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Arguing with Regions

John A. Agnew [a]
[a] Department of Geography, 1255 Bunche Hall, University of California - Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, 90095-1524, USA
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Arguing with Regions

JOHN A. AGNEW
Department of Geography, 1255 Bunche Hall, University of California – Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1524, USA.
Email: jagnew@geog.ucla.edu

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AGNEW J. A. Arguing with regions, *Regional Studies*. An analytical survey of how regions have entered into the arguments of the social sciences serves to highlight the uses and limitations of different understandings of regions and their various theoretical biases. It also provides a way of introducing the articles in the rest of this special issue. It considers how regions have come to be used as a classificatory device across the social sciences, discusses the various meanings given to regions in empirical research, and examines the main philosophical and theoretical controversies that have been sparked by their use. Matching regions to purpose and avoiding a singular conception of 'region' that claims to fit all arguments are the main conclusions.

Regions Classification Territorial Relational

AGNEW J. A. 争论区域，*区域研究*。对于区域如何进入社会科学争论的分析性研究，得以强调不同理解区域方式的使用与限制，及其互异的理论偏见。该分析同时提供做为此一专题中其他文章的引文。它考虑区域如何成为社会科学中分类的机制、探讨经验研究中赋予区域的各种意涵，并检视此一使用在哲学上与理论上引发的主要争论。将区域与目的相互配对，并避免宣称适用于所有主张的单一概念化区域，是为本文的主要结论。

区域 分类 地域 关系性

AGNEW J. A. Discuter avec les régions, *Regional Studies*. Une étude analytique de comment les régions sont entrées dans la polémique des sciences sociales permet de mettre en lumière l'emploi et les limites des divergences d'interprétation de ce que c'est une région et de leurs biais théoriques particuliers. Elle fournit aussi un moyen de présenter les articles qui font figurent dans ce numéro spécial. On considère comment les régions sont devenues un classement à travers les sciences sociales, discute des diverses interprétations dans la recherche empirique de ce que c'est une région, et examine les principales polémiques philosophiques et théoriques qui en découlent. Les principales conclusions à en tirer sont les suivantes: adapter les régions à l'objectif et éviter une notion unique de la 'région' qui prétend s'adapter à tous les arguments.

Régions Classement Territorial Relationnel

AGNEW J. A. Die Kontroverse der Regionen, *Regional Studies*. Eine analytische Untersuchung der Frage, wie die Regionen zum Streitpunkt der Gesellschaftswissenschaften geworden sind, ermöglicht eine Herausarbeitung der Verwendungen und Grenzen der unterschiedlichen Auffassungen der Regionen sowie ihrer verschiedenen theoretischen Verzerrungen. Ebenso bietet diese Untersuchung eine Einführung in die übrigen Artikel dieser Sonderausgabe. Es wird untersucht, wie die Regionen in den Gesellschaftswissenschaften zu einem Mittel der Klassifizierung geworden sind, es werden die verschiedenen Bedeutungen von Regionen in der empirischen Forschung erörtert, und es werden die wichtigsten philosophischen und theoretischen Kontroversen analysiert, die sich aus dieser Nutzung ergeben haben. Die wichtigsten Schlussfolgerungen lauten, dass die Regionen an ihren Zweck angepasst werden müssen und dass die Nutzung einer einzigen Auffassung der 'Region', die für sich in Anspruch nimmt, zu sämtlichen Argumenten zu passen, zu vermeiden ist.

Regionen Klassifizierung Territorial Relational

AGNEW J. A. La polémica con las regiones, *Regional Studies*. Un estudio analítico donde se cuestiona cómo han entrado las regiones en la polémica de las ciencias sociales sirve para destacar el uso y las limitaciones de las diferentes interpretaciones de las regiones y sus sesgos teóricos. También ofrece una forma de presentar los otros artículos de este número especial. Se aborda el modo en que las regiones se han empezado a utilizar como un método de clasificación en las ciencias sociales, analizando los diferentes significados que se han dado a las regiones en el estudio empírico, y examinando las principales controversias filosóficas y teóricas que se han generado por su uso. Las principales conclusiones son que hay que ajustar las regiones a su finalidad y evitar un concepto singular de la 'región' que pretende encajar en todas las discusiones.

Regiones Clasificación Territorial Relacional

JEL classification: N9

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INTRODUCTION

This article starts with a once widely accepted example of arguing with regions. It was recently popular to divide the world as a whole into three parts: the so-called Three Worlds. Since 1989, however, the world has lived through a period of regional 'extinction'. The Second World of the Soviet Union and its allies disappeared from the global political and intellectual radar because the socio-political order that region represented disappeared. At the same time, the 'Other Worlds' this Second World held in place – the First World and the Third World – have necessarily lost their raison d'être. As in any classification scheme based on totalizing the differences between units, once that which the others were defined against disappears, the old regional labels and what they stand for no longer make much sense (PLETSCH, 1981). In other words, regions of whatever scale or definition are neither immediately self-evident as geographical designations nor meaningful outside of the historical context and theoretical frame of reference in which they are used.

