

Various directions in regional history

Sulevi Riukulehto

University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute

sulevi.riukulehto@helsinki.fi

Abstract

History and geography are sister sciences, though their connection is not always close. Over the last twenty years, the regional-history point of view has begun to command a place in research reports, projects, history books, conferences and other scientific outputs. Thus far, the concept is still unestablished. The new regionally oriented directions in historiography are so recent that a generally recognized orthodoxy has yet to be adopted. The various elements from localism to globalization can still be seen. What is a region? There are competing views concerning the definition and criteria. In this article, the various meanings of the concept are made more visible by studying the recent discourse of regional history. At least five main meanings can be differentiated in research literature.

The regional-history discourses have different origins and they have developed independently, yet they also have much in common: National states do not have any special role in research work. Regions are interpreted as being evolutionary processes. Time and space (history and region) are connected in research questions. Borders, the roles of minorities and otherness are popular subjects of research. In a global world we have a need for this kind of vision of history, a regional history that exceeds the national level of historiography, studying regions that are not necessarily nations or its administrative subdivisions.

Keywords: Regional History; Regions; Borders; Institutions; Geography.

Introduction

If one types in the word-pair “regional history” into a search engine in order to find references, the display will not be filled with listings of books and articles in the tens of pages. Regional history is not an established branch of history. Yet it should be. Regional vision would be highly useful in historical analysis in a world where national borders are inexorably losing their importance.

We are living in a global world where the “glocality” is the only universal.¹ In this article, I try to point out the importance of regional vision for history and, perhaps, though it is not the main target here, I may also convince some geographers and regional scientists that their branches also need a deeper historical understanding. We could all benefit from cooperation.

History is but one of those branches of social science that traditionally focused on national characteristics. More specifically, attention has been paid to national history and to those events deemed to have particular national significance. Historians have assumed that they were serving in a national mission – and this attitude has all too often gone so far as to result in writings not far from indoctrination. Historians have taught people something about their national identity, their national situation and particularity. In some countries, historical sciences are still divided into national and general history. This is the case, for example, in my home country, Finland, yet the same outlook can be identified almost anywhere. Governments need national history and historians write it. This is why the big names among American historians have placed a strong emphasis on Americanism: events have been explained in terms of westward expansion, manifest destiny, and in its continuation as the Americanization of Hawaii, Western Samoa, the Philippines, and farther around the world.² In the history of ideas, American historians have talked about the American mind.³ The basic thesis of the school is that Americanism was not imported from Europe. It was something especially national. It was born in the New World.

The similar national outlook can also be observed in African context. It has become a reality in the former colonies that turned into independent states, such as Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania and it can be heard in the South Africa of today when national identity is exacted to be set beyond the tribe and the local.⁴

1 J Meyrowitz, “The rise of glocality. New senses of place and identity in the global village”, K Nyiri (ed.), *A sense of place: The global and the local in mobile communication* (Vienna, Passagen, 2005, pp. 21-30); RD Hurt, “Midwestern Distinctiveness”, AR Cayton and SE Gray (eds.), *The identity of the American Midwest. Essays in Regional History* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 160-179), pp. 176.

2 FJ Turner, *The significance of the frontier in American history* (Penguin UK, 2008).

3 HS Commager, *The American mind: An interpretation of American thought and character since the 1880’s* (Yale University Press, 1950); S Persons, *American minds. A history of ideas* (New York, Henry Holt & Co, 1958).

4 M Ramphela, *Conversations with my sons and daughters* (Johannesburg, Penguin Books, 2012), p. 174.

Historians usually take borders for granted. Often they anachronistically project current political boundaries back in time.⁵ The research area follows the national border or some specific part of it. If the chosen administrative region changes, then so, too, will the historians' research area change likewise. The exploration stops at the projected border. However, in the real world this is not the case, since phenomena seldom stop at the administrative demarcations.⁶

The states play central roles in political history: states wage wars and find themselves allies; they secure business relations, they compete in trade as well as in sport and athletic contests. This is made visible in cartography. In political maps, the administrative state jumps out clearly, because it is presented in gaudy colours and strict borderlines. When a border is changed, one colour is magically exchanged for another. This is simply imaginary. In reality, we seldom have such sharply defined or demarcated borders. The demarcation lines in nature, in the built environment and in cultural phenomena are vague and often blurred.

