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

Hissink Muller, B.M.

Publication date
2013

Summary

Introduction

The summary of this PhD-thesis in spatial planning presents philosophical fieldwork on the concept of territorial cohesion. Territorial cohesion has a simple meaning at first glance, along the lines of 'forming a united whole related to the ownership of an area'. However, such a broad definition leaves considerable room for manoeuvring, thereby providing the starting point for this research.

The confusion surrounding territorial cohesion is also formed by its complex and uncertain, although promoted, usage within the European Union organisation. This organisation is a context in which "everything flows" and can be described as a multi-level structure without a centre of power in which heterogeneous institutions cooperate closely using many informal methods. The concept then informally emerged on the stage of European spatial planning – note that the European Union has no competency in this matter – and later in the official context of the European Treaties, another stage, one which assigns competencies to the European Union, and in the context of Cohesion Policy, yet another stage, one of formal European Union policy (these stages will be explicated below). The main question in this thesis is therefore broad and fundamental, and formulated as: What is the meaning and usage of the concept of territorial cohesion in the European Union? This question has remained unanswered.

This research answered the question based on the Foucaultian stance that the meanings and usage of territorial cohesion mutually affect one another. Furthermore, the power practices in which the concept is used are also regarded as dependant on the knowledge arising from and informing the act of governing. In abstract terms, one can only govern if you know what you govern, hence government's need for knowledge. Moreover, one can only know a "specific something", and one can therefore only know with a focus, hence, knowledge's need for direction.

Instead of researching what we are programmed to see (e.g. sovereignty), this research allows such programmes to merely direct us to spheres of action in which power relations are transformed. In the context of territorial cohesion, what actually happens when it concerns competencies (*auctoritas*), policy (*potestas*), funding (*pecunia*), and framing (*politique spirituelle*) is queried. Given that (expert) thought arguably plays a pivotal role in the relations between meaning and knowledge on the one hand and power on the other hand, by connecting government action and the governed entity, the territorial cohesion discourse as therefore the research object.

The discourse analysis of territorial cohesion

A phronetic path in three directions

The discourse analysis in this research follows a phronetic path with European spatial planning as a point of departure by studying the status of values and interests in relation to the concept of territorial cohesion. It thereby defines 'discourse' as a system of knowledge and its associated practices that operates as a tactical element in a field of force relations. The analysis of the territorial cohesion discourse as such entails a concrete study of rationality and power construction through an interpretative search for meaning in three ways: i) what are the concept's meanings and knowledges (i.e. *connaissances*), ii) what are its usages, iii) and how do these sides relate? These ways map the "ethereal order", "earthly chaos", and "hermeneutic horizon" of territorial cohesion as shown below. In due course this threefold path leads to a questioning of the intertwinement of the concept's scientific and political agendas.

a   The ethereal order of territorial cohesion meanings and knowledges

There appears to be plenty of meanings for territorial cohesion, perhaps even too many. Random definitions include: economic cohesion between territories, the territorial dimension of sustainable development, equal access to Services of General (Economic) Interest (SG(E)I), balanced regional development, horizontal coherence of European Union policies, national territorial development, and a new territorial way of thinking. To structure the concept's "ethereal order", the multitude of such definitions can be categorised by using seven kinds of meaning, of which four are substantive (i.e. descriptive, normative, policy objective, instrumental) and three are technical ones (i.e. policy coherence, spatial planning, territorial 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1980, in Burchell&Gordon&Miller, 1991)). This leads to a taxonomy of territorial cohesion semantics in which different kinds of meaning group different definitions (i.e. in philosophy of language terms, *Sinn* above *Bedeutung*).

