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Conclusion: towards an Agenda for a New Regional History

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In one form or another, the various chapters of this volume have addressed the problem of regions and their borders in the different parts of Europe from the later middle ages to the present. In terms of a uniform matrix of what constitutes a region, what are its key ingredients, and what forms regional identity, it may be that the discussion of a regional discourse in the foregoing chapters has not brought us much closer to this goal. Historians are in any case less interested in devising clear-cut formulas about the essential character of a region than in the historical interpretations of such regions and how these change over time. In this respect the study of a regional agenda past and present in comparative European context has proved highly illuminating: it has provided an ideal laboratory to understand the use of a version of history for a specific purpose at a particular time. Most of the chapter assembled here have analysed 'their' region with this question in mind: they have asked how the agents of a regional agenda have utilized the past to their own ends and how notions of regionality have changed over time. In this way, the chapters have been able to demonstrate how interest groups, politicians, minority leaders and others have appropriated or even invented or amended for their own particular purposes the regional space to which they have laid claim. For instance, political activists in Ireland in the 19th century wrote histories which argued that what was then seen as a region of the British Empire which was sadly in need of firm imperial governance so as to civilize the backward natives was, in fact, the home of a nation of itself, fully up to the challenge of self-government. Both Magyars and Slovaks in Southern Slovakia invoked versions of the past, traditions which needed to be revived, and also remembered histories of suppression and injustice which, so they claimed, needed to be rectified. In many cases cities and towns became the focus of a regional agenda: in Ireland, reading rooms were used as meeting places for political activists; in Slovakia urban space was appropriated for – very often contesting – regional agendas expressed in monuments, street and place names and architecture.

In the same way, it was possible for states to exploit border regions so as to develop and emphasize a rhetoric of difference. Transylvania became the arena for contesting minority identities, with Romanians, Hungarians and Saxons all jockeying for position.

In Flanders, it was the politicians and intellectuals working for the Spanish Empire who forged, not least with the tools of historiography, a unifying response to the threat of their northern (and later southern) neighbour and who shaped a country which hitherto had exhibited strong particularist tendencies and a history of internal strife into a bastion of the Counter-Reformation. This strategy, however, could only work with the complicity of the local elites who made clear choices in respect of their alliances, weighing the pros and cons of an alliance with Spain. Flanders was certainly not the victim of Spanish centralism; but the Spanish regime there was preferred to what was perceived as either Calvinist or, later, French absolutism. Likewise, the Pyrenees, as has been pointed out, contributed greatly to the formation of national identity and the shaping of territorial borders. In regard to the creation of the British multiple monarchy, the attempted transformation of the Anglo-Scottish border region into the Middle Shires proved more problematic: rival nations which had confronted each other across a military frontier for the past three centuries were not so soon merged into a unified Middle region. In Ireland, however, where the political elites of the two medieval nations were challenged by a new colonial elite of English and Scots, the old Anglo-Gaelic frontier and traditional rivalries disappeared remarkably quickly, as cultural markers of identity gave place to religious divisions within this newly-created kingdom of the British monarchy. Overall, we may say that border regions were often fortified as bastions of national identity and memory and in many cases – but not all, as the Irish case makes clear – this role is still firmly embedded in public memory. At the same time, however, there existed alternative discourses of cross-border commonality, which have been overlooked or silenced in the national historiographies of the 19th and 20th centuries.

As individual chapters in this volume have implied, a fruitful approach to future research in this field may well be to liberate the sub-national sphere of identity from its status as a mere periphery to a national centre, thus offering a new and, as we hope, empowering interpretation of regional identities in Europe¹. It also seems important to understand regions not just as part of a wider web centred around a national heartland; but also as – more or less – independent players in a wider cross-border context. While regions may have been peripheral to their national centre, they may also have been central to economic and/or cultural developments of a cross-border character, thus directing energies outside the national framework. An instructive example of this kind is the pattern of cultural transfer across the Anglo-Gaelic marches of the English Pale in Tudor Ireland which has already been mentioned here: in the longer term, this pattern laid the foundations for a modern nation with its own distinct sense of identity. Culturally and administratively, the English and Gaelic inhabitants of an English border region gave rise to the modern Irish nation and to a nation state which had previously been a province of the British state. Further, as Aleida Assmann has rightly pointed out, national borders have to be reconceptualized as internal – rather than external – borders in a common Europe; and in this new context border regions need to function as

transmitters between two nations – as indeed they have in the past². Politically, it may be argued, this goal has already been successfully achieved in many instances through the development of Euregios, which are deliberately designed to build bridges between neighbouring countries. Euregio projects mostly have a very practical approach to border scenarios: they facilitate the study of the language of the respective partner, they mediate and support cross-border employment and social services, and they try to bring businesses together. In terms of developing a common cultural bond based on a common cultural heritage, however, they have achieved very little thus far. A future research agenda might wish to pursue this still neglected area of study by a reassessment of the relationship between regions and states, one which looks beyond the revisionist interpretations of these entities which prevailed in earlier European scholarship.

In order for European citizens to contextualize their identities within the geography and ideology of a new Europe, there are good grounds for thinking that the regional discourse needs to be detached from its currently prevalent anti-state master narrative. Such a project needs also to call in question the established paradigm of a centre-periphery dichotomy in state formation and nation building, one which invariably reduces the region and its inhabitants to a subsidiary role: according to this paradigm, the people of the region were often forced to change their way of life, and their political agents also had to adapt their strategies, to meet the needs of a larger, supposedly more “dynamic” centre – if we want to avoid such contested terms as “progressive” – which is usually associated with a capital or metropolis and her immediate hinterland. A comparative approach to the role of regions across Europe would also help to uncover similarities as well as specific differences between European nations at different times and would also, it is hoped, relativize the association between the nation state and modernity and the concomitant relegation of the region to the status of a periphery and victimhood. Such an agenda would require research from many disciplines. The study of historiography and of cultures of memory certainly provides highly important insights into how societies past and present have conceptualized regional space: tradition – in its numerous expressions as commemorative practices, narratives and also in its omissions and silences – undoubtedly offers one of the most prominent markers of regional identity. Architects, art historians, ethnographers, social scientists and literary scholars can all play their part in helping to unravel what were often complex and conflicting regional narratives. This is the agenda for a new regional history which is suggested by the chapters of the present volume.

NOTES

- ¹ For some initial approaches to this topic, see the latest Special Issue of the “European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’Histoire”, 2008, 15, 3, *Municipalism, Regionalism, Nationalism: Hybrid Identity Formations and the Making of Modern Europe*, and in particular the introduction by M. Umbach (pp. 235-242) and the article by D. Lavan, T. Bancroft, *Border regions and identities*, which discusses several models of spatial identities and their application to border regions such as French Flanders and Trieste (pp. 255-275).
- ² A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Munich 2006, p. 265.