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New regional identities in a global world

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Abstract:

Regional movements are emerging in Europe, often to promote historical, cultural or economic regions. Are we going to have a new regional Europe with 60 regions instead of 27 nation-states ?

Keywords: regions, regional geography, centralisation, federation, confederation

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New regional identities in a global world

Antoine Bailly

The concept of region

What is a region ? Is it an homogenous area from a physical point of view and can one talk of a natural region ? Is it a heterogeneous area with a basic structure such as a river or a fluvial basin ? Is it a cultural area based on a common way of life or an area based on a city and its hinterland – a so-called nodal region ? In fact, all are regions even if, for a long time, natural regions were the only ones considered by the scientists owing to the dominance of the naturalist point of view. This was the case in the 19th century when a "Darwinian" and determinist approach emphasized the influence of nature on mankind. Close relations between environment and people were used to explain life in a region often called a "pays". It was a way to organize the biosphere into regions, by labelling the species and the drawing biome boundaries. This approach was well developed by the German school of geography. The regions were classified, like plants, by their geology, soils, nature, and climate – giving birth to groups of people behaving in a similar way.

In contrast, the French school of Geography at the beginning of the 20th century, was developing a "possibilist" approach. The basis for this was that, if there is a natural environment in a region, people can choose from the possibilities to develop their economic, social and cultural life. The physical environment is just seen as a base for territorial development. Since regions composing France were diversified, each of them could create its own way of life and choose to be part of a nation, France despite the physical differences.

The concept of landscape was developed by Sauer in the U.S in the 1930's. The landscape expresses a natural, social and aesthetic unity, the intimacy between a culture and a region. Regional landscapes have been shaped by human activity, and a special attention is given to the patterns of forests, fields, roads, since cultural groups have different ways of settling the land. This concept is associated with the idea of a common human life, a community, building its way of life and its sense of place.

The french concept of region was used after World War 1 and 2 to reorganize European nations. As an example, each of the Balkan countries was created by uniting a cluster of regions – the underlying hypotheses being that they would share a sense of national unity. History shows us that this was not the case and the world "balkanization" is now used to show a dislocation of territories; cultural regions had more identity than the new nation states and this led to ethnic and religious conflicts. As in many nations in Africa and in the Middle East.

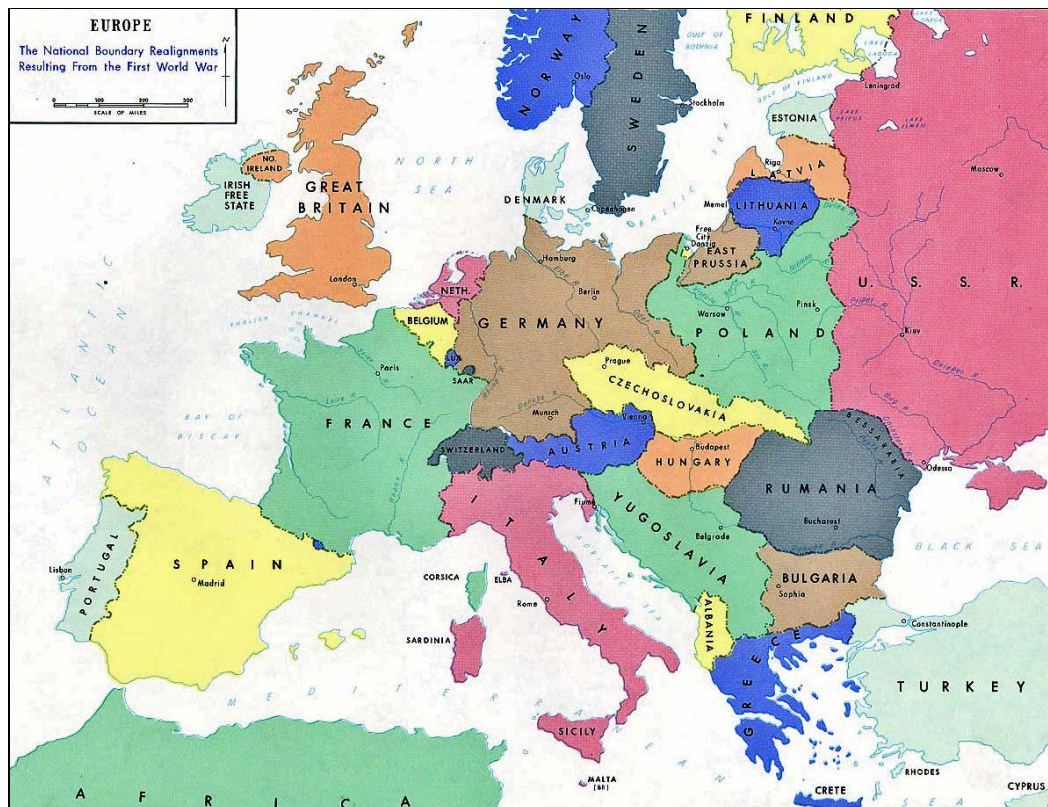


Fig. 1: Europe after the First World War
http://www.emersonkent.com/map_archive/europe_1919.htm
 Courtesy of the United States Military Academy Department of History

The french concept of region was exported in other parts of the world. It had significant effects on the development of regional identities and sometimes separatist movements, as in Québec, for linguistic and cultural reasons. Following the recent growth of sustainability concepts, the regions can be now considered as spatial systems, with their structures and regulations : men, resources, capital, know-how which build forces for regional development organized often from the cities and metropolitan areas.

