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From Geographical/Historical Regions to the Euro Regions,
or the Crystal Ball of Multicultural Regionalism

“We live in a period of transition, when something is apparently about to vanish,
while something else is being born in pain.”

(Vaclav Havel)

It would be an interesting intellectual experiment, and probably also a highly educational one, if researchers of political history tried to divide history into periods according to the keywords characteristic of that age: What was regarded to be the principal guiding force in a given society, and how did the men of politics try to define themselves and their programs? If such a project was carried through, this end-of-century (and end-of-millennium) period of ours would probably be labelled as the age of regionalism.

For the past fifty years the key word in East Central Europe has been restructuring. Its characteristics were deliberate planning, clearly defined goals, accurately selected means and modes. As a synonym for restructuring, the expression ‘feasible planning’ was used, along with all its theoretical accessories and practical consequences.

After the age of totalitarianism, a general state of confusion and drifting replaced the deliberate planning and direction of purpose hitherto propagated. A critical situation set in both in the economy and in the world of intellect. It is not only the region that is in search for a place under the sun, but also Europe as a whole finds itself in a need to re-define itself. In Europe’s crisis of identity and institution, the various shapes and forms of regionalism are increasingly frequently presented as the legitimising force of the new processes. Regionalism at the same time means a thematic framework and a model solution—it is a paradigmatic situation. Similarly to Kuhn, who used his concept, the paradigm, in different senses, regionalism is also interpreted in dozens of meanings, freely and without any regard to pedantry. Irrespective of this, or maybe despite this, the twin notions of regionalisation-regionalism are useful concepts in the study of the current process of restructuring as a paradigm.

Discourse on Region

The various notions of region were introduced and used in the spheres of politics, society and economics independently, with various functions associated with these interpretations. The theoretical category in the history of ideas is beyond—or before—that, and the ideological representation conjures up political philosophy. On the subject of local traditions one has to mention the regionalism of building on broad foundations, distinguishing this from the (high) political architecture’s regionalization carrying the integrationist interests. Region can be interpreted as a historical category, as well as an international system of political institutions. The methodological differentiation of three levels seem justified: the geopolitical level, the regional middle level and the level of locality—local societies.

The interpretation implying a system of institutions makes the identification of specific functions possible. The new political jargon—a Europe of nations and regions—already

signals something: the demand for change, for rethinking. The racial issue, nationalism, and the various forms of discrimination have been given a role—sometimes a major one—in public thinking; on the one hand the ethnocracies gain in strength, and on the other the “homeless peoples”—the Scots, the Welsh, the Basques, the Catalans, the Kurds—indicate that the ethnic groups demand a role in the drafting of the guiding principles of state politics. András A. Gergely speaks on behalf of many people, when he suggests that “it could be the greatest achievement of the twentieth century, if just this once these ethnic cultures were not shifted in the direction of radical politics, but could be linked up with the prevalent democratic ideas of ‘civilised’ humanity, complementing them with their own system of values.” The specialist scholar’s wish springs from the ultimate goal of European development. He is also the one who points out the existing social obstacles: “However, the fulfilment of this desire is made impossible by a whole list of political, economic, cultural and legal barriers.” The obstacles are partly rooted in fears—fears that, once they have tasted democracy, people will throw off the robes of subordination and demand genuine popular representation.

The frequent emergence of the historical category of region also strikes fear in the hearts of many people. The mosaic of nations in East-Central Europe is outlined not with historical borders, but with the ethnic and linguistic boundaries. In addition to the historical background, every ethnic situation is determined by the status quo of yesterday and today, and the relevant discourses are centred around the justifications for “demands” and “revisions”. What is behind the notion of region? What political ideas, or even intentions, can this Trojan horse hide? Whenever a local politician argues for the interests of regional development, to what extent does he consider the economic interests? Could his real motive be to diverge from a disagreeable partner? A rational consideration of the borders cannot get around the subject of self-determination. The reason why relatively stable borders could evolve in the West was that plebiscites were held there to decide the debated areas.

