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THE RISE AND FALL OF REGIONAL STUDIES

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Introduction

In this paper my intention is to review the use that writers have made of geographically identifiable entities - regions. Such entities have been used for a variety of different purposes at different times as well as by writers from distinct intellectual traditions. Geographers, historians and novelists have all found regional frameworks worthy of use at many different scales. In recent decades social science research has passed into a phase where concern with quantitative analysis has either removed the regional component as a spatial framework or else laid emphasis on broader spatial frameworks. The second major objective of this paper is to demonstrate the validity of the concept of the region and of the ways it can be used to illuminate contemporary research, particularly in Latin America. Furthermore, while I naturally emphasise the importance of the spatial components of regional analysis, and of the natural environment - soil, water, climate, vegetation - in any regional study, convincing regionally-based studies must have a broad intellectual focus, and recognise popular conceptions of space.

The rise of regional ideas

The identification and the description of parts of the known world has been a characteristic of the endeavours of scholars since Herodotus (born c. 484 BC). The expansion of Greek culture and commerce, not to mention political influence throughout the Mediterranean and east into South Asia, broadened the horizons of Greek knowledge and enabled scholars to travel widely. The Roman scholar Strabo (born c. 64 BC) described the whole of the world known to him in a 17 volume work that served as a model for many similar encyclopedic works in later centuries and which ordered existing knowledge about places and their inhabitants into a geographical framework. However a basic unit of Greek political organisation was the polis which often encompassed only a small area, a valley system, an island or group of islands, and therefore the scale of some of the more detailed descriptions was relatively large.

A second important feature of these early geographical writings was that they frequently sought to use geographical knowledge to suggest or imply links between the physical characteristics of the areas of the known world and the nature of their inhabitants. Although elements of this appear in Greek and Roman writings, associated with Parmenides and Aristotle, such ideas did not really develop in a way that greatly influenced scientific thought until early in the 19th century, in particular in relation with Humboldt and Ritter. Both the latter were concerned with the compilation and subsequent analysis of observations by themselves and by others in order to develop generalisations or theory which might have wider relevance. Such scholars were greatly concerned with the interrelations between features observed in similar locations, which often resulted in particular locations having characteristics very different from surrounding areas. Such regions were held to be not necessarily identifiable within a given natural framework - such as a valley or river basin - but something worthy of study and to be identified on a deductive basis. Humboldt, of course, had a considerable experience of Latin America and his wide-ranging scientific observations and detailed chronicles of both travels and scientific records were of particular importance to both geologists and botanists and his understanding of some of the natural environmental influences on plant distributions, in particular vertical zonation, was in advance of his time. Above all he sought to explain the distributions that he encountered.

The scale on which knowledge was organised regionally encompassed large areas and world classification of regions, frequently according to climate, and major compendia of world geography were more common than accounts of small areas. Nonetheless Alfred Hettner's monograph of detailed regional geography published in 1893 was concerned not with a continent but with the Cordillera of Bogotá. Much of the concern of the geographers of the nineteenth century was with careful description and only limited interpretation. Their human geography seldom goes beyond distribution of people or of ethnic groupings, and, although they did provide useful data and use maps to convey a great deal of information succinctly, they seldom organised their conclusions in relation to any interpretation of society at a national or continental level. Thus such accounts bridge the gap between natural and social science and demonstrate the importance of the physical background of human settlement and economic organisation but do little to relate this to any coherent theory of society. This orientation led many to argue that the natural environment

was of overriding importance in the location of towns and industries without giving adequate attention to the extent to which locational decisions also reflected the distribution of power in society and the extent to which local and regional societies were influenced by national and regional structures.

During the present century, the great French school of human geography under Vidal de la Blache and later Brunhes and Sorre stimulated world and, later, regional studies on a major scale. The gathering together of information about particular areas and the presentation of a coherent, if limited, picture of a regional society and economy became a distinctive feature of geographical writings in Britain from the time of Hugh Robert Mill, associated with description of very small areas, and in France with the outpourings of regional monographs such as those of Pierre Deffontaines (on the middle Garonne) and of Pierre Monbeig (on the State of São Paulo) from the 1930s. This attention to detailed accounts of geographically defined areas coincided with the development of tribal studies by anthropologists which, by virtue of focussing on a group of people occupying a clearly defined area, were developing regional studies but within a different disciplinary tradition. Although some anthropological monographs displayed sensitivity to the importance of the state of the knowledge and use of natural resources by native peoples, many showed limited awareness of links with other tribes and cultures or of the extent to which so-called 'native' cultures have really been influenced by a dominant alien culture.