Image 1: Some conceivable regions on the 49th parallel in North America



Source: S Evans (ed.), *The borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests. Essays on the Regional History of the forty-ninth parallel* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska), p. xvi.

5 T Binnema, "The case for cross-national and comparative history. The northwestern plains as bioregion", S Evans (ed.), *The borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests. Essays on the Regional History of the forty-ninth parallel* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2006), pp. 17-41.

6 TG Jordan-Bychkow, "Does the border matter? Cattle ranching and the forty-ninth parallel", S Evans (ed.) *The borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests. Essays on the Regional History of the forty-ninth parallel* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2006), pp. 107-116.

Image 2: Pimeria Alta



Source: J Griffith, *A border runs through it. Journeys in Regional History and Folklore* (Tucson, Arizona, Rio Nuevo Publishers 2011), p. ii.

Many artificial African borders have been established as the result of colonial decisions. Indeed, the sphere of cultural and historical influence may, in fact, cross current borders.⁷ Yet the same kinds of demarcations can easily be found outside of Africa as well. The frontier between Mexico and the USA cuts violently across an old cultural area of the Pimeria Alta, thereby forming the states of Arizona, USA and Sonora, Mexico. This is not because of some cultural or natural differences, but simply due to bellicose relations between Mexico and the United States.⁸ The borderline between the USA and Canada runs westward from Lake Winnipeg. Everybody understands that the plumb line on the prairie is not a real frontier.⁹ It was created in the Compromise of 1846. It divided the settlements of Oregon. It crudely separated the Indian tribes and métis groups of habitation in the area. It is not a natural geographic border, nor geologic, climatic, linguistic, nor even an ethnic border. No cultural phenomenon follows the 49th parallel. It is entirely a political demarcation. But it has deeply separated Canadian and American historiographies from each other. Both have had interests in their own national history. Neither has paid enough attention to cross-border phenomena.

It suffices to note that history has often had and still maintains a strong national emphasis.¹⁰ If a smaller unit is taken into consideration, it usually is a politico-administrative part, such as a municipality or county. If a larger area is under analysis, historians will operate on the country level. If national borders are crossed, the study will follow a multiple of national states. Areas other than administrative levels of regions have all too often been neglected. Naturally, there also exist other kinds of historical works as well. I do not imply that historians have always and everywhere been moved by national pathos, but I do maintain that the national angle of vision has been all too encompassing.

The concepts of a region and regional history in historiography

There is no universal consensus among historians concerning the substance and the import of regions in history. Should we emphasise natural or

7 See Ethiopian case in R Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian borderlands. Essays in regional history from ancient times to the end of the 18th century* (Lawrenceville and Asmara, The Red Sea Press, 1997).

8 J Griffith, *A border runs through it...*, p. 113.

9 S Evans (ed.), *The borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests...*

10 TD Isern and RB Shepard, "Duty-free. An introduction to the practice of regional history along the forty-ninth parallel", S Evans (ed.) *The borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests. Essays on the Regional History of the forty-ninth parallel* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2006), pp. xxvii-xxxv.

administrative forms? Are regions simple or complex? Are they static or under continuous evolution?

A region may be differentiated on the grounds of geographical details.¹¹ Such differences between regions are usually almost permanent. An arctic area remains arctic and an island is still an island even after centuries and millennia. For a historian, the mere natural geography is usually not enough. There are other, economic, social and cultural criteria that seem to be more decisive. Some say that a region only becomes a region when it has stable administration with its own regional institutions.¹² Others maintain that a region is rather a discursive phenomenon.¹³ Perhaps a region may have its manifestation in administrative or in discursive form, or perhaps even in both forms.

More differences are apparent in relation to a nation state: a region can be situated in different levels of a national hierarchy. It may be defined as a subnational, supranational or as a cross-national creation.

In traditional historiography, all kinds of regions have been taken to be quite static. The regions have been defined once and for all in history. Yet, I can see a different kind of seam in historiography as well. Some historians have long regarded regions as an outcome of a long-lasting development process. The procedural orientation has been visible in French Annalism, from Lucien Febvre's *La terre et l'évolution humaine* (1922/1970) to many works of Fernand Braudel's.¹⁴ Annalism had imbibed Paul Vidal de La Blache's human geographic view in which geography and history were connected.¹⁵ Environment and human being are mutually intertwined. This was the leading thread, for example, in Eric Dardel's thoughts in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁶ The same idea can be found in America where historian Edward Whiting Fox

11 BK Roberts, "Time and tide in North eastern England", B Lancaster, D Newton and N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history* (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007), pp. 43-62.

