

Soft Spaces in Spatial Planning and Governance: Theoretical Reflections and Definitional Issues

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Abstract

Concepts of space and place have emerged as an increasingly important focus for theoretical and empirical research in the spatial planning literature (see Healey 2004, Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, Faludi 2010, Davoudi 2012). The concept of soft spaces, in particular, signals an attempt to understand the implications of relational and non-state-centric geographies for spatial planning and governance. Allmendinger and Haughton's (2009, 2010) conceptualization of soft spaces is firmly based on experience of planning reform in the UK under the New Labour governments. The emergence of soft spaces in practice is thus associated with a recent 'spatial turn' in UK spatial planning (Davoudi, 2009). Faludi (2010a, b) employs the language of soft and hard spaces to explain the territorial politics of European Union spatial policy. For Faludi, Europe itself constitutes a soft space with fuzzy boundaries.

This paper seeks to move towards a general definition of soft spaces through an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the concept and its relation to the wider literature on critical regional studies and the new regionalism. Significant parallels are evident in the recent work of Harrison (2010, 2012) and Paasi (2009) among others. In particular, the paper will seek to further understanding of the temporal specificity of soft spaces. Are soft spaces a new phenomenon or a new approach to understanding spatial governance with flexible boundaries? How can we conceptualise the gradual emergence of soft spaces over time and perhaps transition periods between soft and hard spaces?

1. A Critical Review of the Soft Spaces Literature

Concepts of space and place have emerged as an increasingly important focus for theoretical and empirical research in the spatial planning literature (see Healey 2004, Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, Faludi 2010a, b, Davoudi 2012). The concept of soft spaces, in particular, signals an attempt to understand the implications of relational and non-state-centric geographies for spatial planning and governance. Allmendinger and Haughton's (2009, 2010) conceptualization of soft spaces is firmly based on experience of planning reform in the UK under the New Labour governments. The emergence of soft spaces in practice is thus associated with a recent 'spatial turn' in UK spatial planning (Davoudi and Strange, 2009). Faludi (2010a, b) and Metzger & Schmitt (2012), however, also employ the language of soft and hard spaces to explain the territorial politics of European Union spatial policy and the emergence of European macro-regions. For Faludi, Europe itself constitutes a soft space with fuzzy boundaries.

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The first mention of ‘soft spaces’ in the academic literature refers to the emergence of ‘alternative administrative geographies’ in the context of new governance arrangements for spatial planning and regional development in the UK (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2008, 143). It is argued that soft spaces represent a deliberate attempt to introduce new and innovative ways of thinking, particularly in areas where there is significant resistance to cross-sectoral and multi-actor governance approaches. Soft spaces are thus viewed as a policy tool facilitating the cross-sectoral policy coordination ambitions of strategic spatial planning. It is further argued that soft spaces of governance are/were becoming increasingly numerous and important in the context of urban regeneration in the UK. In Allmendinger & Haughton (2009) the emergence of soft spaces is characterised as an important trend, related to attempts to break away from the constraints of the formal scalar hierarchies of the planning system in the context of the UK:

‘There is also an emergent resort to new multi-area subregions for strategy making and policy delivery, evident at various scales of regeneration, planning, and other domains, breaking away from the rigidities associated with the formal scales of statutory plan-making. The emergence of these ‘soft spaces’ is an important trend, which alongside the tactical use of ‘fuzzy boundaries’ is related to a policy impetus to break away from the shackles of pre-existing working patterns which might be variously held to be slow, bureaucratic, or not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities’(Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, 619).

Here soft spaces are not explicitly defined but related to the introduction of new scales of governance and the use of fuzzy boundaries. Two reasons are given for their introduction:

1. Increased efficiency in the planning process – breaking away from traditional bureaucratic procedures
2. To better reflect the real geographies of issues under consideration

The concept of soft spaces is further elaborated in Allmendinger & Haughton (2010) where a typology of five new forms of spaces and spatial practices in the UK is introduced:

1. *Formal or statutory* (new formal structures associated with devolution of powers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and also London)
2. *Corporate spatial planning* (here understood as strategies which aim to enhance the spatial dimension of wider government objectives and to improve coordination among sectoral policies with regard to their spatial impact, Wales Spatial Plan is the principal example)
3. *Informal or soft* (three distinct types)
 - a. Bottom-up functional (local or sub-regional initiatives designed to reflect functional relations)

