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Modes of Regionalization, Administrative Divisions, and Subjective Geographies: A Parallelism between Italy and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between administrative boundaries and other forms of regionalization through a comparison between Italy and Sweden. Drawing on theoretical contributions, desk research and preliminary fieldwork in Sweden, it highlights how administrative geography often diverges from lived geographies, shaped by sociocultural, historical, and relational processes. In Italy, the administrative model dominates both popular perception and institutional practice, sometimes producing mismatches with regions as perceived by inhabitants. In Sweden, by contrast, historical provinces and symbolic toponyms coexist with functional administrative units, reflecting a dual system of territorial reference. The comparison underscores the dynamic and constructed nature of regions and calls for governance models that better integrate functional needs with bottom-up territorial identities.

Keywords: regionalization; administrative divisions; subjective geographies; Italy; Sweden.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “region” is among the key notions in geographical analysis. Those engaged in spatial research are often compelled to make one or more choices regarding the area under analysis and the scale to be adopted, thereby, in fact, delimiting a space within which to work. Every operation of this kind represents a process of regionalization, at least in

the broadest sense of the term. Indeed, its etymology (Vallega 2004; Paasi *et al.* 2018a) refers, on the one hand, to practices of territorial governance (from the Latin *regere*), and on the other, to a space divided by ‘straight lines’ or ‘boundaries’ (from the Latin *regione(m)*). The importance of the concept is such that the French geographer Jean Juillard (1974) argued that regional synthesis is the ultimate aim of geography. The breadth of this definition – which sees the region as any portion of space bounded by a border within which some form of internal coherence can be found (Turco 1984, 11) – opens up extremely wide research scenarios that, on the one hand, especially in recent decades, transcend the boundaries of geography itself (Paasi *et al.* 2018a), and on the other, led to the emergence of multiple ramifications within the discipline itself. It is no coincidence that numerous regional geography manuals in the Italian literature (Vallega 1976; Mainardi 1994; Gavinelli e Bolocan Goldstein 2022), the English literature (Fouberg and Moseley 2015; Paasi *et al.* 2018b), as well as the French literature (Frémont 1974), have addressed the topic by attempting a classification of the different types of region, or, epistemologically-wise, a classification of the different ways of defining them. Contemporary geography has repeatedly attempted to define the terminology (in Italian, the word “*regione*” may also define, for example, a part of the body) compared to what might be inferred from its Latin etymology, while taking on the challenging task of not limiting the numerous interpretations the term offers the discipline. The ‘delimited and governed space’ that emerges from one of the two Latin etymologies of the term, in fact, presents at least three issues for twentieth-century and contemporary geography. First, this definition allows for any kind of territorial partition, regardless of its internal characteristics; moreover, it focuses exclusively on the governmental function, identifying a specific type of geographical region, the administrative or institutional region; finally, it only admits clear-cut demarcation lines, to the extent that Adalberto Vallega (2004) wondered whether regional forms with more subjective characteristics, whose boundaries cannot be sharp when they encounter human perceptions and the cultural traits of a territory, could find space within the humanistic paradigm and theoretical framework of a geographer such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1978).

This article aims to explore, through a comparison between Italy and Sweden, the tensions between administrative boundaries and other forms of regionalization that emerge in daily life, in territorial policies, and in the symbolic representations of places. In particular, it reflects on the ways institutions and populations construct, perceive, and act upon

regional space, highlighting how territorial identity is not exhausted within the formal limits of institutional regions (Banini 2013). The second section briefly retraces theoretical developments concerning the concept of region and the modes of regionalization in geography. The reflection develops, in the third section, with a consideration of how administrative regionalization is predominant in Italy, influencing even socio-cultural and political spheres. The examples given for the Italian case are contrasted with the discussion of the Swedish case study, presented in the fourth section, which is useful for suggesting alternative interpretations of the modes of regionalization, administrative territorial division, and the perception of territorial belonging. The results discussed in this section are the first outcome of field and desk research, whose details are set out therein. The article concludes with final reflections and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this work, which aims to compare regions with clear-cut boundaries, such as administrative regions, with cultural and historical regions formed by networks¹, relationships, forms of mobility, communities, landscapes, senses of belonging and practices, it is useful to revisit the definitions of region that are relevant in literature. Juillard (1974) makes it clear that the region is neither uniform nor homogeneous, thus excluding the correspondence between landscape and region, as well as between region and economic activities – an idea still very strong in the U.S. literature (Cochrane 2018). He therefore defines regional space as a space in balance, composed of human and natural factors, in constant motion. The importance of the human subject in the concept of region was later emphasized by Frémont (1975; 2005) and Vallega (1982), who highlighted the role of value systems and *genres de vie*, a geographical category rooted in the thought of Paul Vidal de la Blache (1922). Contemporary literature then considers the region as a scale-less concept (Storey 2018; Gavinelli 2022), rejecting predetermined applicative dimensions, and gives a different meaning to the term “homogeneous” introduced by

