REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

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- Region
- Regional geography
- Regional knowledge
- New regional geography
- New regionalism
- Regional identity
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- Regionalization
- Power

Glossary

New regional geography

A subfield of human geography focusing on the sociocultural construction of regions, their meanings for individual and social identities, and on the power relations embedded in region-building processes. For new regional geographers, the region is an entity based on social practice and discourse.

New regionalism

New regionalism is an expression used to emphasize the importance of the region for political governance and for managing economic development and planning.

Regional geography

By tradition, a subfield of geography that examines the diversity and the organization of nature and human aspects in an integrative regional framework (in contrast with new regional geography).

Regionalization

Regionalization may refer to the process of dividing space into distinct regions, to the political governance of state space and to the decentralization of activities. In the global context, it may refer to the construction of regional blocks at a supranational scale.

Region-building

The process through which regions and their meanings are socially constructed.

Relational regions

Relational thinking suggests that regional entities are best seen as open rather than bounded and that the emergence of regions results from complex social processes and discourses occurring across borders.

Abstract

Regional geography has been a major sub-area of geography since the institutionalization of this field as an academic subject in the late-19th century. Even earlier, the founders of modern geography recognized its importance. Regional geography dominated geography until the 1950-1960s, was in decline afterwards but incessantly maintained its position in geographic education. The rise of 'new regional geography' put this idea back on agenda on the 1980s. New regional geographers, inspired by contemporary social and cultural theory theorized both idea of the region and the role of regional knowledge, typically in relation to historically contingent societal conditions. New regional geography was *not* seen as a mere collection of knowledge organized spatially or an internal methodological problem of geography. Instead, scholars were interested in the power relations associated with region-building processes, regionalization, regional identity narratives and regional development. New regional geography was paralleled, and partly challenged, by new regionalism that especially economic geographers promoted. Geographers see regions today not as unique, isolated entities, but rather as relational and temporary assemblages that express societal power relations that frame the institutionalization and transformation of regions. In the current mobile world, regions may be open in some social practices, in some others relatively closed.

Introduction

Declarations on the death of the region have been for a long time common in social sciences. The region was predicted to vanish alongside with the rise of 'dynamic modernity' in societies. Yet, the region has stubbornly persisted in both academic debates and wider social practices. Similarly, regional geography was anticipated to lose its significance in the 1960s. However, since the 1980s human geographers have begun to develop new ways of thinking about regions and regional geography. This has occurred in many states such as the UK, US, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Czech Republic.

New interest in regions arose from two, partly overlapping intellectual and societal tendencies. The first, 'new regional geography' developed in the 1980s, the second 'new regionalism' during the next decade. These approaches were followed by a relational thinking on regions. New regional geographers had diverse theoretical backgrounds and were drawing on Marxism, humanistic geography and practice theories. New regionalism, had its origins in economic geography and it regarded regions as key contexts for economic processes, and emphasized the role of regional scale in wider economic, cultural and political processes and interactions. New regionalism also highlighted the role of regions for economic innovativeness, learning and competitiveness. Many new regional geographers explicitly reflected the concepts of region. New regionalists focusing on economic processes, institutions and learning saw the region as a necessary background for such processes, as if regions would be internally coherent and externally bounded. International relations scholars and political scientists also used the term new regionalism; in their usage this term referred often to supra-state regional organizations (like the EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR) and related region-building efforts. While both new regional geography and new regionalism problematized regions and regionality, relational thinkers in particular challenged the boundedness of regions and highlighted interactions and networks, phenomena that were seen as critical companions to globalization.

This entry will examine both the long tradition of regional geography and the rise and key features of new regional geography, new regionalism and relational thinking on regions. It shows how both the practicing of regional geography and regional geography as a theoretical enterprise have been disputed and historically and geographically contingent. The contested understanding of what is the 'region' has been a critical part of the conceptual debates in new regional geography, new regionalism and relational thinking.

This entry focuses on methodological issues and on tracing how geographers have outlined and applied have different concepts of the region. It will first scrutinize the definitions of regional geography, will then trace the development of traditional regional geography, and examine the forms of critique that arose after World War II. It will then map the key ideas of new regional geography and new regionalism and the challenges that these have posed to geographical thinking. In addition, the critique of relational thinkers against traditional approaches is analyzed, as well as the challenge of globalization to regional geographic thinking and to the idea of region.

Regional geography: a contested but necessary enterprise

Regional geography has been a significant source of theoretical debate and concrete research practice since the institutionalization of geography. In spite of this creditable past, regional geography often raises mixed feelings among academic geographers who have advanced an increasing specialization in the field, which has led to the philosophical, methodological and theoretical fragmentation of the discipline. While most academic geographers probably sympathize the historical value of regional geography, and while some may still teach regional geography courses, and occasionally put forward pleas on the need to develop this field further, few scholars are probably ready to label themselves as 'regional geographers' today. This is the case even if regional approaches may inform their research, whether they are working with the concept of region as a theoretical idea or with regional themes related to urbanism (e.g. city-regions), political geography (e.g. devolution or regionalism), cultural geography (e.g. regional identity) or economic geography (e.g. learning region, resilient region or sustainable region).

This ambivalence is not a new feature. In the late 1960s, Roger Minshull identified key methodological problems that regional geographers had addressed in very different ways: that is, the methods of finding, defining, mapping and describing the region. This vagueness stretches even further back in the disciplinary (and pre-disciplinary) history. Some scholars suggested already in the mid-1930s that there were nearly as many concepts of the region as there were regional geographers. Indeed, it is obvious that the debates on the idea of region have themselves provided one foundation to justify the existence of geography as an academic discipline and, consequently, the term region has become a major symbol for the identity of the field, a symbol that is in research practice often taken for granted. For many scholars, regional geography has thus simply been an academic territory that serves as a

safeguard against the absorption of geography as part of other academic fields.

The focus of the methodological problems has changed dramatically since the 1960s. New conceptualizations of the region have perpetually been outlined, often claiming the status of cutting-edge knowledge, just as soon to fold under the next proposal of fresh ideas. However, the general importance of mapping regional worlds and words, their meanings and the power relations hidden in regional constructs, have all become crucial features of geographic studies. Also, while the idea of a specific 'geographical region' has lost its importance in academic geography after World War II, the conceptualization of the region has incessantly motivated geographers. *Handbook on the Geographies of the Regions and Territories,* published in 2018, plainly demonstrates the multidimensionality of region-related terminology. The editors of this book provide a list of no less than 150 concepts describing the 21st century regions and regionalisms.

