

Regional Autonomy and Bioregions

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Defining the bioregionalism, Kirkpatrick Sale, one of the preeminent names of the ecological thought, says that we need to achieve being in the closest relationship with the place we live in and its land, water and wind, to learn its ways, capacity and limits, to adopt its rhythm as our model, its rules as our guide and its fruits as our rewards.

According to Sale, the bioregion concept which provides us understanding life and the region we live in together should not be odd: "And nothing, after a moment's thought, so terribly strange in what they convey. If it initially falls oddly on our ears, that may perhaps only be a measure of how far we have distanced ourselves from its wisdom—and how badly we need it now."¹

In today's world determined by the artificially drawn nation-state borders and central administrations, bioregion concept really represents, first of all, a redefinition of the human-nature relationship lost in the industrial system. Humans living in cities and producing goods and services within the network of economic relations or living as consumers reduced to be inseparable pieces of the production-consumption line perceive the nature as something enduring apart from themselves and often they consider it only when they can not overtake it or when the nature becomes a threat. The thought of "human being as a part of nature" becomes mostly mere discourse. We all set ourselves up as parts of an artificial environment that we have formed historically and define the nature using the language that such set up produces. Set up of politics, is the same way too. In politics, human-nature relation is either assessed in instrumental ways or it is ignored after being imprisoned in the vocabulary of alternative politics.

Administrative structures are reflections of forms which are legacies of borders drawn in war fields/on the table, of empires or feudal governments. They go beyond, break down and split the natural borders, making them invisible. The administrative borders are determined as the result of power struggle and clash of economic interest, they become centralized and constant. Bioregionalism is considered to be a close relative to deep ecology, a distinguished one among ecology thoughts because it denies anthropocentrism. Here how Kirkpatrick Sale defines bioregionalism:

"A bioregion is a part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural rather than human dictates and is distinguishable from other areas by attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, landforms, and the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to. The borders between such areas are usually not rigid—nature works with more flexibility and fluidity than that—but the general contours of the regions themselves are not hard to identify and indeed will probably be felt, understood, sensed, or in some way known to many of the inhabitants, particularly those rooted in the land—farmers, ranchers, hunters and fishers, foresters and botanists..."²

Ecological wisdom or native peoples' deep knowledge about the earth has great importance in bioregionalism. In places where ancient communities have been exterminated or assimilated -which is most of the world- having an understanding of region depending on land and nature emerged and having that reflected on the administrative structure, from now on can only be achieved by the ecologist movement. Therefore, I think it is important to underline the bioregionalist approach

¹ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Biyobölgecilik*. Translation: Işıl Sarıyüce, Ayşem Mert, *Üç Ekoloji*, Issue 5, Summer 2006, p. 58-63. English version: "[Mother of All: An Introduction to Bioregionalism](#)"

² *ibid*, p. 59

which would remind us the ecologic point of view in discussions of decentralization and autonomy which stand up for transferring the weight in central administrations to local communities and regions. Such underlining will also remind us that the discussion is not only within the boundaries of political sciences, but also how decisive the historical, sociological, ecological and economic aspects of the issue are. Geography is important as language and history in identity formation. As the poet has said, "one takes after the place he/she lives in".

Small is beautiful

"Small is beautiful", one of the indispensable mottoes of the green thought, is an approach conceptualized by E.F. Schumacher, an advocate of Buddhist economy. In economic and social relations, Schumacher advocates a scale close to human and nature, against the mega-machine that Lewis Mumford described. Structures small enough to access in production, consumption and social structure enables local democracy, as well. Schumacher says:

"What is the meaning of democracy, freedom, human dignity, standard of living, self-realization, and fulfillment? Is it a matter of goods, or of people? Of course it is a matter of people. But people can be themselves only in small comprehensible groups. Therefore we must learn to think in terms of an articulated structure that can cope with a multiplicity of small-scale units."³