Moreover, all these meanings have common four features: i) the question which territorial entities are concerned, ii) that relations between territorial levels are seldom treated, and iii) the exclusion of both politics and iv) tangibility. To put it simply, when talking about territorial cohesion, is one talking about cities, regions, Member States, or the European Union? This question does not need to be answered (in the same way) though. On the other hand, when talking about how territorial levels relate, one has almost passed the fuzzy limit at after which one is not talking about territorial cohesion any more. The last two features give clearer limits though. One cannot simultaneously talk about politics and territorial cohesion (i.e. one can talk about the balance or even tension between policy objectives, but neither about the organisation which sets these objectives, nor about the form of State for instance). One can likewise not simultaneously talk about territorial cohesion and tangible matters. Hence, just as the seven kinds of meaning structure the common ground of territorial cohesion meaning, these four features outline it.

The semantics of this common ground of meaning validates knowledge as being territorial cohesion knowledge and frames it. In the structure of the seven kinds of knowledge (i.e. the same kinds as the seven *Sinn*), epistemic claims can thereby either express the set of all properties that something must have to be called territorial cohesion (i.e. its intension) or a set of all the facts which are actually territorial cohesion (i.e. its extension). However, there only appear to be descriptive, normative, and policy objective intensions, such as a layer approach, equal opportunities, and a policy hyper-cube respectively. Intensional fragments of territorial governmentality are also apparent and these could, for instance, become rationalities that link detailed spatial knowledge and territorial governing. Other claims open the door to the transposition of the system of spatial planning knowledge unto territorial cohesion. However, both these fragments and "open door" are not in themselves knowledge claims, which are uncommon.

Nevertheless, the knowledge claims generate a specific 'gaze' (Fairclough, 2003: 129), through which one sees a particular part of the world with a particular perspective. In the case of territorial cohesion, this is not so much a clear and fixed gaze though but a kaleidoscope with a number of dominant pieces (e.g. quantitative descriptions, social/liberal ideals, and economic conceptions of policy objectives). The commonalities of the

pieces might thereby even provide a broader indication. In alignment with the concept's four semantic features, indicating the direction of the gaze: a system of knowledge of the apolitical and tangible world that is seen through a relational and totalising perspective and with a (state-)government and policy focus (see below).

Both the definitions and knowledge claims are the concept's propositions, and together they form its "ethereal order". This order can now be displayed with an outlined and structured map of territorial cohesion meaning and indicative map of the concept's knowledge, which together display the ways in which the concept's forms, objects, and limits of politics are stratified.

b   The earthly chaos of the concept's power practices

Similarly to its meaning, the concept is (over)used for many issues. Many positions that are taken under the flag of territorial cohesion can namely be reconstructed from the stories told in and about power practices. Some concentrations are however apparent because its agenda seems to be mostly set by positions on balance, services, territorial specificities, coordination, and the territorial dimension. The question, therefore, is how they set the agenda.

One is, in fact, directed to the spheres of action in which these positions are taken by the programmes mentioned above (i.e. juridical programmes of competencies, administrative programmes of policies, financial programmes of funding, and mental programmes of thought). These then lead to four usage areas which structure the whole territorial cohesion usage field: i) the Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) (*auctoritas*), ii) the (post-)ESDP process (informal *potestas*, as the European Union has no competency for spatial planning), iii) Regional/Cohesion policy (formal *potestas*), and iv) the European funds (*pecunia*); mental programmes thus do not have a corresponding usage area – *politique spirituelle* features more in meaning, knowledge, and discourse. Territorial cohesion, and with that the positions which most definitively set its agenda, therefore plays a role in adding to European Union competency, promoting European spatial planning, the substantive expansion of Regional/Cohesion policy, and/or the channelling of European funding. Each position taken under the flag of the concept can thereby 'mobilise bias' (Schattschneider, 1960: 71; Lukes, 1975: 16) in these transformations of power relations, especially when it features in a metanarrative that marks where and what territorial cohesion deals with.