The geographical regions were initially identified in two different ways: by proceeding from small units to larger ones, and *vice versa*. The idea of the geographical region was not as narrow as was the idea of a 'natural region' that was in use in many countries before World War II. Most prominently, this idea arose in A.J Herbertson's (1865-1915) efforts to distinguish large-scale natural regions by using primarily climatic indicators, an idea leaning on the supposed existence of 'natural boundaries'. This exploitation of a natural basis in the demarcation of regions also manifested itself in political geography, where scholars discussed so-called 'natural boundaries'. This idea was even present in political practice when state leaders and military authorities sought to negotiate, fix and defend such boundaries through diplomacy and war. Regions and their boundaries were seen as being dictated by nature, and in the extreme case regions were regarded as organisms that expand similarly as biological organisms. While the notions of natural boundaries have been rejected, world regional and cultural geography textbooks still remind us of the tendency to divide the earth surface into such large-scale components, and their authors often lean on some macro-scale regional frameworks simply to manage the complexity of multiple materials. Such efforts are also common in area studies, in such expressions as global south, Latin America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa or Europe, for example.

The aim of regional geographers to distinguish regional spaces is related to regionalization and regionalism. Regionalization as a practice to distinguish regions by dividing or integrating spaces is continually important in both regional planning and the governance of the spatiality

of social life. Think, for example, the current tendency to rescale state spaces which has manifested itself in devolution, in the mergers of territorial units or in the efforts to create and strengthen supra-state institutional regional arrangements such the EU or NAFTA. Similarly regionalism, originally a cultural and political movement based upon regional features and interests, often draws on regional knowledge and at times on passionate ideas of a specific regional unity and identity. Regionalist parties and movements typically transform such ideas into political practice and often struggle for autonomy or independence, either peacefully or through conflicts. Regionalism has also been, and still is, a significant source of motivation for art (painting, literature, architecture). It was also an important source of inspiration for many traditional regional geographers. Contrary to the traditional inwards-looking regionalism, the 'new regionalism' has had a more open character, often being a tool for economic and regional development strategies in a world where state governance and power relations have been re-scaling. Both regionalism and regionalization are social practices that bring together political-geographic, regional-geographic and scalar aspects.

The most significant and persistent site for the application of regional-geographic knowledge has nevertheless been education and the production/reproduction of geographical world views in academic, educational and popular circles. This has been part of the wider social reproduction. Regional geographic courses exist in the syllabus at all levels of education, and have a strong position in the academic and school geography textbook publishing market. Historically it was not only the enthusiasm of teachers or professionals, but also the passions of state and military officials, political leaders and nation-builders, that turned the world's attention to regional knowledge as a medium in both social reproduction and the construction of national identities. When geography entered universities during the late-19th century, the major ideological backgrounds for this step were nationalism and colonialism; geographical knowledge was simply found to be crucial for such ideologies. Geographic education has therefore been exploited not only to mediate 'geographical facts' but also to construct, and to reproduce, regional and national territories, national stereotypes and ideologies, and at times also 'enemy' images.

Regional geography has therefore a close connection to societal and political power and a potentially close relation to racism, peace and violence. The need for the research on national stereotypes was recognized by UNESCO after World War II. This theme is closely related to cartography. Probably in no other field of geography has the power of maps been as obvious as in regional geography. Regional representations and narratives – always based

in certain choices and simplifications from the complexity of the world – ostensibly 'objectify' the regional worlds that they are representing. This effect is particularly influential when these worlds are inscribed on maps that fix them as apparently timeless and 'stop' the historical process that a region actually *is*. Regional-geographic education and maps effectively produce and reproduce the image of a homology between cultures and bounded spaces, thereby forging a sense of 'us' ('here') and the 'Other' (or 'them, there'). Maps are thus key utensils to naturalize the borders between cultural and political realms. This practice of subjugating and homogenizing complex cultural relations in given spatial grids has been severely criticized by geographers and anthropologists during the last few decades. In spite of this critique, the link between regional geography and education has been and still is a surprisingly neglected theme in critical human-geographic research.

Defining regional geography

How to define 'regional geography', has been a contested question in the history of the field. R.W. Dickinson defined it in the 1970s as the treatment of a variety of spatially distributed phenomena in a particular area, whether it is a local area, a country or a continent – thus implying that regional geographers should operate at all spatial scales. The challenge for the regional geographer is, he argued, to discover integrating processes that give some measure of identity and uniqueness to an area. For him, regional consciousness and the names of regions are important in mapping such identities. Regional consciousness and identity have been significant topics, particularly among continental European geographers, up to recent times. These issues have become ever more significant also in political practice and European strategic planning since the turn of the millennium, partly because the EU Commission led by Romano Prodi recognized regional identity as one of the corner stones for regional and economic development policies.

In the early-1960s E.W. Gilbert defined geography as the art of recognizing, describing and interpreting the 'personalities' of regions and noted how the 'characters' of regions constantly change and develop. For J.F. Hart, writing in the early 1980s, the task of regional geography was to produce vivid descriptions that facilitate an understanding and appreciation of regions, places and areas. Regions were for him subjective artistic tools that must be designed to fit the hands of the users.

While regional geography lost its position at the core of methodological debates after the 1950s, regional geography was still at times evaluated in nostalgic ways, particularly in Presidential or Memorial Addresses. Some of them became widely recognized, like the address by Hart noted above or two addresses from the early 1960s: H.C. Darby's talk to the Institute of British Geographers or E.W. Gilbert's Herbertson Memorial Lecture. This suggests that regional geography was regarded as valuable, something that reminded us of the time when geography was supposedly characterized by some sort of unity. Terms such as Whole, synthesis, uniqueness, total composition or complexity, compage, holism, individual, totality, organism or personality, or German terms *Zusammenhang* and *Ganzheit*, for example, have been used over time to convince geographers, and perhaps also others, of the power of the region as a unity or an organizing principle that brings nature and culture together. This ideal of towards a unity is obvious in the comments of S.W. Wooldridge in 1956. He suggested that the aim of regional geography is to bring together the different strands of the systematic studies, the 'geographical aspects' of other disciplines. The aim is to create a coherent and focused unity, that is to see nature and nurture, physique and personality as intimately related and interdependent features in specific regions. For many scholars, the region seemingly carries a certain 'primordialism', hence reminding the term 'community' in sociology that has attracted similar massive attention.

The historical roots of regional geography

The origins of regional geography are often traced back to the Classical period, and Ancient Greek scholars such as Strabo (63/64 BC-c.AD 24) are frequently seen as ancestors of *chorographic* thinking. Chorography term comes from *khŏros*, 'place', and *graphein*, 'writing', thus meaning literally 'writing about place'. Much later, the German scholars Alexander von Humboldt (1760-1859) and Carl Ritter (1779-1859) developed comparative methods for geography. Whereas Humboldt developed his approach in the tradition of natural sciences by collecting data and by generalizing, Ritter followed a historical approach, tried to identify distinct regions and to find a unity in diversity. Humboldt's *Kosmos* and Ritter's *Erdkunde*, are often recognized as the founding works of modern geography. While Humboldt is seen as the father of systematic geography, Ritter was developing regional geography. This division between 'general' or 'systematic geography' and 'special' or 'regional geography' has long roots that can be traced back to the classic work *Geographia Generalis* written by the German Bernhard Varenius in the 17th century. These two elements have constituted a unity for many

scholars, two sides of the same coin, and both have been regarded as significant for geographic research.