Regional indicators deal, through Geographic Information Systems (G.I.S.), with environmental variables (global warming, pollutions...), land planning (buildings, places, infrastructures...) and flows (of water, energy, cars, inhabitants...). This very complex reality is integrated in Regional Information Systems (R.I.S.), composed by databases, which can also integrate social values, such as quality of life indicators and citizen satisfaction criterias. Desicion makers can consult the G.I.S. for the monitoring and action processes. The added-value of G.I.S. comes from its capacity to present and manage quantitative and qualitative datas and to take into account the satisfaction level of the population (preferences, value systems) and the objectives of regional planning. By developing this G.I.S. approach, geography can focus on sustainability issues at the regional level, in a real strategic planning approach.

New regional identities

Globalization and fragmentation are terms of a new dialectic between the global and the regional. Our relationship with the world has changed. Before it was local – local. Now it is local – global. Globalization has made us discover other forms of citizenships, not only the citizen of the world, of

nations, but also the importance of regional identities. The forging of regional communities has coincided with the establishment of the world and continental systems. Let just see what is going on in Europe since the rise of the European Union. Scotland is asking for independence from the United Kingdom and Catalunya is seeking independence from Spain. Russia is moving into Crimea and the Eastern Ukraine towards new Russian citizenship. Just to use these examples and those from past Yugoslavia, more than 15'000 km of new frontiers have emerged in Europe since 1990! We are far from the unified world of Montesquieu and Huxley!

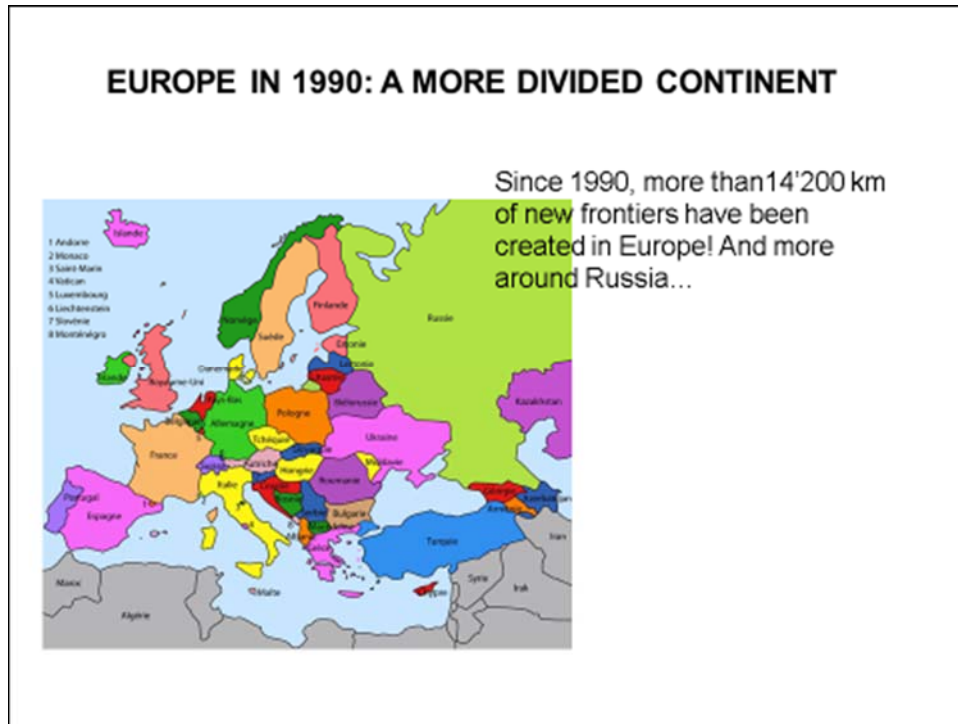


Fig. 2: Europe in 1990: a more divided continent

Inside the European Union, many of these regions now have representatives in Brussels, to promote their culture and economy. Inside the Nation States many regions develop marketing policies to attract tourism or firms, on the basis of their landscapes, climate and quality of life. The competition among regions is as important as the one between nations to get more activities and more wealth. Some economists and regional scientists developed the concept of "milieu" to explain how local authorities, combining political, educational and entrepreneurial groups, could promote regional attractiveness. The milieu theory, based on regional "savoir-faire" (know how) and control, is used to show the bottom up potential of regions confronted with the demand of the world economy. Instead of waiting for top down decisions from multinationals, they create their own economic and social environment to find niches in the world market. French spatial economists call this a "microglobal" approach ; micro by taking into account the region and its enterprises, global since they are integrated in the world system. Examples of these successful regions are numerous : the watch industry of Jura in Switzerland, the Third Italy or the shoe and leather industry of Choletais in France... All of these regions have an economic base, founded on local entrepreneurship and knowledge and a positive image due to their successes in the world competition.