But what if the geographical scale of regionalization represented by the Three Worlds had either long since failed to or never ever did capture the complex geography of the world in the twentieth century? From this point of view, the emerging regional 'reality' has been of a world either of meso-scale regions based around world cities challenging the division of the world into a set of mutually exclusive state territories (for example, SCOTT, 1998, 2001) or a world whose shape is increasingly complex and difficult to define according to a single regional measure or a limited set of criteria because of globalization and increased geographical differentiation of cultural and economic processes at a range of scales (for example, SCHWARZ and DIENST, 1996; COX, 1998, 2009; MACLEOD, 2001; BRENNER, 2004, 2009). Of course, such representations do not go unchallenged nor do they supersede attempts at stabilizing the world intellectually and politically by reasserting the power of old global–regional schemes of one sort or another such as civilizational blocs or Eurasia as the cockpit of world–political conflict (for example, HUNTINGTON, 1993; BRZEZINSKI, 1997; KELLY, 1997). Arguing with regions is always historically contingent.

Beyond the global scale and perhaps even as a response to the declining relevance of the regional schemas at that scale there has been a recent revival of interest in thinking with regions at other scales. Classifying the world by geographical areas seemingly cannot be avoided if one is both to make sense of it and acknowledge that many people also think about the world in terms of regional divisions at various scales. This revival extends well beyond the confines of geography as a field, so necessarily this survey must also. Regions are used to make arguments in a large number of fields. The main concern in this article in the context of this special issue is with how regions have come to be used as a classificatory device across the social sciences and history (from sociology and political science to geography and economic history), the various meanings given to regions in empirical research, and the main philosophical and theoretical controversies that have been sparked by their use. This is not primarily a survey of specific disputes about regions among geographers. Down the years others have had much to say about this (for example, HARTSHORNE, 1939; KIMBLE, 1951; MASSEY, 1979; NEUMANN, 2010; ENTRIKIN, 2011; JONAS, 2011). However, as the more general points related to arguing with regions are examined in this article, the endeavour is to situate the subsequent articles in this issue in relation to the more general overview of how regions have figured in arguments made by social scientists and historians of various casts.

This overview of the regional problematic in the social sciences first turns to how regions can qualify as classificatory devices for investigating a range of social, political and economic phenomena. It then considers four ways in which regions have been used in social science arguments (as so-called macro-regions in 'total history', functional regions and specific phenomena, geographical areas of similarity, and sub-national regional identities). The third section addresses seven controversies that have arisen over arguing with regions, a number of which are pursued explicitly and implicitly in other articles in this special issue: the region as a territorial or relational concept, the region as an idea versus a real object, regions as persistent over the *longue durée* or not, regions as particular contexts versus containers for case studies, some regions as 'modern' versus others as 'backward', regions as opposed to mobility, and regions as a feature of the past in a nationalizing world. Finally, it concludes by suggesting four ways in which regions can be thought of within the pluralistic conception of regional studies being championed: as communities, territories, networks and societies, giving brief examples of each and how they match different disciplinary and epistemological imperatives.

USING REGIONS AS GEOGRAPHICAL CLASSIFICATION DEVICES

In much popular usage and in many academic fields, the 'region' typically conjures up the idea of a homogeneous block of space that has a persisting distinctiveness due to its physical and cultural characteristics. The claim is that it exists 'out there' in the world, even if there is a prior requirement to think that the world is divided up in this way. This combination of a claim to real existence and the necessity for prior thought so as to define a region has caused untold problems for those trying to have their regionalization schemes

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accepted as more 'real' than others. It also leads to the opposition in contemporary geography between those who claim the mantle 'real' for their regions and those who regard all regions as mere inventions of an observer whose definitions say more about the political–social position of that observer than the phenomena the regions purport to classify. Thus, there are conflicts between realists and constructionists, empiricists and postmodernists.

The idea of the region typically goes against that of the nation-state as the fundamental geographical unit of account that has been at the heart of the humanities and social sciences as a whole since the late nineteenth century (DUARA, 1995). Yet, the 'view from below', or that of social groups marginalized in orthodox political history and often associated with, for example, social history and anthropology as fields of study, rests on the premise that the national scale typically represents the privileging of attention to the institutions associated with the interests and outlooks of modern political élites more than the reality of an homogeneous and enclosed society conforming to the political boundaries imposed by the modern system of territorial states. Moreover, not only have the world's political boundaries been unstable over even relatively short periods of time – consider how 'Poland' has moved across the map of Europe in this century – but also the geographical patterning of social life is by no means successfully captured by a singular focus on the national scale. Social networks, cultural influences, and economic linkages often transcend borders as well as cluster regionally inside them.

Of course, this is not to say that national-state-based processes of political and economic regulation are without substance in European social history. Since the nineteenth century in particular nation-states have played influential roles both in reinforcing and in changing various social phenomena. Rather, it is to suggest that the national is only one geographical scale among several in terms of relevance to understanding the long-term structuring of such phenomena as household and family organization, economic growth, industrial development, literacy, social protest, social-class formation, and political ideologies. Consequently, regions at a sub-national level and regions at a supra-national level are often invoked by social scientists, depending on the phenomenon in question, to provide more appropriate territorial units than the putative nation-state upon which to base their empirical investigations. As Otto Dann expressed the point with respect to social history:

> With the region, social history, liberated for some time from the weight of the national state, finally has found a more adequate concept of space. The region is the territory of the social historian, varying in its size and structure depending on the object of research.
>
> (DANN, 1989, p. 117)

Usage of the term 'region' is often without much conscious motivation other than either to group together nations that are apparently similar and thus to simplify a greater complexity or to ground local studies within a larger meso-regional/sub-national field of reference. The drawing of regional differences above and below the national scale also frequently involves deploying such familiar, and often theoretically unexamined, conceptual oppositions as modern–backward, capitalist–feudal and core–periphery, depending upon the theoretical orientation of the author in question. In this light, regions are often viewed as geographical units in narratives that are incidental to more fundamental processes operating across space and time.