- b. Pragmatic² (informal strategies used to overcome rigidities and time delays of statutory processes, with a specific focus on delivery and concrete objectives, example is Thames Gateway)
 - c. Top-down functional spaces³ (driven by central government departments in relation to housing market and travel to work areas)
4. *Fuzzy* (a way to deliberately create ambiguity in terms of spatial boundaries, key example is regions in Wales Spatial Plan, the boundaries of which are not clear, also the case with city-regions where the boundaries may overlap in places).
 5. *National Spaces of Delivery* (major infrastructure projects undertaken at a national level)

(Adapted from Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010, 811-812)

The characterisation of soft spaces presented by Allmendinger and Haughton suggests that soft spaces are a feature of 'soft' (i.e. informal) forms of governance. It is not clear, however if soft governance is a necessary condition for soft spaces or even perhaps a sufficient condition. The following critical questions regarding the definition of soft spaces may be raised at this point:

1. Can soft spaces emerge through (relatively) formal planning mechanisms? An example may be spatial concepts in a national spatial strategy or national spatial planning guidelines, which are supported through legislation.
2. Do all cases of informal spatial governance involve soft spaces?
3. What type of space do soft spaces refer to? Is it for example, metaphorical space, physical, material space, lived space or social constructed representations of space?
4. Do hard and soft spaces represent the two ends of a continuum or are they discrete categories?

This ambiguity surrounding the precise meaning of the concept of soft spaces has already led to a degree of conceptual slippage and the use of the term in ways which are not fully consistent with the Allmendinger and Haughton's formulation of the concept. Thomas and Littlewood (2010) in their analysis of a discursive transition from green belts to green infrastructure in UK spatial planning use the concept of soft spaces to refer to informal spatial governance arrangements. Here soft spaces are understood to involve new coalitions of actors, usually working outside of the traditional geographical boundaries of local government:

These soft spaces depend on new coalitions of stakeholders and tend to apply to different geographical boundaries from traditional local councils. The spaces can apply to the scale of city regions and/or sub-regional groupings for example. Urban fringe areas, previously

² The term pragmatic is not used in the text (own interpretation).

³ City-regions in England are viewed as hybrid of bottom-up and top-down functional spaces – these categories are not exhaustive but represent ideal-types perhaps?

geographically and politically marginal, now command more political attention and require resolution within these new collaborative policy arenas (Thomas and Littlewood, 2010, 204).

Throughout the paper the terms ‘soft governance’ and ‘spaces of soft governance’ are used repeatedly (with direct reference to the work of Allmendinger and Haughton) to refer to new or emerging informal governance arrangements for spatial planning and regional development. The understanding of space here is variously physical space (the object of spatial planning) and metaphorical space (spaces of governance as an equivalent concept to policy arenas).

Waterhout (2010a) in a paper presented at a workshop on ‘soft spatial planning’ in Hamburg similarly conflates the concepts of soft planning and soft spaces. Soft spatial planning is defined here as spatial planning through informal means:

Soft spatial planning basically refers to a type of planning that is not grounded on legal or financial instruments; it merely refers to informal ways of acting and to joint visioning and strategy making. (Waterhout, 2010a, 1).

In this case, the adjective ‘soft’ refers to the type of planning and not the type of space although it is argued that the rationale for soft spatial planning arises due to the apparent incapacity of current (hard) systems of planning to adequately deal with ‘new conceptions of space and place’ and the ‘spatial complexity’ of contemporary society. This conceptualization of soft spatial planning is subsequently further employed by Knieling (2011) in his study of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region, and its positioning within the Western Baltic Sea Region. In a second paper, Waterhout (2010b) subsequently reverts to Allmendinger and Haughton’s original understanding of soft spaces, and in particular, suggests, that soft spaces may represent an attempt to ‘regain control over territories’ in the context of the diminishing formal role of nation-states in the contemporary governance context (unpaginated). More recently Olesen (2011) in his doctoral study of spatial planning in Denmark refers to soft spaces in terms of ‘episodes’ of strategy-making:

We might understand soft spaces as particular strategy-making episodes, where strategic spatial planning moves beyond formal planning arenas in attempts to destabilize existing practices and structures (Olesen, 2011, 151).