In these usage areas many minor conflicts appear, which are too numerous to mention here. The focus is therefore only on the main conclusions per usage area, which are drawn from the perspective of European spatial planning. These conclusions are then linked, and thus the usage areas. As far as the IGCs usage area is concerned a threefold contested usage of the concept then appears: i) for or against a European Union competency for territorial cohesion policy, ii) for or against a European Union competency for spatial planning, and iii) for or against their overlap or relationship. These disputes in the IGCs therefore act as a filter for how the concept may manifest itself (i.e. the in/formality of its usage).

In contrast, the (post-)ESDP usage area has no contested usage of the concept, but merely promotions of it. Here, territorial cohesion is only used to place a large number of European spatial planning issues on the agenda. You could therefore say that the concept is simply used to promote European spatial planning. This is in stark contrast to the contests in the IGCs usage area. Yet, the (post-)ESDP process does deliver almost all the territorial cohesion content, and therefore informally demarcates the substantive limits for possible usages of said concept (e.g. polycentrism or territorial capital, spatial development or territorial governance).

The Regional/Cohesion policy usage area obviously demarcates the formal usage of territorial cohesion in European policies. By doing so, it promotes the expansion of the Regional/Cohesion policy area of action by combining roaming along the official limits of the concept's usage with cherry-picking from the informal (post-)ESDP process. This revolves around the questions of what exactly territorial cohesion gives a competency to (see the IGCs; e.g. services or even policy coordination) and which territorial cohesion content from European spatial planning can be used for Regional/Cohesion policy (see the (post-)ESDP process; e.g. a balancing of economy-society-environment, informal cooperation)?

The European Funds usage area seems to resonate with the three other usage areas in financial concretisation with a guerrilla-like deployment for territorial cohesion. The European funds might be involved in a messy asymmetrical battle because: i) the concept's usage appears to be opportunistic, ii) to risk a "schisming" of itself, iii) to risk to become too complex, and this while iv) a channelling of European funds *via* the concept is contested in fivefold. These features will be briefly clarified below, starting with the opportunism of the usage of the concept. This is indicated by the multiplicity of interests (e.g. peripheral regions, territorial cooperation) that sometimes return under the concept's flag, which are or are not counterposed, and which were always also promoted without the usage of territorial cohesion. The usage of the concept for these interests may have been nothing more than one of many opportunities to acquire (more) funding, either through an expansion of this area of action, or through a fortification of certain interests within it. The risk of "schisming" then comes from the sole formal way in which the concept is used here (until the beginning of 2006), namely in the Rural Development Fund. The resources from this fund are mostly made available for other areas than those for which resources are made available from the more urban Structural Funds, such as the Cohesion and European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), in which territorial cohesion is also used, as, for example, referred to in the European Union's Regional/Cohesion policy. From the financial point of view the concept then has to endure such a wide split between funding streams that it could schism. The risk of becoming too complex does not come from the increasing variation in interests for which the concept is used, but from the frequently stressed substantive coordination between them, between agricultural and other policies for instance. This makes it more and perhaps too complex. This opportunism, "schisming", and "complexing" also feature in the in fivefold contested channelling of European funds *via* territorial cohesion. Although this channelling is debated, much namely goes against it: i) the contests between existing and/or wished for usages of the concept, ii) the in/formality of the positions involved, iii) their guerrilla-like situation, iv) the uncertainty of the concept's influence, and v) that the European Funds usage area seems to play no role in financial affairs. The concept's financial punching power therefore appears to be questionable, even if the IGCs were to broaden and solidify the formal base for its usage.

Nevertheless, these four maps help us to draw conclusions about territorial cohesion's "earthly chaos", because they display the concept's usage. We are also able to link the four maps together to indicate the whole territorial cohesion usage field and consider what its topical order implies. Although all kinds of links can be drawn between the four usage areas, it is hard to create an orderly overview without adopting a perspectival viewpoint to start from (e.g. of a partial actor such as a national government).

