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THE REGION: A BASIC CONCEPT FOR UNDERSTANDING LOCAL AREAS AND GLOBAL SYSTEMS

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Résumé : La région : un concept fondamental pour comprendre les aires locales et les systèmes globaux

La science régionale est "la seule discipline pour laquelle la région soit une notion centrale". A travers l'histoire des concepts régionaux, région naturelle, région homogène, région historique, région culturelle, région fonctionnelle, pôles de croissance et théorie des milieux, cet article synthétique aborde les logiques du nouvel ordre régional face à la mondialisation économique et politique.

Abstract: The region: a basic concept for understanding local areas and global systems

Regional science is the only field integrating explicitly the notion of region. Through an analysis of the basic regional concepts, such as natural region, homogeneous region, historical region, functional region, growth pole, milieu theory, this paper develops the logics of the new regional orders confronted with the economic and political globalization.

KEYWORDS: region, historical region, functional region, cultural area, regional development, world region.

Extract from the Journal Officiel Français of 17 July 1851:


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Victor Hugo:..."after a long and difficult period, this revolution gave birth to a French Republic...The people of France carved in indestructible granite and lay at the very heart of the old monarchistic continent, the foundation for a great edifice of the future, which will one day be called the United States of Europe."

Mr. de Montalembert:"The United States of Europe! That's preposterous. Hugo is mad."

In this short statement Victor Hugo provided a vision of the future...of supranational structures at the end of the 20th century. He set the debate at the level of the Region, Europe. But before this Region could be integrated and accepted as such, it had to go through a long process of evolution which we are going to recount here, going through the history of spatial analysis and its opening up to geographical, political, economic and social issues.

The Historical Development of the Regional Concept

In the classical geography of Strabo and A. von Humboldt, the world consists of routes and countries discovered in the course of explorations. The region is assimilated into countries whose landscapes, peoples and ways of life are described, and which are ruled over by a dominant country (we will recall that "regere" is the root of region). It was with E. Reclus (1885,1887) and more specifically in the Géographie Universelle that the regional concept was framed: a popular term relating to regional spaces and which serves as the basis for administrative divisions of nation-states.

It was only at the end of the 19th century, in the vein of Darwin, that the regional concept split with the "pays" concept, and the natural region was considered a spatial unit defined by physical criteria: soil, relief, vegetation, climate... Whether they were large or small, these regions provided the framework for determinist research on the man-environment relationship. Vidal de la Blache (1889, 1910) cast a different shade of meaning on this approach with the concept of homogenous regions and based regional geography on a possibilist vision: the bond between nature and societies creates a history and common geography for men who have been able to take advantage of the milieu in which they live. Vidal de la Blache stated that in the 20th century the role of societies is marked by the establishment of the means of communication and concentrations of economic activity that account
for the distortions of spatial homogeneity.

In the concept of historical region proposed by J. Bruhnes (1956) and A. Demangeon (1905, 1927), geography became the offspring of history. In their observations on the stability of historical delimitations, these authors pointed out the significance of countries spawned by history and the role played by borders between these units. They described landscapes, ways of life and human practices using idiographic logic and explained them by the history of societies. M. Sorre (1943, 1954) fully supported this thinking in a series of works on human geography and clarified the broad concepts applicable to regions, such as "way of life" ("genre de vie").

The concept of cultural area presented by R. Dion (1991), P. Defontaines (1956) and, in the United States, C. Sauer (1970) is derived from this historical vision. The term "culture region" designates the area over which cultures are spread and develop territorial solidarity. From this point, the geography of representations which allows us to pass from analysis on a collective scale (microgeography) to the study of individuals (microgeography) had only to take one step to get to A. Fremont's "espaces vécus" (1976). Cultural geographies are very rich and provide the link between the history of societies and spatial practices.

The economic dimension, which as far as E. Levasseur (1867) was concerned already existed in the 19th century, gained strength from 1930 onwards with W. Christaller's central-place theory (1980) and particularly with the developments in the functional region concept which is defined according to the operational structures of its activities. It is due to its explanatory potential that this concept became of central importance in the 1950s. It gave regional analysis a more nomothetic character that was to go on to develop regional science (Polese, 1994) and in so doing paved the way for generalizations that were fundamental to economic planning.