¹ The dialectic between networks and boundaries – concepts as contradictory as they are coexistent in reality – is a recurring theme in the literature. See, for example, Muscarà 2005 and the role of cities such as Vienna, Basel, and Trieste.

Juillard. In fact, it is not considered synonymous with ‘uniform’ but, on the contrary, is associated with interdependence and reciprocity among factors, functions, and actors that make up or operate within a region (Tanca 2022). As for the issue of boundaries and the clear delimitation of the region in the humanistic paradigm, it appears, for obvious reasons, to be impossible.

In this context, it may be useful to recall the idea that the region, unlike place and landscape, which are perceived, is imagined and conceived (Entrikin 2018). It follows that the region can undoubtedly also be considered a social construct formed in a collective consciousness (Paasi 1986; 2003), in an ‘imagined community’ (Dai Prà e Gabellieri 2022). Consequently, it is impossible to regionalize space uniformly with boundaries that are universally valid, even when analyzing the territory through different lenses, filters, and perspectives: this task, as arduous as it is necessary, is in fact that of administrative geography, which cannot and should not be considered the only ‘regionalizing’ branch of the discipline (Quaini 1990), despite its highly performative value, which is also easily encountered in inhabitants’ perceptions and in the cultural approach to the region (Barthes 1966; Dematteis 1985).

This article, of a reflective nature, intends to contribute to studies on the relationship between the administrative region and the region characterized by relational, network-based, mobility, or cultural systems, on how they often do not coincide, and aims to bring new, albeit preliminary, field-based knowledge to the matter. The aim here is not to question the existence of administrative boundaries, necessary for territorial governance (Raffestin 1987) and result of stratified structuring processes (Turco 2010); on the contrary, the aim is to suggest other boundaries, based on other perspectives and analyzed through different lenses (Newman 2005). This implies that administrators should be aware of this complexity, as it is an integral part of ‘their’ territories, especially because of the characteristics and diversity that such spaces themselves encompass, and because of the impact these practices have on the lives of inhabitants.

The analysis of the epistemological framework outlined above opens the door to an important consideration in the dialectic between administrative regions and other regional forms: the region (especially the administrative one), initially conceived as a tool for legitimizing and representing the peripheries, risks evolving into a “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994), “incarnando [...] una rappresentazione caricaturale della geografia nel suo complesso, una sorta di ritaglio rigido o di ‘buco della

serratura' che vincola la conoscenza del territorio e le analisi territoriali [...], che condiziona lo sviluppo e mira a replicare il potere” (Boulineau e Molinari 2018, 122).

If these considerations lead to the recognition that all institutionalized territory within certain boundaries can be subject to criticism, reform, and change (Dematteis 1985; Raffestin 1987; Turco 2010), it is appropriate to acknowledge that even within the institutional form of regional design, different solutions are devised depending on the objective pursued by the regionalization. Indeed, while it is true that administrative regions, in Italy as in much of the so called Western countries, have rigid and crystallized features (or boundaries), it is also true that institutions create different forms of regionalization according to their needs: examples include electoral constituencies, health districts, or, with greater political-administrative autonomy, municipal unions or Interreg programs, which are often promoted by local institutions. Scientific research also often must draw boundaries, which may seem as top-down as institutional ones, yet at the same time do not coincide with them. This can be found, for example, in theories relating to the great European development corridors such as the “Blue Banana” (Faludi 2015), to regional descriptions (Vidal de la Blache 1889), to analyses of urban mega-regions (Gottmann 1961; Corna Pellegrini 1977; Ross 2012), or the search for theories regulating the development and functions of territory such as the hexagonal regionalizations of Christaller’s (1980) central place theory.