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Regional geography turned out to be important soon after geography became an academic subject at the end of the 19th century. Regional geography has had somewhat different meanings and trajectories in various national contexts, but it was typical in many states that the first 'geographers' were recruited from other fields, like geology or biology. In such a situation the ideas of region and regional geography provided soon a ground for a disciplinary identity. For many geographers working in British, French, German or North American universities regional geography was then for a long time the 'crown' of the discipline, a synthetic approach that intended to bring together separate sub-areas of geography, such as geomorphology, climatology, biogeography, urban geography, economic geography and social geography. After the institutionalization of geography regional geography dominated over systematic approaches until the 1940s-1950s. Since then systematic approaches became gradually more significant.

Contrary to the current situation where Anglo-American theories and approaches are said to be hegemonic in international human geography, the origin of regional geography in Britain (UK) and North America (especially the USA) largely mirrored developments in Germany and France. Hugh Clout observes that in the UK most lecturers in geography departments during the 1930s-1950s derived their inspiration for regional geography from the French classics. Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918), the founder of modern French geography, saw regional geography as the core of the discipline. In France, the ideal context for the then popular regional monographs were the *pays*, small-scale regional units that corresponded to a distinctive landscape assemblage based on the intimate connection between human beings and their physical environment, and on the ways of life (*genres de vie*) that emerged from this relation. It was supposed that this unity fostered the strong regional identity and identification felt by the inhabitants of their respective *pays*. The study of such unique regions was seen as the key task of the geographer. French geography was characterized by a relatively high degree of unity before World War II, a fact based on the predominating influence of Vidal.

Vidal's approach to regional geography was inductive and historical, but in some other contexts approaches were more theoretically grounded. Certain key representatives of chorological thought, such as Alfred Hettner (1859-1941) in Germany, Richard Hartshorne

(1899-1992) in the USA and many other scholars in Germany, Russia, Japan, Belgium and Switzerland, based their arguments on a division of labor between scientific fields. Both Hettner in his *Die Geographie, ihre Geschichte, ihr Wesen und Ihre Methoden* (1927) and Hartshorne, following Hettner, in his *The Nature of Geography* (1939) were drawing on the philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) classification of sciences whereby geography was distinguished from other fields because, like history but contrary to all other major academic fields, it did not have any particular research object that would define its own field. Rather, it was their approach that distinguished geography and history from other fields. According to this thinking, often labelled as 'exceptionalist', history observes the world in relation to time, geography in relation to space.

*****Fig. 2 approximately here

For chorologists, regional geography was a way to enact *the* geographical method: that is, to study the natural and human worlds according to their areal differentiation, stressing the 'areal' differences between regions, and to map out, describe and explain the causal relationships obtaining within the distinctive assemblages of phenomena within (and in effect constituting) different regions. Accordingly, the region was regarded as a central element for the identity of the discipline as a synthetic field, but also instrumental for the analysis of the differentiation of the earth surface. Hettner's theoretical contemplations suggested a close relation between regional and systematic geography, and his reasoning on geography as a chorological science of regions paved the way for research, with a number of scholars following his ideas with great interest. Contrary to French colleagues, German geographers were not primarily studying Germany and its areas, but were often carrying out regional research overseas.

Geographers have dedicated much time to reflect upon whether regional geography should be regarded as a proper 'science' or whether this should be rather seen as a form of 'art' or applied geography. This debate characterized the pre-quantitative tradition of geography, summarized by Hartshorne in his *Perspectives on the Nature of Geography* in the late-1950. He reminded that we should not confuse either the regional concept or the regional method with what we usually call regional geography, since the former tend to be used in every facet or at every level of geographic study, along the continuum from that of the studying the most elementary integrations (the extreme 'topical' or 'systematic' approach) to that of studying maximum integration (the extreme 'regional' approach). The confusion results from the fact, he argued, that we use the word 'region' for a number of dissimilar concepts, each of which

bears a different relation to the contrast between topical and the regional approaches.

In several states, geographers thought about what a good regional geography would include. In France, the classical regional monograph became significant; practicing regional geography was seen as a demanding task where scientific knowledge, cartographic skills and literary art were brought together. Some scholars, like the German Alfred Kirchhoff created a mechanistic layered scheme (*Das Länderkundliche Schema*) for carrying out regional geography. Another German, Hans Spethman outlined a dynamic regional geography focusing on forces that were modifying regions.

Regional geography has been closely related to another key category, *landscape*. Whereas in the English language usage, landscape is primarily a visual category, in the German and Scandinavian context, for example, region and landscape come together in such categories as *Landschaft* or *Landskap*. This idea was also adopted by some historical geographers elsewhere. The most prominent example in the USA was Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889-1975), who suggested that geographers should trace the areal connections of the transformation of natural landscapes into cultural landscapes. In this approach, he advanced further the ideas of the German geographer Otto Schlüter.

The relation between region and landscape brings in the question of art, both in the sense of skills and artistic or aesthetic representation. These problems were discussed by many authors in, for instance, France, England, Germany and Finland. This topic was particularly significant in German geography, possibly reflecting the dominant continental hermeneutic and interpretative philosophical tradition as well as the importance of neo-Kantianism. At the extreme were German geographers like Ewald Banse (1833-1953) who claimed that a creative geography should be artistic, and he even wrote a small book on geography and expressionism in 1920. Also such a towering German figure in natural science as von Humboldt recognized the importance of artistic description. Similarly, the father of political geography, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), discussed the role of art in understanding nature in his posthumously published book *Über Naturschilderung*. Gilbert suggested in the UK that regional geography is an art comparable with other arts; both poetry and painting can and do portray landscape. He also proposed that if geographers are going to make regions vivid and alive, they should actually possess something of the expressive and sensuous imagination of poets and painters. Hartshorne was much more categorical and claimed that description carried out in geography should involve no small degree of art, not in the sense of subjective impressions, but in the

objective sense of discernment and insight based on knowledge of those relationships that can be known. The artistic character of regional geography was hence discussed by a number of scholars. Later it has been particularly important in 'literary geography' where novels and poems are crucial materials and sources of inspiration in the efforts of geographers to represent and make sense of regional diversity, regional identities and socio-spatial life.

The decline of traditional regional geography

The fate of regional geography varied in various states after World War II. In the US and UK, systematic approaches drawing on new theoretical, law-seeking approaches, quantitative methods and statistical data soon became dominant in the analysis of the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing capitalist states characterized by human mobility. This led to a decline in research focusing on bounded regional spaces in regional geography. The decline of regional geography was based on several factors beyond the societal changes. Human geography gained new applied, more instrumental forms. Along with the rise of systematic approaches in geography, the development of quantitative methods and the adoption of positivist philosophies, the representatives of this 'new geography' also formulated an explicit critique of regional geography. Old concerns about the subjective judgments hidden in the methods of regional geography, and on the 'incestuous', inwards-looking exceptionalist approach, were taken to a new level when they were combined with the philosophical claims of positivist conceptions regarding the precise routes to scientific explanation. In effect, the traditional geographical perspective, concerned with the details of regions, was now challenged by a generalizing spatial science separated from 'concrete ground'. Instead, then, it was abstract spatial relations, networks, and forms of interaction that would be studied in order to recognize general patterns, supposedly holding everywhere, not the unique and seemingly static material features of bounded regions.