The concept of the functional region was later taken up in the theory of spatial economy by W. Isard (1956), J.R. Boudeville (1970), F. Perroux (1991) and J. Paelinck (1985). One of their theories, the growth pole, links the development of towns and regions: the growth pole, as an economic unit, changes regional structures so that the growth rate of overall regional product is increased. The region is therefore tied to a pole which propels it, provided that an environment for the propagation of economic activity is planned. This is the "milieu theory" proposed by D. Maillat (1986) who, by integrating the innovative potential of regions and the concept of local development, gave the region specificity in
economic growth. Because of its inherent social and economic characteristics, each region can offer businesses scope for integration in a context of cooperative relationships which favour its development.

Many regional analysts, at pains to reduce regional disparities which stem from the marginalization of certain spaces considered dead angles in the world system, took up these themes of spatial economy and added a dimension of identity. Regional identity reveals the collective conscience of the people living in certain places who share social solidarity. It is through spatial econometry (Paelinck, 1985) that researchers are able to participate in regionalization in progress in several countries and on several continents.

In one century, the evolution of the concept of the "region" has led us to the understanding that behind this widely used and ambiguous word lies a human, historical, cultural and economic reality. This reality is the social product gradually built up by societies in their life places. It is therefore not surprising that the contents as well as regional geographic scales can vary. At the end of the 20th century the region has become more economic and more political... it has even become supranational: in the United Nations the world is divided into areas such as "European region" and "American region". Depending on its privileged geographic scale, the region makes reference to local logic or to global logic in fine meshes of space or in continental systems.

Contemporary regional science, like economics and spatial econometrics, is therefore facing a complex world reflecting the spatial concerns of our societies; the explosion of borders created and passed down from past administrations; the capacities for the creation of space and reconstruction of the world and States; and the new regional order that can better explain it, construct models to demonstrate it, and plan it.

The new regional order

As the 20th century, marked by free trade and the emergence of supranational communities, draws to a close, are we approaching that single State invoked by Montesquieu in his visionary work, "Les Richesses d'Espagne", and parodied by Huxley in his political utopia? Will the close of the century bear witness to the end of spatial reflection that is undermined by the disappearance of nations, their borders and spatial discontinuities as claimed at the beginning of the 1980s? These are two questions to which any regionalist, as a careful observer of the spectacle on Earth, can only answer in the negative. Never has the world
experienced such dramatic upheavals: regions and countries are born and reborn either as a sign of historical perpetuity or in a break with the past. New cases of regionalism, which often have nothing to do with the old demons of ethnic purity, emerge from the ashes of nations in decline with their cultural, economic and territorial aspirations. When nations do remain strong, regionalization movements reconstruct the territories in a new administrative order.

The challenge posed by contemporary regionalism is the diversity of economic and cultural forms (ways of life, languages, social manifestations...); values rooted in history and geography are glorified by the regional elites seeking to develop their heritage. Regionalism expresses a process of consciousness of identity and facilitates spatial practices in a defined framework.

All spatial domination has an economic dimension. History clearly shows how, after a period of force, the expansion of regions and nations, subtly takes place as a result of economic domination. Current times also show the hegemony of the United States through the dissemination of the American way of life and its forms of expression worldwide...crushing or robbing local cultures and identities of their originality.

Regional development

"Individuals behave as if they were more or less masters and owners of a small portion of the environment." wrote A. Moles in Encyclopédie de Géographie (Bailly, et al, 1992). Figuring among these portions of environment are the regions, defined as a natural area, an existential space and an organized space. According to the first term, the region is a "milieu de vie" in equilibrium and is a resource to be conserved. According to the second, it reveals cultural identity and belonging to a piece of acquired land. Regional organization translates distribution logic, localization logic and the logic of the powers that be into a geopolitical context. To discuss the regional concept we must understand this triple aspect that makes each one an original space-product with its physical traits and its cultural, social, economic and political milieu. This is what allows us to apprehend the models of spatial econometrics, including the famous Qualiflex (Paelinck,1985).