The region, whatever its precise geographical and social parameters, however, is increasingly important in a range of fields, even when it is not rigorously defined as an inherent feature of a particular study. In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of studies explicitly engaging with sub-national regions, not least because of the regional–ethnic revivals going on around Europe, from Spain and the British Isles to the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. Regions as geographical units with which to define the *contexts* of study of a wide range of social structures and processes are therefore important both implicitly and explicitly in the contemporary humanities and social sciences.

Some 'schools' of history, particularly that associated with the *Annales* in interwar and immediate post-war France, have been explicitly devoted to avoiding the privileging of the state as the primary unit of geographical context. Perhaps the close link between Geography and History in France led to a greater recognition by social and economic historians of the importance of assumptions about the spatial units used in research that is largely missing in the English-speaking world where an abstract sounding but usually nationally oriented Sociology has tended to be more influential than Geography among historians. FERNAND BRAUDEL's classic study, *La Méditerranée et Le Monde Méditerranéen* (1949), is an excellent example of the use of an alternative geographical frame of reference, in this case an ocean basin, to the nation-states that had dominated historical research during the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth centuries. For Braudel's long-term total history the relatively short histories of European states posed a significant barrier to the historical understanding that only a larger regional entity, such as the Mediterranean world, could adequately convey. Of course, even Braudel eventually succumbed to the allure of national history in his *L'identité de la France* (1986), though this work remains more sensitive than the typical national history to the physical geography and regional distinctions of the territory that later became France as it is known today. In addition, according to Lynn Hunt:

> Despite the enormous prestige of *La Méditerranée*, Braudel's example did not elicit many works within the French historical community on cross-national networks of commercial exchange. Rather, French historians of the third *Annales* generation focused largely on France, and usually on one region of France. The best known of these great *theses* were *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (1966) by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis* (1960) by Pierre Goubert.
>
> (HUNT, 1986, p. 212)

More recently, world-systems frameworks, such as that of Immanuel Wallerstein (WALLERSTEIN, 1974), based on distinguishing the dynamic economic–geographical core macro-regions, such as Northwest Europe after 1700, from relatively peripheral or exploited ones, such as Eastern and Southern Europe; theoretical frameworks such as that of E. W. Fox (FOX, 1971) posing an opposition between 'commercial' and 'feudal' regions within countries such as France; and internal–colonial or mode of production arguments, such as those of Michael Hechter (HECHTER, 1976) and William Brustein (BRUSTEIN, 1988), identifying different types of regions within states with respect to political and social characteristics, represent different ways of explicitly incorporating regions into social–historical or economic analysis. Even greater emphasis on the role of regions as contexts for social invention and political affiliation can be found in the work of the economic historians Sidney Pollard (POLLARD, 1981) and Gary Herrigel (HERRIGEL, 1996), of economic sociologists such as Arnaldo Bagnasco (BAGNASCO, 1977) on local economic development and the social construction of the market, and of economic geographers such as Michael Storper (STORPER, 1995) and Allen Scott (SCOTT, 2001) on the importance of regionalized agglomeration economies to the overall geography of economic growth. Much research, however, tends to operate on an implicit rather than an explicit conception of region. Even as they adopt regional frameworks in their research, scholars are not always very self-conscious about the nature of the geographical divisions that they use.

ARGUING WITH REGIONS

Using mainly European examples, it could be said that five modes of usage of regions tend to have dominated across the social sciences. The first consists of *macro-regions* as units for the pursuit of total history. The *locus classicus* of this approach is BRAUDEL's *La Méditerranée et Le Monde Méditerranéen* (1949). The claim is that over long periods of time regions emerge based on functional linkages that then continue to distinguish one from the other. Such regions need not be ocean basins such as the Black Sea, the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean. They can be units determined by their relative orientations towards certain modes of production and exchange.

The example of FOX's *History in Geographic Perspective: The Other France* (1971) illustrates this case, as the logic of the argument need not be restricted to a single national setting. Struck by a France that seemed repeatedly to divide itself since the Revolution of 1789 into two socio-political divisions around 'order' and 'movement', Fox states that 'For an American, it was natural to begin by seeking to identify these societies in sectional terms' (p. 13). Unlike the United States, however, France has had nothing like a regional–sectional civil war since at least the medieval Albigensian Crusade. Fox finds the regional division in the different communications orbits that have emerged down the years between a Paris-oriented interior France and an externally oriented commercial France along the coasts. He gives the argument a transcendental appeal by claiming that the opposition between an agricultural–military society, on the one hand, and a commercial–seagoing society, on the other, can be found in ancient Greece and in medieval Europe as much as in the modern world. What Fox is distinguishing between is a subsistence society dependent on control of territory and a waterborne commercial society dependent on access to flows of goods and capital. The two 'types' of society achieved their most characteristic forms during the 'long' century between the revolutions of the sixteenth century and the French Revolution. The social commentators of the time, such as Charles-Louis Montesquieu, clearly recognized them. Fox uses the dichotomous model as a framework for exploring the course of French social history since 1789, but accepts that by the Fifth Republic the opposition between two societies had largely run its material course, even if the legacy of the two Frances still 'left its imprint upon the political preferences of their members' (FOX-GENOVESE and GENOVESE, 1989, p. 237).

