Editorial

Thinking New Regionalism in Israel – Concepts, Challenges, and Directions

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The organization of space and the various ways in which places and regions develop and thrive have long constituted a significant field of inquiry in the social sciences. In Israel, the space between national government and the actual places where people live is typically defined and managed by entities established by the state, often at its inception: local authorities (municipalities or local councils, depending on population size) and rural settlements grouped into regional councils with contiguous territories. This typology reflects Israel's unique administrative structure, though terminology and institutional frameworks may differ in other states. The study of regionalism and spatial governance bridges diverse disciplines and professional arenas, including economics, sociology, political science, architecture, urban planning, and geography.

The concept of the region and regionalism is not new. Already in Utopia (1516), Thomas More described the organization of settlements on the island of Utopia, with 54 cities surrounded by villages, each no more than a day's walk from the next. This represents an egalitarian division of space into functional regions centered around key cities, where "no city wishes to expand its territory, as the Utopians see themselves more as cultivators of the land than its masters." More further notes that in Utopia, "there is no city (or region) so remote that one cannot reach another on foot in a single day" (More, 1516/1895). In such a world, there is essentially no periphery, and no inter-regional disparities emerge.

However, our world is far from utopian as envisioned by Thomas More. Unlike the idealized and egalitarian spatial order of Utopia—where there are no peripheral areas and every city is equally accessible—our reality is shaped by a multitude of processes that generate distinct characteristics and, inevitably, differences between regions. These processes result in the emergence of both central and peripheral areas,

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each with its own dynamics and complexities. Achieving an environment in which all regions have the opportunity and capacity to flourish requires ongoing effort, as peripheral regions must adopt different modes of thinking, organization, and action compared to the often self-sustaining development of central regions.

Alongside global trends, including a shift from centralized to regional and local thinking, there is a growing recognition that the acute challenges faced by peripheral regions, such as deepening economic, social, and security crises, are driving a fundamental rethinking of regional structures and relationships. The distress and frustration experienced in many peripheral areas have become a catalyst for renewed interest in "new regionalism"—a paradigm that seeks to redefine the interactions between the state, local authorities, the region, and the community. This approach examines how regionalism can serve as a lever for strengthening civic cohesion, sustainability, partnership, and inclusive growth, offering tools and concepts such as resilience, economies of scale, and inter-municipal cooperation to address both local needs and broader national challenges.

Exploring the concept of new regionalism offers ways for peripheral regions—and not only them—to address the challenges posed by urban concentration and the emergence of megacities and dominant central regions. Regionalist thinking introduces key concepts such as resilience, economies of scale, and inter-municipal cooperation, providing tools and frameworks to strive for a more equitable regional space that enables growth and prosperity for every locality and region.

The increasing demand for new forms of governance, functionality, and even conceptualization is evident not only among regional actors but also, increasingly, at the national level. However, the central government's engagement with regional frameworks—such as the establishment of regional clusters (Eshkolot in Hebrew) or other arrangements—often arises less from a deep-seated recognition of their value, and more as a pragmatic response to mounting pressures and crises that reveal the limitations of centralized control. In this sense, regionalism emerges as both a necessity and an opportunity for more adaptive, resilient, and inclusive territorial development.

This special issue documents and summarizes a conference held at the School of Architecture at the Shamoon College of Engineering in Be'er Sheva, titled "Thinking Regionalism," which focused on the growing interest in regionalism as a tool for the development or revitalization of peripheral cities and towns in Israel. The conference, held on November 6, 2024, brought together a diverse array of prominent stakeholders, researchers, and organizations to present their perspectives on the application of regional theory and policy in the Israeli context. Some of the articles presented here were first introduced at the conference and are published here in expanded form, while others were added subsequently.

The very title and definition of the conference— "Thinking Regionalism"—imply that the regional space—its definition, creation, function, and management—is not self-evident and requires deeper exploration. It is a concept in formation, demanding

flexibility, understanding, and redefinition. This stage necessitates reflection before action, which is why the topic and its title were chosen.

The conference and the renewed consideration of regionalism took place under the heavy shadow of the events of October 7, 2023, during which Israel's northern and southern peripheries were attacked and hundreds of civilians were massacred. The harm inflicted on these regions sharpened the need to revisit the concept, alongside numerous programs for recovery and healing, and the efforts of individuals, residents and non-resident, communities, organizations, and state institutions to restore and strengthen these afflicted areas. The renewed and intensified focus on regional planning has opened a window for a comprehensive examination of regionalism in Israel, from theoretical foundations to practical applications and critiques of these programs.

