal with these complexities.

### From urban competition to urban and regional cooperation

The focus of the debate on the economic role of cities is shifting from individual large cities to urban networks and metropolitan regions. Cooperation and coordination between cities and their surrounding area is increasingly regarded as important for stimulating their competitiveness. The policies that aim to do so not only focus on factors affecting the economic competitiveness, but also on how to organise important local, regional and national political and economic actors in a form of multi-level governance.

It is a general observation that cities not only compete but also cooperate. They cooperate in new institutional arrangements to cope with the problems a crisis-prone globalising economy generates. They also cooperate on the new tasks they receive from the nation state following the decentralisation of power and responsibilities.

The ‘new regions’ created in such cooperation are sometimes based merely on the cooperation between of adjacent administrative territories. However, it is not always the case. The new regions increasingly consist of complex urban networks, linking cities with each other and further with local and regional administrations. They are complex while they increasingly include administrations from different administrative levels (local, regional, national) and non-administrative partners, like business (organisations) and other groups of stakeholders. The organisation of these new regions and urban networks is based more on the cooperation between policymakers of different public administrations and non-state actors – like business associations – in networks, than on an administrative hierarchy of geographically fixed territories. This reminds us of the Middle Ages, which consisted of different territories and networks that were used to look after the interests of local stakeholders.<sup>29</sup>

Of note is that new regions and urban networks frequently cover different policy fields, partially overlap in space and lack clear spatial borders. As a consequence, local actors are confronted with many different new regions and urban networks. Some conceptualise these new regions as a problem linked to the crisis-prone capitalism. According to Neil Brenner<sup>30</sup> this “mosaics of scalar organization” cut across the classical nested administrative hierarchies to create a “continued institutional and spatial disorder.”<sup>31</sup>

Other authors conceptualise new regions as a viable solution. For example, Bruno Frey labels these regions as FOCJs (Functional Overlapping Competing Jurisdictions) and regards them as an alternative to the hierarchical system of a centralised state.<sup>32</sup> FOCJs emerge bottom-up in response to the complex geography of problems. Their flexibility enables them to provide public goods more effectively and efficiently. FOCJs are not an alternative, but a complimentary administrative structure. The area of these functional regions is defined by the specific task they have to fulfil. Their

29 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

30 B.S. Frey, 2005.

31 B. McSweeney, 1999, p. 77-78.

32 A. Paasi, 2012, p. 1206-1219.

size fits the scope of the interests of the stakeholders, like local business associations cooperating to collectively promote the competitiveness of their region. Such conceptualisation results in a layered administrative landscape of multiple coexisting and partially overlapping new regions. This can be justified by the specific spatial shape of the problems they address, but the legal framework on which the cooperation (mostly informal) in these new regions is based is in fact more problematic – as is their democratic legitimisation.

### **The identity of urban networks and regions**

One way to counter the fragmentation linked to the crisis of the nation state and the growing importance of urban networks is related to the new ways in which different identities of communities, cities, regions, nations and continents are being constructed. New forms of identities can provide alternatives for the civic bonding based on the nationalism (that focuses on the territory of the nation state). Identities are not some fixed facts, but constantly evolving social constructions. “Collective identity is not ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered. What is ‘out there’ is an identity discourse on the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others, who engage in the process of constructing, negotiating, manipulating or affirming”.<sup>33</sup> This means that spatial identities are not something tangible and fixed, but rather something formed through the so called “identity discourses” – the proposed ways of bonding uttered by many groups, which are subsequently disputed, agreed upon, reinterpreted and transformed. Identities, as a result, are social constructs – the entities created and governed by society itself. As Anssi Paasi puts it, when describing regional identity: “Rather than as an empirical entity defined in terms of its inherent qualities or as the product of the identification of its inhabitants, regional identity is understood (...) as a social construct that is produced and reproduced in discourse. The discourses of regional identity are plural and contextual. They are generated through social practices and power relations both within regions and through the relationship between regions and the wider constituencies of which they are part.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, spatial identity discourses are always related to other competing or complementary discourses. They emerge out of interaction with other identities.

The role of national identities in both national and international politics has been extensively acknowledged and studied. The rise of nationalism and the decline of localism since the nineteenth century in Western countries were commonly regarded as the opposite sides of the same coin. What is interesting, the decline of local urban identities was seen – at that time – as a welcome sign of the breaking of the bonds of traditional medieval societies that were viewed pejoratively – as societies that solely

33 A. Smith, 1982, p.149-161;  
A. Paasi, *op. cit.*

34 A. Confino, 1997.

restrained individuals in their path toward modernity. Hence, phenomena such as individual freedom, democracy, economic development and welfare, were linked to the imagined future community of the nation, which as a two-faced god Janus not only looked backwards in history at the Dark Middle Ages, but also forward at the bright future of modernity. In this view, urban and regional identities were seen as a relic of the divisive medieval past, which was finally being surpassed by more future-oriented, modern and integrative nationalisms.

All nationalisms stress the homogeneity of the nation and the exclusiveness of the relation between the individual and the nation. They leave no room for other significant competing collective identities.<sup>35</sup> Hence, modern individuals were to identify predominantly with their national community. Although local and regional identities did not disappear at that time, they were reformulated as the historical setting of the national discourse which focuses more on integration and development away from the old localism characterised by fragmentation and stagnation.<sup>36</sup>

It took many centuries for this hierarchal relation between local, regional and national identities (with the nation and civic activity on the top) to emerge, mature and thicken. It had sufficient time to become institutionalised and thickened. However, the newly formed reality of urban networks and regions hardly has the time to develop these kinds of thick spatial identities. These new identities are in fact much thinner and more subject to change and competition than the traditional thick identities. Below, table 2 gives an overview of the key characteristics of the thick, territorial identities and the thin, more network based identities.

