

III. BORDERS TRANSFORMATION AND GLOBALIZATION

BETWEEN THE LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL: THE PROBLEM OF “REGIONAL IDENTITIES”

Wioletta Małgorzata Kowalska

University of Białystok, Institute of Sociology,
Plac Uniwersytecki 1, 15–420 Białystok, Poland
E-mail: malkowal@gmail.com

The main objective of the paper is to examine the concepts of region and regional identity in order to point out their political, social and theoretical/philosophical opportunity, and also their highly problematic character, especially in the current Eastern European context. The author tries to determine the contents of the concept of region from phenomenological perspective and shows that it is hardly possible because, in practice, “region” refers more to arbitrary political and administrative criteria than to what can be experienced as a common “surrounding world”. The examples of regions analyzed in the paper are those of the infra-state Polish region Podlasie and of the supra-state Euregion Neman. In conclusion, the author claims that the opposition cultural/political, or experienced/constructed, should be mediated by European legal and moral rules. It is also claimed that only awareness of difficulties connected with the project of regions can allow their construction in a realistic, not arbitrary and not utopian way.

Keywords: civilization, culture, globalization, identity, nation-state, phenomenology, politics, region.

doi:10.3846/limes.2010.16

Introduction: main theses

The main question of the paper is about the phenomenological reality of an entity such as “region” and, more particularly, the Eastern-European, or “Baltic Sea” region. Can such a region be more than a vague and inconsistent political postulation expressing either the current interests of the State governors, or those of a minority? What criteria should be respected to distinguish a territory as a region? What conditions are necessary to allow the formation of regional identity? What policies ought to be adopted to favor its emergence? And what are the main obstacles (historical/cultural/religious, linguistic, geo-political) to it?

Our two main theses are the following:

- 1) in principle, the ongoing economical, political and cultural transformations related to globalization and, more specially, to the European integration, promote the formation of regional identities as a kind of the third term between the local and the national on the one hand, and between the national and the global on the other. Regionalization should be as much the result of globalization as a reaction to and against it, a search for a synthesis between the “extremes” of local diversity and global unification – in the context of weakening importance of the nation-state. From this point of view, regions would be successors and replacements of the nation-state in its role of the third term between the local and the global – a replacement more efficient in so far it is supposed to be less formal, less administrative and imposed by the top, more rooted in culture and in spontaneous social relations than the nation-state. Such idea apparently lies behind the current European re-evaluation of regions – both at sub-national and transnational levels, i.e. both in the program of state decentralization, or emancipation of regions as parts of it, and in the program of developing the trans-border “Euro-regions”. The concept of region, in contrast to that of nation-state, is undetermined or fluid enough to embrace both sub-national and supra-national entities. That can be considered as its strength, but also as its weakness;
- 2) in practice, however, there is nothing less obvious than a “region” and “regional identity”. The distinction of a region is very problematic already on the infra-state level because the political and administration reasons are often in conflict with the historical, linguistic and cultural criteria (that is the case of the so-called “Podlasie region” in Poland). The problem is still graver at supra-national level (like in the case of “Baltic Sea region”), where geographical criteria compete with the cultural ones, and both with political. So, the importance of the current borders of the European Union (EU) seems decisive, regardless of the historical and cultural links between the respective peoples.

In short, we would like to examine the concepts of “region” and “regional identity” in order to point out their (political, social and theoretical/philosophical) opportunity but also their highly problematic character, especially in the current Eastern European context.

Regions versus civilizations

Let us start with a brief comparison of the concept of region to that of civilization understood as the biggest cultural entity, usually transcending the nation-state borders (Huntington 1996). There are interesting similarities and as much interesting differences between them. Firstly, alike civilization, region is conceived as a kind of replacement of the nation-state in its role of the third term between the local and the global. The difference is that, while civilization is supposed to constitute an entity bigger than nation-state, regions are conceived as or bigger either smaller, both bigger and smaller – what is one of the essential ambiguities of the concept. Secondly, alike

civilizations, regions are supposed to be based on both spatial vicinity (proximity) and cultural affinities, regardless of purely political or administrative borders. The difference is that the importance of cultural similarities and, more specially, of religious identities is, all in all, much less important, in the concept of region, than the purely spatial factor, and, in practice, the role of politics is very important (Paleczny 2008). From this point of view, region, more than civilization, is a bastard concept, mixing historical, cultural, political, and purely geographical criteria. In theory, those criteria are not exclusive, not only they can be combined but they overlap. But in reality they are often in conflict, and we have to decide, which criterion we will take for essential.