However, today's industrial civilization is built upon big structures. The concepts which Mumford described exemplifying the pyramids and skyscrapers and used to form the pentagon metaphor which symbolizes militarism, power and destructiveness, could be used to understand big and central administrative structures, too: power, prestige, property, productivity, profit.⁴ Those central structures have become steady components of the industrial system by the help of technology. Today, while we start to discuss about direct democracy, participation and decentralization, we also start reconsidering an order in which big and central structures actually forced by the industrial system might dissolve perhaps by the help of technological transformations again. An order more local, closer to nature and human scale, in which small and accessible structures are possible. And it is invaluable to think about decentralization under the light from those ecological principles. Decentralization is not only about enabling more direct democracy and realizing and easing the right to decide about people's own lives and future, but it also makes the role of politics organizing everyday life open to the influence from people and makes it accessible. And that is only possible in structures with comprehensible scale and in certain geographic field that reflects nature-human relations.

But the current central order closes politics to participation and also makes the central influence untouchable even in structures with local profile. Furthermore, in Turkey, decentralization and autonomy issues have been discussed in a meta language which prevents them to be discussed in their essential plane of discussion. My suggestion is to comprehend decentralization and regional autonomy primarily with their social, economic and ecologic contents and regard it as a discussion of local democracy, first of all.

Over-centralization and regional autonomy in Turkey

In Turkey, discussions about autonomy are in the periphery of Kurdish question. There's no doubt that local self governing and decreasing the central influence would be very important in resolution of the Kurdish question and one can't deny that Kurdish political movement has an important priority and knowledge in discussions about autonomy.⁵ However, it is possible to say that

³ E.F. Schumacher, *Küçük Güzeldir. Cep Kitapları*, İstanbul, 1989

⁴ "Power, prestige, property, productivity, profit" For the pentagon metaphor, Lewis Mumford, *Makine Efsanesi, İnsan yayınları*, İstanbul, 1996

⁵ The "Democratic Autonomy Policy" proposed by Democratic Society Party in 2007, is still adopted by Peace and

contribution from autonomy discussions to the resolution of Kurdish question would only be possible by considering the issue in an extent broader than the boundaries of Kurdish question. The reason for that situation is -rather than destructive influences of probable nationalist reactions to discussions around the Kurdish question might cause- that it makes harder for us to understand the opportunities decentralization would provide and to see how possible regional autonomy is and how easy the transition process is.

Current over-centralized administrative structure in Turkey is built upon 81 narrow regions (provinces). Big and small cities and towns with their own local administration structures (municipalities) are bound to one of those narrow regions of which the greatest is usually the economic and administrative center. Every province has its own "regional parliament", called the Provincial General Assembly. Members of those parliaments are elected by the votes given for the political parties in local elections. And the president of the assembly is elected among those elected members.⁶

But that narrow regional parliament in provincial level is one of the three elements of a mixed structure called the Special Provincial Administration. The Special Provincial Administration is consisted of the governor and the Provincial Council, besides the Provincial General Assembly. The Provincial Council is also a mixed structured consisting the elected and the assigned ones.⁷ So, the Provincial General Assemblies seem to be some sort of a regional parliament at the very first sight and should be the focus of local politics and participation, but in fact they are regional parliaments just by appearance because they lack the power to establish a local government, they are under the proxy of people and institutions assigned by the center and their authority is very limited. Special Provincial Administrations are responsible for municipal services in rural settlements lacking municipalities. And in cities and towns, they are pale beside the municipalities and appear to be the agents of the central administration in some limited areas. Therefore it is hard to say that particularly people living in big cities are aware of the structure and members and in some cases even existence of the Provincial General Assemblies.

Throughout the historical process of the provincial system in France, from which the Provincial General Assemblies in Turkey were inspired, paved the way for decentralization of French administrative structure since members of the parliament have acquired influence and authorities by time.⁸ However in Turkey, even the limited reforms of 2004 were mostly vetoed by Ahmet Necdet Sezer, then President of the Republic. That development causes such narrow region parliaments in provincial level being enchained under the influence of the central proxy and they can not be perceived as examples throughout the discussions about achieving autonomy.