12 AC Hepburn, "Contested regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ulster in comparative perspective", B Lancaster, D Newton and N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history* (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007), pp. 115-129.

13 M Holford, "The North and the dynamics of regional identity in later medieval England", B Lancaster, D Newton and N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history* (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007), pp. 303-316.

14 L Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine. Introduction géographique à l'histoire* (Albin Michel, 1970, original edition La Renaissance du livre, 1922).

15 J Aurell Cardona, *La escritura de la memoria. De los positivismos a los postmodernismos* (Universitat de València, 2005), pp. 44-45, 53-54.

16 E Dardel, *L'histoire, science du concret* (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1946); *L'homme et la terre. Nature de la réalité géographique* (Paris, 1990 Editions de CTHS, original edition 1952).

pronounced in the 1970s that man's relation to his environment could best be described in terms of experience, thus re-establishing a relationship between history and region.¹⁷

Braudel maintained that historians are or must be interested in the totality of the past: not only about sudden unforeseen and exceptional events in time, but also about the long-lasting phenomena with their ups and downs in history (conjunctures). These may be economic conjunctures or ideas with their development spans. Besides, there is an important group of phenomena even more rigid and slowly developing: the structures such as economic systems or the structure of a city are changing very slowly over time. One generation usually can't see the entire difference.¹⁸ Both space and time are built into Braudel's concept of history.

The sense of time and the sense of space are attributes of memory. Without remembrance, one can be aware of neither of them. Phenomena such as cities, politics or religions cannot exist without memory.¹⁹ Regions are under especial analysis in Braudel's last book, *L'identité de la France*. Regions seem to change their form and nature very slowly, yet unavoidably. In Braudel's terminology, they certainly are structures.

What, then, is a region in history sciences? Traditionally, theorists have compiled listings of criteria that have to be met in order to recognize or define a territorial area as a region – or as a (nation) state – as the authors put it in the 18th and 19th centuries. The criteria have much in common. In *An agenda for regional history* (2007) we find two recent examples: Charles Phythian-Adams and Bill Lancaster present two possible listings.

According to Phythian-Adams, the key features defining a region are:²⁰

- Concentration of population
- Hierarchical structure
- Intra-dependence of the region
- Self-identifying
- Own provincial interests against national power structures

17 EW Fox, *History in geographic perspective. The other France* (New York, WW Norton, 1971), p. 21.

18 F Braudel, *L'identité de la France. I Espace et histoire. II Les hommes et les choses* (Paris, Flammarion, 1990; original edition, Arthaud 1986), pp. 44-56.

19 J Piwnica, *L'histoire: écriture de la mémoire* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2014), pp. 12, 14.

20 C Phythian-Adams, "Differentiating provincial societies in English history: Spatial contexts and cultural processes", B Lancaster, D Newton & N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history*, 3-22 (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007, pp. 3-22), pp. 8-9.

- A demographic concentration (of indigenous families)
- The regional sense of belonging together.

Lancaster's list reads as follows:²¹

- Space
- Language
- Culture
- Economy
- Political movements
- Traditions
- Relationships to the nation state.

Certain similarities, yet no definite agreement, can be observed in these definitions. In Lancaster's list, the major emphasis is on cultural phenomena. Clearly, region is not an unambiguous, axiomatic concept for historians. However, honestly, the concept of region is not easier for social scientists either and there are competing views concerning the definition and criteria even among regional scientists. Criteria such as territorial space or borders, group solidarity or identity, organization and symbolic manifestations of any kind are most commonly mentioned in recent literature.²²

The diversity of the concept can perhaps become more understandable if we have a look at the discourse of regional history. What do regional historians mean by the term region? Five or six different meanings can be differentiated in research literature.

- There are lively traditions of regional histories in Central Europe under the German label of *Landesgeschichte* and the history of *Heimat*.

21 B Lancaster, "The North East, England's most distinctive region?", B Lancaster, D Newton & N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history*, 3–22 (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007, pp. 23-42), p. 24.

22 See A Paasi, "Bounded spaces in the mobile world: Deconstructing 'regional identity'", *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geographie*, 2, pp. 137-148; D Fernández Manjón, *La identidad humana y los territorios. El caso de Castilla y León* (Madrid, Vision Libros, 2010), pp. 68-69.