Adopting a bird's eye view helps to create a more abstract order. Territorial cohesion then stands for a battlefield forming a corridor between the different areas of action. The concept therefore stands out as a three-way crossing between European spatial planning, Regional/Cohesion policy, and the European Funds and their fuzzy line of in/formality from the IGCs. Then again, two features of the concept make this image more complex: i) the concept is not only placed between these areas, but also within them and ii) the concept does not only have a location, it also relocates due to the changing territorial cohesion positions. Hence, the concept is a three-way crossing that moves over various power practices.

In a context where "everything streams", territorial cohesion's topical order might then selectively re/organise institutional spaces. Its usage could namely steer towards an indistinct symbiosis of European spatial planning and Regional/Cohesion policy due to the usage of the same concept, and thus an overlap of positions. This would subject the former to the latter due to the difference in their in/formal status and the cherry-picking involved.

The usage of territorial cohesion could on the European level be accompanied by in/formal "concertedness", as it is unclear who gets a competency for what, and a flexibility in management, as various ways of doing from the different areas of action can be taken up. On the lower levels this could all lead to nebulosity due to the little-known haze that comes from the European Union (e.g. with funding).

The usage of territorial cohesion thus reveals implicit but major battles at the margin of the European Union (e.g. on European spatial planning). It demonstrates the decision to make no decisions, that is, non-decisions with which the *status quo* persists and thus dominates.

c   The concept's hermeneutic horizon

Consequently territorial cohesion has, on the one hand, a common ground of many meanings on which forms, objects, and limits of politics are stratified and, on the other hand, numerous usages of the concept in power practices. The point then is that almost all the propositions of the concept's "ethereal order" correspond to positions in the topical order of its "earthly chaos". These overlapping propositions and positions (i.e. pro/positions) suggest that thinking in daily discursive practices can easily form the hermeneutic horizon of territorial cohesion by linking the concept's "ether" and "earth".

In other words, possibilities appear on this horizon for reciprocal relationships in which European politics affect the discussion of the concept, while territorial cohesion research has policy implications. Obvious examples of this tactical productivity between pro/positions would be territorial cohesion indicators, which have to be defined, and the distribution of funds, including on the basis of those indicators. Two additional examples are: i) if the concept is used to coordinate European Union policies territorially, territorial cohesion research cannot then focus any longer on balanced development without contradicting that usage, but must at least have a more technical meaning, and ii) if a territorial cohesion knowledge presents the competitiveness of all regions, this could have a detrimental effect on the promotion of specific regions with the concept (e.g. peripheral or mountainous regions), given that the territorial cohesion then applies to competitiveness in general rather than that of specific regions.

Due to these power-knowledge effects, knowledge on the concept can corroborate its mobilisation of bias in forms (e.g. by descriptively ordering viewpoints on it) and inform government (e.g. by devising a European Territorial Cohesion Index). Given that the knowledge is being constructed while the many usages are still changing, a complex and dynamic network of 'discursive interdependencies' (Foucault, 1968, in Burchell&Gordon&Miller, 1991: 58; Wæver, 1998: 116; Diez, 2001: 12) could then be weaved between them. Although this weave is a work in progress, its characteristics can still be defined. It focuses on policy with an emphasis on economic thinking and the criticism thereof. Moreover, many of the threads, or even the fabric, of territorial cohesion seems to come from spatial planning. This may mean that the research tradition and institutions of European spatial planning are being mimicked (e.g. with the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON)). These institutions were set up on behalf of a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power (e.g. to describe European policy-making for government). The question is then which 'possibilities of articulation' (Foucault, 1968, in Burchell&Gordon&Miller, 1991: 58; Wæver, 1998: 116; Diez, 2001: 12) emerge out of the discursive interdependencies of the concept's hermeneutic horizon. In other words, in which way do they limit what is considered to be reasonable in the case of territorial cohesion?