THREE AXES OF REGIONALISM

The articles presented here survey the main axes around which the idea of regionalism has developed—from the national-planning layer, where the region was a tool for state-building ("old regionalism"), to the recognition of the region as a locus of interest and content, whose development may benefit its residents and the state as a whole ("new regionalism"). We propose to view the topic through three primary components: first, the creation of the centralized system and the rationale and need for change—a process with historical, planning roots and dynamics of spatial control, which in most cases has failed to adequately address regional needs. The second perspective examines the advantages, opportunities, and virtues of adopting new regionalist approaches to regional development. The third addresses the economic layers of development programs and the division of regions as formulated by the Planning Administration, offering a critical eye on the actions and plans already being implemented as regional programs, and highlighting their deficiencies. Notably, all these components are reflected in each of the articles.

Between the National and the Regional: Processes of Disassembly and Reassembly

The Israeli case outlines an understanding and recognition of the need for administrative and governmental decentralization of regions and authorities. The stagnation in the structure of local government, despite various amendments over the years, is striking. The process of reform does not occur voluntarily, but rather as a gradual process of disintegration and partial transfer of responsibilities to local government, often without full authority, or with only partial authority.

The transfer of partial responsibilities and powers is carried out by the central government in response to crises that reflect an understanding that it is impossible to govern space so centrally, alongside bottom-up demands for self-control over resources, improvement of public services, and other needs. The article by Itay Beeri illustrates

and describes this process over the years. Beeri emphasizes that regional and national crises—in security, economy, health, education, and more—create mechanisms that push towards less centralized governance and the emergence of various forms of delegated responsibility (albeit with partial authority) to local authorities, as well as the creation of regional mechanisms, such as the "cluster" model, which groups together several authorities (cities in local councils and villages in regional councils).

Berri contends that the link between crises and the development of governance also produces gradual reforms, but a series of actions is required to establish a stable regional governmental layer that will provide resilience to the communities within it. His call for a comprehensive reform includes legislation, institutionalization, and actions to build a stable, local, and high-quality professional workforce.

Liat Savin-Ben Shoshan and Bat-El Yosef-Ravid outline the historical formation of Israeli settlement and the roots of the centralist approach. Their article lays out the rationale underlying the creation of Israel's governmental-spatial structure, while highlighting the need for its change. Their proposal, as partners in the Institute for Israeli Thought, embodies the growing interest of many groups and organizations in regional thinking and the need for a new regional division. They present an initial version of a new map for the division of the state's regions, aiming to restore spatial balance in Israel and reduce existing gaps between central and peripheral regions. To this end, they weigh various parameters—economic, geographic, demographic, and transportation—to create new polygons with boundaries that can provide suitable living environments for their inhabitants. In this process, they present different sub-regional typologies that have emerged and reflect the autonomous processes of the regions in their self-definition. Presenting a new regional division under the framework of "new regionalism" may lead to improvement and welfare for the residents of these regions and for the state as a whole.

Designing the Region: Diversity, Environment and Inclusion

Another perspective on regionalist thinking involves questions related to the design of the regional space and its inherent possibilities—from shaping a shared identity narrative, to recognizing regional assets and integrating environmental aspects. All these constitute the advantage of building a functional regional space and serve as a prominent benefit of regionalist thinking in assuming responsibility for a shared space. The realization of these regional components may lead to the consolidation and prosperity of the region.

Batya Roded and Revital Berlinshtein propose the "regional city" as a model between the city and the region. Roded and Berlinshtein argue that the current situation in Israel's periphery, and especially in the Negev, is the result of central government concentration alongside the dependence of local authorities on the central government. This situation exacerbates the gaps between center and periphery and even increases intra-regional disparities. Against this backdrop, they present case studies that signal the beginnings of change and decentralization.

Existing evidence of cooperation between heads of small but different councils—such as Arad and the Tamar Regional Council—leads to the idea that the regional city model proposed by the authors can express the synergy inherent in the concept of the region, increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of this region within Israel. The authors point to the "regional city" model as a possible intermediate step towards a regional model, identifying the advantages of scale, familiarity, and the shared narrative among residents of neighboring places.

The potential for diversity in redefining a region emerges in the article by Noa Avriel-Avni and Miri Lavi-Neeman, which tells the story of Bedouin residents in the Ramat HaNegev Regional Council. The attempt to define a region seeks to identify a set of similar characteristics and functions among its residents. One of the central problems in defining regions is the lack of homogeneity. In peripheral regions, and especially in the Negev, population diversity and differing characteristics are evident in many aspects: different lifestyles, religions, socioeconomic statuses, and even unique forms of residence—such as unrecognized villages lacking basic municipal infrastructure—which would seem to undermine the possibility of defining a region. Yet, it is precisely this diversity that may enable the development and prosperity of a region.