The geographical literature thus shows how modes of regionalization can be extremely varied and, consequently, how administrative regionalization, though the result of a necessary compromise, does not necessarily satisfy all territorial actors (citizens, lower-level local authorities, businesses, and stakeholders). This is closely linked to the multiple possibilities for regionalization. Reasoning in reverse, absurdly, if administrative regions were fully satisfactory, there would be no need for other forms, and vice versa. Consequently, alternative forms of regionalization can be found on the geographical, social, and political margins of administrative regions and, in some cases, may cross over or have features in common with territories of other regions.

This work aims to capture these marginalities and to distinguish them critically from forms of localism or the “production” of culture, folklore, or originality (Dai Prà e Gabellieri 2022), or from individual experiences and subjective geographies which, while deserving of great consideration, rarely have the strength of regionalizing phenomena

(Banini e Magnani 2022). Such characteristics can be found in the cultural, social, mobility, or political practices of territories; they can be inferred from scientific, popular, institutional, and artistic documents; or from scientific or political choices of alternative regionalization, such as those suggested in the previous paragraph, whether top-down or bottom-up (Molinari 2019).

3. THE ITALIAN CASE AND THE PRE-EMINENCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONALIZATION

As Della Dora and Minca (2009, 64) recall, regarding the common conception of the term ‘region’ in Italy:

la prima immagine che la maggior parte di noi richiamerà alla propria mente sarà probabilmente una colorata carta geografica del nostro Paese – forse la stessa che eravamo soliti vedere appesa in classe ai tempi della scuola, con le sagome ben definite delle regioni istituzionali, simili a tante variopinte tessere di un puzzle a noi ormai piuttosto familiare: Veneto, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Piemonte, Lombardia, Toscana, Lazio, e così via.

Yet, other forms of regionalization do exist in Italy. Even remaining within the institutional sphere, examples include the large Alpine and Apennine *comunità montane* (still in existence or no longer functioning), which are bound by a strong connection to the territory² and play an important representative role for inland areas, such as the Ossola Valleys or the Valle Camonica. In Italy, these bottom-up administrative bodies are particularly useful also because the design of local government bodies is mostly recognized as inefficient (Dini and Zilli 2023); however, it is worth noting that almost all European countries, especially those with very large territories, make use of them (Borghi 2017).

Another example of alternative and strictly operational regionalization – without political autonomy but closely linked to the characteristics of the territories – is that of the *Aziende Sanitarie Locali* (ASL, also known as AUSL or other acronyms adopted in certain regions); in some cases, their boundaries do not coincide with provincial ones, as happens with the *Agenzia di Tutela della Salute della Montagna* in Lombardy.

² This connection is probably due to the ease of defining the territories of valleys, which are bounded by their slopes.

Its establishment allowed the regional health service to overcome provincial homogeneity by combining the province of Sondrio with the main mountainous areas adjacent to it: Valle Camonica, in the province of Brescia, and the western Upper Lake Como area, in the province of Como. In this case, physical regionalization prevailed over an administrative one, considering the peculiarities of a complex yet homogeneous territory.

Similarly, the so-called ecclesiastical provinces – subdivisions of ecclesiastical regions – may not coincide with administrative provinces. One example concerns the Diocese of Tortona, which has jurisdiction over municipalities and hamlets belonging to four administrative regions: Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Piedmont, and Lombardy. Another example is the Diocese of Trivento, which includes municipalities from the provinces of Campobasso, Isernia, and Chieti.

The Italian telephone territorial division into districts (that is, the prefixes for landlines), adopted before the provincial reorganizations of the Fascist era, also does not match current administrative boundaries. For instance, the province of Novara has two districts – Novara and Arona – and three municipalities within the provincial territory receive their service from external districts. The municipality of Montenero di Bisaccia, in Molise, even has a district boundary running within its own municipal territory, since the main town falls within the Termoli district, while the hamlets north of the Trigno River use the Vasto prefix.

These forms of regionalization are the result of historical stratifications and often reflect subdivisions predating the various 20th-century provincial reorganizations. Such variety inevitably mirrors the complexity of Italy's medieval and modern history, the historical importance of fiefs, municipalities, and their boundaries, and tells of economic and social exchanges, of mountain chains that did not divide administrative regions but rather stood at the center of networks that formed cultural regions (Dell'Agnese 2014).