Fox's regionalization rests on what can be called a fixed spatial division of labour between two different modes of production which though present within the boundaries of the same state nevertheless have both fractured that state and led to distinctive social orders (class struggles, inheritance systems, religious and political affiliations, etc.) within it. Thus, the history of France (and, Fox suggests, many other states) cannot be understood satisfactorily as a singular whole but only in terms of the opposition and interaction between 'two Frances' based upon competing principles of social and economic organization. Though articulated in the setting of a specific (perhaps the quintessential) nation-state, Fox's argument is similar to other macro-regional ones in pointing to the *persistence* of regional patterns of social and political behaviour as the foundation for interpreting other social phenomena. Whether such phenomena can be invariably reduced to the opposition is, of course, another thing entirely.

The second and perhaps most common mode of use is that of dividing up Europe into *functional regions* to

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examine specific phenomena such as class transitions and transformations of rule, industrialization, urbanization, and trade. Sometimes these regions are at a macro-scale, as with the divisions between Western and Eastern Europe (or between Western, Central/Middle and Eastern Europe) in such works as BARRINGTON MOORE, JR's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1960) (although this study extends in scope well beyond Europe per se), PERRY ANDERSON's *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), and WILLIAM MCNEILL's *The Shape of European History* (1974), and sometimes the regions are more fine-grained and sub-national, as in GARY HERRIGEL's study of German industrialization, *Industrial Constructions* (1996), CHARLES TILLY's work (for example, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992*, 1991) on the logics of coercion and capital in European urbanization and state formation, and work on regional differences in artistic production as in CASTELNUOVO and GINZBURG's (1994) work on Italy.

Stein Rokkan's geographical template for Europe as a whole with respect to rates and degrees of state formation (for example, ROKKAN and URWIN, 1983), is an example of work that brings together the main west–east division of the continent with the centre–periphery differences that have developed within the emerging states. Among other things, Rokkan noted that adjacent states tended to develop similar forms of government and that there was a fairly systematic north–south and east–west dimensionality to this variation. He represented spatial variation between states in a series of schematic diagrams transforming Europe into an abstract space by drawing on crucial periods and processes in European socio-political history. Three periods/processes are seen as crucial. The first is the pattern of the peopling and vernacularization of language in the aftermath of the Roman Empire. This produces a geo-ethnic map of Europe based on the south–north influence of the Romans and a west to east physical geography/ethnic geography of the settlement of new groups and their differentiation from one another. The second is the pattern of economic development and urbanization in medieval/early modern Europe, distinguishing a south–north axis drawn largely with reference to the impact of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation and an east–west axis with strong seaward states to the west, a belt of city-states in the centre, and a set of weak landward states to the east. The third is the way in which recent democratization has produced different responses in different regions with smaller, unitary states in the extreme west, larger, unitary states flanking them to the east, a belt of federal and consociational states in the centre, and a set of 'retrenched empires' and successor authoritarian states yet further to the east.

This geographical template draws attention to systematic geographic variation in the forms of European states and how they arose out of different combinations of social and economic processes. It is particularly original in pointing out the distinctiveness of a long-established urbanized region running from Italy in the south to Flanders in the north. But this use of regionalization neglects the ways in which the social divisions to which Rokkan refers (ethnic identities, city-states versus territorial states and empires, religious affiliations) are translated into political power and how this in turn affects the character of state formation. An entire stage in the process of creating the political map of Europe is missing. As TILLY (1991) put it, perhaps a little too forcefully:

> It is hard to see how Rokkan could have gotten much farther without laying aside his maps and concentrating on the analysis of the mechanisms of state formation.
>
> (p. 13)

The third use is to aggregate together lower-level units (counties, departments, etc.) without much regard for national boundaries to identify persisting patterns of demographic, social and political behaviour. Regions are thus *geographical areas of similarity* extending across space and time. This inductive approach to regionalization is most common in studies of demography, literacy, land tenure, economic growth and the development of political ideologies. This very different approach to the use of regions uses local government areas in different countries as the basis for identifying clusters of units that can cross national boundaries and that define formal regions sharing particular attributes to one degree or another. Maps can be made of such phenomena as family types, fertility and mortality rates, rates of suicide, types of land holding, modes of agrarian organization (share cropping, peasant proprietorship, capitalist agriculture, etc.), literacy, religious practice (for example, attendance at Catholic mass), levels of industrial employment, civic culture, and levels of support for ideological parties of the right and the left (for example, GOODY *et al.*, 1976; LE BRAS, 1979; GRAFF, 1981; PUTNAM, 1993). These maps can also be correlated to see to what extent the various phenomena co-vary spatially with one another. For example, high suicide rates correlate highly in some places with high rates of illegitimate births and high female autonomy (for example, much of Sweden and Finland), but elsewhere, as in Southern Portugal, they seem to correlate more with something absent in the rest of Europe, perhaps going back to the recovery of the region from Islamic conquest, matrilineal inheritance of names, equal relations in families between parents, and a nuclear ideal of family (TODD, 1990, pp. 56–61).