A phenomenological approach to the concept of region

Let us examine now the concept of region from a phenomenological perspective. Does region belong to what Husserl called *Lebenswelt*, or, more precisely, our *surrounding world*, i.e. the world perceived no longer from a purely subjective, “monadologic” perspective, as “my own”, but in the light of some inter-subjective concepts and values, and of shared experiences, related to a common history (Husserl 1982: §58). Husserl was well aware that it was based on many subsequent layers of our consciousness and memory. Those layers form a “sedimentation” of collective and individual consciousness, developing through history. Some of these layers, usually most recent, are immediately available to our reflection, some other, usually most ancient, require a hermeneutic exploration, a search for what is somewhat present in our consciousness but hidden, covered, in oblivion. The description of the “surrounding world”, proposed by Husserl is quite suggestive, but, from our point of view, much too general. In fact, Husserl is not clear at all as for what he considers as the borders of a “surrounding world”, or culture. Especially in the light of his late works, such a *Crisis of European humanity and philosophy*, it seems that the only cultural entity that imported to him was not less than Europe as such (Husserl 1993). Or, more precisely, a certain idea of Europe. Let us say: a Europe of philosophers searching a universal rational truth. Such ambitious idea of culture and cultural identity is certainly of little use to those who, as we now, are looking for identifying the phenomenological status of a concrete region.

To accomplish our task, we cannot then have a direct recourse to classical authors. We can only refer to them at the general level.

The important question is to what extent can be region considered as the phenomenological data, or as the meaning of some effective individual and collective experiences, either immediately given to reflection, or demanding a deeper exploration? And to what extent is it only, on the contrary, the presumed object of an empty intention which can not be fulfilled by any effective data? The question can be formulated also as follows: to what extent is something as region *passively* experienced as real, or existing for “us” and for “me” as a member of “us”, and to what extent is it only intended, only postulated as something that should exist, but will not without our practical and, *in fine*, political efforts?

The answer to such a question can not be simple. One can say that the idea of a region embraces both what is perceived as real and what is only postulated, both what is historically given and what is only a project, affair of intentionally constructed future. That ambiguous status of a region is not to surprise and, in fact, it is nothing exceptional. Giving the creative character of human thinking and actions, the situation of between the given and projected is rather normal, not only in the case of phenomenon such as region. However, the important point, particularly in the case of region, is that projected or intended contents should be somewhat rooted in what is passively given, instead of representing a quite arbitrary construction. The other important point is the kind of criteria adopted in our projects. More particularly: should those criteria follow mainly current political and geo-political reasons, or, on the contrary, refer to the factors such as spatial proximity, historical links or linguistic affinities?

Regions between the infra-national and supra-national: the conflict of criteria on the examples of “Podlasie region” and “Neman” Euro-region¹

In theory, there is no contradiction between the regionalization within a State, or the idea of political and administrative decentralization, and the regionalization transcending the State borders: one can argue that the two processes are complementary and imply each other. But in practice it is easy to observe that the crossing of divisions into infra-state regions (in Polish: *voievodies*) and trans-border regions provokes some inconsistency, if not contradictions. In Poland, two types of regionalizations started almost at the same time, in the late 1990 (“Neman” Euro-region was officially outlined in 1997, and the *vojevodie* of “Podlasie” in 1999). The “Neman” Euro-region includes, on Polish side, the North-Eastern part of “Podlasie” *vojevodie* and a part of “Mazury-Warmia” *vojevodie*. Such a crossing outlining can have – and really has – an ambiguous effect: it can dynamize exchanges both on infra- and trans-national levels between various local communities, and thus enhance the formation of open, plural, “post-modern” identities, shifting from the local to the global through a fluid, polyvalent, poly-orientated regionality; but it can also hinder the consolidation of any region and the identification of the inhabitants to any of them, infra-national and trans-national as well, provoking rather indifference in regard to the very idea of region and the identification only to the local on the one hand, and to the national on the other. In other words, regions, when too “fluid” and heterogeneous, can be perceived as artificial.