A major current in regional description that has developed in the past 40 years has been detailed historical analysis. The students of the Annales school of economic history associated with Lucien Febvre in France have long been aware of the importance of detailed local studies and of a range of factors concerned with the natural environment as exemplified by some of the earlier writing of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. The account and analysis of the development over long periods of regional societies and economies necessitates both an awareness of trends in society as a whole and of the many interrelated variables that result in social and spatial problems of development. In Latin America this tradition of historical regional analysis has been represented by James Parsons' account of the human and historical geography of Antioquia (1948), by Rafael Baraona and colleagues' masterly analysis of the development of landownership patterns since the colonial period in a single Andean valley in Central Chile (1961), and by

Gilbert Butland's study of the human geography of the southernmost parts of Chile (1957).

The tradition of regional studies in and related to geography is both of long-standing and much used if not admired by scholars in other disciplines. Although some studies lacked vision and made naive assumptions about man-land relations they did establish that the study of human activity within small areas makes possible a synthesis of different influences on the pattern and process of human development.

The decline of regional studies

It can be seen that areal description and regionally oriented studies were clearly appropriate when there were large areas of the habitable world for which little published information existed. The regional framework for further study and analysis became associated in the minds of many people with 'mere description' which was not conducive to the development of theory that offered a structure to explain human behaviour whether social, political or economic. The appropriateness of regional frameworks for analysis lay, in large measure, in the fact that the region was often a spatial unit readily identifiable by its inhabitants.

A series of important trends in intellectual activity in the social sciences have tended, in past decades, to diminish the importance attached to regional studies for a variety of reasons. Such changes in emphasis are understandable and a highly desirable part of the evolution of method in the social sciences but, if they lead to ignorance of the importance of regions as a spatial framework for study and to an emphasis on data collection and publication for large administrative units, such a tendency can also lead to a divorce between popularly conceived regional units and much larger geographical areas that satisfy bureaucratic needs for fewer large units for administration.

As Guillermo de la Peña has pointed out in his analysis of the recent history of part of the Morelos Highlands (1981), the growing importance of the State, accompanied by centralisation of authority and administration diminishes the power of local leadership - or at least confines the area of its authority - to control local activity and to minister to local needs. John Friedmann and colleagues have argued for recognition of a new politics of space within which a new territorial-political community with common political institutions to combat current inequalities that are the

consequence of the increasing integration of people's lives into a global system of economic (and political) relations (Friedmann et al.,1980). The creation of large units for post-primary education, for example, removes students from the environment in which they grew up, forces migration and associates further education with increasing anomie. It becomes increasingly difficult, therefore, to conceive of regional education except in the context of large territorial units that have little meaning to parents or children. Roberts makes the point that 'people combine regionally to make a living in ways which reflect the special social and economic circumstances of the area. The special character of a region depends on social and economic relations being not the same as those elsewhere in the country. In contrast, when industrial capital predominates, the tendency of the state is to homogenize social and economic conditions throughout the national territory ...' (1981, p 31). Although the tendency to homogenise is more to treat uniformly rather than to diminish spatial and social inequality since, as Friedmann, Slater and others have argued, centralisation is frequently associated with increased inequality.

The improved reliability of statistical data from government and other sources and the increased use of rigorous statistical procedures in analysing such data by social scientists has reinforced the use of large spatial units, whatever the extent to which such units correspond to identifiable regions that are recognised by their inhabitants. The use of national data sets made it possible to describe in a precise way many aspects of population and economic activity but the applicability of such analysis to local and regional situations is limited by the spatial units used. A similar but quite separate problem is the lack of comparability of social science community studies which limits their value for comparative statistical analysis. This leads many scholars versed in quantitative analysis to doubt the value of interviews and case studies and, still less life histories, and has led to the discussion of such ideas as Rapid Rural Appraisal, designed to collect information quickly over large areas.