When G. Schöplin talks about the—apparent or real—revival of identity politics of the 1990s, he above else refers to the practice, which made a rather strongly cohesive interpretation of citizenship to be the basis of identity politics. “Citizenship, too, forms part of identity politics, although not as universal as its advocates believe it be; however, without citizenship, it would be difficult to maintain a state.” The state expects loyalty from its citizens, precisely in the name of democracy. But as soon as the “supreme necessity” of the institutions making up the state is called into question, the former Irish Prime Minister J. Brutton’s conclusion is almost involuntarily given scope: “It is difficult to engender loyalty for bodies established explicitly for administrative purposes.” That is to say, it is not irrelevant where one lives, in other words citizenship is not everything. The truth content of the statement is well known, as can be verified in the West and in the East alike. The majority nation approaches the problem from the direction of economic-social mobility, bearing the relativisation of state borders in mind. The minorities worry about the preservation of the national character in accordance with István Bibó’s remark: on account of their fears for the community, “minority life ceases to be a full human life, and becomes a marginal, oppressed existence.”

The discourse on region directs attention to the differences existing within any country: to different local values and character traits. It becomes especially important, when a country is unable to come to terms with its “united” character, and tries to eliminate the different traditions of the various geographical and historical regions with the help of centralised political will and homogenisation. The democracy-in-the-making tears open the straitjacket of

facelessness, and the elements of “authentic existence”, the identity-creating manifestations and symbols of local roles providing the dignity of local awareness become apparent from underneath the alien, enforced patterns. With open violence lacking, the marks of ethnic diversity emerge and the communal cohesion and the networks of solidarity evolve. The ethnosphere undoubtedly possesses the dimension of the regional. The various diversities appear at the same time, becoming associated even when otherwise there is no essential link between them. Open or disguised, the discourse on region passes through ethnicisation.

For establishments having legitimacy problems, the region becomes a political bogey. ****

Region and Identity

There are two fundamental processes that have truly influenced the identity movements of today: the political-philosophical decline of class-consciousness and the relativisation of the borders. Ever since Weber, the major statements of Marx’s theory of stratification have been debated by sociologists, including the claim that social actions are to be explained primarily by the category of class. When M. Olson proved that it was far from self-evident that the classes—an otherwise self-seeking group—would want to realise common interests, he above else questioned Marx’s theory of classes. The modern theory of interest alliances reached back to the concept of group, taking into account the variety of group formations.

By the relativisation of the state borders’ role we mean the impact of globalisation on such modern notions as space, time, freedom, economy, society, culture, communication, etc., rather the well known changes in the character of today’s border. Before modernisation, human communities lived in the duality of “sacred and profane” spaces, for which the geographical space provided only the scenario. Sacredness as an effective force of social organisation has been eliminated by modernity, in consequence of which profane space changed into a material, geographical/state formation. According to one tenet of modernity, societies are arranged in a well-defined manner in geographical space, and the spaces incorporating a single society can be divided both functionally and structurally. The spatial structure of globalisation as achieved by power politics is different from that of modernisation, and for that reason the above idea of spatial structure should be discarded. The severance of social and geographical spaces already began in the age of modernisation, and has by now greatly accelerated, as a consequence of which there are several, differently organised social spaces within the state borders fixed in geographical space. In any one of these, full or mutilated societies can be established, which are in subordinated to one another. As a result of the changed spatial structure the earlier frameworks of interpretation become invalid. We could carry on discussing the issues associated with the emergence of the world society of globalisation, beginning with the societies of the dominant world powers occupying the top section of the social space right down to the marginal societies within the borders of a state yet distinct from that state, or down to the conjuring of the resulting capital of different character—power political, loyalty political—the crux of the matter remains the same: in the society of supra-nations it is the economically strongest power that dictates the terms, in accordance with its own needs.