The shaping of the “Neman” Euro-region is supposed to be based on both geographical and cultural criteria: communities included into this region are not only neighboring, but also culturally close one to the other. That is why the Western part of “Podlasie” *voivedie* (*Lomża* district) is not included into the Euro-region in question. Let us leave aside, at the moment, the foundation of the presumption of cultural

¹ For more, see the Polish site for the “Neman” Euro-region (Euroregion Niemen 2010).

similarity between the local communities, included into the “Neman” region. What is interesting is that, in excluding a part of “Podlasie” *voievodie* from the “Neman” agreement, one admits that this part of the *voievodie* is culturally different from its other part. One admits, in other words, that “Podlasie” is not a region shaped in concordance with cultural criteria, or that the prevailing criteria in its outlining were mostly of administrative order. In other words, its regional identity is given at a very little degree; creating it appears then as a political task. The problem is that this task seems somewhat contradictory with the task of consolidation of the Baltic Sea Region. Would we have to choose between the two projects?

When examining separately “Podlasie” and “Neman” assembly of communities as regions, we found, in both cases, another interesting contradiction. Generally speaking, the question is about the competence between the regional and national identities. From this point of view, the situation in our part of Europe is noticeably different from the situation in the so called old Europe. There, national identities have usually been well shaped, well defined for a long time and the idea of the very European integration and that of Euro-regions in particular was to transcend the established national divisions. In our part of Europe, where the formation of independent nation-states and of the modern national identities was blocked under communism, the process of such formation restarted only at the moment when, at European range, national divisions were supposed to be overcome in the name of a transnational integration. So, the conflict between the spirit of integration and new nationalisms has been inevitable and it is very sensible at regional level. The problem is not only, and even not so much, that Poles from Poland, Lithuanians from Lithuania or Belarusians from Belarus are often prone to defend and to promote their national rather than regional identities (Snyder 2002). The problem is also and mainly that national and ethnical minorities in respective countries (Poles in Lithuania or in Belarus, Lithuanian or Belarusians in Poland, etc.) are inclined to reinforce or to build their national identities rather than transcend them within infra-national or transnational regions. When we say “build”, we mean particularly the case of the Orthodox in “Podlasie”, for long time identifying themselves simply as Orthodox, or as “tutejeszy” and now, in the context of new nationalisms, facing the problem of “national identity”, having then to choose between identifying themselves as Poles, Belarusians or Ukrainians (Sadowski 1995; Pawluczuk 2006, 2007). Certainly, on the one hand, the reinforcement of national identities among minorities favors the development of trans-border, euro-regional relationship. These are, for example, Lithuanians from Poland and Belarusians from Poland who are particularly interested in developing the cooperation between Polish and, respectively, Lithuanian or Belarusian neighboring communities. But on the other hand, the strengthening of national identities among minorities makes an obstacle to the consolidation of regions conceived as entities transcending national divisions at infra-state and trans-national level. It deepens, for example, the gap between the Eastern and Western parts of “Podlasie”, and even between its North-Eastern and its South-Eastern parts (the Orthodox inhabitants of the first identifying themselves rather than Belarusians, let us aside Lithuanians, while the inhabitants of the second rather as Ukrainians).

It is still easier to see the conflict between cultural and political criteria in defining a region and, in practice, the predominance of politics in the context of the EU, more specially of the Schengen zone. This conflict obviously influences the functioning of the “Neman” Euro-region, whose two parties, Polish and Lithuanian, belong to a broader European unity, while the third, Belarusian part does not. In result, although according to the idea of Euro-region all parties are equal, in practice they are not because they cannot act following the same rules. For political reasons, the Belarusian part of the region, separated by the border of the EU, has a quite different status than the other two. Yet, ironically enough, cultural, religious and even linguistic links between the Eastern part of “Podlasie” and Belarus are stronger than between this part of “Podlasie” and Lithuania.