Image 3: Germany in the beginning of the 10th century



Source: S Tägil, “The roots of identity. Territoriality in early European history”, S Tägil (ed.), *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999, 20-52), p. 40.

Ancient Central European principalities have a flourishing tradition of regional histories that are commonly known by their German name as *Landesgeschichte*. Actually, the history of *Landesgeschichte* is longer than national historiography.²³ It extends over centuries. The ethno-territorial evolution in Europe was already distinctive in the early Middle Ages.²⁴ The old principalities were once more or less independent with their own rulers, laws and cultural specialties. In present-day Germany there are, at the most,

23 J-F Berdah, R Eßer, M Moll and AM Pult Quaglia, “Regional history in Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain”, SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe* (Pisa, Edizioni Plus, 2009), pp. 55-75), pp. 37-53; M Řezník, “Transformations of regional history in the Polish ‘Western territories’ since 1945: Legitimization, nationalization, regionalization”, SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe* (Pisa, Edizioni Plus, 2009), pp. 223-244.

24 S Tägil, “The roots of identity. Territoriality in early European history”, S Tägil (ed.), *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999), pp. 20-52; L Lindeborg, “Regional deep structures in the German cultural space”, S Tägil (ed.), *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999), pp. 53-113, pp. 64-72; M Řezník, M Ciuchea, E Mannová and E Szpak, “Regional History and the regional agenda in Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia”, SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe...*, pp. 59-60.

two hundred states, and in both Italy and Austria several dozens. A similar system of miniature regional bodies reached the large area of Central and Southern Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. A prosperous group of institutions have been established in these regions. There are regional newspapers, annual books, museums, associations, and foundations. Some of the principalities now exist as part of current federations. A few have continuously maintained their independence as dwarf states (Monaco and San Marino). Still others have regained their independence after a long period of subsumption, or even for the first time (Montenegro, Croatia, Slovakia and Slovenia). Those who have lost their autonomy have still often maintained various regional institutions and plenty of specific characteristics.

The sense of belonging is also an important factor: these regions are felt to be homey. They are indeed home to their inhabitants.²⁵ Many languages have a specific word for this kind of span of belonging and attachment. In German it is *Heimat*. It is a complex of landscapes and memories, a room of experiences, full of personal interpretations of events and places, and thus necessarily unique. The geographic bounds of home vary individually. One can have several homes one after the other and even at the same time. One's personal idea of home as *Heimat* includes them all.²⁶ Demarcation between *Landesgeschichte* and the history of *Heimat* is both difficult and actually useless. Today both seem to be translated into English as regional history.²⁷ The German word *Heimat* and the French concept *son pays* are also made use of in English in this connection.²⁸

- Many regional scientists define regions as a level between that of local and national. This concept has also been adopted by some regional historians.

This is a moderate interpretation of the concept. The only difference between a regional historian thus defined and a nationally oriented historian is the fact

25 P Blickle, *Heimat: A critical theory of the German idea of homeland* (Camden House, 2004), pp. 1-9.

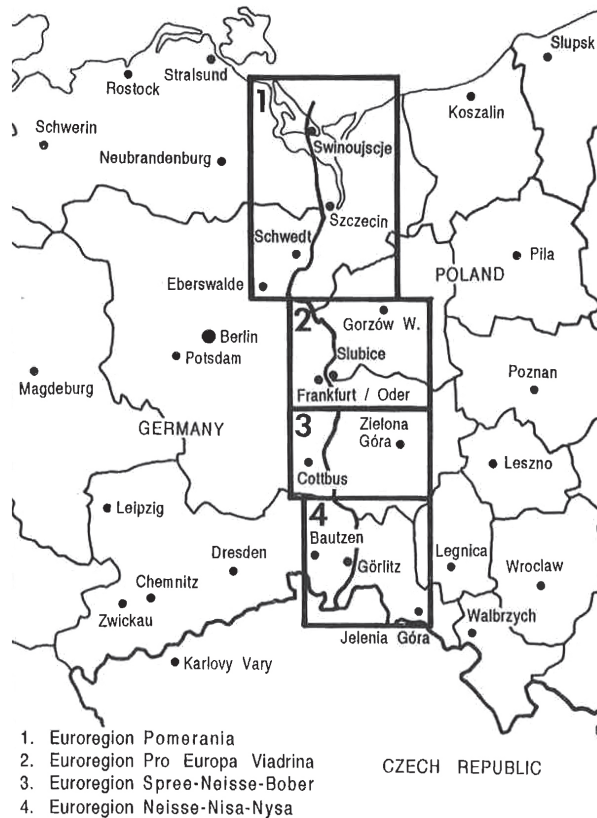
26 S Riukulehto and K Rinne-Koski, "Historical consciousness and the experiential idea of home", S Riukulehto (ed.), *Between time and space* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2015), pp. 114-134.

