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The place where streams seek ground. Towards a new territorial governmentality: the meaning and usage of the concept of territorial cohesion in the European Union

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Introduction



Picasso (1955) *Don Quichotte*

Personal kick-off

When I introduce myself to students in urban and regional planning or human geography at the University of Amsterdam, I also tell them what my PhD-research is about, but this shortly and simplistically, because most of the times I deem it as pretty irrelevant for the course. Yet, to give them a glimpse of an idea I always do thus: I start by saying that ‘I do research on a concept that is used in the European Union, and this concept is ‘territorial cohesion’’, then I wait for a few seconds before I say ‘...and then I always wait until you have a question mark above your heads’ – this does not have to be truthful to (social) reality of course – ‘...but my goal is to show that the experts do not know what it means either’ – after which often smiles follow.

Formal continuation

This book in front of you is written for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy (i.e. PhD) and lays down a thesis on territorial cohesion from the departure-point of spatial planning and European spatial planning in particular – as a thorn in its side that is. As the research for this thesis analyses a concept which is used in the European Union, the main question which guides the endeavour therefore is: what is the meaning and usage of the concept of territorial cohesion in the European Union?

Although this is a broad question indeed, it is a fundamental one which for long remained unanswered too. During the research the question was specified, as it will be for the reader while reading this book too. The

main question for starters implies two subquestions: i) what is the meaning of territorial cohesion and ii) how is the concept used in the European Union? You could see both these questions as attending to the same issue in two different ways, that is, what does territorial cohesion mean in the sense of its definition and what does the concept mean in practice. Furthermore, a third subquestion can be added when you see these ways as two sides of the same coin: iii) how do the concept's meaning and usage relate? This could be seen as a third way to ask what territorial cohesion means, now in the form of what does this meaning and usage of the concept mean? The answer to this third subquestion will be the main outcome of the research and, to get a bit ahead of the matter, revolves around the territorial cohesion discourse.

Before we get to this though, much needs to be done. Namely, how to get a grip on concepts, such as territorial cohesion and perhaps many more, whose meaning is not clear even though experts use them? How for instance to prevent following Don Quichotte (De Cervantes Saavedra, 1605) and polemically "fight windmills"? Fuelled by the academic interest in social science's opaque concepts, this research then conducts a discourse analysis, because it emphasises the tendencies of qualitative research to dig deeper in and give meaning to what happens in social reality and how people think about it (Bryman, 2008: 500, 385-387). This method of analysis therefore suits a research that wants to know what territorial cohesion meaning and usage mean very well.

Yet, when measured against criteria to evaluate social scientific research which appear in Bryman's (2008) manual *Social Research Methods*, characteristics of discourse analysis could be called "strengths" or "weaknesses". Due to the subjective nature of discourse analysis and the central role interpretation plays during the analysis, it for instance is questionable whether conducting the research again would deliver the same results (Bryman, 2008: 501). In general this research copes with this low reliability by being reflexive and thorough (Bryman, 2008: 31). The 'thick description' this leads to then asks for a clear sectioning of the book that makes it as easy as possible for the reader to follow the argument put forward.

The main sectioning derives from the problem when you see the territorial cohesion discourse as if it were a painting that must be described or even explained in language, that is, where to start? The answer to this question then follows common scientific practice. Before this research's picture of territorial cohesion is drawn, the frame of it is namely unfolded.^a What leads to the main division of the text in Book II The Analysis and Book I The Frameworks respectively.

The further sectioning within this main division can be laid out below by structuring it according to a methodical logic, that is, by showing how each section has part in the reasoned way in which this research copes with the strengths and weaknesses of discourse analysis. It could for instance suffer from a low ecological validity, because – not an experimental setting, but – its focus on thoughts and the interpretation needed for this could lead to a research on an artefact of the researcher instead of the "real world" (Bryman, 2008: 33, 510). The three parts of Book I cope with this as they together introduce territorial cohesion as research topic by framing it.