In his posthumously published text of 1953, Fred K. Schaefer, a refugee from Nazi-Germany to the US, challenged the descriptive regional-geographic approach and suggested that as long as geographers cultivate its systematic aspects, geography's prospects as an independent discipline are good. Yet he was not so optimistic if geographers reject the search for laws, celebrate its regional aspects for its own sake and limit itself to mere description. In the same spirit, in 1971 Ronald Abler and his co-authors wrote in their *Spatial Organization: A Geographer's View of the World* that for a long time, geographers tended to believe that

internally homogeneous regions, based on one or several place-based features, existed independently of the principles which defined them, and that regions themselves were basically worthy of delimitation and study. They claimed that further progress depended upon generalization and analysis at levels that advance beyond mere classification. Some scholars had a very negative view of the past. Peter Gould moaned in 1979 that, with the exception of a few studies in historical geography, it was virtually impossible to find a study that could be given to scholars in other disciplines without feeling ashamed.

New spirit emphasizing the significance of distances, models and relative spaces spread to geography departments outside of the US and UK as well. This shift was seen as the most substantial revolution in the history of geography. Abler et al. suggested that it opened up a virtually infinite number of new worlds to explore and to map. In locational analysis and spatial science 'regions' still existed, but they became in effect data-bound cells in the spatial matrix that could be analyzed by statistical methods, and regionalization increasingly became classification and the making of taxonomies. It is important to note here the seminal role of Walter Christaller (1893-1969) in Germany, Walter Isard (1919-2010) in the USA, and Torsten Hägerstrand (1916-2004) in Sweden, who were all pioneering quantitative and theoretical geography. In spite of his role in this context, Hägerstrand was also interested in regional-geographic and environmental perspectives and his ideas on time-geography recurred later in 'new regional geography' where Allan Pred used them to develop his theoretical ideas on place and region.

In France, the regional-geographic style and the regional monograph as the crown of scholarship, both created in the Vidalian spirit, were still strong after World War II, and it took longer to replace them by new approaches. This is an interesting delay, since, as noted by Nigel Thrift, during the heyday of Vidalian geography the locally distinctive ways of life of the French peasantry were already vanishing under the onslaught of both capitalism and the activities of French state. The 1960s heralded an active debate in France on the purpose and methods of regional geography, and on the substance of human geography. Also here the emphasis turned gradually towards spatial interactions and distribution patterns. But, as Paul Claval demonstrated, the region and regional geography still were important in France.

The rise of new theoretical and quantitative approaches did not mean the end of regional geography in the 1950s-1960s. This persistence was based on many factors. Regional knowledge was, and still is, crucial in schools and higher education. The ideas of the region

and the potential roles of regional geography have been discussed in geography journals, at times in connection with geography teaching, at times with discussions about the methodologies of geography. Pleas for a balance between regional geography and a new technical and quantitative approach were already being set forth in the late-1960s when regional geography was declared 'dead' by the representatives of spatial science. Likewise, in spite of the major upheavals in geographical research, a strong regional approacht has persisted in North American cultural geography, where certain forms of regional geography lingered in the studies of vernacular regions and regional identities. In Germany, some representatives of the tradition of *Sozial Geographie* continued to develop regional geography, but quantitative approaches did also diffuse here. The early-1970s witnessed a lively debate on the roles of regional geography in Germany, partly reflecting the generational gap, and many authors claimed that regional geography was still valid and needed. Since the late-1980s the region and regional approaches have remained visible in Germany, and scholars have studied subject-matters such as the hermeneutic roots of regional geography, the regionalization of everyday life, region-building processes and the discursive construction of regions. British and Dutch geographers organized a bi-national symposium at the turn of the 1990s to develop new approaches in regional geography. Since then new regional geography and new regionalism have been visible in the UK whereas regional identities have been studied mainly by Dutch and Scandinavian geographers.

The rise of "new regional geography" and new regionalism

One of the fundamental ontological and epistemological questions in traditional regional geography – and one central to understanding how such questions differ from the theoretical discussions raised later in new regional geography – has been whether regions do 'really exist': that is, are they visible and demonstrable realities or are they merely ideas or 'subjective artistic devices', mental entities which geographers develop and use in the classification of the variety of the world? This topic was discussed by Hartshorne and many later authors. For scholars like George Kimble, the whole idea of the region was ambiguous because such units simply do not straightforwardly 'exist' in reality, an argument that was also used by Hartshorne when logically deconstructing the nature of geography. For Hartshorne, regions were neither objects nor phenomena of the material world, but rather creations of the student's mind and thoughts. Here, the region is cast as both an absolute space and an abstract field of experience where things and processes exist. There have been two forms for such constructions: the

‘generic region’, corresponding to the positivist mode of classification, and the ‘specific’ or ‘unique region’, forming the core of the exceptionalist thesis (and which has arguably been the more philosophically and methodologically testing).

Such questions on the nature of regions are actually much more problematic than, superficially taken, they seem to be; but they also help us to understand some features of the new regional geography that has emerged since the 1980s. A logical step further is to question what kind of philosophical and methodological commitments do we possess or reveal when answering such questions. For instance, does the ontological aspect inescapably involved in questioning the nature of regions simply refer to the problem of empirical observation, so that the existence of regions would be based only on the ability of researchers to ‘find’ regions in the world? The implications of such thought have long prevented the development of the geographer’s concepts of region in other respects too. Central problems have been the understanding of regions as non-historical frames or containers, in which the countless phenomena of nature and culture are arranged in varying substantive ways, and the conceptual reduction of regions to mental categories which the researcher creates on the basis of her research motives.

Theoretically-oriented new regional geographers do not limit the question on the nature of regions merely to problems of classification or definition as such. A much more challenging issue is that taking seriously the ontology of the region forces scholars to trace abstractions by which they can reveal the crucial economic, cultural and political aspects of the ‘regionality’ phenomenon and, ultimately, ‘draw’ out, as ‘objects’ for concrete research, the regions which have been produced, reproduced and maybe ultimately destroyed within various social practices and discourses. For new regional geographers, both the questions and answers regarding the existence and manifestation of regions are inevitably based on social *practice*. Hence new regional geographers have been interested in the power relations, practices and discourses through which people, communities and social classes produce and reproduce ‘regions’ and localities in their daily life through various institutionalized practices, such as politics, governance, economy, education, media, or communication. Due to this complexity new regional geographers often adopt an emancipatory interest. Hence, there is a fundamental step from – to use the concepts of Jürgen Habermas – a ‘technical’ interest in knowledge to a ‘practical’ (hermeneutic) and an ‘emancipatory’ one; a shift from gathering and presenting information on the facts of the ‘objective regional world’ to exploit as a technical device in the control of nature and society, to understanding the social and cultural practices and power relations inherent in region-building processes, and ultimately to determining the social and

psychological fetters which restrain society, and in this way achieving mastery over society, so as to release people from their control.