EMANUEL TODD's *L'invention d'Europe* (1990) can be taken as a good example of this genre of usage. Various hypotheses about secularization of European society, the impact of industrialization, and the persisting effects on politics and social life of historic forms of household and family organization have been investigated by

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Todd and others taking this approach. Todd is perhaps the most forceful in his claim for basing the incidence of a wide range of social phenomena on the prior spatial distribution of family types. He shows quite convincingly that family types (communal, nuclear, stem, etc.), inheritance customs, parent–child relations, and certain features of fertility in Europe do not conform to national-level patterns. Rather, there are both localized clusters within countries and regional groupings which criss-cross national boundaries. What is less convincing is the degree to which other social phenomena are truly the outcome of the 'underlying' demographic and familial characteristics rather than mediated regionally by a range of economic and social pressures that have extra-regional rather than historically accrued local sources. The tendency is to interpret rigidly regional patterns of 'higher-level' phenomena (such as political ideologies or civic cultures) as arising from long-term regional patterns of familial and demographic features (for example, SABETTI, 1996).

Fourth is the usage associated with the so-called *new regionalism*. This refers to those theoretical and policy perspectives that directly relate the relevance of regions to the economic restructuring of national economies in the face of globalization and supranational regionalization (above all with the European Union). The overall focus is on the 'hollowing out' of national economies and the regulatory response to this as manifested in the growth of regional-level initiatives to manage economic challenges. The new regionalism literature has a number of strands. One strand emphasizes newly empowered regions arising as a consequence of central government and cross-national border initiatives in response to economic restructuring, sometimes seeing these as a direct administrative response (for example, BRENNER, 2004) sometimes more as a political response to the dilemmas facing states in contemporary circumstances (for example, LAGENDIJK, 2007). Other strands stress either the development of global-city regions (for example, SCOTT, 1998) or the emergence of metropolitan-level political coalitions pursuing resolutions to local economic challenges (for example, COX, 2010). All these approaches tend to share economic–functionalist logic in that regions are seen as a 'response' to the 'need' for a new regulatory framework in the face of economic change (AGNEW, 2012). Other major criticisms include a tendency to reify regions as fixed containers rather than seeing them in relational terms as only operational in relation to the networks and flows that define them (for example, ALLEN and COCHRANE, 2007) and the dissolution of the state as a continuing defining actor in their formation and operation (for example, THERBORN, 2011). Nevertheless, the new regionalism can still be seen as an important vehicle for the introduction of regions into ongoing debates about globalization. Indeed, this literature serves as an important source for many of the arguments deployed by the articles in this issue.

Finally, the explosion of regionalist and separatist movements in Europe has stimulated considerable interest in the emergence and roots of regional identities in relation to national ones. *Sub-national regional identities* have become the focus for social historians and others concerned with the history and restructuring of European political identities (for example, APPLEGATE, 1999). Nations and regions are typically understood as categories of practice that are reified or given separate existence by people struggling to define themselves as members of this or that group. Much work seeks to identify the diversity of group identities in contemporary Europe and how they have arisen. A distinctive current, however, tries to relate regional to national identities as they have arisen over the past several hundred years. The basic premise is that regional and national identities are often intertwined rather than necessarily oppositional and that only with the rise of globalization and the emergence of supranational agencies such as the European Union have these connections undergone significant challenge (for example, MURPHY, 1993; KEATING, 1995).

Charlotte Tacke, for example, in comparing the historical construction of French and German national identities, claims that

> the individual's identification with the nation … rests on a large variety of social ties, which simultaneously forge the links between the individual and the nation.
>
> (TACKE, 1994, p. 698)

The most important ties are those constituted in regions, which serve as 'cultural and social space' for 'civic communication'. Local bourgeoisies in both countries created renewed regional identities at precisely the same time that the symbols they selected (honouring ancient heroes in statues, for example) were made available for appropriation by nation-building elites. In these cases, therefore, regional identities fed into the national ones and were thus frequently lost from sight.

Elsewhere in Europe, however, regional identities, particularly those coming to the fore recently, appear more as acts of opposition than of accommodation to national ones (AGNEW, 1995; PAASI, 2002). This is the message not only of the internal–colonial and mode of production approaches, but also of constructivist approaches that emphasize the tendency of region and nation to become synonymous in some social–cultural contexts. Resistant regional identities, such as the Irish and Basque ones, have taken shape around claims to nationhood. Unlike the French and German cases, they have tried to develop alternative spatial mythologies to the dominant nations within their respective states (the English and the Castilian, respectively), but are often forced into terms of debate and the use of institutional forms that signify the inevitability of at least a degree of accommodation to the territorial status quo. Of course, the resistant regional identities suggest that the word 'region' in political usage is itself

dependent on the prior existence of nation-states of which the regions are presently part but could possibly become their own nations in the future.

One lesson is clear: if all of the other meanings of the term discussed previously are neglected in pursuit of the currently fashionable interest in political regionalism and regional identities, then one will be left with thin intellectual gruel indeed – regions are only potential nations in the making. The attempt to find an alternative regional accounting system to that of the dominant national one would then have come full circle.

CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE USES OF REGIONS

Down the years, seven disputes or controversies about regions have episodically flared up both to challenge and to enliven the generally consensus view of regions as homogeneous, self-evident blocks of terrestrial space. This article cannot hope to cover each of these in great detail. The purpose is to give the flavour of what has been at stake in arguing with regions as a modus operandi in social science research and show how the various disputes show up in subsequent articles in this special issue.