What are the features of these two types of identity? Thick spatial identities are more backward-looking and value the spatial community as a political goal in itself. They focus more on bonding within a territorial community, while thin identities focus more on bridging between networked communities.

Thin spatial identities are more forward-looking and value more the effectiveness of their especially economic policies. Moreover, thin spatial identities are more functional and linked to sectorial policies and special interests and stakeholders, while thick spatial identities are more integrative. Whereas thin spatial identities are created around a few - often economic - characteristics, thick spatial identities cover a broad range of cultural, social, political, landscape and economic characteristics. Also, thin spatial identities are more changeable. Their spatial form and meaning can be adapted to changing circumstances. They are less based on static territories with a fixed meaning, but focus more on fluid networks and dialogue.<sup>37</sup>

The growing importance of thin spatial identities can be illustrated by comparing

*Like in the Middle Ages, the people of the future will have to deal with complex and overlapping entities*

35 A. Smith, 1982; p.149-161; A. Paasi, *op. cit.*

36 A. Confino, 1997.

37 K. Terlouw, 2009; Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*

the traditional region Lippe with the modern region OWL which is based on cooperation in an urban network. Both are located in the North-east of the German federal state of Nordrhein-Westfalen.

Lippe has a very strong traditional thick regional identity rooted in its rural landscape, regional traditions and long history. It is a strongly institutionalised region within a territory which was already formed in the Middle Ages and which has hardly changed over the centuries. Its rural landscape is hardly touched by industrialisation and urbanisation. After centuries of being an independent state, Lippe is now an administrative district. But its thick regional identity discourse focusing on its history and the landscape within its territory, now hinders Lippe from effective participation in new forms of regional cooperation, like that of OWL.

In 1989, in Bielefeld - a large city just outside Lippe - important regional companies together with the regional chambers of commerce founded an association - to promote the region Ostwestfalen-Lippe (OWL) as a business location. As its complicated name suggests, Ostwestfalen-Lippe has no established regional identity. Ostwestfalen-Lippe wants to communicate a regional identity which is different from both the more rural Westfalen and the declining industrial Ruhr area. By advertising its many mid-sized cities with thriving local companies, they communicate a distinct thin regional identity. Its regional identity discourse is thus based on economic characteristics, is offensive, expansive and future oriented. It focuses its communications not on its own population, but on entrepreneurs. Its communicated regional identity has shifted over time from correcting a negative image of backwardness, to promoting OWL as an innovative and cooperative business community showing the rest of Germany how to improve global competitiveness through networking and deregulation.<sup>38</sup>

38 K. Terlouw, 2012.

### **Conclusion: the layering of urban networks, regions and their identities**

Like in the Middle Ages, the people of the future will have to deal with complex, multiple, competing and overlapping economic as well as political entities. Like in the Middle Ages, cities and regions will have considerable autonomy towards territorial states. The urban centrifugal forces now challenge the legitimacy of the political system based on the coherence between collective national identity and political territory. Together with the nation state the thick territorial spatial identities are now being challenged as well. Thus, new forms of spatial identities are needed to legitimise and stabilise this fragmenting political system. But this does not mean that the new, thin, relational identities are to replace the traditional thick territorial identities. How they will relate to each other in the future?

Urban networks and regions will become more numerous and important and depend more and more on future oriented, thin spatial identity discourses focusing on strengthening very specific elements on which they want to base their economic competitiveness in the global economy. But in order to legitimise their political decisions they have to link these thin economic identity discourses with elements of the historically rooted thick identities. Urban networks and regions can thicken their thin

Aspect	<i>Ranging from traditional thick:</i>	<i>To future oriented thin:</i>
Spatial form	Closed	Open
	Territorial	Network
Organisation	Institutionalised	Project
Participants	General population	Administrators and specific stakeholders
Purpose	Broad and many	Single
	Culture	Economy
Time	Defensive	Offensive
	Historical oriented	Future oriented
	Stable	Change
	Old	New
Scale focus	Local and National	Global

Table 2. Aspects of spatial identity discourses (source: K. Terlouw 2009)

economic regional identity discourse by referring to a glorious past, even though this was long before the administrations in these regions started to cooperate. They do this to widen their support base from policy makers to the general population.<sup>39</sup> Urban administrations sometimes use different spatial identities for different audiences. Thin urban identities focusing on economic competitiveness are more used to attract outside investors. In turn, thick urban identity discourses are frequently used as an ideological shield to conceal the drawbacks of these neoliberal policies for the general population, by focusing on the supposedly shared interest of all members of a urban community.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> K.R. Cox, 1999.

But these new thinner and layered identity discourses of urban networks and regions are not simply replacing national identities. Over the last decade all over the Western world there is a resurgence of a new form of nativist nationalism. Traditional nationalism was more based on the horizontal confrontation across the border with neighbouring nations at the same spatial scale. A new nativist nationalism, however, focuses more on the vertical power relations across scales: native nationalists now cooperate across borders to reduce the influence of the European Union and limit globalisation in general and international migration in particular. But even this resurgence of nationalism that opposes globalisation and thin identity discourses focusing on urban competitiveness and international urban relations does not signal a return to the traditional nation state. Why? Because nativist nationalism also creates new bonds across territorial borders, thus adding a further layer to the complex relations and identities of cities, urban networks, urban regions and the administrative territories of the nation state and Europe. The application of neomedievalist perspective to the study of these problems can help us to understand how to deal with the globalized urban future.

*Paradoxically, nationalism, in combating transnational globalization creates transnational ties itself*

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