27 E.g. J-F Berdah, R Eßer, M Möll and AM Pult Quaglia, "Regional history in Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain", p. 39; M Řezník, "Transformations of regional history in the Polish 'Western territories' since 1945: Legitimization, nationalization, regionalization", p. 233; T Gullberg, "The primacy of the nation and regional identity. Carinthia, Burgenland and state-formation after the dissolution of the dynastic system" S Tägil (ed.) *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999, pp. 147-177), pp. 158-164.

28 AW Fox, *A lost frontier revealed. Regional separation in the East Midlands*, 7, Studies in regional and local History (Hatfield, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009), p. 5; E Bozkurt, *Conceptualising "home". The question of belonging among Turkish families in Germany* (Frankfurt/Main, Campus Verlag, 2009), pp. 21-31; D Morley, *Home territories: Media, mobility and identity* (Psychology Press, 2000), pp. 4-6, 34, 70, 80, 265.

that the former focus on a certain in-between level and the latter on national level. The methods and the whole *modus operandi* are the same. The in-between levels often have a role in the traditions of national historiography as well. It is possible that historians who have specialized in a certain province may be unbeknown to be counted within the circle of regional history.²⁹ Similarly, the history of autonomous territories, such as the historiography of Catalonia or the Basque Provinces, can be interpreted as regional history. Its difference from national history is not substantial.

Image 4: Euroregions of Oder-Neisse line



Source: H-Å Persson, “Viadrina to the Oder-Neisse Line. Historical evolution and the prospects of regional cooperation”, S Tägil (ed.), *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999, pp. 212-257), p. 250.

29 I-M Bucur and I Costea, “Transylvania between two national historiographies. Historical consciousness and political identity”, SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe...*, pp. 271-285; K Hoare, “From region to nation: The development of Irish nationalist historiography, 1880–1920”, SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe...*, pp. 205-221.

Image 5: Linguistic minorities in France



Source: E Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire de France des régions. La périphérie française des origines à nos jours, L'univers historique* (Paris, Seuil, 2001), p. 21.

- Cross-border and cross-cultural areas serve as excellent bases for regional history.

European regionalism has given a new importance to the histories of areas.³⁰ Europe of Regions is an essential term in the EU jargon. The European Union is operating with regions on many levels, not only states and the regions located inside national borders. Much attention has been given to the areas that cross state borders, ethnological borders and linguistic borders. In this connection,

³⁰ M Keating, *The new regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial restructuring and political change* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 1998).

some authors preferably talk about new regional history. Such phenomena as divided cities, European Euregions (e.g. *Oderraum*, the frontier area between Poland and Germany from the Baltic Sea to the Czech border), and the contemporary history of so-called potential states (e.g. Galicia) are under analysis, as are the economic micro-regions inside cities and the identities in micro-regions.³¹

A border can also have a mental nature. Thus, such themes as immigration and linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities have been studied under the label of regional history. In France, there are regional history books concerning European immigration, linguistic minorities and the Jewish Holocaust from a regional perspective.³²

During the sixth framework programme, the European Union funded quite a large humanistic research project, Cliohres. Altogether 45 European universities participated in the research network. Special attention was paid to borders and minorities. National borders are not the only frontiers to cross. Again, many regional historians are interested in invisible borders, such as sexual, professional, ethnic and linguistic ones.³³ Some researchers have made a positive separation from the old *Landesgeschichte* tradition in the sense that they now merely talk about New Regional History.³⁴

- Regional history may study artificial regions.

Some areas may never have had a historical identity, although they could be reasonably restricted by some research criteria. Such a region is the American

31 M Řezník, M Ciuchea, E Mannová and E Szpak, "Regional History and the regional agenda in Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia", SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe...*, pp. 55-75; H-Å Persson, "Viadrina to the Oder-Neisse Line. Historical evolution and the prospects of regional cooperation", S Tägil (ed.), *Regions in Central Europe. The legacy of History* (London, Hurst & Co, 1999), pp. 211-257; J Ira, "Creating local and broader identities: Historical monographs on Bohemian, Moravian, and Galician towns, 1860-1900", L Klusáková and L Teulière (eds.), *Frontiers and identities. Cities in regions and nations* (Pisa University Press 2008), pp. 251-266.