Regions and the political problem of the “Other”

As Carl Schmitt brutally put it, a community identity usually emerges through the exclusion of the “Other”, i.e. it is shaped in opposition to other identities and other communities, even if only imagined (Schmitt 1996). In the light of the official Polish and Lithuanian political discourse, the “Other” against which not only the Polish-Lithuanian but also the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian-Ukrainian regional identity could be shaped, is mainly Russia. Even if we put aside the highly problematic sense of such politics in the context of globalization and, also, that of the European integration (the EU has no interest indeed in opposing itself to Russia), the problem is that this standpoint is not shared by most Belarusians or Ukrainians. It is not shared either by the prevailing part of non-Polish orthodox minorities in Poland and, we suppose, as well in Lithuania. Thus, a certain political project of regionalization is at least partially denied by social and cultural reality, by what is phenomenologically *given*. Moreover, it provokes the emergence of counter-projects, especially in Belarus, according to which the “Other” is not Russia, but Poland and Lithuania, or the EU, or the West as such. So, nowadays, the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian-Ukrainian borderland, far from constituting a consistent region in the light of political criteria, has become much rather a field of ideological and geo-political battle between the “West” and the “East”.

The problem would certainly appear as quite different if we consider the problem of otherness not in brutally political, but in ethical terms, or, following Levinasian inspiration, perceive the other not as enemy but as the claim to broke and open our identity (political and cultural as well) to new adventures (Levinas 1998). From such a perspective, there is – or, rather, should be – no essential obstacle to built a real community with any neighbours, regardless of their political and administrative belonging, their native language or their ethnic (self)determination. But there is no reason either to build such an open, decentralized community, refusing any defined identity, with rather such a concrete group of people than another. Ethical brotherhood transcends in principle both nation-states and regions, both political and cultural or civilization borders. The universalistic ethical reference can not be treated, then, as relevant to solve the problem of the form of regions and regional identity. But it can, and should,

be considered as a necessary mediation, reducing, if not eliminating, the brutality of the “real political” point of view.

Analogically, the ethical mediation can, and should, reduce the importance of purely cultural, ethnical, linguistic or religious criteria in the constitution of regions and regional identity. Wanting to build a region on such criteria would be certainly a dangerous project, inducing conflicts both at the infra-state and supra-state levels. Fortunately, ethics is supported, here, by the dynamics of (post)modernization which favors rather weak, flexible and plural than strong and unequivocal cultural (ethnical, religious) identities (Bauman 1996; Giddens 2007). Personal identity becomes more and more matter of choice and negotiation with the plural environment than of what is simply “given” as an “objective” cultural determination. In such a context, it is possible to promote a regional sense of community transcending the traditional cultural distinctions and divisions.

However, to be effective, that sense of community – without excluding a broader ethical sense of human solidarity – should be based on the recognition of some common values on the one hand, and of a common history on the other. As for common values, they coincide, all in all, with modern human rights – much rather than with a traditional religion or traditional customs. As for the common history (which links, no doubt, Eastern Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians, but also divide them), it remains a matter to debate. There is no common history free from ethnical or religious conflicts and from divergent interpretations of them. And there is no other way to build a mutual understanding and a sense of community than openly discussing those conflicts and those different, or divergent perspectives.

To put it in a word, the constitution of a region, more specially, at the supra-state level, implies both the recognition and the respect of the “other”, and the perception of what is common, even though the common is not immediately obvious and requires a democratic debate to allow a better mutual understanding. That means, that the constitution of a region such as the region of the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland, though referring to some “phenomenological data”, is an extremely difficult, both political and ethical, task.