A great increase in human mobility in recent decades, allied with the increased awareness by social scientists of the extent to which people move over large areas in search of their livelihood has also resulted more recently in scepticism towards regional and community studies that do not take into account the role of absent members of the community and of outside income. Just as John Murra and others have shown the extent to

which Andean communities may have territories that encompass several ecological zones and areas of land separated from one another by many hours walk, so a number of writers, not least Long and Roberts (1978) have shown the extent to which in many rural communities farming is really only one part of a system of occupations taking place in different locations where the same actors may play different roles at distinct times of the year. An individual is then seen conceptually as only part of a family enterprise whether he farms in the Sierra, as an ayudante on his cousin's lorry, or works as a cane cutter in a lowland sugar estate. For such an individual the idea of region is elusive, to say the least. Likewise, with the increasing size and complexity of commercial farming, a single economic enterprise may include scattered farmsteads producing complementary produce, or alternatively it may be a freeholding farm unit which is tied contractually to a multinational food corporation which limits severely freedom of action.

Finally the increased development of behavioural geography with its awareness of relevant and related work in psychology and zoology has undoubtely enriched the field of human geography and demonstrated the importance of considering the context within which, for instance, farmers or farm families take decisions and the importance of the cultural context within which actions are taken (see for example the work in Mexico of Kirsten Johnson[1977] or Anne Kirkby[1973]) which could imply a diminished importance for the regional context of behaviour and decision making unless individuals and families are seen as influenced primarily by those from beyond the community. Gold's recent survey(1982) of work on territoriality implies considerable confusion about the scale at which interest should be focussed and suggests that the obvious advances which behaviouralist approaches could bring to community or regional studies are not yet perceived.

These various currents in recent research are only a few that reflect personal interest and commitment but, in different ways, each of them can be seen to diminish the importance of regional studies. Within geography this trend is clearly demonstrated by Chisholm's condescending and brief references to regional geography in what purports to be a synoptic view of the very broad field of human geography (Chisholm, 1971).

The importance of regional studies

Regional studies are not likely to cease to exist. The geographically identified region is a convenient spatial framework for detailed analyses even if the full logic of such a unit escapes many investigators. However, I wish to argue that a regional framework should be seen as valuable in its use of a geographical unit readily recognised by the local population and which has an underlying coherence through the recognition of the common interest and experience of its people. But their boundaries are not static and, not only can different regional organisations be identified for specific purposes but also regions change in configuration through time in response to changes in economic development, political organisation and organisation of production. Most regions can also be seen as part of a national and world system and many of the changes that take place in regions are in response to changes outside the immediate region.

In a contribution to an earlier symposium of regions in Latin America, Bryan Roberts has reviewed the value of regional identity particularly from a sociological viewpoint and he emphasised the importance of identifying the prevailing forms of production within specific areas and the changes in those forms of production which were means of creating and changing regional identity and also of linking the region to the State (Roberts, 1981). His view of the region as a concept was largely non-spatial and, in particular, showed little regard for the natural environment. What I wish to offer here is a case for taking specific consideration of the spatial aspects of regions and for the recognition that such spatial units exist in the view of those who live in them and, moreover, that the natural environment's importance to the human population can best be understood within such a logical and geographical framework.

A increasing number of scholars, including many geographers, have written about the importance of the 'sense of place' in relation to human existence and for territorial identification. The territorial area occupied by families and larger groups of people is usually identified by a name which is universally recognised by the population of that area. The name may reflect a natural feature or a pre-existing cultural identity even though long since of little significance beyond that of a label. This sense of identity with territory for individuals and families is logically expressed by a place-name even though the exact boundaries may not always be clearly identified or generally recognised. Such territorial

organisation is often to some extent reflected in the spatial structure of political units where, for administrative convenience, regional labels are given to parishes, cantons or provinces. Once this is done it is in the interest of the regional political authorities to accentuate the degree of regional identity in order for the inhabitants to identify strong common interest.

In recent field work in Pimampiro (northern Ecuador) the importance of the town having recently been made capital of its own political region (canton) was continually stressed by local residents and by rural people. However, the coalition of four parishes which had worked to obtain canton status - a prolonged and costly procedure from which all four could benefit but greatest benefit would undoubtledly accrue to Pimampiro town - has broken down and the one predominantly indian parish of Mariano Acosta was seeking to secede from Pimampiro canton and affiliate themselves elsewhere. The basis of their break from Pimampiro was longstanding racial and economic discrimination by the town merchants and lorry drivers. Its inhabitants had organised the opening of a new road and a regular bus service giving them direct access to Ibarra, the provincial capital, and by political action they had effectively changed the regional structure of the north-east of the Province of Imbabura.