The concept of soft spaces as employed here clearly refers here to processes of strategic spatial planning rather than the way in which space is conceptualised through particular planning or governance processes.

2. Further Specification of the Concept of Soft Spaces

The above discussion indicates a clear need for a further specification of the concept of soft spaces. Drawing on the existing academic literature as outlined above we arrive at the following definition of soft spaces:

Soft spaces are a particular type of space, which are the result of a deliberate, conscious strategy constructed by governing actors (usually public sector led) to represent a geographical area in a particular way that lies outside of the political-administrative boundaries and internal territorial divisions of the nation-state.

The purpose is to ensure common understanding of the concept which is consistent with the original formulation by Allmendinger & Haughton. In particular our concern is to ensure the analytical distinction between hard/soft as an attribute of space and hard/soft as an attribute of governance is clear. The following definitional criteria seek to further clarify the concept, in part by outlining what soft spaces are not:

- Soft spaces are thus, in the terminology of Lefebvre ‘representations of space’ or ‘conceived space’ (Lefebvre, 1991). This implies that, for example, a metropolitan region in itself is not a soft space but that its representation (through maps or text) in spatial plans or strategies or governance documents may be a soft space.
- In some cases, strategies and policies with an implicit spatial reference (e.g. EU regional policy or some economic strategies for cities) may be spatially blind or work with very limited (banal) concepts of space (see Läßle 1991, Barca 2009). The concept of planning (or governance) with soft spaces assumes a degree of spatial sophistication in the decision to represent or construct space in a particular way.
- Planning with soft spaces can occur through the use of both formal and informal strategic planning instruments. Planning with soft spaces does not necessarily imply ‘soft’ forms of planning.
- The use of soft spaces may be economically, socially, culturally, politically or environmentally motivated. For example International River Basin Districts, created under the Water Framework Directive may be considered soft spaces within an environmental policy context. Cross-border cooperation areas may also be soft spaces whose primary motivation is not necessarily economic growth and competitiveness.

3. Soft Spaces and Relational Geographies: Towards a Polymorphic Approach

The concept of soft spaces, as introduced by Allmendinger and Haughton, is directly associated with a *relational* perspective on socio-spatial relations and reflects recent arguments in planning theory that spatial planning should be reformulated to take greater account of relations across space rather than objects in space (see Friedmann 1993, Graham & Healey, 1999, Healey 2004):

So whilst planning still needs its clear legal ‘fix’ around set boundaries for formal plans, it is to reflect the more complex relational world of associational relationships which

stretch across a range of geographies, planning also needs to operate through other spaces, and it is these we think of as 'soft spaces' (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, 619).

It is important, however, to ask, whether a relational ontology is necessary for the comprehension of soft spaces. To what extent can the critical regional studies tradition, and recent polymorphic approaches which acknowledge the role of both bounded territory and networked relations, contribute to a fuller understanding of the geography of soft spaces?

For Davoudi (2012) soft spaces may clearly be viewed as part of a wider shift towards the use of interpretative rather than positivist concepts of space and place in planning theory and practice. She contends that positivist and interpretative perspectives represent the 'two distinct ways of conceptualising space and place' in the social sciences' (2012, 2). Where positivist perspectives are associated with an absolute view of space, the interpretative tradition influenced by thinkers such as Leibnitz and Einstein, is characterised as the realm of relational perspectives (2012, 3). Indeed the emergence of relational perspectives has done much to question some of the underlying assumptions of commonplace understandings of space and place. Amin (2004) calling specifically for a 'relational politics of place', argues that transformations in society associated with globalisation serve to destabilise traditional spatial imaginations composed of nested territorial hierarchies and rigid boundaries. He argues that dominant conceptualisations of space and place in popular and academic discourse continue to ignore the relational foundation of spatiality, in favour of territorial spatial imaginaries: 'These [relational] spatialities are decisive in the constitution of the local, but they continue to be written out of the hegemonic territorial imaginary of the world' (Amin, 2004, 34). It is contended that regions can *only* be understood through 'a conception of places as open, discontinuous, relational and internally diverse' (Allen, et al. 1998, 143, in MacLeod and Jones, 2007, 1178). Macleod and Jones (2007) argue that the relational approach tends to present a caricatured reading of territorial and scalar approaches as closed and static. They argue for an approach that explicitly acknowledges the socio-political institutionalisation of regions as territorial structures through 'active political struggle and discursive imaginings' (2007, p. 1186). Paasi (2009) similarly reflects that traditional regional geographers have explicitly acknowledged the contingent, open and porous character of regions, despite their employment of the geographic region as a principal unit of analysis. For Paasi, the concept of territory refers to a specific type of region, characterized by relations of political control:

All territories are regions but not all regions are territories ... a territory differs from a region in that its boundaries and the resources therein are under the control of people. Such control is an expression of territoriality. Territoriality is not a constant but a political, spatially selective strategy that can be exercised or not (2009, 124)

Morgan (2007, p. 33) in an attempt to overcome what he sees as an artificial binary division between territorial and relational geographies, argues for a more nuanced perspective that acknowledges that 'political space is bounded *and* porous' recognising both the importance of networked relations of

connectivity and the territoriality of formal state structures. Hudson (2007) argues that the ‘boundedness’ of regions is ultimately a question for empirical research. Here, it might be suggested, that soft spaces in spatial planning serve to question the degree to which planning spaces require formal hard boundaries and provide a policy framework for considering regions whose boundaries may be contingent, contested, or fuzzy or simply lie beyond the formal jurisdiction of the planning authority. The TPSN (Territory, Place, Scale, Network) approach of Jessop et al. (2008) places further emphasis on the need for conceptual precision and focuses on the interrelationships between territory, place, scale and network, and associated processes of socio-spatial structuration and social construction. Jessop et al. (2008, 396) argue that such an approach can lead to a more sophisticated understanding, where each socio-spatial concept is understood as both a *structuring principle* and a *structured field of operation*. Applying the TPSN framework, Harrison (2012) demonstrates the potential for a polymorphic approach, in a study reflecting on the recent demise of regional governance in England. He argues that the key issue for debate is ‘not *which* sociospatial relations are dominant, emergent or residual in any given space-time but understanding *how* and *why* they are dominant, emergent or residual (2012, 4).

Structuring principles	Fields of operation			
	Territory	Place	Scale	Networks
Territory	Past, present, and emergent frontiers borders, boundaries	Distinct places in a given territory	Multilevel government	Interstate system, state alliances, multi-area government
Place	Core–periphery, borderlands, empires, neomedievalism	Locales, milieux, cities, sites, regions, localities, globalities	Division of labor linked to differently scaled places	Local/urban governance, partnerships
Scale	Scalar division of political power (unitary state, federal state, etc)	Scale as area rather than level (local through to global), spatial division of labor (Russian doll)	Vertical ontology based on nested or tangled hierarchies	Parallel power networks, nongovernmental international regimes
Networks	Origin–edge, ripple effects (radiation), stretching and folding, crossborder region, interstate system	Global city networks, polynucleated cities, intermeshed sites	Flat ontology with multiple, ascalar entry points	Networks of networks, spaces of flows, rhizome

Table 1: Dimensions and Interrelationships in the TPSN framework (source: Jessop et al, 2008, 395).

Relational approaches may be more appropriate for the analysis of networks of socio-spatial relations whereas studies of spatial boundaries (whether hard or soft) require an understanding of territory as a category of analysis. In practice, analyses of the conceptualization of space and place in spatial

planning and territorial governance may best focus on the interrelationships between the four dimensions of socio-spatial relations. From this perspective, cross-border-regions may be viewed analytically in terms of the influence of network structuring principles in a territorial context (Table 1, above). The meaning of specific territorial boundaries or border spaces is reconfigured through the influence of cross-border socio-spatial networking.

Soft spaces may be understood as part of an attempt to understand and respond to the complexity of contemporary socio-spatial relations which as Allmendinger and Haughton suggest, do not fit well with formal, administrative state spaces. If spatial planning strategies have until recently been dominated by positivist, absolutist concepts of space and place, as suggested by Davoudi and Strange (2009), perhaps soft spaces are best understood as part of a deliberate, conscious strategy to move away from dominant territorial spatial imaginaries or 'meta-geographies', to break away from thinking in terms of the nation-state and geographies defined by political-administrative borders (Walsh 2010, Walsh, under review). The concept of 'unusual' or non-standard regions introduced by Deas and Lord (2005) in reference to growing number of supra-national cooperative arrangements in Europe, established, in particular through INTERREG and related programmes, indicates the significance of non-territorial regions in European spatial policy (see also Zimmerbauer 2012).

