Chapter 9
From Region to Space
Part I

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The region, it seems, is an idea that just won’t go away. MacKinnon (2009: 229)

Introduction

In 1935, the American geographer Clarence Fielden Jones published a textbook, *Economic Geography*, based on a class he taught at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. The volume was subsequently used “as the standard introductory text on the subject for thousands of college students” (Hudson 1993: 167). It begins:

The work of different regions. Whether young men and women do the things they would like to do when they grow up depends on many things, but especially the kind of country that they live in and the number of neighbors nearby. Eskimos spend much of their time hunting and fishing to obtain food and clothing. Indians on the Amazon gather food from the forest and streams: they don’t have to work as hard as the Eskimos. Not many people live in Eskimo land or in the Amazon forest: but their youths have to learn to do the things their parents did. (Jones 1935: 3)

In 1965, the British geographer Peter Haggett published a textbook, *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*, also based on a class that he taught, this one held at 9am Saturday morning given to third year students at Cambridge University. The first paragraph of his first substantive chapter, “Movement,” begins:

One of the difficulties we face in trying to analyse integrated regional systems is that there is no obvious or single point of entry. Indeed the more integrated the system, the harder it is to crack. Thus in the case of nodal regions, it is just as logical to
begin with the study of settlement as with the study of routes. As Isard comments: “the maze of interdependencies in reality is indeed formidable, its tale unending, its circularity unquestionable. Yet, its dissection is imperative. … At some point we must cut into its circumference.” We chose to make that cut with movement. (Haggett 1965: 31)

And in 1984, the British geographer Doreen Massey published *Spatial Divisions of Labor*. This book was not written as a textbook, but de facto became one, with economic geographers subsequently talking about the discipline as “before” *Spatial Divisions* and “after.” Massey ends her book this way:

The geographical organisation of society is integral to its social reproduction and to politics in the widest sense. For decades now the battle over labourism, and to some extent trade union power itself, has been fought in and over particular regions. … “Thinking geographically” is part of thinking about society more generally, and recognition and understanding of geographical variation is essential for any strategy of national political change. (Massey 1984: 305)

In each of these quotations, the word “region” appears, but the surrounding intellectual frame is vastly different. Region for Clarence Jones is defined as a geographically circumscribed container of natural conditions that makes life for the people who live there easier or harder. List those conditions in the appropriate classification scheme and you understand the “work of the region.” The ante is upped in Peter Haggett’s text where the region is now part of a larger system, but also an integrative problem to be solved. Analytical “dissection is imperative,” revealing the logic of regional spaces. And for Doreen Massey the region is about politics. The regional question is inseparable from social reproduction, and for her sodden in political conflicts between labor and capital.

These intellectual differences about the region, of course, are conjoined with historical ones. Jones’s paragraph is shaped in part by when he is writing in the early 1930s, a period when formal empires were still a going concern, when most people in the world lived in the countryside pre-occupied with resource production, and when, despite the beginning of time-space compression, places like the Amazon and “Eskimo land” appeared impossibly far-off and exotic to most Western readers (certainly for American Freshman undergraduates). When Haggett published his book thirty years later, the Anglo-American world was quite different. The Second World War, followed by the Cold War, fostered a scientific instrumentalism that was taken up by the state, and subsequently seeping into various academic disciplines including human geography. Consequently, the region was redefined, conceived by Haggett as explanatory, theoretical, and instrumental, a tool to achieve functional objectives like “integrated regional systems.” Moreover, the state itself changed, becoming interventionist, rationally managing economic and social life, ensuring that people “never had it so good,” as one of the British Prime Ministers of the time, Harold Macmillan, expressed it. But when Doreen Massey published *Spatial Divisions* in 1984 just shy of twenty years after Haggett’s book, it seemed that many people had never had it so bad. State rational planning by the late 1970s was clearly failing. The economy was hemorrhaging jobs and investment as deindustrialization
and industrial restructuring convulsed Western countries. Amidst this trauma, the region was a principle political battle ground where social reproduction was undone, redone and done up.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the changing definitions and purposes of the region found in Anglo-American human geography over the course of the twentieth century. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once likened different equations that looked alike to bones separated from their bodily integuments. Outside of the body, the bones appeared similar. But re-attached to the “surrounding manifold context of the organism,” the bones could hardly be more different (Wittgenstein quoted in Bloor 1983: 103). I will make the same point about the region. While different versions of the region when taken out of context might look alike, once re-inserted into the sinews and gristle of the academic and historical context in which they were originally set, they take on inimitable identities.

The Region in Geography and the Geography of the Region

David Livingstone (1992) provides an elegant historical account of the “regionalizing ritual” practiced by the first academic geographers in Western Europe and the United States from the late nineteenth century until roughly the mid-twentieth century (Paasi 2009: 217–220). Regional geography didn’t come in just one version, but was itself regionally variegated. Initially there were three entangled national traditions – German, French and British – that folded into a fourth, American.

Germany was perhaps the most important because it was there that the twin foundations of the institutionalized form of the discipline were laid down by Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), principally a physical scientist (the Kosmos, 1845), and Carl Ritter (1779–1859), principally an anthropologist (the Erdkunde, 1817–1859). Consequently, from the get-go geography was a hybrid discipline: “the study of earth and the study of life on earth” (Pudup 2001: 12905). And where could this interaction best be studied? The region. The region was the laboratory where the two different disciplinary ends were investigated, fitted together, unified. As Pudup (2001: 12905) puts it: “the region fell into the discipline’s lap as the obvious focus of its pursuits.”