Part I then gives the substantive framework about the European Union context and the concept's when- and whereabouts to place the research object in its "real world" (Chapter 1). Part II clarifies the analytical framework in the sense of the fundamental posture that underpins the research's analysis of territorial cohesion, what thus explicitly illuminates the roots of any way in which the researcher could have constructed the research object (Chapter 2 and 3). Part III finally explains the methodological framework by stating how this research describes its object (Chapter 4 until 8). Yet, the crux for discourse analysis lies in the reflection on the construction of research objects with scepticism towards any "real world knowledge" in social science (Chapter 4).

Note though, that descriptions of the world become scientific due to their use of methods. Another weakness of using discourse analysis in social science then is almost as problematic as its low reliability, that is, its low replicability. Discourse analysis namely almost always lacks explicit procedures that can be followed (Bryman, 2008: 501). The main way in which the methodological framework brought forward in Part III deals with this is by three in-depth operationalisations of this research's discourse analysis (Chapter 5, 6, and 7), each

^a I thank Eric Warmerdam (well-known trainer and owner of Seconds Out Kick&Boxing Gym in Almere) for coming up with this metaphor and the idea it represents.

revolving around one of the subquestions mentioned above. This to show that the research's interpretations follow a strict frame; another way this research deals with the low replicability is, if not by prescribing procedures for how to interpret text, then by in detail demonstrating the systemic ways in which this research interprets, so that it can at least in principle be done again (Appendix A). Yet, as operationalisation ensures that a research actually measures what it says to measure, it also is the common way to strengthen measurement validity of course (Bryman, 32, 143).

Then again, as pointed out when Book I ends with the aims of this research (Chapter 8), discourse analysis could be typified as a reflection on what is measured and thought to be measured (e.g. by others). In this case Book II showcases such a reflection when it concerns territorial cohesion. It does so with three parts again, this time each takes one of the three operationalised steps of the discourse analysis. Part I treats territorial cohesion meaning and knowledge (Chapter 9 and 10), Part II the usage of the concept in practices (Chapter 11 until 15), Part III the relationship between both in a discourse (Chapter 16 and 17), and Part IV concludes this analysis (Chapter 18). Especially the research done for Part II is carried out very thoroughly to strengthen the reliability, because even though these practices are substantively framed, an extra interpretation was necessary. That is to say, the described usage of the concept is not only an interpretation, just as the description of its meaning and knowledge, but also an interpretation of reconstructed practices instead of these practices themselves (Appendix C until F).

The central role interpretation plays in discourse analysis also weakens this research's internal validity. This is even the case when you take into account that this research does not aim to find and/or explain causal relationships, the measuring rod for internal validity, but whether its conclusions are correct (Bryman, 2008: 32. 34). These conclusions then mostly hinge on the thoroughness of Parts I and II and reflexivity of Part III. This division of labour comes from the way in which the three discourse analytical steps are taken. They namely should not be seen as successive steps, but the first two as simultaneous steps after which the third connects them; metaphorically speaking this does not involve a walk, but first a jump forwards with two feet besides each other, followed by a jump upwards in which the feet hit each other. The correctness of the conclusions is thus based on the solidity of the first "jump" and the explicit awareness of the speculative nature of the conclusions in the latter, which are therefore raised as hypotheses only.

Yet, even if the conclusions of this discourse analysis of territorial cohesion are correct, they only hold for the concept. Such a difficulty to generalise beyond territorial cohesion then points to a weakness, that is, a relatively low external validity (Bryman, 2008: 33). This research therefore ends with a call to reflect on its outcomes to understand what this territorial cohesion discourse means (e.g. for researchers). The last section does so by proposing a in qualitative research common way for it: a generalisation *moderatum* (Bryman, 2008: 392), this by comparing the hypothetical conclusions of this research with cognate theories and fitting them in reflections about the relationship between knowledge and power in our society.