In all the continents, regional movements are emerging, raising new questions. Recent regional-national citizenship systems, based on local advantages and governance at the local level, are shaping the political world. New spatial divisions and their geopolitical implications is at the center of debates in many countries. Questions of identities and citizenship convergence or divergence, autonomy or federation, must gradually be incorporated in the debate in many cases : let us think about Catalunya, SudTirol, Corsica... in Europe.

AND FOR THE FUTURE?

Right of people to decide for themselves? Or Nation States Power?

- How to define a region? Language, culture, history, society, economic power?
- Bottom up or top down decisions?
- EU with more than 60 regional states or a more Nation-State Europe?

Migrations

Essential to the notion of new regional identities are flows and linkages. The study of flows and linkages is nothing new but it might be argued that what is new is the magnitude and the geographic scale of the flows. A well known cliché is "the world is getting smaller". Movements between continents and the cultural changes that come with such movements are familiar topics in migrations analysis.

The reasons for migrations are known and include economic opportunity, reunification of families, flights from war-torn regions, flights from religious and other forms of persecution, and both natural and cultural amenity seeking. Often less well understood are the socio-cultural and economic consequences for both the sending and receiving regions.

Intra-regional movements within Europe or within North America have substantial consequences. But perhaps international flows such as those that bring populations from places such as Ethiopia, Mali, Libya to Italy, Germany or those from the Middle East to Greece will have even more economic and social effects. Given the magnitude and geographic scale of movements and the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of migrants it is easy to imagine that established regional identities will be challenged and that new regional identities will develop over time...

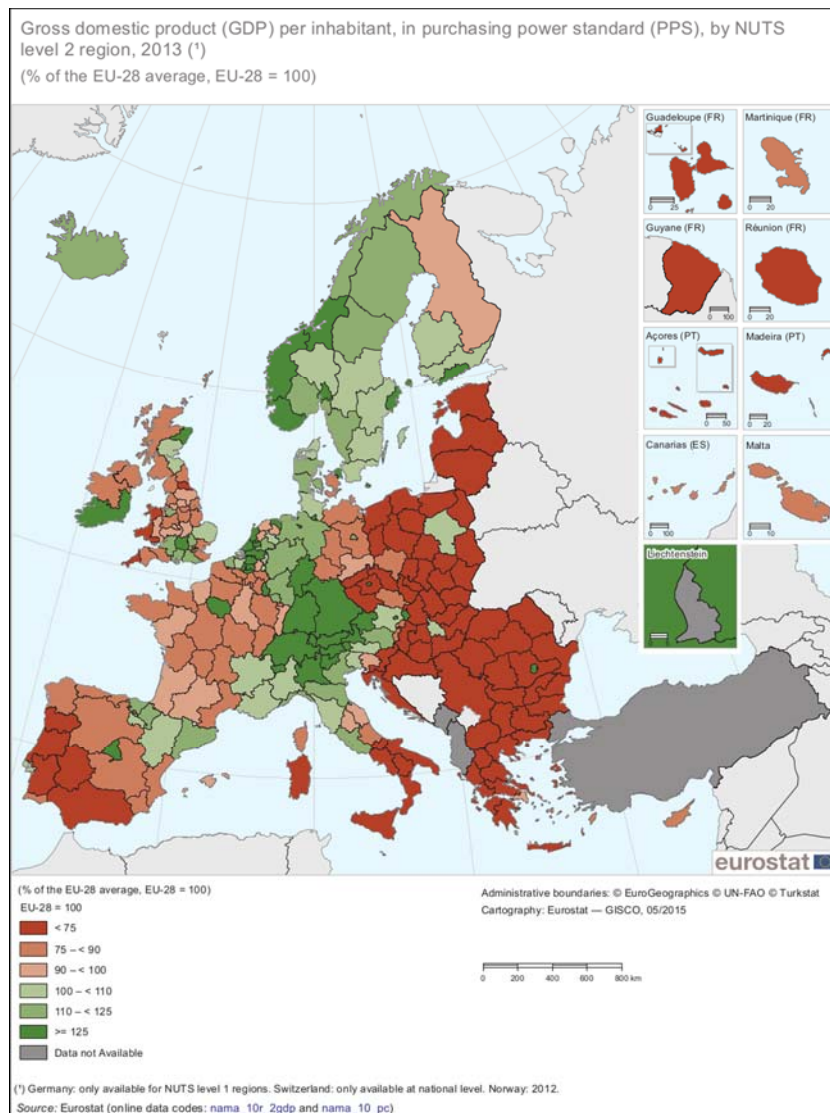


Fig. 3: Regional disparities in Europe

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