New regionalists have been partly on a different track. While accentuating the general significance of regions or regional scale for economy and governance, or for understanding regional learning and innovation processes, the conceptualization of the region has often played the second fiddle in this approach. For relational geographers region (or place) is rather the meeting place of social and political processes and networks, rather than a bounded space.

Relatedly, geographers have been rethinking the question of the 'objectivity' of regions and conceive them nowadays as processes performed, limited, symbolized and institutionalized through numerous practices, discourses and power relations that are not inevitably bound up with some specific spatial scale but may indeed 'stretch' in both time and space. A typical feature in both new regional geography and relational regional geography has been that they do not prefer any specific spatial scale: the understanding of regions requires recognizing and analyzing the processes, which take place in, between and across different scales. This is useful for understanding both the complexities of contemporary spatialities and the inherent relations of power. Furthermore, the emphasis on historical approaches has not meant merely 'to take history seriously' or to place emphasis on past processes, but instead the problematization of all assumptions concerning society, human beings, social change and territorial transformation. New regional geographers have demonstrated that there is no reason to distinguish between historical and other geographies: regions and their construction are constantly ongoing, never-completed processes, 'geo-histories'.

Whereas traditional regional geographers focused on regional worlds consisting of a supposedly rich mosaic of regional entities, the challenge for the revival of regional geography was thus to develop methodological approaches for studying broader social and spatial transformations taking place in a world characterized by the increasing dynamics of the globalizing capitalism. Many scholars inspired by new regional geographies now pay attention not only to how regions and region-building processes are materially embedded and constituted, as well as to the 'stretching' of regions across supposed regional borders, but they also closely examine the regionalities and regionalizations of social and everyday life. Some geographers are interested in the sense of belonging, structures of feeling, loyalties or the mobilization of memory in regional contexts. Regions and regionality thus start to appear as constructed in the dialectics of materiality, individual and social imagination, and the

formation of subjectivities. Since all of these elements are continually in flux in a globalizing world, this realization has forced scholars to develop new perspectives for regional research and to search for relevant influences from social and cultural theory.

This re-orientation towards new regional geographies initially took place during the 1970-80s. In the middle of exchanges between the still-dominant positivist approaches and the emerging humanistic and Marxist critiques, Derek Gregory set forth – in his 1978 text *Ideology, Science and Human Geography* – the claim that it is important to revive regional geography in one form or other. He suggested, in the spirit of an emerging Marxist terminology, that the challenge is to study the constitution of specific, regionally-embedded social formations, articulations and transformations. Following such pleas to study regions in theoretically-informed ways, the 'new regional geography' became rapidly an important label during the 1980s. This label, proposed by Thrift in 1983, became widespread along with Anne Gilbert's review in *Progress in Human Geography* in 1988. She brought together various theoretical perspectives on the region from both English- and French-speaking geography, including Marxist and humanistic conceptions, alongside approaches based on theories of practice. The latter directed the theoretical attention of human geographers towards the works of some well-known sociologists. Especially significant sources of inspiration were the 'structuration theory' developed by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens and the theories of practice developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

While some geographers saw new regional geography simply as a project 'coming from the left', Gilbert made a distinction between three approaches in what she too called a 'new regional geography'. The first approach may be labelled as 'materialist', looking at the spatial organization of social processes associated with a specific mode of production. It focuses on the political-economic basis of regions and accentuates the role played by the capital circulation within socio-spatial processes. This interpretation was typical for Marxist geographers, and perhaps the most illustrative examples were Doreen Massey's works from the late-1970s and early-1980s. For her, the region was a result of uneven economic development and successive, overlaying rounds of capital accumulation expressed spatially. Her suggestion in 1978 was that an analysis should start from accumulation rather than regions and that this analysis should produce concepts of geographical organization in terms of the spatial division of labour.

The second approach begins from the region as a setting for social interaction, and suggests that this setting plays a fundamental role in the production and reproduction of social relations.

As a result, space (as well as time), embracing its symbolic and ideological dimensions as well as its material basis (nature, economy), is understood as a social and cultural construct. Space and spatial patterns are not independent of social, cultural and natural or ecological processes. Space is not seen as a causal power that would as such determine social processes. Rather social (and cultural) and spatial are understood as constituents and outcomes of each other.

The representatives of the second approach have been typically inspired by the ideas of structuration theorists, mainly Giddens, or have developed their own ideas on this basis. In general, this approach emphasizes the need to recognize how human agency and societal institutional structures are produced and reproduced in a dialectical process, and how diverging power relations are involved in this process. One example is Allan Pred's effort to theorize place or region (he did not make any distinction between the two) as historically contingent processes. Pred combined a structuration-theoretic viewpoint with Hägerstrand's 'time geography', and also drew upon Vidalian thoughts about the importance of local *milieu* as a context shaping people's ways of life. His empirical examples were based on the historical geography of Sweden and the daily life patterns of local peasants. Another example is Anssi Paasi's work on the institutionalization of regions. For him, the region is a social process with a beginning and an end. From this process, he conceptualizes four abstractions: territorial, symbolic and institutional shaping, and the establishment of the region in the regional system and social consciousness. In social practices, such as economy, politics, governance, media or education, regions acquire their borders, which are important as social institutions and symbols rather than just as physical lines, and respectively may be relatively open. Similarly, the often contested symbolism of regions is created, together with the institutional practices that are crucial in the maintenance of territorial and symbolic shapes. Regions, their borders, symbols and institutions are hence not the result of autonomous and evolutionary processes, but instead expressions of a perpetual struggle over power and over the meanings associated with space, representation, democracy and welfare. Paasi's studied the construction and meaning-making of regionality in the case of Finnish provinces and, in later work, the social construction of the Finnish national state.

The third approach stresses culture, focusing on regional identification and regional identities. Here the region is understood primarily as a set of cultural and emotional relations between a specific human group and a particular place; it is a people-bound category, conceived less with regard to individuals but rather more with social groupings or communities. Human geographers often discuss these kinds of themes nowadays by referring to the concept of place

rather than region. Along with the rise of humanistic geography, place became a significant category, but the scope of this category has expanded since the 1990s so that the element of experience accentuated by early humanistic geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph or David Seamon is not any more the only key dimension. It is instead the socially constructed character of place, and the 'power geometries', to use Massey's somewhat fuzzy term, that are involved in this construction and that have attracted the attention of geographers and other scholars. Geographers have also continued work that is more theoretical on place. The publications of Tim Cresswell have been particularly influential.

