FEATURED REVIEW


The social construction of markers on which we rely to interpret the world has functioned as an inexhaustible source of raw material for historians and social scientists. Research in this field has become increasingly prevalent over the course of the past three decades. Space especially has emerged as one of the concepts closely interrogated in a wide variety of research projects. It is a fundamental device of orientation, and its constructed character is masked by its appearance as quintessentially *a priori* in character, always already “given.” By engaging critically with the semblance of naturalness, research can uncover a multiplicity of knowledge production mechanisms linked to the social construction of space.

There remain, however, aspects of such practices which have attracted limited attention so far, precisely because of the vastness of the material available for study. While notions of national territory and boundary-making have been analyzed repeatedly, regionalization, which in this context means the imposition of supranational divisions over continuities of physical expanse, has remained understudied. Discipline-specific treatises on the academic or political construction and instrumentalization of specific regions abound, but the existing literature has been less inquisitive regarding what may be said in general about the logics of regionalization as recurring modes of knowledge production.

The ambitions of this edited volume include making inroads into this latter, imperfectly charted meta-territory of academic and political language games. The research project organized by editors Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi adopted two different perspectives with an effect similar to organizing two concurrent expeditions towards the same hard-to-reach summit. The first half of the book presents interdisciplinary analyses of the construction of regionalized spaces in the mode of conceptual history. The concepts investigated here are Western Europe, Scandinavia/Norden, the Baltics, The Mediterranean, Southern Europe, Iberia, the Balkans/Southeastern Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia. The second part changes the perspective, offering disciplinary case studies of logics of regionalization operating in specific fields of academia (European History, Political Geography, Economics, Historical
Demography, Linguistics, Literary History, and Art History). The two parts should ideally lead the reader towards the same destination, offering complementary analyses. These analyses would demonstrate how conceptualizations of space converge around certain ideologically (if not academically) overdetermined regions, on the one hand, and offer the reader a peek into the academic laboratories of regionalizing knowledge production, on the other. The latter would emerge as a meta-study of “how-to” construct regions (regionalizing knowledges), while one expects the former to contain case studies (regionalizing practices) that tie in with the meta-studies.

If one accepts this logic, European Regions and Boundaries may be summarized as an exceptionally rich and productive failure. Failure here does not refer to the quality of either the contributions or the work of the editors. Rather, failure here is a research outcome. It highlights an important imbalance in the production of spatial knowledge with regard to conceptualizing regions which causes the two parts of the book to be more corrective to each other than symbiotic in character. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century political, civilizational, and geopolitical frames have shaped and often determined the ways in which we think about regions. This is shown in the first half. The second half of the book demonstrates the extent to which these inherited notions of regions that populate even present-day collective imaginaries have either been deconstructed or superseded by critical and reflexive academic work within the individual disciplines. The first half is a reminder of the ideological determinants of spatial thinking, the second perhaps a cautious argument in favor of academia’s potential (at least in some cases) to recast its toolbox by generating novel and ideologically less burdened conceptualizations.

The first half presents a survey of regions as strategic concepts. Some of these regions have been strikingly underutilized in shaping public thinking throughout the Late Modern Era, the notion of Iberia, for instance (discussed by Xosé M. Núñez Seixas). Others have become thick and layered to the point of being impossible to disentangle. This is notably the case with the Balkans/Southeastern Europe (Mishkova), Central Europe (Trencsényi), and most importantly Western Europe (Stefan Berger). The latter emerges as a polyvalent signifier that can enter almost any discourse as a point of comparison, and, accordingly, the notion of the (or “a”) West resonates across almost all chapters. Berger’s perceptive analysis provides a solid footing, but the reader begins to understand the omnipresence of “some” concept of Western Europe only when repeatedly encountering it, with shifting meanings, in the subsequent papers
as a point of reference and comparison. In the end, the (nuanced, yet fairly unequivocal) image that emerges is one of the West against the Rest. Dichotomies based on normative contrasts between the meaning of Western Europe and the concept of some other region appear as the rhetorical devices governing the discourses. Relying on these dichotomies, the regionalizing discourses disseminate notions of belatedness or “authenticity”, depending on whether they possess a westernizing or a more autochthonous bent. Regionalization is shown to function (in the clearest form perhaps in Frithjof B. Schenk’s chapter on Eastern Europe) as yet another battleground for the competing ideologies.