32 J-R Genty, *Les étrangers dans la région du nord. Repères pour une histoire régionale de l'immigration dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais, 1850-1970* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009); E Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire de France des régions. La périphérie française des origines à nos jours*, L'univers historique (Paris, Seuil, 2001); P Cabanel & J Fijalkow, *Histoire régionale de la Shoah en France. Déportation, sauvetage, survie* (Paris, Les éditions de Paris Max Chaleil, 2011).

33 F Pintescu, "Ethnic and professional frontiers in Transylvanian cities from the 16th to the 18th century", L Klusáková and L Teulière (eds.), *Frontiers and identities. Cities in regions and nations* (Pisa University Press 2008), pp. 153-167; U Hofmann, "Ethnic, social and mental frontiers in interwar Latvia: Reflections from Baltic Germans' autobiographies", L Klusáková and L Teulière (eds.), *Frontiers and identities. Cities in regions and nations* (Pisa University Press 2008), pp. 181-196; O Betlii, "Ubi bene ibi patria: Reading the city of Kiev through Polish and Czech "Spatial Stories" from the First World War period", L Klusáková and L Teulière (eds.), *Frontiers and identities. Cities in regions and nations* (Pisa University Press 2008), pp. 197-220.

34 R Eßer and SG Ellis, "Conclusion: Towards an agenda for a New Regional History", SG Ellis, R Eßer, J-F Berdah and M Řezník (eds.), *Frontiers, regions, and identities in Europe...*, pp. 287-289.

Midwest, for instance. The Midwest lacks the kind of geographic, historical and cultural coherence that can be found in New England or in the American South. However, the topic of regional identity can be relevant here as well.³⁵

Exemplifying cases can also be found in Europe. Regional scientists have paid attention to unusual regions. As many as 146 such regions have been differentiated or named in Europe – mostly attributable to the influence of new regionalism.³⁶ Such is, for example, the Euro-Arctic Barents region in Northern Europe. Its area encompasses 13 districts or counties in Northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The region had rarely institutional or historical identity before the Kirkenes Declaration on Cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region that was given in the Conference of Foreign Ministers in 1993. This declaration was the starting point for diversified cooperation. Nothing prevents regional historians from studying unusual regions also from a historical point of view.

Image 6: Midwestern Region of the United States



Source: ARL Cayton and SE Gray (eds.), *The identity of the American Midwest. Essays on regional history* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), p. x.

35 ARL Cayton and SE Gray, "The story of the Midwest: An introduction", ARL Cayton and SE Gray (eds.), *The identity of the American Midwest. Essays on regional history* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 1-26), p. 1.
36 A Lord, "From a new regionalism to an unusual regionalism? The emergence of non-standard regional spaces and lessons for the territorial reorganization of the state", *Urban Studies*, 43(10), 2006, pp. 1847-1877, 1853-1854.

Image 7: Euro-Arctic Barents region



Source: K Zimmerbauer, “Constructing peripheral cross-border regions in planning. Territory-network interplay in the Barents region”, *Environment and Planning A*, 46(11), pp. 2718-2734.

An entirely different meaning for regional history has been developed in the research of international macro-regions.

Such phenomena as globalization and international business draw attention to the level of continents and free trade areas. This concept is commonly used by economic historians and globalization researchers. They may study large zones, such as Southeast Asia, Central Europe, the Mercosur area in Latin America or European development corridors (e.g. a zone from Northern Italy to the Benelux-countries).³⁷ The macro-regions may be artificial, or then perhaps not. In both cases, they could also be studied by regional historians.

³⁷ A Acharya, *The making of South-East Asia. International relations of a region* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012), [Original edition, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies]; D Tussie and P Trucco, “Los actores nacionales en la integración regional: Elementos para en análisis y evaluación de su incidencia en América del Sur”, D Tussie & P Trucco (eds.), *Nación y Región en América del Sur. Los actores nacionales y la economía política de la integración sudamericana* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Teseo, 2010), pp. 7-42; M Escuder, II Gonzalo, I Iglesias, “Argentina. El escenario global como complemento al escenario regional”, D Tussie & P Trucco (eds.), *Nación y Región en América del Sur. Los actores nacionales y la economía política de la integración sudamericana* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Teseo, 2010), pp. 43-97.