During the last 10-15 years or so the idea of place has gained new ground in regional planning and particularly in so-called place based approaches to regional development. Another idea that is often associated with both new regional geography and planning is 'regional identity'. It should not be understood refer to any search for separate, unique regions. What is important is the process through which regional identity narratives are created as part of the institutionalization of regions, what kinds of elements are mobilized in such narratives and how these narratives are used by individuals and institutional actors in the networks of power manifesting themselves in social and cultural life at and across various spatial scales.

Overall, new regional geography has been a rather multifaceted phenomenon, something that was already obvious in the late-1980s. It is still a somewhat ambivalent brand: while many authors have noted the need to reconceptualize region and place, very few have been that explicit in proposing a new regional geography. It may thus be argued that new regional geography has not and very unlikely will become a coherent approach. Rather, it is an umbrella term for region-based research and for reflecting how region and/or place are constituted by and constitutive of social life, social relations and identity. One important, dynamic feature of regional-geographic thinking since its infancy has been methodological debates regarding the concept of the region and the processes of regionalization. The arguments of new regional geographers are merely one fold of this continual discourse. There are also wider contextual and structural factors that foreground and modify regional thinking in various states, for example, nationalism, imperialism, geopolitics, wars and conflicts, globalization, uneven regional development and, last but not least, currently influential evaluation systems in academia that simply claim scholars to be 'novel' and to invent both new conceptual ideas and empirical approaches.

It is no wonder that some authors, like Ron Johnston, have suggested that, rather than a 'new

regional geography', we actually need a more developed study of 'regions in geography'. Paasi, Harrison and Jones have recently suggested that instead of inventing continually new regional words to depict and interpret regional worlds, geography perhaps needs a more consolidated approach to regions that could help to avoid the ongoing fragmentation of regional geography.

Regional geography and the concept of the region

Sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu have suggested that language plays a key role in scientific practice. Scientific facts, arguments and theories are mostly constructed, communicated and evaluated in the form of written statements, which simply means that scientific work is basically a literary and interpretative activity. The understanding of what are the key categories in scientific discourse is historically and spatially contingent, not only because these categories are embedded in different languages but also because of different institutional contexts where scientific work is carried out, and because of existing societal and academic power relations. Even if theories may travel from one context to another, in social sciences they are at least partly context-dependent. What German geographers, for instance, have meant by the region, and how regional geography has then been recognized and practiced in this context, has differed from the British, French, Finnish and other contexts.

Preston James argued that words, whether they are technical ones or not, are valuable only as symbols standing for ideas or concepts. In academic geography, region, place, space and some other related categories, such as location, distance and direction, have been identified as such keywords. By tradition the region has been the most powerful term in geography. It has been the central intellectual reference-point for both the concrete research process (including the presentation of results in maps, pictures, and text) and the philosophy and methodology of the discipline. One feature in the development of new regional geography has been the fact that, along with its rise, the terminology of regional geography has become broader, although not necessarily less ambivalent, than in the past. It has not merely been the region that has been scrutinized, but also the concepts of place and space. All too little serious research has been done on the possibilities for conceptualizing the region and place together to reveal the complex dynamics of socio-spatial world. Even for many new regional geographers, these two terms are more or less similar or overlapping.

Human geographers simultaneously use several concepts of the region, which may be roughly

classified into three categories. The *pre-scientific* concept of the region means that researchers do not problematize the meanings of regions. This is typical in applied research which is tailor-made e.g. for planning bodies or other regional authorities that simply define in advance the 'regions' (e.g. statistical units) that researchers are expected to use. This concept is increasingly common in some fields of geography, such as economic geography, where various statistical and administrative regions are often the point of departure for the analysis. Similar critique has been presented on the concepts of region that characterize the works of the representatives of new regionalism. *Discipline-centered* regions are created by researchers when using, for instance, uniformity of characteristics, homogeneity of content or functional coherence as their criteria. In *critical interpretations*, regions are seen as manifestations of often contested social, political and cultural practices and discourses. Even if it is still the critical geographer who abstracts and 'creates' the idea of the major dimensions of regions and their formation, these abstractions are created to uncover the mechanisms, processes and power relations of the social, political, economic and cultural worlds.

The discipline-centered perspective regards regions as objects (e.g. traditional *Landschaft* geography) or, as results of the research process, often formal classifications of diverging empirical elements. These perspectives are sometimes used to legitimize a specific 'geographical perspective', and hence the theoretical debates on whether regions are 'real' units or imagined, mental categories. These debates are not only a historical curiosity but fitting illustrations of the struggle over legitimate conceptualizations, and the resulting 'regions' are also examples of academic socialization and power/knowledge relations. These regions also show the power of geography: once 'invented', they can be powerful in shaping the spatial imaginations and actions of researchers.

Critical approaches to the region both emerge from and focus on social practice, relations and discourse. They aim at conceptualizing and scrutinizing current spatialities as part of wider networks of cultural, political and economic processes, and socio-spatial divisions of labour. Most studies labelled as 'new regional geography' belong to this category: e.g. those mapping individual and social identities, those regarding regions as manifestations of capital accumulation or settings for interaction as well as those focusing on the conceptual dimensions of region-building processes. While these approaches have normally been pursued separately, a critical regional geography should ideally combine the political-economic focus with questions of subjectification and identity formation. Furthermore, the understanding of regions as social processes stresses both the importance of a geohistorical perspective in understanding them as

part of broader regional transformations, and demand the conceptualization of the relevant time-scales of history in each concrete case. The way that we understand and conceptualize the region may hence have a profound effect on how we shape and experience regional development, globalization and the world.

Challenging bounded regions: relational approaches to regions

An unchanging and somehow fixed image of traditional regional geography seems to have become a caricature that the proponents of more recent relational approaches often surpass. A relational emphasis on regions is not a completely new feature but can be traced in the history of regional-geographic thought, even if the strive to develop regional geography often manifested itself in the search for regional unity and coherence, duly 'arresting' the spatial complexity into a specific form. George Kimble, for instance, noted in early 1950s that regional geographers may perhaps be trying to put borders that do not exist around areas that do not matter! But also Richard Hartshorne or Jan Broek were not only looking at hermetically-sealed, bounded spaces. For Hartshorne, this was a logical result of his 'Kantian' understanding of the region as a mental category rather than a 'really existing' unit. Hartshorne suggested in 1939 that the problem of establishing the boundaries of geographical regions is a problem for which geographers have no reason to even hope for an objective solution and that any regional unit has important relations with all neighboring units. The region may therefore be more closely related to certain regional unit than to some others, but not inevitably in all respects. Broek, for his part, suggested in 1965 that places have a position in both time and space: it is important to know both the legacy of the past and presence of change, and also to look at the internal nature of place (site) and its external relations with other areas (situation).