Nevertheless, considering some sort of regional identity perception⁹ caused by the provincial system and the behavior of voting for a local assembly other than the municipalities, as a basis for reforms to empower decentralization should not be regarded as optimism. Furthermore, people in Turkey have already met 26 broader regions through regional development agencies and the 12 broadest regions by means of official statistics, though that happens slowly.

Democracy Party and it is widely being discussed about not only among the Kurdish movement but also in the society. That policy proposal is important particularly because it suggests autonomous regions for all of Turkey and it adopts principles such as participation, ecology, gender equality, economic equality among regions.

⁶ The governor used to be the president of the Provincial General Assembly, until the local administrations reform of 2004. Through that perspective, the weight of the elected people has increased after the reform.

⁷ S. Ulaş Bayraktar, *Dönüşüm ve Statüko: Reform Sonrası İl Genel Meclisleri*. Kalkedon yayınları, İstanbul, 2011

⁸ *ibid*, p. 32-33

⁹ It is possible to say that in society of Turkey where identity of region or homeland is strong, particularly the big provinces gather up places other than the ones people feel that they belong to, so they create a sort of secondary regional identity feeling.

Possibilities of considering regional autonomy from the EU

European Charter of Local Self-Government constitutes the fundamentals of empowering Europe's local administrations. Though the text belongs to the European Council but not European Union, it sets the principal basis for local administration policies of EU countries of which all are members of the European Council, too. European Charter of Local Self-Government sets some principles as the fundamentals of democracy and understanding of administration in ratifying countries, such as: importance of local administrations, the tenacious bond between decentralization and democracy and importance of participation. Turkey is a ratifying country to the charter, though she has not ratified some articles. In the EU, decentralization policies are being improved, as it was recently seen in the example of Greece, member countries establish regional parliaments and proceed in transferring administrative authorities to the local.

Local administration policies of the EU aim to prevent economic inequalities and development level gaps deepening between regions. So, the NUTS system¹⁰ which suggests a standardization in forming the regions, aims only standardizing the statistics and monitoring the regional distribution of economic development in member countries, rather than determining the borders of administrative autonomous regions in the countries. NUTS system has aims such as collecting, improving and harmonizing the community regional statistics; enabling socio-economic analysis for the regions and constituting regional policies for the community.¹¹

Within the NUTS system, which has been used in European Union since 2003, member and candidate countries to the EU are divided into regions in three levels. The greatest region of NUTS1s have populations between 3-7 million, the mid-level NUTS2s have populations 800 thousand to 3 million and NUTS3s, the narrowest regions have populations of 150 thousand to 800 thousand. (Figure 1)

NUTS regions in European Union countries



Figure 1a- NUTS1 regions

¹⁰ The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

¹¹ Pınar Taşkan, NUTS (The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) (Presentation), 2006