Economic areas, however, do not necessarily correspond to administrative districts but long-term economic development, by imposing a particular pattern of change on a series of areas, can create a region in the way that Jalisco emerged during the 19th century as a distinctive region in western Mexico before subsequently becoming part of the larger region of Guadalajara, as Roberts described (Ibid., 18-19). Cultural identity, in many instances, is based on the occupation of a specific place and the belief systems of many native American peoples associated particular sites, especially mountains, with supernatural characteristics. Likewise, rituals are sometimes associated with reaffirming the boundary of community territory, defining exactly that part of the region that they occupy.

Although many of the regions identified by physical geographers are locations of similar phenomena - coniferous forest, desert or high altitude steppe - others have sufficient diversity to offer a range of different environments for human occupation. Access to a range of environments, or at least to land of varying quality, is important to many human groups

although, as Henri Favre has pointed out in an area of Huancavelica, there are considerable possibilities for modifying the system of use when access to one ecological zone is curtailed (Favre, 1977). A major challenge to social scientists who embark on regional studies is to recognise both the extent and limitation of the influence of the natural environment on the pattern of human development. Wasserstrom, for example, has exposed the limitations of Collier's view that Tzotzil people in Chiapas had developed agricultural systems that were destructive of their natural environment (Wasserstrom, 1978 and Collier, 1975) largely because the population density had increased and the strength of attachment to their native region precluded a move to alternative areas. Wasserstrom showed that, in fact, some Tzotzil made extensive use of other zones or had adopted other strategies to subsist on often only 2000 square metres of land but that this had been forced on them since the colonial period when tribute payments and the theft of land by non-indians (rather than population growth) had resricted their resource base.

A number of recent studies by human ecologists have shown convincingly that the problems of human adaptation to particular environmental stresses need to be studied rigorously and on the basis of quantitative analysis of activity patterns and diet. The Nuñoa study testifies to the value of this sort of approach (Baker and Little, 1976), but few studies combine a concern for quantitative analysis of means of livelihood with a consideration of the relationship between the small regional society and the State. Thus, Nietschmann's excellent and perceptive essays on a Miskito village in Nicaragua, which are among the most stimulating regional studies by a human geographer in recent years, are marred by an unwillingness to relate the problems of the Miskito to the overall political economy of Nicaragua or to the influence of multinational food corporations on food production (Nietschmann, 1973,1979).

Although it is now becoming commonplace for anthropologists working in the Amazon basin to consider the environmental impact of the settlement schemes or of the constriction of native reservations by major reservoirs, such a concern with the natural environment is not common elsewhere in Latin America. Indeed meetings of natural and social scientists, such as the recent Hillsides Symposium, are uncommon and when they do occur marked by mutual incomprehension rather than recognition of common concern (Novoa & Posner, 1981).

Even though a majority of the Latin American population is urban, away from the big cities the majority of the population is concerned in some way with farming. The problems that face rural populations include both the inequalities of opportunity for people occupying different niches in society and the hazards that the natural environment presents to farmers, hunters and fishermen. The perception of these hazards by people from different cultural backgrounds varies considerably. But, just as it is increasingly possible to recognise that food shortages can be attributed just as much to a maldistribution of total resources as to 'inevitable' crop failure due to drought or disease, so it is still necessary to understand all the factors associated with the drought or disease. Not only must land use changes be examined in any analysis of 'disaster' but also the methods of marketing, the patterns of migration and the range of external influences on the development of community livelihood strategies. The changes in the environment and society are interrelated not only in their causes, involving different elements of human society, but also different areas within the same region. The use of water for irrigation in the upper part of a valley reduces the quantity available downstream and may also radically change the purity of the water as soluble agricultural chemicals accumulate, as has been the experience in the lower Colorado valley in Mexico. The study of the relations between society and the natural environment needs thus to be undertaken on a regional scale in order to at least start to understand the inter-relations between the problems and experience of different communities. Bunge, indeed, suggested that one should try to identify or even create natural man-made regions for the long-term survival of mankind, areas where man and nature exist in symbiosis rather than in conflict (Bunge,1973).

I showed earlier how the development of regional accounts of peoples and places originated from a need to order what was known about the world. Although social scientists are stimulated by a variety of problems related to contemporary and historical social issues, and natural scientists are likewise in part concerned with the natural environment as modified by man, the study of human society in many parts of Latin America must encompass the natural environment and should be undertaken at the scale of the region. Not all social science theory can be expressed in spatial terms but applied social science must be concerned with where people live as well as how they subsist and regions are a spatial framework within which such issues can be examined.

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