The first controversy has been about the ways in which the areas designated as regions at whatever geographical scale (local, sub-national, continental or global) are integrated and/or exhibit homogeneous characteristics. Typically, regions are thought of as areas exhibiting uniformity with respect to one or more characteristics. This view has been challenged by scholars who claim that such regions are often purely *formal*, in the sense that they are the result of aggregating smaller geographical units (census districts, municipalities, provinces, etc.) according to statistical similarity without attending to what it is that binds the region together with respect to *functional* ties. Functional ties include the network/circulation linkages (transport, migration, trade and capital flows) and central-place (settlement hierarchy) links that create distinctive regions and from which their other characteristics are derived (as described, for example, in HOHENBERG and LEES, 1994).

Of course, regions are often politically defined by governments (PATRIARCA, 1994) and political movements (such as separatist ones). They can also have affective meaning for local populations (APPLEGATE, 1999). In such cases, the absolute formal/functional opposition fails to account for the subjective identifications that people can have with formal regions even if it continues to serve a useful analytic purpose more generally in questioning the territorial homogeneity assumption on which much regionalization tends to rely (LÈVY, 1997). Institutionalization of regions as legitimate political forms seems particularly crucial in underpinning their role in building regional political identities and in persisting as effective agents of economic development (see Garcia-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaria, in this issue). As Zimmerbauer (in this issue) emphasizes for the Barents Sea supranational region, however, top-down designations rarely seem enough for either. There must be some impetus from local actors.

The recent call to think of geographic space in entirely relational and non-territorial terms can be thought of as extending the idea of functionality, but also perhaps brings into doubt the entire idea of regionalizing at all (JONES, 2009). Functionality relies on a relative view of space in which the objects and processes of interest are differentiated in some way by how they relate in one region from how they do in another. From this viewpoint, regions are still territorial entities, even though they are integrated differently than when they are thought of as absolute spaces, as with the formal sense of a region. On a relational view, regions can no longer be ascribed either a classificatory or a political–economic–cultural role in themselves, but only as clusters of nodes and flows that regions are held to represent. In this perspective, all that counts is connectivity across space (for example, AMIN, 2004). Dividing space territorially misses precisely what space does: it relates objects and has no meaning apart from them. Yet, of course, as much of the research discussed by AMIN (2004) attests, 'regions' are powerful sources of social and political identification and social life remains bounded and regionalized in ways that defy the presumed total 'openness' of space on a relational basis. An epistemological obsession with the nature of space can miss the ontological significance of regions for practical life (ENTRIKIN, 2011; MUSSO, 2003; see Ramutsindela, in this issue).

The uses and limitations of the 'relational debate' are examined at some length by Varró and Lagendijk (in this issue). In identifying two groups of scholars subscribing to 'radical' and 'moderate' positions on relationality, they suggest that the groups tend to argue past one another because the former tend to have an ontological understanding of relationality, whereas the latter see it in terms of empirical connectedness. The solution, they say, is to think of regions when defined as possible instruments for economic policies and political representation, as being 'constituted relationally through agonistic struggles'. In other words, regions come to exist and take on significance only in the context of their wider political and institutional settings. Harrison (in this issue) reaches a somewhat different conclusion when in surveying the course of the 'debate' over the years he argues that in the case of a North West England region a spatial development strategy initially configured around a network conception could not escape 'the territorial mosaic of politico-administrative units' inherited from the past. To the extent that the relational view relies on the practical character of networks, therefore, it cannot ever escape from the equally practical constraints exercised by the powers of

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existing territorial–administrative arrangements (also see Zimmerbauer, in this issue).

Another dispute, mentioned at the outset, and going back to Immanuel Kant, concerns the belief that regions are real in the sense of marking off truly distinctive bits of the Earth's surface versus the view that they are the product solely of political and social conventions that impose regions on a much more geographically variegated world. There is a visceral tension between the idea that something is *real* and that is *constructed*. But are they indeed as mutually exclusive as the dispute suggests? The opposition between the real and the conventional has once again arisen to prominence in recent disputes among geographers over the character of region and place (ENTRIKIN, 1996, 2011; SACK 1997; LEWIS and WIGEN, 1997). On the one hand, the real is like the body in Philosophy's mind–body problem. It is tangible, touchable and empirically visible. On the other hand, the constructed is like the mind making sense of itself and the body. Consciousness is prior to how the body works. Each of these positions rests on the same confusion between an object (a region) and an idea about that object (regional schemes). Regions both reflect differences in the world and ideas about the geography of such differences. They cannot be reduced simply to one or the other (AGNEW, 1999). As Varró and Lagendijk (in this issue) argue, this confusion continues to bedevil much recent writing about regions.