From a historical-cultural perspective, there are also non-institutional regions which, because of their long-established significance and social, landscape, or productive uniformity, are firmly part of how the territorial layout is perceived – both by the people who live there and by outsiders. These are often historical regions such as Tigullio, Langhe, Monferrato, Roero, Valtellina, Insubria, Brianza, Lomellina, Franciacorta, Mugello, Tuscia, Marsica, Irpinia, Salento, Belice. These are regions and territories whose boundaries – unofficial – are often anything but precise and cross provincial or regional administrative divisions. The

possible absence of clear boundaries, however, does not call into question the homogeneity of some of their characteristics nor, for that matter, their existence. Homogeneity in these regions may be landscape-related, productive (especially in the food and wine sector), linguistic-cultural, or economic-touristic (consider the promotion of certain areas and the use companies make of them, as in the case of Tigullio milk, Franciacorta sparkling wine, or Langhe hazelnuts). These economic and promotional opportunities are often appealing to local consortia, bodies, and institutions that adopt geographical regional names for tourism or commercial purposes: while on one hand these delimitations help locate territories more precisely, on the other hand they risk providing boundaries that are too arbitrary and not always free of economic and political interests. An example of this is the road signs placed at the entrance of some municipalities in the Valtenesi area, in the province of Brescia, to promote the wine of the same name. These were installed with an evident institutional value even in municipalities that historically have not been part of the territory and that, on the contrary, belong hydrologically to the Valle Sabbia. It is important to highlight the strong performative value of these choices (Dematteis 1985), whose impact is reinforced by institutional support and by landscape interventions such as the one mentioned above.

The distribution of languages – which are key gateways to community culture – also follows historical processes that sometimes date back to the Italic period and do not coincide with the current Italian administrative division. For example, between the Valle Vermentagna (in Piedmont) and the Val Roia (between Liguria and the French Alps), Italian, French, and Occitan – with all their variants – are spoken and protected on both sides of the borders. More broadly, the entire Italy–France border is extremely permeable linguistically-wise: Occitan, Franco-Provençal, French, Italian, and a series of dialects are arranged in a geographical *continuum* and are in constant flux; while the case of the Aosta Valley is well known, less known are the realities of the Walser communities in northern Piedmont and the strong, even official, use of the Valtellina dialects in Brusio and Poschiavo, in the Swiss canton of Graubünden. Anyone who has ever looked at Giovan Battista Pellegrini's 1977 map of Italian dialects, or other similar works, will have noticed, for example, that much of the Salento dialects belong to the “extreme southern” group, unlike the rest of the dialects of the Apulia region; likewise, one will note that within the administrative region of Marche, idioms belonging to three different dialect systems are found: “northern”, “middle”, and “southern”.

Language is not the only cultural trait to determine regional cohesion capable of crossing natural or administrative boundaries. Similar reflections can also be made regarding food. Consider the spread of apple strudel on both sides of the Tyrolean Alps, the tomme cheeses shared – with some variations – between Piedmont and Savoy, or how some hamlets in the municipality of L'Aquila, located near the Gran Sasso d'Italia mountain range, share culinary traditions with communities in the province of Teramo (such as endive stracciatella soup), distinguishing themselves from the habits of the related main town.

All these examples show that human experiences are not always representable in polygonal forms. Subjective geographies are often point-based or network-like. Increasing possibilities for movement and connection, at both local and global scales, now allow for polytopic life experiences that transcend administrative boundaries. Remaining with the Italian case, consider cross-border commuting with Switzerland; in the case of the canton of Graubünden, cross-border movements are essential not only for the local economy, but also for providing essential services to citizens; likewise, it is well known that Italy's lower cost of living encourages many Swiss citizens to make use of businesses across the border, thus establishing dense transboundary economic relations (Mazzoleni and Ratti 2014).

Other networks, less culturally dense, are those of logistics, transport, and industry. Consider, for example, the “industrial triangle” economic region, a phrase used to indicate the relationships between the industrial development centers of Lombardy and Piedmont with the Ligurian ports, or the aforementioned ‘blue banana’ region, or the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) project.

Despite the great variety of regionalization possibilities such as those listed here, in Italy the administrative conception is by far the prevailing one. This is evident in several areas. First of all, consider how in the country it is common practice to introduce oneself to an interlocutor by indicating an administrative region or a provincial capital as one's place of origin (Della Dora e Minca 2009). In other words, it is very rare to say one comes from Monferrato, Mugello, Irpinia, or Belice; it is much more common to say one is Piedmontese, Tuscan, Campanian, or Sicilian, or at most that one comes from Alessandria, Asti, Florence, Avellino, Trapani, Agrigento, or Palermo (either NUTS 2 or NUTS 3 regional toponyms). Administrative regions are also commonly used to classify dialects in everyday speech: people therefore speak of the Venetian, Abruzzese, Apulian, or Sicilian dialects – which do not actually exist – since such

regions contain within them hundreds of idioms belonging to multiple linguistic regions whose boundaries cross administrative ones (Avolio 2013).