The relatively open character of regions was also strong in spatial approaches. In the mid-1960s Peter Haggett, for example, regarded functional, nodal regions as open systems. He suggested that an analysis of the build-up of such systems would require at first an analysis of movements (the channels along which movements occur), networks, nodes and their organization in a hierarchy, acknowledging that this complex system ultimately forms functional surfaces that we can identify. Currently important keywords like networks and movement/mobility were thus already in the 1960s identified as important categories in understanding spatial patterns. While scholars like Fred Lukermann recognized in the 1960s that the character of the places of the earth is always emergent and becoming, the relational complexities of practices and power involved in region-building processes were not yet accentuated. New regional geographers and relational thinkers in particular brought such issues

on agenda.

What is then the role of regions and regional geography in a globalizing world characterized by new regional and scalar divisions of space in economy and culture, processes of regional integration, reorganization and re-scaling of regional governance, regionalization processes and place marketing and image-building? Some scholars have advised that, if geographers wish to contribute to globalization debates, regional geography has to be revived. This has been the aim of new regional geographers and new regionalists. As a result, some of them have sought to reshape thinking about the global regional geographies of the world system, some others the regional worlds of economic production, often in the context of city-regions. Still others have taken more explicitly political steps, and relational thinkers such as Doreen Massey and Ash Amin have suggested that regions should be seen as non-bounded in the mobile world, and that the opening of borders is a challenge for a progressive social science and politics. They offer what is thus as much a political message as a purely scientific one. It is based on the challenges posed by the fact that – compared with the traditional efforts to create distinctive 'geographical regions' – most (con)temporary regions are 'topological' in the sense that they 'stretch' in space; their variable social contents and relations are networked and uninterruptedly fluctuate across borders. This networking and fluctuation actually produces, modifies and reproduces regions. Regional boundaries and narratives regarding regional identities are not and do *not* need to be exclusive and permanent. New regional geographers want to challenge any taken-for-granted essence of regions and see them as contested enterprises and results of social and political processes.

This sort of more open regional geography is a challenge for both geographic education and research. The problem is that, while in some cases borders are quite insignificant, in other cases they are more important and persistent. Such cases were likely the prompt for the idea of the border/boundary that many traditional regional geographers had in mind when they tried to distinguish and to classify 'unique' regional spaces. A certain boundedness is also obvious in the case where regions are also *territories* produced and reproduced within the processes of governance, and hence become socially meaningful entities in such processes. Correspondingly borders may have a constitutive role in the management and control of social action. The significance of regions and their borders as catalysts for regionalist movements and for planning strategies is also obvious. Particularly evident this is in the case of many ethno-territorial groups, but identity narratives produced and reproduced by regional activists, media and governmental bodies are also fitting examples of this politics of distinction. Such social

movements hardly regard their own activities as regressive, although others may do so in chorus with academic theories accentuating the progressive nature of the openness of regions.

All of this is obvious, but what we need next is the rethinking of precisely what are 'borders'. Many relational thinkers apparently leaned on a typical political geographic understanding of borders as pretty sharp dividing lines between social entities and criticized this idea, at times challenging the roles of borders. Regions acquire their borders in complex social practices and discourses as part of the institutionalization of region. Borders are hence important as social institutions and symbols, not merely as physical lines. This has important implications for both political-geographic and regional-geographic understandings of borders and regions/territories, and helps to understand their perseverance. This also implies that borders do not 'locate' only in border areas, but are widely spread in a region, into diverging social practices, ideologies and discourses. This idea becomes obvious in such national and regional examples as 'flag days', regional media, festivals, museums and archives, education, regional novels, electoral districts and voting, or sports events: these are all practices that are constitutive of the region, regional identity-building and, indeed, borders! Regional borders are therefore not bounding the practices and discourses in some abstract way, rather it is the practices and discourses that produce and reproduce such borders. It is therefore critical for regional geographers to study in each case how existing ideas of 'difference' are produced and reproduced. Positing of difference as itself problematic, and searching for how this is produced and reproduced in the context of regions and territories, may be more fruitful than simply ignoring the role of 'boundedness' in social life.

Recent decade has again witnessed the emergence of new approaches to regions. Much of the new arguments have focused on *bridging* territorial and relational approaches, by seeing them as 'chiasmatic' sides of the same socio-spatial process, rather than understanding them as opposites. This has been an important step not only in theoretical debates but also in the context of regional planning and governance, for example.

Conclusion

Regional geography has been an important sub-area of academic geography, both as a concrete research field and as an object of theorization. It was vibrant in many states until the 1950-1960s, and since then declined in academic research while maintaining its role in school geography and higher education. New regional geography brought both regional geography

and the region back on to theoretical debates since the 1980s. New regional geographers have theorized both the ideas of the region and the role of regional knowledge in the frameworks inspired by social and cultural theory, taking seriously historically contingent societal conditions. New regional geography is therefore not just the collection of 'spatial knowledge' nor an internal methodological problem for the discipline of geography. The representatives of this approach have considered how best to perform a new regional geography. Most scholars suggest that it occurs most effectively when exceeding the traditional boundaries between social sciences and humanities, and when scholars become interested in the power relations associated with region-building processes, regional identity narratives, or regional development. Along with the rise of the new regional geography, some other traditional themes have also been developed further, above all the question of scale and the role of historical approaches. New regional geography has been paralleled by new regionalism that has resonated particularly with economic geography.

Regions are today understood as complicated institutional structures, 'institutional facts', since they are dependent on both human agreement and the operation and decisions made in the context of such social institutions as political organization, governance, economy, media or education systems. These institutions operate across scales, which contests traditional concepts of regions as isolated, bounded units. This boundedness is not an either/or question since in the current mobile world, regional borders may be open in some social practices and discourses, in some others relatively closed. It is also to be noted that actors, institutions and organizations involved in the territorialization and meaning making of regional spaces may act both inside and outside of regions. Making regions always includes normative components because institutional structures are sedimentations of rules, power and trust, in which borders, symbols and institutions merge through material and discursive practice. Once created, they are also social facts in the sense that they can generate and are generated by action as long as people believe in their existence and they have a legitimate role in the spaces of 'publicity' (e.g. in the media) or in governance. This action may be simultaneously reproductive, resistant or transformative.

Though regional geography lost its academic status during the 1950-60s, and even if new regional geography and new regionalism provide novel theoretically informed perspectives on regional geographies, the traditional viewpoints still often manifest themselves in regional geography textbooks where regions, formed and classified by the authors, are often described without contextual interpretation. One everlasting challenge for regional geographers is

therefore to deconstruct the 'geographical' assumptions and inclusions/exclusions that such regions imply at various spatial scales. Textbooks often reproduce the etymological meaning of geography: *ge* (earth) and *grapho* (to write or describe). We should not deny the cultural role of such information: whatever the critique says, regional geography is also, in this traditional, rather technical sense, important for our world views. But a critical understanding of the problems of this approach is important, and the challenge is to spot the versatile and complex chiasm of power and regional geography. This suggests that a critical regional geography is simultaneously also political geography.