Figure 1b - NUTS2 regions

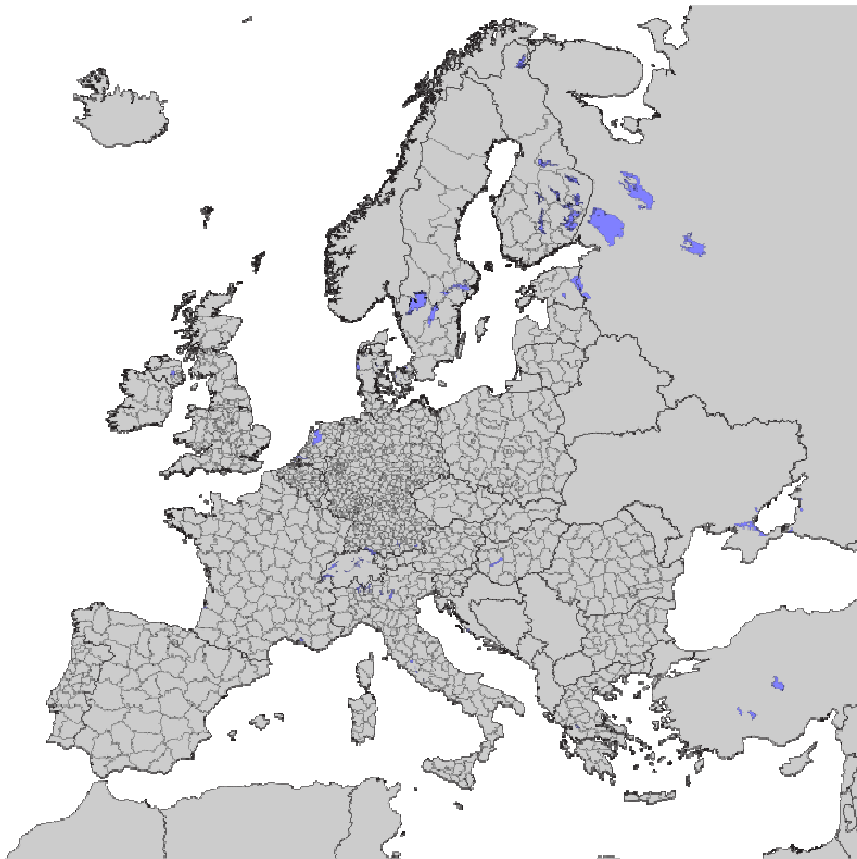


Figure 1c - NUTS3 regions

Though it is not meant to suggest transforming the administrative structures of countries, such system provides us important ways of thinking. For example, when Greece organized the first regional parliament elections in 2010, the regions considered were the 13 regions that were determined by the NUTS2 regions. (Figure 2) In a country having its administrative structure as federation, such as Germany, the provinces correspond to MUTS1. In countries where various regional autonomy models are practiced such as Spain, Italy and Netherlands, such regional system has been harmonized with the NUTS system.



Figure 2 – NUTS2 regions in Greece where regional parliaments are established.

In Turkey, NUTS2 regions are 26 regions each gathering three provinces in average. While İstanbul, Ankara and Izmir are each individual regions in NUTS2 system, for instance Kayseri, Sivas and Yozgat constitutes Kayseri NUTS2 region, Mardin, Batman; Şırnak and Siirt constitutes Mardin NUTS2 region. That system is used for regional development agencies which are still a part of EU harmonization process. (Figure 3)



Figure 3 – 26 NUTS2 regions in Turkey.

According to the NUTS system the greatest 12 regions in Turkey are as follows: İstanbul (still an individual region), Eastern Marmara, Western Marmara, the Aegean, Western Anatolia, Central Anatolia, the Mediterranean, Western Black Sea, Eastern Black Sea, Central Eastern Anatolia, North Eastern Anatolia, South Eastern Anatolia. That regioning is already used by TÜİK (Turkish Statistical Institute) and other institutions for statistical purposes. (Figure 4) The smallest regions, NUTS3 regions are the 81 provinces.



Figure 4 – 12 NUTS1 regions in Turkey.

The reason that I reminded that regioning system is that it is impossible to talk about decentralization and autonomy unless we consider the administrative system in Turkey with a new approach. In the current system, new provinces are being established for political interests, bigger cities extend swallowing the cities and towns around them, provinces lose their characteristics of region -although they are narrow regions- and metropolitan municipalities administered by some sort of a presidential system expand to the whole country while destructing local democracy. However, Turkey can be divided into about 20 regions with reasonable sizes or for example it can be divided into 26 regions just like it is in NUTS2 regioning. So, in those regions with a population of 2-3 million in average -excluding the big cities- decentralization could be realized by establishing regional parliaments.

Determining those regions, bioregion approach, which is not considered in NUTS regioning, should be considered, too.