This pattern is also often carried over into territorial policies. Consider some examples from the management of recent emergencies: the Covid-19 pandemic and the L'Aquila earthquake. In the first case, the color-coded system used to determine restrictions on people's mobility was based on administrative regions; during the so-called Phase II of the emergency, for example, it was permitted to visit relatives up to the sixth degree and "congiunti" (close relations) within regional boundaries. This measure did not take into account the fact that some functional urban areas cross regional administrative perimeters – meaning, paradoxically, that a person from Piacenza could visit a relative in Cattolica, on the other side of the Emilia-Romagna region, but not a relative living in a municipality in the lower Lodigiano area, which in functional terms is centered on Piacenza. The same situation could occur, for instance, for residents of municipalities around the city of Carrara, some of which are in Liguria.

In the second case, a reflection is offered on the types of housing proposed to address the housing emergency following the earthquake that struck L'Aquila and nearby municipalities in 2009. The emergency housing measures developed by the Italian government were of two types: the C.A.S.E. (*Complessi Antisismici Sostenibili ed Ecocompatibili*) and the M.A.P. (*Moduli Abitativi Provvisori*) projects. The first type has typically urban features, consisting of three-story apartment blocks plus one floor of anti-seismic isolators used as car parking. The second type better suits the landscape of small towns, consisting of one- or two-story houses with independent entrances. The first solution was proposed only for the municipality of L'Aquila, the only urban area affected by the earthquake, while the second was proposed for neighboring municipalities (and later also extended to L'Aquila itself). However, this approach did not take into account that the municipality of L'Aquila consists not only of the urban area of the main town – where the C.A.S.E. Project has minimal impact on the landscape – but also of about 70 hamlets of only a few hundred inhabitants each, located on mountain plateaus and valleys where such urban typology had a major impact on the landscape. Two of these new neighborhoods, Camarda and Assergi, were built within the territory of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park.

Examples of how administrative geography influences the consciously or unconsciously adopted modes of regionalization in Italy could

continue and extend into other areas, even more playful ones (consider a well-known game show broadcast every evening on the country's main TV channel, featuring 20 contestants, one from each administrative region). It is possible to imagine that this perception has been influenced by the traditional way geography is taught in Italian schools (Dematteis 1978) and by the “rassicurante [...] ordine immobile” (Della Dora e Minca 2009, 72) of political maps of the country hanging on classroom walls. This approach, however, is specifically Italian and does not occur in the same way in other countries.

4. DIFFERENT MODES OF REGIONALIZATION: THE SWEDISH CASE

Considered in parallel with the Italian case, the Swedish case reveals a more complex relationship between administrative boundaries, geographical perception, and the population's organization of territory. Unlike what has been described for Italy, this relationship does not align local people's common geographical knowledge and identity perceptions with the boundaries, institutions, and toponymy of administrative geography.

This paragraph briefly presents the first results of preliminary fieldwork and desk research aimed at understanding modes of regional identification in the Swedish context, taken as a case study and considered as an alternative model to the Italian one. The observations reported here derive from participant observation and short structured interviews conducted at Dalarna University in Sweden, as well as from the consultation of schoolbooks and institutional websites belonging to the Swedish national statistical office, the national postal service, and the public transport authority of Stockholm County.

The research was carried out between February and May 2025. All statements and texts cited were originally expressed or written in Swedish and translated into English by the authors

4.1. *The Swedish administrative context*

The Swedish case reveals a complex relationship between administrative boundaries and the population's perception of the territory and its organization. Unlike what has been described for the Italian case – a pattern also common to other countries – this relationship does not align

the local population's common geographical knowledge and identity perceptions with the boundaries, institutions, and toponymy of administrative geography.