It might seem as a paradox that, while the globalisational institutions take away from individuals and groups alike the freedom to form an identity, the regionalism of ethnocultural basis can establish autonomous identities, under the sign of which a region’s community manifests itself. World television is inundated by the clichés of the global institutions of interpretation, and the mega-adverts elbow the local and the specific out of the media’s local

market. The globalised public relations network controlling the primary news and fundamental interpretations employ almost as many staff as the press—and although the odds are heavily against the local interpreters with their partisan views, there seem to be an increasing need for such views.

As to the specific questions of the region, the identification deficit following the fall of totalitarianism almost inevitably turns the attention to such untapped and unsullied identity elements as the region. Totalitarianism never recognised the region as a level of political self-realisation, and this further increases the value of the possibilities in public-social organisation. The difficulties and setbacks of the transition all lead to the region's further political-economic over-evaluation. At the same time, those persons and groups (can) play a part in today's general re-evaluation, whose ethnic consciousness, both in space and in time, and both in culture and in civilisation, is experienced in a sovereign manner and can be represented in a communal form. Self-interpretations have their own natural regional component, one being precisely the region—staunchly denied and therefore withered away in the earlier social practice. This is how ethnic groups and regions meet on the road described/envisaged as transition.

One of the dimensions of minority survival is co-existence. Which requires harmony, not ethno-centrism. Especially not an authoritarian ethno-centrism, as co-operation presupposes self-limiting tolerance on the part of the majority. The region can provide almost the sole form of a framework for this as long as the national level is ethnocratic. Admittedly, anomalies are likely to appear here, too. Since regionalism reaches back to the identity elements of the earlier, disputed and problematic ages almost as a rule, advocates of regionalism can expect to be accused of tribal mentality, of having intentions to ethnicise the public sphere.

Region and Legitimation

Since it is unlikely that we can come up with a generalised European region concept in clear-cut and reassuring manner, the diversity of interpretations assigns key importance to the question of the relationship between countries and regions. The central authority's demonstrable attitude associated with the middle level is one of the indications of the essential qualities of democracy. "The original reason and motive for establishing and reinforcing political regions are very different within the member states of the European Union." In sharp contrast with the general, pro-region movement, in some countries this level weakened or even disappeared altogether. Due to the national developments, the political and administrative regions in the countries of the European Union have a heterogeneous character."

Regionalisation as a political instrument can be incorporated into the legitimisation process by the central authority in two ways. After the first major political-social shocks it can aim for the solution of social crisis situations. The central element of the proposals to consolidate the domestic situation of Germany and Austria after the Second World War was internal regionalisation—by reaching back to the social roots. In Spain, the authorities replacing Franco's dictatorship turned to the means of internal regionalisation. When the political tensions on the domestic front in Belgium in the early 1990s increased considerably, it was internal regionalisation and the recognition of middle-level autonomies that brought solution. The concrete solutions in the dissimilar basic situations are different. The German and Austrian solution meant the establishment of a federal structure. In Spain a system of ethno-

regional autonomies was set up with the preservation of the constitutional unity of the state; in Belgium a mixed system of regional and ethnic elements was introduced. We use the word regionalisation, although what essential took place in all the above case was the recognition of historical and demographical verities. Political common sense prevailed, and that legitimise as such.

Regionalisation can also serve to justify political/economic decisions. Growing social tensions can rise, and are almost generally observed, in the developed world, too, and not just in the poorest countries known as the third world. The environmental problems are well known. The consequences of inequality are manifested in both the political and the social dimension. The spatial structure of the world economy has also grown through changes, yet the essence has remained the same: as in the age of colonisation, the developed countries of today drain the resources of the third world —of course, now they employ much more refined financial techniques. The social-based internal conflicts characterise not just the African countries; it should be noted, for example, to what extent people's fear of losing their jobs increased in the 1990s.