Conclusions

To sum up these remarks, in way of conclusion, we propose the following set of the statements:

- a) the entity such as region is not obvious at all from the phenomenological point of view. It is more a matter of project than a matter of experience or memory;
- b) the criteria of the projection of a region are not only various, but conflicted;
- c) the conflict of criteria is objective, i.e. experienced as real, but it is also historical, then susceptible of changes, and, *in fine*, susceptible to be overcome;
- d) the ideal would be a convergence of cultural and political criteria, mediated by ethics. That requires not only a transformation of politics (let us say: a political rapprochement, and finally integration, of the European West and East, including

Russia), but also a transformation of culture and cultural identities. The feeling of cultural community should be based no longer on national, linguistic or religious criteria, but on the common sharing of some fundamental values such as human rights, combined with the recognition of a common history and the attachment to a common space. As any ideal, that is a kind of “regulatory idea” that will certainly never be fully reached or accomplished, but can and should orient our projects;

- e) in practice, we can hope that the program of the Eastern Partnership, recently adopted by the EU, will be up to reduce the gap between the cultural and political criteria of “europeanity” and, therefore, of the construction of a “Euro-region”. The problem is only that this program, promoted mainly by Poland, seems too anti-Russia oriented, and then unable to deconstruct, or to transcend, the “civilizational” division between the so-called the West and the East.
- f) in front of all those problems, the role and the vocation of the intellectuals should not consist in disregarding them in the name of what is considered as “politically correct”, but, on the contrary, in revealing them. Only the full awareness of the difficulties connected with the project of a region can enable us to construct them in a conscious, reasonable and realistic, not arbitrary and not utopian way. The question of regions, alike the question of Europe, is too serious indeed to be left to the only politicians.

References

- Bauman, Z. 1996. *Etyka ponowoczesna*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Euroregion Niemen. 2010. [Last access: 10-09-2010]. Available from Internet: <http://niemen.org.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=15>.
- Giddens, A. 2007. *Nowoczesność i tożsamość*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Husserl, E. 1993. *Kryzys europejskiego człowieczeństwa a filozofia*. Warszawa: Aletheia.
- Husserl, E. 1982. *Medytacje kartezjańskie*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Levinas, E. 1998. *Całość i nieskończoność*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Palczyński, T. 2008. „Procesy regionalizacji a zjawiska globalizacji“, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 4: 97–107.
- Pawluczuk, W. 2006. „Belarusians: Political, Local and Others“, in Janovich, S. (Ed.). *Annus Albaruthenicus*. Krynki: Villa Sokrates, Krynki, 31–50.
- Sadowski, A. 1995. *Pogranicze Polsko-Białoruskie: Tożsamość mieszkańców*. Białystok: Transhumana.
- Schmitt, C. 1996. *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snyder, T. 2003. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1989*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

TARP LOKALUMO, NACIONALUMO IR GLOBALUMO: REGIONINIŲ TAPATUMŲ PROBLEMA

Wioletta Małgorzata Kowalska

Santrauka

Pagrindinis straipsnio tikslas – išnagrinėti regiono ir regioninio tapatumo sampratas, siekiant ne tik išsiaiškinti jų politinę, socialinę ir teorinę bei filosofinę esmę, bet ir išties problemišką pobūdį, ypač dabartiniame Rytų Europos kontekste. Autorė siekia apibrėžti regiono sampratos turinį iš fenomenologinės perspektyvos ir parodo, kad tai vargu ar įmanoma, nes praktiniu požiūriu regionas labiau nurodo politinius ir administracinius kriterijus, o ne tai, kas gali būti vertinama kaip supantis pasaulis. Straipsnyje analizuojami du regionai – lenkų infranacionalinis Palenkės regionas ir supranacionalinis Nemuno euroregionas. Tvirtinama, kad kultūros bei politikos ir patirties bei supratimo prieštaravimus turi derinti Europos įstatymai ir moralės normos. Autorė teigia, kad tik kylančių sunkumų dėl regionų tyrimo įsisąmoninimas leidžia jų realų, o ne arbitralinį ar utopinį konstravimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: civilizacija, kultūra, globalizacija, tapatumas, tauta ir valstybė, fenomenologija, politika, regionas.

Received 10 May 2010, accepted 10 June 2010