To better understand this context, it is useful to briefly outline the legislative history of Sweden's municipalities and counties. These two entities, classified respectively as LAU³ and NUTS 3 in the European framework for territorial nomenclature, are the only administrative subdivisions for which citizens elect representatives through local elections, and they are by far the main administrative divisions of the country⁴. Present-day Sweden is divided into twenty-one counties (*län*, in Swedish). County government is split between regional councils, which administer the region (whose main responsibilities are managing the healthcare system and public transport), and county administrative boards, appointed by Parliament, which handle local-level state functions (mainly environmental matters, infrastructure investments, and justice). Despite numerous toponymic and territorial changes over the centuries, counties have enjoyed relative stability in both boundaries and functions since the 1634 reform that created them, making them the state's primary administrative division (NUTS 2), replacing the provinces (*landskap*, lit. landscape).

Counties are further subdivided into municipalities⁵ with extensive territories, whose councils are directly elected by residents, and whose mayors are chosen by the council from among the highest-ranking municipal employees. The recent history of these entities has been heavily shaped by the numerous reforms of the second half of the twentieth century, which reduced their number from more than two thousand in the post-World War II period to the current 290, following a strictly functionalist approach based on central place theory⁶ (Christaller 1980; Nielsen 2003). Moreover, the broad powers assigned to Swedish municipalities⁷ mean that boundary definitions are based on demographic criteria, since the resident population must be sufficient to support the

³ Local Administrative Units are the equivalent of municipalities in Italy.

⁴ Other administrative subdivisions serve purely electoral or statistical functions.

⁵ With the exception of Gotland, which includes only a single municipality – also assigned the functions of the region – known as Region Gotland.

⁶ Even today, municipal seats are referred to as *centralort* (that is, central localities).

⁷ These responsibilities include the direct and autonomous management of all public schools, from nursery schools to upper secondary schools, the comprehensive Swedish social security system, as well as housing policies, urban planning, and land maintenance.

large number of employees required⁸, yet not exceed a maximum threshold that would undermine the highly individualized service provision. These criteria naturally lead to the creation of municipalities with large surface areas in rural regions and much smaller ones in urban areas⁹.

4.2. The results of the analysis

These criteria lead to the definition of administrative boundaries that are highly functional for carrying out municipal responsibilities; however, they do not take into account the history of settlements, the territory, or forms of territorialization – especially in their symbolic dimension. This creates a gap between a top-down administrative geography and a bottom-up subjective geography, shaped by the population's knowledge of the territory and their sense of territorial belonging. Nevertheless, the influence that administrative geography – its boundaries and toponyms – has on citizens' territorial awareness is limited to the competencies of municipalities and regions.

Indeed, from the participant observation, interviews, and desk analysis of schoolbooks and websites with which Swedish citizens interact in daily life – conducted for the purposes of this study – a clear distinction between the two levels emerges. All interviewees identified their place of belonging, birth, residence, work, or travel destination using historical toponymy rather than the current administrative one, which rarely coincides¹⁰. Likewise, none of the interviewees referred to their municipality or county except when alluding to institutions in discussions about healthcare or local elections. “I'm from Storuman, in Lapland”¹¹, “In Svadsjö life is quieter, but in Falun you have everything

⁸ Around 900,000 people are employed by Swedish municipalities – an average of more than 3,000 employees per municipality; see <https://skr.se/skr/englishpages/municipalitiesandregions.1088.html#:~:text=Employment%20in%20municipalities%20and%20regions%20Overall%2C%20municipalities,total%20employment%20figure%20for%20municipalities%20and%20regions>, last accessed August 4, 2025.

⁹ The largest municipality in the country, Kiruna, covers an area of more than 20,000 square kilometers – exceeding the territorial extent of Apulia. The smallest municipality, Sundbyberg, in the Stockholm urban area, covers just over 8 square kilometers.

¹⁰ In the rare cases of coincidence, speakers usually refer to the central locality.

¹¹ The former is a central locality (which gives its name to the municipality), while the latter is a historical province now divided into three counties.

[...]”¹², “Midsommar is celebrated in Torgås, outside Borlänge”¹³: these excerpts, drawn from interviews or recorded during participant observations, demonstrate not only the greater precision of historical toponymy compared to administrative names, but also a clear preference for the former as a mode of regional identification.

This trend is confirmed by the analysis of several tools that citizens engage with daily. First, it is significant that Swedish school geography textbooks present the territorial division based on the twenty-five historical provinces predating the 17th century provinces to which the collective imagination assigns cultural and landscape characteristics, sometimes even stereotyped ones.

Municipalities themselves are rarely part of Swedes’ geographical knowledge, to the extent that they are not included, for example, in the official postal address format (which is based on postal codes and urban areas or villages)¹⁴, nor in road signage or public transport timetables¹⁵. Even Statistics Sweden (*Statliga Centralbyrån*, SCB) often indicates villages and urban areas instead of municipalities in many of its surveys¹⁶, suggesting considerable flexibility in the use of place names even within public administration.