Faludi (2009) cogently argues that the future of European spatial planning and territorial cohesion policy is fundamentally tied to questions of territoriality and the problematic nature of the nation-state in the current era of multi-level governance. He contends that the underlying spatial imaginary of the ESDP and Territorial Agenda process is of the EU as a 'club of self-contained nation-states' (2009, 35). In this case, the spatiality of formal political structures has a substantive influence on the content of spatial policy, even where deliberate efforts are made to overcome established geographical perspectives and introduce soft spaces. Indeed it may be argued that the shift in terminology from a European *spatial* development perspective to a *territorial* agenda for the EU perhaps reveals more about the types of spatial concepts employed than is apparent at first glance. Faludi explicitly relates what he sees as a required shift in dominant spatial imaginaries at the European level to the concept of soft spaces (Faludi 2010a, b). Indeed, the macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube regions are identified as first examples of a new form of spatial planning with soft spaces. Following Bialasiewicz et al. (2005) he suggests that European spatial policy represents a form of 'aspirational territoriality' which is significantly different from the 'hard' territoriality of nation-states, in not being based on direct political control, but aspirational norms and shared policy objectives (Faludi, 2010a, 18).

Rather than a rejection of territoriality in favour of relational geographies, soft spaces may reflect new forms of territoriality, produced in a complex multi-level governance context, where the significance of nation-state borders is diminished, but state-centric perspectives continue to influence spatial policy and governance.

4. The Role of Soft Spaces in Processes of Institutional and Territorial Shaping

When soft spaces are understood as representations of space in spatial planning and governance strategies, the role of soft spaces in processes of *deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation* becomes an important question for empirical research. Are soft spatial concepts significant in the shaping and reshaping of collective spatial identities in practice? How can we understand the processes through which soft spaces might over time achieve a degree of fixity and ‘hardness’? Metzger and Schmitt (2012) in a recent study of the Baltic Sea Region employ Actor Network Theory (ANT) in an attempt to provide answers to these questions. Significantly, they make an analytical distinction between ‘degrees of formal institutional fixity’ and ‘properties of durability’ (2012, 273). They note that formalized spatial configurations may, in fact, prove less durable over time than soft spaces which allow room for interpretation and flexibility.

The conceptual framework developed by Paasi (1986) for the analysis of the institutionalization of regions provides an alternative theoretical perspective from which to examine the role of spatial planning strategies and soft spaces in processes of regionalization. Paasi (1986) identified four stages in the process of regional institutionalisation; assumption of territorial shape, development of conceptual shape, development of institutions and establishment as part of the reference system and consciousness of the society concerned (1986, 121).

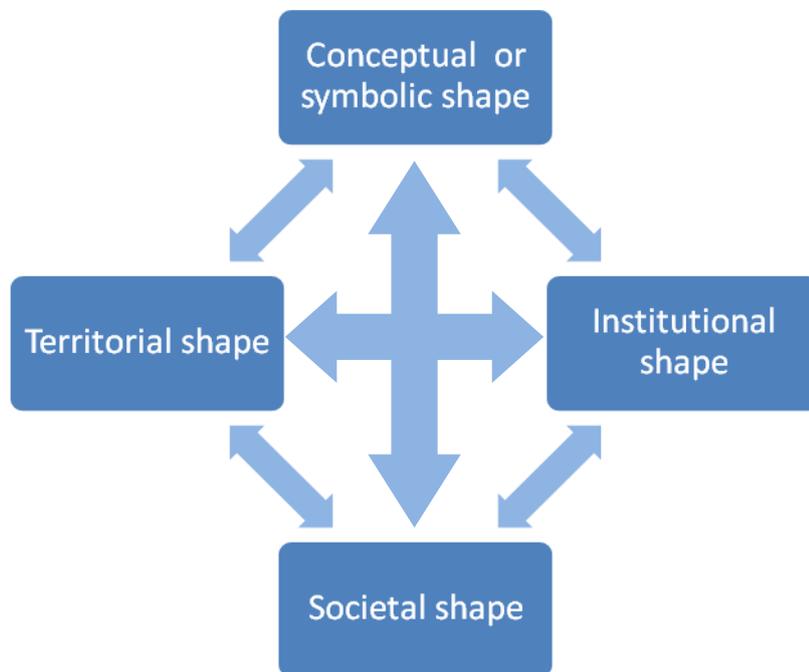


Figure 1: Interacting stages in the institutionalisation of regions (adapted from Paasi 1986, 121).