The legitimacy of the traditional institutions—parliament, government—is continuously declining, but surprisingly enough the press itself is one of the victims of the general trend. The social confidence index shows such a low figure, which was inconceivable earlier. One of the reasons for this is that certain vital decisions have been taken away from the institutions under control—i.e. from the institutions with legitimacy; in major questions of investment policy the great powers of the economic sphere decide. The great powers which have been made even greater as a result of globalisation. Now they offer their help to the weak. But in general, they give aid not to governments, but to regions. Could it be just a coincidence that the structures that receive aid are those which have no legitimate leadership. Hardly. One of the open secrets of the internal regionalisation recently gaining momentum in East-Central Europe is to lay hands on the money distributed under the aegis of European integration. It cuts no ice with the West that these macro-regions have been created in a rush, quite often against the historical traditions; the process itself qualifies as regional politics in either way. If the money given to a macro-region is spent imprudently, who could be called to account, and more importantly, how? Who could or should be dismissed? The region became the fundamental unit of the—global—development politics without the introduction of the necessary constitutional measures in the various countries. The relevant new laws that have been passed refer to development politics, not to the legal status of the region called into existence. And this legal obscurity probably favours the central authorities, since under the aegis of subsidiarity in fact the concealed efforts of centralisation are reinforced.

Region and Integration

Integration was “discovered” by Europe in search of itself. Hoping to replace the national framework with something new, Europe's paradigm is integration, which should be interpreted as the symbol of clear-sightedness and the acceptance of responsibility, according to A. Marga. If that is what people say in Romania, then it is good to know that in the North-Western part of the Balkan in the foreseeable future the prevalent tenet will remain this: everything that takes place in the continent is European. And this (might) mean that it is the air here that makes everything European, not the spiritual heritage. If this was also how people in university circles saw it, then it would hardly be fashionable to discuss “European studies”. One of the fundamental tenets of these European studies is that not only people have spirituality, but so does Europe. It seems that the representatives of German culture, who

proclaimed the existence of Volksgeist specific to national culture, are the ones who worry the most about the spirituality of Europe—at least according to the evidence of the citation index. For Nietzsche, to be good European meant a task under the aegis of the civilisational challenge of self-discovery. It is hardly surprising, then, that for Nietzsche Europe is eine junge Seele, Welche beständig kommt.

The initial steps of the politics of integration were responses to the anomalies of the peace treaties concluding the Second World War. In addition to rectifying the German economic course of coercion, the Coal and Steel Community served to provide the framework for the political settlement of the relations between France and Germany. The first paragraph of the Proclamation declaring the political intention talks of the necessity of an “organised and vigorous Europe”. The Common Market, called to life by the economic challenge, and COMECON, the program of mutual economic cooperation, were born under the aegis of European bipolarity, with an integrative function. The Treaty of Maastricht is a formation characteristic of the 1990s: the monetary politics of the European Union, the effects of which have already been discussed in previous chapters, took shape in that spirit and under the pressure of integration. This monetary politics appoints the region to be the building bloc of economy, which is evident from the admitted goal of European Union’s subsidies, the reduction of the differences between these regions. The politics of regarding integration as the instrument of structural development can be traced back to Keynesianism, to the doctrine of the welfare state, and to the need to reduce the differences between regions.

The new Europe treats the Euro-region as a middle level structure, even when the scale, which stretches from a couple of kilometers—see the European Development Pole established at the common border between Belgium, France and Luxemburg—to formations as large as a country, is everything but commensurable. It flows from the “philosophy” of the process that nobody is worried about this, and new ones will be added to the approximately 150 existing formations. Because the region is a unit that under the present circumstances can expect to be subsidised.

Among the ingredients of integration, which serves as Europe’s ointment, the region is—once again—there, despite the fact that the principle of regionalism has not been adopted by the European Union. Since neither is the principle of subsidiariness, it will reflect on the future European architecture “whether the principles of subsidiariness, federalism and regionalism will be given the role assigned to them—in the area of legitimisation, democratisation and increased efficiency”.