Despite the Archimedean position of the “West” in the conceptualization of macroregions, the thickest and most intriguing (hi)story emerges out of a parallel reading of several chapters on the shift in spatial thinking under the aegis of liberal ideology in the nineteenth century. These highly dialogical chapters on Eastern Europe, the North, and Eurasia (by Schenk, Marja Jalava and Bo Stråth, and Mark Bassin, respectively) significantly enrich our understanding of this complex process, which has had repercussions into the present. This is accomplished by drawing liberally on past scholarship, including Larry Wolff’s classic contribution on the construction of Eastern Europe in the “West” (Inventing Eastern Europe [1994]) and also on less frequently cited, yet groundbreaking texts, inter alia by Hans Lemberg (“Zur Entstehung des Osteuropabegriffs im 19. Jahrhundert,” Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas [1985]) and Ezequiel Adamovsky (Euro-Orientalism: Liberal Ideology and the Image of Russia in France [2006]). The chapters offer an exceptionally nuanced account of how the triadic division of Europe was reduced into an often orientalizing East–West dualism in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. As both Jalava and Stråth and Schenk observe, the repositioning of Russia as an Eastern rather than a Nordic power opened up a way to a reconstruction of the concept of the North as a minor region with positive connotations, becoming synonymous with Scandinavia in the process (pp.36, 45–47, and 189–93). At the same time, the mapping of Russia onto the East also “colonized” understandings of Eastern Europe as a zone not only of backwardness, but also of political otherness, under the specter of tyranny (p.194). This added a juridico-political layer which reinforced the already established civilizational cleavage. While the chapters do not explore current European controversies about perceived threats to regional identities in any detail, this tradition of intracontinental othering has already been traced to the present and shown to influence current discourses of political identity in the European Union, most recently by Maria Mälksoo (“Memory
Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security,” *Security Dialogue* [2013]).

If the authors can be faulted for anything, it is perhaps the relative lack of attention given to nineteenth-century reflections originating from the newly constructed “East.” Schenk’s discussion of interwar conceptualizations of East Central European is an important quasi-digression in his text on Eastern Europe, and his subsequent account about region-focused research in the Eastern Bloc is both detailed and conceptually refined (pp.195–97 and 199–203). Adding to these, Balázs Trencsényi’s detailed chapter on twentieth-century notions of Central Europe further enriches the image of intellectuals belonging to a mesoregion (the non-Russian East, rebranded as East Central Europe). They are seen struggling to distance themselves and their homelands from the dominant image of the macroregion under which they have found themselves subsumed, while also increasingly resenting the orientalizing discourse they perceive as developed and deployed by the “West.” What is not discussed in either chapter is the nineteenth-century liberal reaction in the non-Russian parts of the new East, to which Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, and other intellectuals contributed in droves. Before the birth of intellectual discourses about East Central European specificity, such as that of Oskar Halecki, the initial reaction to finding oneself relegated to the zone of backwardness and tyranny was to reject the classification (while acknowledging the fact of backwardness itself) and to construct discourses about belonging to the West by virtue of culture and often constitutional or legal traditions.

The tradition of negating the perennial character of one’s “home” region (Eastern Europe or the East) even made spearheads into Russia through the ideology of *zapadniks*. Yet, as Bassin’s essay makes clear, Russian spatial thinking was shaped to a far greater extent by the idea of Eurasia. Eurasia represents a rather novel construct when compared with the triadic and dualist Western divisions of Europe, and it was usually deployed, from the late nineteenth century on, as a trope challenging the orientalism inherent in the East/West dichotomy. It replaced (and is still used to replace) the expanse traditionally thought of as the East, providing it with an autochthonous and positive character (pp.211–13). With some of the ideas familiar from present-day Russian neoimperialist thought, the essay also works as a reminder of how Eurasia once enjoyed broad currency also in Western scholarship and spatial thinking in general. In the end, both Russia and its smaller Western neighbours, that is to say both the imperial half and the other half composed of nation-states managed to produce
their respective emancipatory discourses. However, Eurasia and (East) Central Europe represent divergent elective affinities symptomatic of the thinking of the intellectuals who promoted and still promote these concepts. One of the chief virtues of the book is that it sheds light on how these identity discourses have unfolded in the interplay of often competing regionalizing logics.