Even though the region may appear to be a triple-faceted closed shell, it is in no way immune to the effects of external influences, that arise from outside its milieu. J. Paelinck defined the concept of allotopy. Each region is formed by successive domination, open to challenges from both
within and without. Let us, in this regard, look at linguistic, and cultural
domination where one group imposes its identity on other communities.
This type of domination occurs nowadays in more subtle ways through
other mechanisms, for example, in economic relations where the centre
imposes its will on the periphery, thereby creating regional inequalities
and dissymmetric flows. It also occurs in cultural relations where one
dominant group crushes the others by means of the skillful diffusion of
its audio-visual or literary products.

It has become commonplace to oppose endogenous development, as a
function of the local capacity to embark upon ventures, and exogenous
development (Polese, 1994). In one case, the local groups take decisions
on the actions within their regions, in the other case, external logics are
proposed. The constraints of economic trade and the centralization of
powers nowadays promote the second solution in most non-metropolitan
regions. In order to change this trend, the role of the "milieux" as
economic incubators is often cited: the attraction of a region is a function
of its ability to create resources, to generate processes of innovation and
to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants.

Regional logic of these "milieux" (Marit, Vassorot, 1986) and economic
logic coincide in some privileged regions. But others, which are really
dead angles, find themselves marginalized vis à vis economic and social
networks. Competitiveness and the struggle for growth can destroy many
regions. Should we not substitute regionalization, quality of life,
territorial responsibility and solidarity for the five key words liberalism,
globalization, competitiveness, privatization and deregulation, to take into
account our "milieux" and to put an end to the confusion in today's
world? Without confusing it the far reaches of identity, the time of
regional architecture has come, provided that it accepts federalism and
the inter-regional balancing process and develops its regional
imagination.

Regions in chaos and world regions

Economic and political globalization present a challenge for regional
governments; what is the future of the spatial units we call "country" and
"region"? P. George's answers in the Encyclopédie de Géographie
(Bailly et al., 1992) is that "the universalization of organic
relationships should not skirt the issue of differences and the
variation of differences." Could we also substitute the ideology of the
uniqueness of each group of people and their right to live on their own
territory for the ideology of the "melting pot", the intermixing of
populations in countries and in the world?
Beyond the false opposition between an attachment to the past and modernism, we must resort to A. Fremont's concept of "espaces vécus" to understand the intensity of the feeling of belonging held by people who share a history, culture, language, religion...on one territory; so many regional practices are rooted in the history of societies, quite different from the direct consequences of economic and administrative decisions. The concepts of identity, cultural heritage and sense of place become central to the understanding of these "espaces vécus" as do the concepts of minority and majority. The relationships of power between minority and majority quickly lead to questions of appropriation, limits and political management. 

Will the acceptance of the regional vision not lead to the creation of a world composed of a host of small autonomous States, an ungovernable world in which the local wins out over the global (O. Dollfus, 1994)? Will competition and selection between these units not exclude those situated outside the major economic networks? Entire regions could find themselves isolated from the world system. This is how new regional chaos would arise, that is to say, territories kept within their borders, where the State no longer exerts its regulatory or monitoring function, where large infrastructures disintegrate with the disappearance of the role of centres, where insecurity is widespread unless order is imposed by violence from a group that is better armed or more determined than the others." (Dollfus, 1992, p.726, in A.Bailly et al, Encyclopédie de Géographie).

However, all regions do not give way to this inexorable chaos; some of them, drawing on their own strength, become world regions with their local organization and external policy. Regionalist ferment are thus the source of new nations. In the history of the world, periods of regional birth and periods of imperialist expansion have alternated, gathering together territorial organizations; the contemporary era is no exception. Still, in the 20th century, the underlying stakes of regionalization in cultural and political terms and the risks run by these new States in economic and overall terms must be understood.

Conclusions

To speak of a region is to understand its past, to grasp the attachment that societies and men have for places, it is to explain its economic, political and social functioning in a local and world context, it is to address the prospects for its future. The role of spatial analysis is to bring
out the best in these regions in which the evolutive identities of societies are revealed, to deal with these remarkable mutations that cause States to collapse. But those that collapse can also pull themselves together. E. Renan had a good grasp on the changing nature of spatial units when he said, "Oblivion, and I would even say error, are essential factors in nation-building." ("Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" Oeuvres complètes). But far too often oblivion is only partial and regionalism resurfaces; it is left to the spatialist to remind all those who would wish to wipe out the past and build the future without taking into account this fundamental concept that is the region.

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