The answer provided by this research is an interpretative demarcation of the territorial cohesion discourse. Hypothetically speaking, there are four rules which demarcate the statements within this discourse, that is, the territorial cohesion pro/positions described in this research's philosophical fieldwork seems to obey four prescriptions. These regularities are then: i) all objects can neither be political nor tangible, ii) all operations must be policy-centred in specific ways and lack reflective argumentation, iii) all concepts must be open to relate their content to that of others, and iv) all theoretical options must be adopted.

The first rule regarding what territorial cohesion can be about follows from the concept's "ether" as shown above. The second rule has more to do with the ways in which territorial cohesion can be about these apolitical and intangible objects. The part of the rule that the operations have to be policy-centred comes from the discursive interdependencies outlined above that are woven into the concept's hermeneutic horizon, whereby its 'specific ways' points to the battlefield that the concept forms in and between the usage areas of the IGCs, the (post-)ESDP process, Regional/Cohesion policy, and the European Funds. The third rule concerns the variety of issues territorial cohesion deals with, instead of mere economic examples, that are treated and frequently

shown as interwoven. The part of the second rule on reflective argumentation and the fourth rule simply state that neither reflections nor theories appear with the concept, except for theories from elsewhere (e.g. Rawls' theory of justice). These regularities together constitute the discourse's 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 1968, in Burchell&Gordon&Miller, 1991: 54) that demarcate what are considered to be reasonable articulations of the concept.

These boundaries of territorial cohesion discourse define it as an individual entity. However, its rules of formation leave plenty of opportunities to make statements about this. After all, they have to take account of the multitude of existing territorial cohesion pro/positions. These pro/positions do not appear out of thin air, but each of them is conditioned. The general rules of formation therefore have many conditions. However, these conditions individualise some of its pro/positions instead of the entire discourse. The discourse would be further individualised by the setting up of the dominant *status quo* outside the concept's gaze, as indicated by its "earth". Such a viewpoint enables everything within its perspective to appear in a constant state of flux.

The openness of the territorial cohesion discourse leaves room for tying many other discourses together (i.e. as a *Discursive Nodal Point* (Diez, 2001)). Although specific discourses can be tied together in this way (e.g. the social cohesion discourse, an economic policy discourse), there are too many to mention here. Nevertheless, there are three ways in which the territorial cohesion discourse can do this, which may therefore further individualise it, as they structure the concept's discursive interdependencies. The three expectations here are territorial cohesion as a discursive formation, aggregation, or thoroughfare surface, and these prospects are briefly treated in the same order below.

If the territorial cohesion discourse were to tie other discourses together in its creation, a discursive formation surface would be formed. It would both consist of various discourses and exist as tied together discourses. The territorial cohesion discourse would not have to change fundamentally, because its articulations simply have to comply with the above rules of formation.

If the discourse were to become a discursive aggregation surface, this would carry with it certain changes. That is because a holistic arena then indicates which policy discourses are appropriated (e.g. the cohesion policy discourse, European Union's spatial policy discourse), and in this battle arena statements should also follow the topical order of the concept's usage. However, given that the resulting changes would relate to particular cases and these changes could be contested as well, the territorial cohesion discourse is not fundamentally changed.

However, the discourse would fundamentally change if its essence is formed by a territorial view. It would then become a discursive thoroughfare surface which structures other discourses and by doing so adds a feature to them. This view supplements the above stated rule with which all of its operations have to comply, given that all the discourse's statements have a territorial perspective.

Although territorial cohesion did not develop in one of these three discursive surfaces, the discourse is still open to them. However, since many conditions hamper changes, the territorial cohesion discourse will most likely remain rather vague with regards to this.

Consequently, the concept's meanings and knowledges and its usages together form an indefinite entity, in their reciprocal productivity they form a system of territorial cohesion knowledge and its associated practices as a discourse. Although its rules offer room for a large variety of articulations and discursive structures, not all statements are reasoned as territorial cohesion statements. Here, the discourse re/inserts an openness into debates on territorial cohesion, a limited openness that is.