The second part of the volume offers a different background narrative to the social construction of regions. Traditional “allies” of regionalizing discourses, first and foremost history (Stefan Troebst) and political geography/geopolitics (Virginie Mamadouh and Martin Müller), are revisited in discipline-specific analyses which suggest patterns of increasing reflexivity as a mode of “scientific evolution.” With regard to both of the aforementioned disciplines, the texts relate how in recent decades scholarly discourse has tended to move towards critical engagement with earlier entanglements in the production of spatial impositions, or, in plainer terms, with having functioned as a language of power. As the overlaps and synergies with the first half of the tome make evident, these disciplines were indeed responsible for sustaining and refining the bulk of conceptualizations that have structured social thinking about Europe’s regions in the past.

The other disciplines differ from history and political geography both with regard to their impact on collective imaginaries of space and their modes of engaging with intra-disciplinary legacies. While both history and political geography have engaged in the deconstruction of its earlier regionalizing modes, disciplines less impacted by linguistic and reflexive turns and less central to the production of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cognitive maps of European regions have tended simply to evolve away from earlier modes of regionalization. This movement has involved abandoning conceptualizations borrowed from prevailing ideologies and engaging in discipline-specific conceptualizations. Some chapters in the volume are thoroughly historicizing and offer ample insight into this process (for instance the chapter on historical demography by Attila Melegh). Others tend towards academic presentism and highlight the current prevalence of discipline-specific regionalizations (the chapter on economics by Georgy Ganev, for instance). Yet more straddle a medial position (the chapters on linguistics by Uwe Hinrichs, literary history by Alex Drace-Francis, and art history by Eric Storm). Despite this variation, the overarching realization that academic evolution has led to, inter alia, the discipline-specific and increasingly autonomous production and deployment of regionalizing discourse shines through most contributions.
The shared character of this trend nevertheless allows for considerable variation. Historical demography both reflects and diverges from received spatial knowledges, reproducing regional divisions familiar from historical and political thought (as in the case of LePlay), but as a discipline it has also “evolved away” from the traditional patterns of dividing Europe either into a triad or two opposing poles (pp.303–04 and 312–14). At the same time, these legacies have never quite disappeared. In Melegh’s text, they transect the discipline itself. A more traditional approach investigates existing regionalizations and considers whether demography reflects or lends support to them. Simultaneously, a broadly critical stream argues against projecting cultural-ideological regionalizations onto demographic data and vice-versa.

The chapter on linguistics does not reflect this kind of bifurcation. It describes a fairly linear evolution away from reliance on exogenous, culturalist notions of regions towards a procedural (as opposed to substantive) understanding of them. In this latter mode, the existence/operability of a certain regionalizing frame within the discipline is conditional on confirmation by linguistic markers, rather than being accepted as existing a priori. Similarly to the “critical stream” in demography, contemporary linguists (and also economists) have tended towards generating their own, intra-disciplinary concepts, which are less connected to the political and cultural legacies of earlier patterns in regionalizing knowledges.

Despite all of the above, a survey of the volume as a whole demonstrates first and foremost the confluence of research and ideology in the invention of regions. Traditional academic knowledges have greatly contributed to the construction of a value-laden, culturalist lexicon of regions on which most of us still routinely rely in referencing larger European spaces. Both in the humanities and the social sciences, practitioners have mapped onto the globe images of civilizational difference, neatly tucked in behind regional boundaries. The studies included in this selection enable the reader to trace these processes both across disciplines and across specific cases. Continuing and expanding on earlier work by some of the contributors (such as Bassin, Troebst, and Trenčsényi), the volume respects the divergent disciplinary histories, paying the cost of this attention to detail and idiosyncrasies with an occasional loss of coherence or dialogue between the individual contributions. This is especially palpable towards the final chapters of the book. The present-day state of linguistics or economics seems to have little bearing on the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century genealogies of regions which the reader encounters in the first chapters. At the same time, this relative lack of coherence highlights the very justified emphasis on the collusion
of other disciplines (history and political geography) with political languages of spatial division. Perhaps current regionalizing schemes prevailing in linguistics or economics could also be deconstructed as older ones schemes in interwar history and geopolitics have been deconstructed in this book, i.e. through engagement and self-reflective critique.

This volume accomplishes a great deal even if it stops short of this (i.e. offering a deconstruction of current regionalizing schemes used in linguistics or economics). It analyzes and subverts the late-nineteenth century regionalizing frames by highlighting the ideological contingencies underpinning them and adds to this a survey of contemporary, more reflexive and cautious, less sweeping trends of thinking about regions within the confines of individual disciplines. In this respect, the book amounts to a considerable reflexive achievement, and it is itself part of the cross-disciplinary trend towards the kind of greater academic autonomy its last half-dozen or so chapters aptly survey.

Gergely Romsics
Hungarian Academy of Sciences