A third controversy has focused on the tendency to see regions as fixed for long time periods rather than mutable and subject to reformulation, even over relatively short periods. Leading figures in the *Annales* school, such as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, world-systems theorists, and demographic historians have been particularly drawn to the idea of macro-regions as the settings for long-term structural history. At the same time others, particularly local historians and regional geographers, have invested heavily in the idea of fixed regional divisions and unique regional entities within countries, owing their uniqueness to 'internal' characteristics. One thinks, for example, of such an influential study as ROBERT PUTNAM's *Making Democracy Work* (1993) which posits a set of Italian regional differences in political mores more or less immutable since the tenth century AD. In recent years, however, with the increased sense of a world subject to time–space compression, following the opening of national borders to increased trade, capital, and labour mobility and the shrinkage of global communication and transportation costs, regions are increasingly seen as *contingent* on the changing character of the larger contexts in which they are embedded rather than dependent on *unique* features of a more-or-less permanent nature (JOHNSTON *et al.*, 1990; GUPTA and FERGUSON, 1997). This understanding animates Rutherford and Holmes (in this issue), who show how shifts in the organization of automotive industry workplaces within the Ontario (Canada)–Great Lakes (United States) cross-border region owe as much to the rapidly changing dynamics of demands on labour force characteristics as to relatively stable national–institutional traditions.

Less noted but perhaps more importantly with respect to the meaning of regions for social history and economic geography, a debate has periodically erupted over regions as fundamental *contexts* for social life as opposed to mere accounting devices or *case study settings* taken as examples of national or Europe-wide norms and standards. With respect to industrialization, for example, POLLARD (1981) has argued that regions are the relevant entities for considering the processes whereby different industries developed. Each brings different combinations of attributes crucial to the establishment of specific industries. In like manner, social and political processes relating to household structures, class formation, and political movements can all be thought of as embedded in regional and local contexts, 'the physical arenas in which human interaction takes place' (WEITZ, 1995, p. 291), rather than as abstract or national-level processes only manifesting themselves regionally, as presumed by the idea of the regional case study. The case study is always of something that is presumably not regional as such, hence the reference to 'case study'. MARTIN and SUNLEY (1996) made much the same point when criticizing the conception of region in the 'new' geographical economics for reducing regions entirely to externality containers rather than seeing them as also involving institutional and cultural contexts that can also systematically affect regional patterns of growth and change. An important contribution of Thomas (in this issue) is to show how much economic development in a region (in this case the South West of England) owes to harnessing the region's accumulated creative impulses for self-governance as much as the economic organization of the end-products for sale elsewhere.

A fifth controversy has involved the tendency to represent the character of regions by locating them along a temporal continuum from the *backward* or traditional at one end and the *advanced* or modern at the other. This conversion of time into space has been particularly important in historicizing and exoticizing certain sub-national regions (such as the Italian South, the Scottish Highlands and Andalusia) and countries as a whole (such as Italy or Ireland) into a schema representing the historical trajectory of Europe as a whole (AGNEW, 1996). Thus, presumably isolated and remote regions with lower levels of economic growth than more central regions are viewed as lagging behind the more advanced ones, notwithstanding the long-term ties that bind such regions into their particular nation-states. This tendency has given rise to a contending view that poorer regions are poor because the richer ones have become rich at their expense (as in HECHTER, 1976, on the British Isles). In other words,

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it is not a temporal lag but rather spatial exploitation that lies behind regional differences in economic development and social change. Though also criticizing 'radical' relational conceptions of regions, Ramutsindela (in this issue) illustrates neatly how much the relative location of regions within a country, in this case South Africa, depends on coeval power relations across regions rather than on the inherent character of different regions judged according to a temporal scale categorizing differences in economic development.

A sixth controversy arises because regions are often seen as diametrically opposed in character to the realities of population movement that are such an evident part of many people's lives. In other words, regions are simple spatial containers that cannot possibly match the dynamism of mobility. This position animates many of the relativist and relational critiques of regionalizing mentioned previously. In fact, the conventional territorial sense of region need not be seen in such a light. Much recent attention to place as a concept has attempted to mediate between the relatively fixed and the relatively mobile in defining geographical contexts. In this construction, nomads, travellers, temporary migrants, commuters and other itinerants, even while inherently mobile, also define places (more specifically, locales) with which to move and in which to rest and interact. Thus, rather than the opposite to or disruptive of place or region, *mobility* is an inherent part of how many places are defined and operate (CRESSWELL, 2004).

For example, commuting paths are very much part of the experience of place of many people and migrants often maintain social ties over long distances and thus acquire different senses of place than those of their more spatially rooted neighbours. The kinship, migrant itineraries and ritual exchanges that form personhood do not necessarily require long histories of sedentary habitation. In a 'frontier region' of East Java, Indonesia, for example, the anthropologist RETSIKAS (2007) noted that place is a tool of sociality; by which he means that because people

> move and stop, settle, and move again … places are shifting and changing, always becoming through people's engagements – material as well as discursive – in, through, and with them. … In other words, place is not where social relations simply take place, but an inherent ingredient of their modalities of actualization.
>
> (pp. 971–972)

The relational views of regions discussed by Varró and Lagendijk and others in this issue seem particularly appropriate in taking population mobility into account in their approach to regions. Rather than fixed containers it is the relative openness/closedness of regions to the dynamics of population movement that defines one of the ways in which they mediate between established social routines and new possibilities introduced from outside.