Finally, certain toponym choices underscore the existence of this symbolic ‘dual track’ in places naming in Sweden. For example, some municipalities, such as Härjedalen, are named after no specific settlement, but rather after a small region. It is also notable that some of the most internationally recognized historical provinces have had a complex toponymic history. For instance, no territory in Sweden has been officially called *Lapland* at the administrative level since the 18th century, while the counties of Scania and Dalarna¹⁷ persisted in subjective geographies without official recognition of their names from the 17th century until the late 20th century¹⁸.

¹² The former is an urban area (that is, a village) in the municipality of Falun, while the latter is the central locality that gives its name to the municipality.

¹³ Torgås is located a few kilometers from the central locality of Borlänge but lies entirely within the municipality of Borlänge.

¹⁴ See <https://www.postnord.se/> [04/08/2025].

¹⁵ See <https://sl.se/> [04/08/2025].

¹⁶ See <https://www.scb.se/> [04/08/2025].

¹⁷ In Swedish, respectively, Skåne and Dalarna.

¹⁸ The county of Scania was divided between the counties of Kristiansand and Malmöhus, while the county of Dalarna was called Kopparberg.

4.3. *Discussion of the Swedish case results*

The results suggest the presence of a dual system governing place names and territorial knowledge in Sweden: one purely administrative and the other tied to the historical sedimentation of territorialization processes. Within this context, there appears to be an awareness – shared by both institutions and citizens – of the extreme difficulty of unifying the two systems. It would be incorrect, in fact, to speak of ‘formal’ or ‘official’ toponymy or of formal errors: institutions themselves use both forms.

In official tourism communications, for example, Kiruna is described as a city in Lapland (a historical province), not in Norrbotten (the administrative county); furthermore, the settings of well-known Swedish literature rarely make reference to administrative place names (for instance, Kurravara, in Åsa Larsson’s work, or Fjällbacka, in Camilla Läckberg’s, do not constitute autonomous municipalities).

This situation represents an evolution of the process that, as Borghi (2017) suggests, should carefully and precisely connect administrative geography with that rooted in lived experience, subjective geographies, and territorial culture (Harvey 1980). The result is the preservation of the historically embedded semantics of the territory, without imposing changes aimed at aligning it with the administrative system. Conversely, the governing system is not forced to draw boundaries ill-suited to the practical management of institutional responsibilities simply to respect a symbolic territorialization system born under different circumstances and for different purposes.

Indeed, applying Turco’s (2010) framework, this is a case in which the third level of control over the Earth’s surface – the organizational – does not alter but rather coexists alongside the symbolic plane of naming.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The variety of regionalization possibilities present in every country illustrates the great difficulty of establishing ideal administrative regionalizations. The comparison between Italy and Sweden highlights how modes of regionalization and the meanings attributed to the concept of “region” can vary according to administrative traditions, territorial cultures, and everyday practices. While in Italy the administrative model predominates both in popular perception and in the institutional and

educational design of space, Sweden presents a more flexible and dual articulation between functional boundaries and symbolic affiliations. This parallel falls within a line of research that emphasizes how regions are not fixed entities, but dynamic constructions resulting from historical, cultural, political, and social processes.

The examples briefly presented here show how the sometimes-excessive rigidity of the Italian administrative model can lead to the overlapping of institutional boundaries with regions perceived or experienced differently by the population, at times producing distortive effects on public policy, spatial planning, and emergency management. Conversely, the Swedish case demonstrates an approach that, while not without its challenges, allows for a greater coexistence of differentiated, complementary regional levels.

In the Italian context, geography still has much work to do in promoting – beyond the academic sphere – greater awareness of the variety of regionalization modes, as well as of the political-cultural and historical nature underlying the establishment of current administrative regions. As the Swedish case shows, regions cannot be defined once and for all; indeed, the Italian debate has for years highlighted the need to revise the current territorial division (Ferlaino e Molinari 2009; Dini and Zilli 2014; 2023). Future studies could further investigate the relationship between perception geography, administrative divisions, and local decision-making processes – as well as explore how alternative forms of regionalization are received in different European contexts – to propose regionalization models that better align with the actual needs of territorial governance and the bottom-up expressions of territorial belonging.

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