These ‘stages’ are understood as interrelated and may occur in parallel rather than sequentially. From this perspective institutionalisation of a region is understood as the process through which the region

emerges as an established identity which is continuously reproduced through individual and institutional practices. More recent studies by Paasi and colleagues have focussed more specifically on the discursive dimension of regional identity, through the analysis of particular case studies (see for example Paasi & Zimmerbauer 2012). From the perspective of this framework, the process of institutionalisation is understood in a broad sense, including formal, informal and discursive institutional practices which lead over time to the development of shared spatial identity. Soft spaces introduced through spatial planning or territorial cooperation strategies provide one element through which new geographical perspectives are introduced. For Gualini (2004) processes of institutionalization are defined as a combination of three sets of properties of an institutional field that require addressing different dimensions of analysis:

- *Formal institutional settings*: institutional regimes, formalized norms, rules and procedures
- *Informal institutional settings*: modes of interaction, prevailing strategies, behaviours and routines
- *The discursive domain of institutions*: frames, scripts, narratives, images, paradigms.

Formal institutional settings and processes are understood to involve a relatively high degree of social structuration whereas the analysis of the discursive domain is characterised by an emphasis on processes of social construction (Gualini, 2004, 62).

It is at the discursive level that socially constructed concepts of space and place assume particular importance in processes of institutionalisation. From a *discursive institutionalism* perspective, institutions are understood as simultaneously constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning (see Schmidt 2008, 2010). Emphasis is placed on the role of socially constructed ideas and concepts in processes of institutional change (Hay, 2007, 63-64, Fuller, 2010, 1123). Discursive institutionalism seeks to identify the extent to which ideas become established and codified as cognitive filters or normative structures through which actors come to interpret their environment and institutional context. It is also concerned with the conditions through which established cognitive filters and discursive paradigms become contested, transformed or replaced. Whereas other variants of institutional theory presume some form of equilibrium and tend to view institutional change as gradual and *path-dependent*, discursive institutionalism emphasises the potential for *path-shaping* institutional change through periodic paradigm shifts (Hay, 2006, 61, 65). Institutional change is conceptualised as punctuated moments within broader evolving systems of social learning (*punctuated evolution* – Fuller, 2010, 1123). Discursive institutionalism thus has the capacity to provide a more nuanced analysis of the internal dynamics of political and social institutions. Particular institutional arenas may be characterised by a multiplicity of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, reflecting not only internal power relations among institutional actors but the influence of broader societal discourses.

Discursive institutionalist theory, thus, provides a framework for analyzing the role of spatial concepts in reconfiguring socio-spatial imaginaries and influencing the direction of institutional change in particular regional contexts. In some cases, soft spaces may have limited influence beyond the narrow range of a spatial planning epistemic community or policy network, whereas in other cases, spatial strategies and soft spaces may be instrumental in reconfiguring regional identities and developing a basis for sustained cooperation across spatial and institutional boundaries.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This paper has identified significant conceptual slippage in relation to the concept of soft spaces as employed in the recent and expanding literature on the topic. A precise definition and set of criteria are presented in attempt to clarify and resolve in particular the distinction between soft spaces in planning and governance and soft forms of spatial governance. The second half of the paper has subsequently explored the extent to which the concept of soft spaces necessarily reflects a relational understanding of socio-spatial relations. It is suggested that the analysis of soft spaces can benefit from a polymorphic analytical approach, which acknowledges the significance of both territorial and network geographies in contemporary socio-spatial configurations of governance and collective identity. Finally the paper examines the potential contribution of institutional theoretical perspectives to the understanding of the role of spatial concepts in the institutionalization of regions and reconfiguration of socio-spatial imaginaries.

The extent to which soft spaces are influential in processes of institutional and territorial shaping in contemporary Europe is a significant question for empirical research, requiring rigorous analysis and intensive engagement with contemporary approaches in critical regional studies and institutional theory.

Notes

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