From this point of view, contexts of place and time are perhaps not best thought of as invariably regional (in the sense of sub-national) or local, although they frequently have elements of one or both. Rather, they are best considered as always located somewhere with some contexts more stretched over space (such as means of mass communication and the spatial division of labour) and others more localized (school, workplace and residential interactions). The balance of influence on social and political choices between and among the stretched and more local contextual processes can be expected to change over time, giving rise to subsequent shifts in political outlooks and affiliations (for example, NICHOLLS, 2009). So, for example, as foreign companies introduce branch plants, trade unions must negotiate new work practices, which, in turn, erode long-accepted views of the roles of managers and employees. In due course, this sort of *configuration of contextual changes* can, for example, give an opening to a new political party or a redefined old one as interests, identities and political heuristics (yardsticks) shift and upset established political affiliations (for example, AGNEW, 2007; CUTLER, 2007). But changes must always fit into existing cultural templates and cleavages that often show amazing resilience as well as adaptation. Identities of regions can persist as influences on behaviour even as regional consciousness, in the sense of lives buried in singular regional contexts, weakens (PAASI, 2002). Indeed, much of the political regionalism increasingly found in different parts of the world reflects the former as much as or more than the latter. The overall point about the openness of places or regions is made well by Doreen Massey, when she wrote:

> This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of isolation – now to be disrupted by globalization – but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there.
>
> (MASSEY, 1999, p. 22)

Finally, perhaps the dominant sense of many scholars about regions, particularly of regions at the sub-national level, has been of entities destined to fade in significance with the creation of national markets, the emergence of national political parties with more or less uniform support across all regions, and the spread of national cultures robbing local and regional identities of their specificity. This *nationalization* or modernization thesis, articulated in works ranging from EUGEN WEBER's general study of late-nineteenth century France, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), to SUSAN COTTS WATKINS's survey of demographic indicators (fertility rates, women's age at marriage, etc.) across Western Europe between 1870 and 1960, *From Provinces into Nations* (1991), relies on the premise that social organization in Europe has undergone a fundamental shift from local and regional levels to the national scale. This premise is a shaky one, however. Not only can some of

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the data in a study such as that of Watkins be interpreted to indicate re-provincialization after a period of nationalization, but also nationalization of demographic indicators need not indicate the substitution of regional sources of social influence by national ones. Rather, demographic behaviour may still be mediated through the regionally specific routines and institutions of everyday life yet yield increasing similarity of behavioural outcomes across regions. The same goes for religious affiliations, voting, consumption and other types of social behaviour, some of which betray regional patterns that conform little or at all with national political boundaries (TODD, 1990; AGNEW, 1987; CARTOCCI, 1994). All of the articles in this issue speak to the continuing relevance of regions in various guises as continuing the work of mediating various forms of social, economic and political behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Arguing with regions has been a major feature of social science of various genres for many years. This article has briefly traced the lineage of some perspectives that are avowedly 'regionalist'. This can involve adopting a certain kind of region as a case study for a specific phenomenon or using regions as the basis for undertaking comparative analysis. The use of regions as an alternative classificatory framework to states has become well established, particularly at a time when the world is perhaps less meaningfully thought of entirely in state-based terms. This article has described with examples how regions have been used in a number of distinctive ways in actual social science research: as macro-regions, functional regions, geographical areas of similarity and sub-national regional political identities. There is hardly a singular or overarching conception of region inspiring all of these approaches. This reflects the fact that there have been numerous philosophical and theoretical challenges to arguing with regions. This article has surveyed seven of these, from the formal/functional, real/conventional and relational space to case study/context, mobility/fixity, backward/modern, and nationalization of regions. In a sense these disputes are irresolvable, resting as they do on competing assumptions about the nature of space and time, the relative roles of thought and practice in designating regions, and the methodological traditions of different research fields. What they also suggest, however, is a lively and continuing debate about the 'regional question' that extends across a number of disciplines. The region is often pronounced dead in a particular guise only to be resurrected in another. Altogether, one cannot seem to avoid arguing with regions in one mode or another. The articles in this special issue provide some interesting and distinctive ways in which dialogue about the uses and limitations of regions in argument can be pushed forward outside the constraints imposed by the typical usages necessarily assumed in the empirical work that regularly appears in the pages of *Regional Studies*.

By way of conclusion, it seems clear that there is no single way of best arguing with regions, at whatever geographical scale is of interest, and there are plenty of plausible arguments about what regions are and how regions should be used. Usage is so diverse and disputes over the substance and philosophy of regions are too contentious to allow for application of a single principle of division. This being the case, four general conceptions of regions in theory and practice can be suggested. The first concerns that of distinctive regional *communities* which can share identities as well as other socio-political characteristics. This conception is most useful for those focusing on the vagaries of sub-national political regionalism as well as the persistence of socio-political traits from the past. The second is that of geo-political *territories* under construction and challenge, often on the peripheries of states. Apparently less relevant to the interests of many sociologists and economic historians, this one is useful for those concerned with the tensions and conflicts associated with state formation and disintegration. As authors such as Rokkan and Tilly have suggested, historically based lines of geographical fracture both between and within states have emerged due to differences in state-organization and the divergent histories of capitalism. The third is that of geographical *networks* which tie together regions through hierarchies of cities and their hinterlands. This is most relevant to studies of industrialization, urbanization and trade. The fourth is that of regional *societies* which now share a wide range of social and cultural characteristics. This fits the needs of those interested in associating social indicators to examine hypotheses about trends in social phenomena such as classes, family types, secularization, economic development and political activities by identifying formal regions.

The main lesson to be drawn from this analysis is that we should collectively invest in the plural of 'regional logics', tailoring usage to the problems at hand, rather than in a singular logic that simply replaces the romance of the nation-state with an equally simple and one-size-fits-all alternative geographical unit of account such as the ocean basin, the civilization, the administrative region or the global city-region. All of these, if one can forgive the pun, have their place.

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