Occasionally the term “regional history” is also used as a synonym for local history.³⁸ I find this is a little bit confusing. Why not use the term local history if this is what is meant? Clearly, the great majority of the authors have a more specific idea of their concept of region; i.e. they draw a distinction between the concepts local and regional.

Although the discourses presented above have different origins and although they have developed independently, they also have much in common. They are not entirely separated but clustered, just like concepts usually are. At least four features connect the different discourses of regional history:

- National states do not have any special role in research work;
- Regions are interpreted as evolutionary processes;
- Time and space (history and region) are connected in research questions;
- Borders, the roles of minorities and otherness are popular subjects of research.

A procedural model for a region

International networks have grown increasingly complex. They are requiring units of administration that connect with economic and social reality. New non-governmental agencies and institutions have emerged. In this context, it is only natural to enquire also after a new regional vision of History, a history that exceeds the national level of historiography, one studying regions that are not necessarily nations or its administrative subdivisions. Their form may vary; they may cross national borders. Finally, a nation is somehow understood as an exception of a region, a special case of a regional framework.

There are many reasons why historians should not blindly follow politico-administrative regions of the moment. Current regions may have evoked entirely different meanings in the past. There are regions that have never had administrative status. There are others that have come and gone; they appeared, disappeared and reappeared many times. Probably, the change of status has been administrative only. In reality, i.e. in people’s minds, the region has always been there with its cultural, institutional and experiential

38 D Saunders, “Andreevskoe, an estate in nineteenth-century Yaroslavl”, B Lancaster, D Newton & N Vall (eds.), *An agenda for regional history* (Newcastle, Northumbria University Press, 2007), pp. 130-148; A Jackson, “Local and regional history as heritage: The heritage process and conceptualising the purpose and practice of local historians”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14(4), 2008, pp. 362-379.

manifestations. Regions have very rigid institutional character.³⁹ Historians can make this visible.⁴⁰

Right now, regional scientists are also discussing the stickiness of regions.⁴¹ Borders are multi-layered constructs, and we are on a wrong track if we stare at the administrative borders only. A merger of regions means that the border is removed, but it is often only the administrative or the legal layer that is erased, and in fact some other layers, such as social, cultural or identity layers, may simultaneously even be strengthened. The wrong regional orientation may lead policy makers to base their agendas on fictive creations or false projections of regional division that do not correspond with, or are only remotely related to historical reality. At its worst, the history is profoundly misinterpreted. Or it may be the other way around: the false regional units are zealously kept alive in statistics so that the current administration may operate with regions that do not exist except on the maps of planners.

The new interpretation of regions as evolutionary processes is currently challenging both traditional economic history and new institutional economics in many ways. I believe that if we combine institutional implications with the methods of regional science and with the new agenda of regional history, we could more accurately define what a region truly is in history; what role institutions have played in the region, and maybe even what the region's significance may be in future.

It is on the particularized ways in which the human factor in region has developed that the regional historian must focus. Societies are processes. We surely need more research work concerning the principles of the procedural development of regions: regarding the way in which they define, form and change themselves. It seems to me that historians have been overly interested in asking “what”, “when” and “who”? and all too reluctant in asking “where”? and “in what direction”? All of these combined will give a better understanding also to such deeper delving questions such as “why”? and “with what influences and results”?

39 See also Elize S van Eeden's argument in “Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa: Reflections within the former Section for Regional History at the HSRC”, *Historia*, 59(1), May 2014; ES van Eeden, “Challenging traditional ways of thinking and doing local/regional history research in South Africa: Some global learning and sharing”, *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 9(1), May 2014, pp. 27-43.

40 Fernand Braudel gives us plenty of examples, from the Treaty of Verdun to colonial Africa and to the Conference of Yalta, of the rigidity of regions. F Braudel, *L'identité de la France. I Espace et histoire. II Les hommes et les choses* (Paris, Flammarion 1990), [Original edition, Arthaud 1986], pp. 314-321.

41 K Zimmerbauer, T Suutari and A Saartenoja, “Resistance in deinstitutionalization of a region. Boundaries, identity and activism in municipality merger”, *Geoforum*, 43(6), 2012, pp. 1065-1075.