River and agriculture basins and bioregions

As Kirkpatrick Sale said, people living in the area, particularly the ones closer to the nature and land can somehow comprehend and feel the bioregions. For example, anyone who travels along the Black Sea can notice the differentiation between the seacoast and Çoruh Valley or Küre mountains or when you pass from Eastern Mediterranean to the Antioch plane, many things differ. Such differentiation is not only about landforms but is also about the climate, plants, animals, products produced and certainly about the culture.

When it comes to determining a countrywide regional structure considering the bioregions, of course we have to use more scientific methods. We already have two maps for that purpose: One for the river basins and the other for agriculture basins.

River basins determine the natural borders which are important for natural life researches and particularly for water management. We can say that natural borders most suitable with the bioregion approach are visible in river basins. There are 26 river basins in Turkey such as Gediz, Susurluk, Ceyhan, Seyhan, Yeşilırmak, Kızılırmak (or 28 when Euphrates is divided into three such as upper, mid and lower). (Figure 5)



Figure 5 – Borders of the 28 river basins in Turkey.

Agriculture basins are determined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs "in a way that expresses the regions ecologically similar, suitable to the administrative structure of the country, having a manageable size, available to cultivate economically and ecologically the most suitable products". The purpose of determining agriculture basins is better management of agricultural production, as a matter of fact. But while determining the regions, very detailed ecologic and agricultural data have been used such as soil, land classification, topography and products cultivated. In that study, by assessing thousands of data, Turkey has been divided into 190 agriculture basins according to climate, topography and land data and then the number of those regions have been reduced to 30 considering product patterns, manageability and ecological similarity. (Figure 6)¹²

¹² TC Tarım ve Köyişleri Bakanlığı, Türkiye Tarım Havzaları Üretim ve Destekleme Modeli (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Turkey Agriculture Basins Production and Subsidies Model) (Presentation) Ankara, July 2009



Figure 6 – 30 agriculture basins in Turkey, determined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

Those 28 river basins and 30 agriculture basins which are used for various purposes in Turkey, could be assessed together and considering 12 NUTS1 regions and 26 NUTS2 regions together with the current administrative structure, new administrative regions having partly bioregional characteristics in terms of ecology, also culturally and historically close to each other and manageable in size could be determined. So, decentralization could be really realized in those new regions with a population of 2-3 million in average -excluding the big cities- instead of 81 provinces -very narrow and very different in characteristics- through establishing regional parliaments and regional governments in those parliaments.

Those parliaments can make decisions upon not only about municipality services -as it is in current understanding of local administration- but also about health, education, culture and several aspects of social and economic life in a manner that is closer to people and in a more participatory way. And while electing the local government people could consider policies about their own lives and everyday lives more than they do in the general elections.

Conclusion

There's no doubt that decentralization or transferring authority from the center to the local will not be a problem-free and totally positive process. Unless it was inspected and accompanied by a well running democracy, increasing the authorities of the local might cause continuing corruption and new local tyrants emerging. Furthermore transferring authorities to the local might even act as a folding screen to transfer public resources to private companies and persons.

But in a situation where regional autonomous governments are established in company with an improving understanding of decentralization and an improving democracy, participation of people to administration and decision processes will increase, centrally assigned administrators' proxy over the elected ones will dissolve and Turkey will become a more manageable country where democracy is spread in grassroots. And bioregional approach will provide human-nature relations to be perceived as a question of democracy and people will know their environment better. Therefore it might be better understood that protecting the nature is not only a question of ethics or aesthetics but also it is directly related to the economic interests of the region.

Such regional autonomy achieving process aiming decentralization and participation can not resolve the Kurdish question by itself, nor it has the capacity to repair Turkey's political system on its own. But such an approach discussing how all people living in Turkey will govern themselves in the

places they live might provide us the opportunity for a better understanding of what we talk about when we say regional autonomy. Otherwise, we might keep wasting all our energy on details such as flag and be kept away from the essence of the issue forever.

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