Avriel-Avni and Lavi-Neeman highlight the potential of including all residents of the region as partners in shaping the space and utilizing its existing resources—culturally and historically—not only to correct past actions but also to create opportunities for all residents and communities. Incorporating the historical-cultural narrative of the Bedouin population for a tourism initiative beathed new life and economic opportunities into the area. Their article presents findings from in-depth research based on interviews with Bedouin residents in Ramat HaNegev. They employ two research concepts and tools: "sense of place" and the layered approach of "environmental imagination"', to demonstrate the broader meaning of the region for culture, worldview, personal identity, and the symbolic significance of the region, and thus the possibility of acting within it. Not only the place—the home or settlement—shapes human action, but also the region and the space perceived as a region. This article adds a significant layer to the understanding of the region and the need to address the psyche of its inhabitants. In this context, we recall the seminal works of early urban sociologists, such as Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Simmel, 1950). The analogy to the changing region, which transforms over time, requires a similar approach to the processes experienced by its residents. In other words, the space of action has meaning and should be present in decision-making processes, for and regarding every region.

The rehabilitation programs for the area affected by the October 7 massacre focus on a region located seven kilometers from the Gaza Strip, defined as the "Tkuma Region." The programs developed and implemented around this area are the subject of two articles in this issue. The first, by Galia Limor-Sagiv, Adi Wolfson, and Ofira Ayalon, addresses the environmental aspects of treating and defining a region. The regional perspective enables—and indeed requires—a deep consideration of climatic

and environmental aspects. The authors point to the possibilities inherent in addressing these aspects, which, they argue, reflect regionalism in practice. These aspects can only be considered and utilized as resources through a comprehensive regional perspective at every stage of decision-making and program implementation. The region has an advantage in addressing, considering, and leveraging various environmental challenges, particularly those requiring broad cooperation, such as climate challenges.

A Functioning Economic Region: A Critical Reading of the Programs

The third perspective, addressed in the two concluding articles of the issue, focuses on the economic aspects of programs that have been planned and implemented, ostensibly, in a regional approach under central government leadership. Both articles present a critical view of the current processes in Israeli regionalism.

Deborah Abramzon examines the economic rationale underpinning the "Tkuma Region" program, sharpening her critique of the regional programs currently being implemented, perhaps hastily, regarding the planning of the Tkuma Region's boundaries. Her socio-economic analysis highlights the need to address economic aspects on a broad, regional level. Abramzon delves into the distinction between old and new regionalism, emphasizing the need to use new regionalist tools in the rehabilitation programs for the region. As she demonstrates, these programs tend to perpetuate the logic of old regionalism, failing to bring real change to the region and its residents.

Tomer Dekel and Uri Ilan offer a critical perspective on the main program of the Planning Administration—the governmental body responsible in Israel for planning and creating regions. They present the reasons and need for regional division and emphasize that the trend toward regionalism exists, but appears to be a process not grounded in long-term strategic planning. They stress the necessity of strategic planning components in the creation of Israel's new regional map, a topic on which all organizations are engaged.

REGIONALISM IN MOTION: PHILOSOPHICAL CYCLES AND PRACTICAL HORIZONS

The three perspectives presented in this issue provide a picture of the evolving regionalism in Israel: its historical causes and possible vision, the design, advantages, and opportunities of the new regionalist approach, and finally, implementation—particularly in economic thinking, which serves as a central incentive for adopting and critiquing the regional approach. Ostensibly, this offers a comprehensive picture of the state of regionalism in Israel.

However, further perspectives are needed, such as comparative studies of the regional process in rigid governmental systems like Israel's, tools for alleviating intra-regional tensions common in the Israeli periphery, and the integration of aspects related to innovation, technology, and sustainability in regional contexts. Some

of these aspects are already addressed-at least in part-by the articles in this issue, demonstrating the authors' engagement with the complexity of the topic.

The Israeli periphery, like peripheral regions around the world, is rising and seeking new paths for development and growth. Recent events have intensified the frustration and anger resulting from widening inter-regional gaps. As Rodríguez-Pose (2018) emphasizes, ignoring the unique needs of such regions can lead not only to deepening disparities, but also to social and political unrest—a phenomenon he terms "the revenge of the places that don't matter." The articles in this issue echo the call for place-sensitive regional policy, continuing the contemporary line of thought that characterizes current research on peripheral regions worldwide.

Finally, the questions remain: Are these just cyclical processes occurring on different spatial scales? Is regionalism merely a backwash to the intensifying processes of centralization and urbanization, nothing more than the whim of world-reformers who see regionalism in its various forms as a value in itself? Is there intrinsic value in regionalism per se?

My hope is that this special issue will underscore the value of regionalism, both as a concept and as a practical tool for planning and action, and its capacity to create a fair regional space for all the country's residents.

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