Critique of territorial cohesion expertise

This openness of this discourse leaves it open to much criticism on the involved expertise. This research has strangely enough found the boundaries of discourse or rather the ways in which it is limited to be more problematic.

This research, therefore, does not make a point on the randomness of choosing a particular territorial cohesion meaning over many others, or that they contain some unresolved tensions (e.g. on territorial entities), nor that its kinds of meaning mutually contradict (e.g. either territorial cohesion is an existing state of affairs

or an ideal, or either policy coherence or a policy objective, but it is impossible for it to be both). The resulting instability of the concept's common ground of meaning or the fact that this common ground frames territorial cohesion knowledge are not criticised here. Criticism is also not directed at the fact this knowledge is often created by referring to combinations of existing information as being territorial cohesion knowledge, or that it is arbitrary to prefer one knowledge claim over another, or that they contradict each other. Similarly, this research also does not criticise the indecisiveness of the concept's power practices due to uncertain changes in its usage and that territorial cohesion stands for systematic uncertainty due to how almost every position taken with the concept is contestable. This research does not even criticise the bricolage of areas of action, where territorial cohesion does not form common ground for decision-making (e.g. what subject to discuss, on what to decide?). All the above points criticise is the openness of the territorial cohesion discourse.

This research instead regards the boundaries of the territorial cohesion discourse as being far more problematic. Of course, the discourse's rules of formation exclude political and tangible objects as well as operations that are not policy-centred. They also exclude aspects that remain (illogically) untreated in the concept's meaning (e.g. dealing with multiple territorial levels). The same applies to knowledge, as it lacks facts beyond policy "facts", argumentation in the case of contradicting claims, theory (e.g. on place- or territory-boundedness, relations or demarcation as basis), and reflection (e.g. on the tension between the apolitical world and political perspective of the territorial cohesion gaze). Yet, the main criticism of this research is not directed at these discourse boundaries, but the fact that they are adhered to.

This research criticises territorial cohesion expertise primarily for the dubiousness of the involved discursive interdependencies that ensure power-knowledge effects. With territorial cohesion, every intellectual choice always implies a political choice. This sinister link seems to justify that power is being exercised in a technocratic way, because the territorial cohesion discourse, which ensures these reciprocal relationships, separates its experts from the general public.

The discourse paradoxically does this in a vague way that is both indefinite and unspecific. The difficulty in pinning down the discourse suggests that it perhaps does not exist, neither as a system of knowledge, nor as power practices, nor as rules of formation. One can assert that the concept merely prescribes (the thinking about) the taking of positions in power practices because territorial cohesion lacks factual knowledge and argumentation. Consequentially, territorial cohesion is not a discourse, but a *politique spirituelle*, which therefore distinguishes experts from laymen but this without any actual expertise being involved – save the expertise of mental power practices.

Concluding the philosophical fieldwork about the concept of territorial cohesion

The philosophical fieldwork of this research began with the question on what the meaning and usage of the concept of territorial cohesion is within the European Union. While travelling along its threefold phronetical path, it passed by many meanings, knowledges, powers, and reasonings that flow together and form the territorial cohesion discourse. If these semantic, epistemic, agonistic, and rational streams together represent a part of the world at all, it is a place where numerous objects and processes flow together. In both cases, territorial cohesion can be interpreted as *The Place where Streams seek Ground*.

Although these streams flow together, they do not appear to form a consistent and coherent system. There seems to be no basis for such a conjugation, neither in facts nor tangible objects, nor in decisions or in thought. Nevertheless, the ideas involved are oriented toward tangibility, the positions have been placed on the decision-making agenda, and the discourse needs argumentation. Given the problematic status of the concept of territorial cohesion, this research therefore concludes by asking the practitioners (of science) who still know what to do in this context 'Why these territorial cohesion interpretations?' or indeed, 'Why territorial cohesion interpretations at all?'