Further reading

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Cross references

Region, regionalism, regionalization, structurationist geography, place, space, Hartshorne, R, Hettner, A

Web resources

Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde http://www.ifl-leipzig.com/institut.0.html?&L=1

http://www.uwsp.edu/geO/internet/world_regions.html

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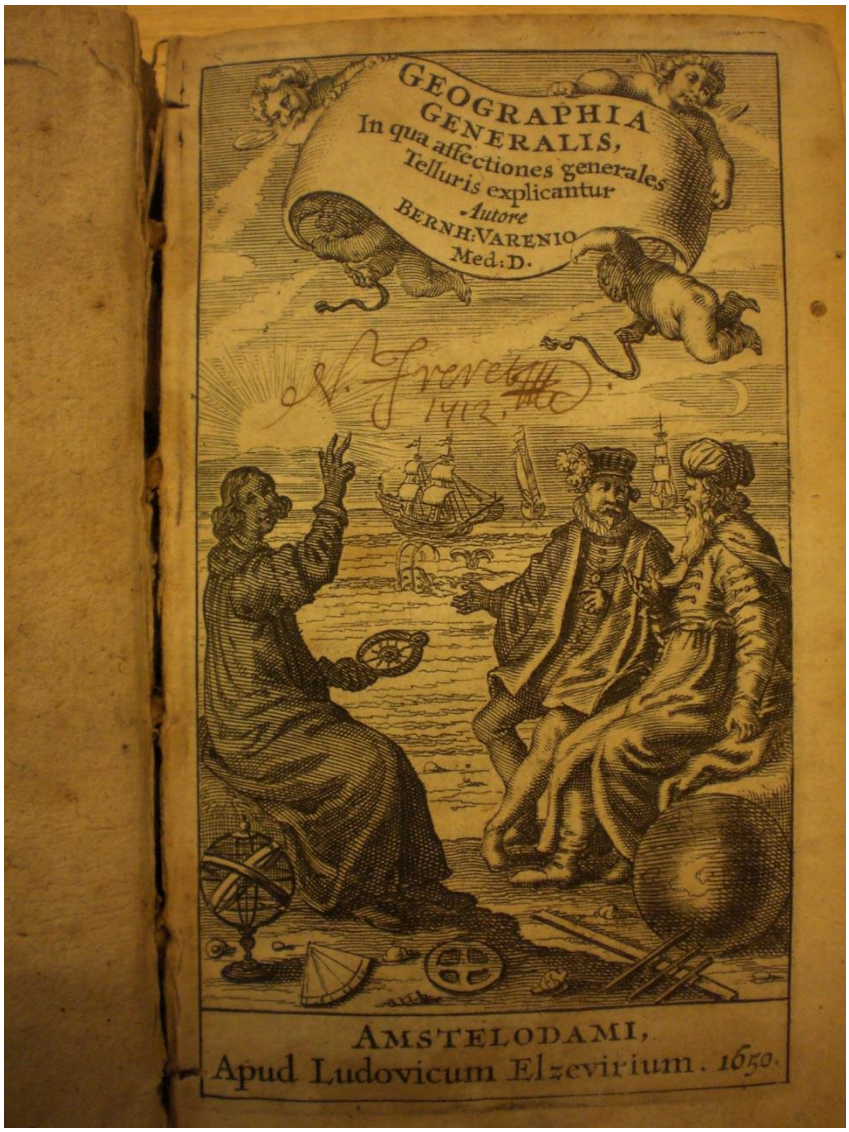

Figure 1. The cover of The *Geographia Generalis* by Berhard Varenius (1650). The division between general (systematic) and special (regional) geography was introduced in this book. (The Library of the University of Oulu, photo by Anssi Paasi)

GEOGRAPHY AND SYSTEMATIC SCIENCES

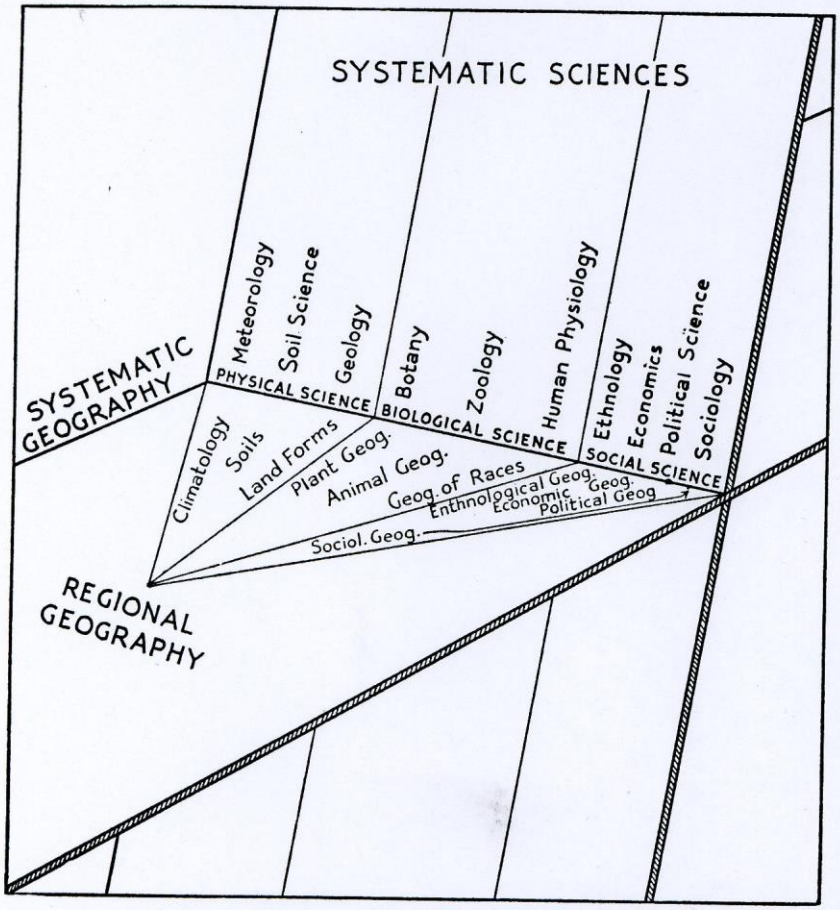

FIG. 1.—Diagram illustrating the relation of geography to the systematic sciences. The planes are not to be considered literally as plane surfaces, but as representing two opposing points of view in studying reality. The view of reality in terms of areal differentiation of the earth surface is intersected at every point by the view in which reality is considered in terms of phenomena classified by kind. The different systematic sciences that study different phenomena found within the earth surface are intersected by the corresponding branches of systematic geography. The *integration* of all the branches of systematic geography, focussed on a particular place in the earth surface, is regional geography. (See Sec. XI E.)

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Figure 2. Richard Hartshorne's view on the relations between geography and systematic science. The figure was included in his *The Nature of Geography*.