But that still left the question of how to conceive the region. The Heidelberg geographer Alfred Hettner (1859–1941) at the turn of the century revived Greek “chorology” as the basis. For the Ancient Greeks, choros was the study of particular regions by telling stories about them. It contrasted with geos, the examination of the entire face of the earth, involving the use of general analytical principles, often mathematical (Lukermann 1961; Curry 2005). Hettner’s definition and use of chorology was complex (Elkins 1989; Harvey and Wardenga 2006), but two points were straightforward. First, the region was to be geography’s primary epistemological object. The geographical world could be known only by organizing facts regionally. To fail to reference the region was to fail to do geography. Second, regions were to be studied by the scrupulous collection of geographical facts (a geographical fact by definition was one that was different from one region to another). Each unique geographical fact was to be sorted by its region into a set of pre-determined typological boxes (Hettner’s Länderkundliche Schema) such as relief, settlement, population, biogeography, and resources. By then running your eye along the rows...
of the Schema the distinctiveness of each region was immediately apparent. Chorology stared you in the face.

Such a stern Germanic regimen was relaxed under the French regional school of Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918). While still believing in a science of the region, Vidal shunned the encyclopaedic recitation generated by Hettner’s Schema (a “machine” for producing geographical facts), as well as some of his lingering environmental determinism that stemmed from Ritter’s influence. Sorting out the relationship between nature and culture was always going to be difficult in a discipline that made them its twin starting points. While the Germans inclined to the primacy of the environment, Vidal stressed culture as the moving force. Culture modified nature, creating distinctive integrated assemblages of people and environment, unique ways of life (genres de vie), and which were, and this was the point, organized and set regionally. The region (pay) was the unit in which people and their environment gelled. They became one, even taking on a single distinctive character or personality. As Vidal wrote in The Personality of France:

It is man [sic] who reveals a country’s individuality by molding it to his own use. ... In establishing a connection between unrelated features ... a country acquires a specific character differentiating it from others, till at length it becomes, as it were, a medal struck in the likeness of its people. (Vidal 1928: 14)

In the UK, the elements of regional geography were mixed in yet a different combination. There was certainly an inclination towards the encyclopedic as in George Chisholm’s Handbook of Commercial Geography published in 1889 (its flavor perfectly captured by Chisholm’s statement that “if ... there is some drudgery in the learning of geography, I see no harm in it,” quoted in MacLean 1988: 25). A.J. Herbertson, the second geographer ever at Oxford University (Halford Mackinder’s replacement), provided the first British theorization of the region combining elements of environmentalism with Vidal’s jolie géographie. On the one hand, Herbertson believed that the boundaries of the region were literally carved in stone, inscribed by and into the natural environment. Climate, Herbertson thought, was especially important, delimiting “natural regions” (Herbertson 1905; also see Paasi 2009: 215). But on the other hand, regions by their very constitution were vitally human, possessing a distinctive cultural, aesthetic and metaphysical content, a “consciousness” (Herbertson 1916). They acquired “a genius loci as well as a Zeitgeist – a spirit of place as well as of time” (Herbertson 1916: 153).

There wasn’t much sense of a jolie géographie or genius loci in the American conception of the region surfacing in the late nineteenth century especially in courses in economic geography offered in economics departments and business schools (the dismal science strikes again; Fellman 1986). An example is the work of J. Russell Smith (1913) who taught at the Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania. His nine-hundred-and-fourteen page Industrial and Commercial Geography (it reads longer) is as much an extended geographical shopping list as a textbook. If there was a theory of the region it was bound to an ethically suspect environmental determinism. Ellen Churchill Semple (1911: 1) had provided an early statement: “Man is a product of the earth’s surface” was her blunt first sentence. It was later systematized by Harvard’s Professor of Geography, Ellsworth Huntington, who
attempted to enlist both Chisholm and Smith into one of his environmental determinist ventures to define and rank all regions in the world according to their “level of civilization,” correlating them with their respective levels of “climatic energy.” The principled Chisholm declined to participate, but J. Russell Smith did, gleefully agreeing to “take a half day off to sit in judgment upon the world” (quoted in Livingstone 1994: 143).

Critiques of environmental determinism as bigoted and unscientific led to its demise. But the result for American geography was its replacement by an anodyne version of the Germanic regional regimen (Porter 1978): regional facts collected in thematically marked boxes. Of course, that’s what Clarence Jones was doing in 1935. He had eight boxes, and into them he sorted the regional facts of the world. For British Columbia, put the Fraser under rivers, Coastal Mountains under relief, Vancouver under settlement, cedar and hemlock under forestry, coal and gold under mining, and salmon and halibut under fishing. The eight-fold typology used by Jones to organize facts collected in part from his world travels was more finely variegated than some others (Ray Whitbeck and Vernon Finch 1924, for example, used only a parsimonious four boxes in their textbook). But they all performed the same role: a typological grid for classifying observations that could then be photographed, mapped, tabulated, or most likely, merely listed under the appropriate classificatory heading. By comparing the facts of the different regions by using the same typological grid, regional differences were immediately seen, and the distinctiveness of each region shone by its own light.

But still there was no explicit intellectual rationale in English for this conception of the region. That was provided by Richard Hartshorne (1939) in his The Nature of Geography. The volume was in effect a reply that got out of hand. It started life as a response to the Berkeley geographer John Leighly’s (1937) paper published in the Annals of the Association of American Geographers. Although the editor, Derwent Whittlesey, told Hartshorne that his rejoinder “could be brief,” Hartshorne just kept on writing, taking the piece with him on sabbatical to Vienna in 1938 (Hartshorne 1979: 63). Because of the Nazi Anschluss in Austria that same year, Hartshorne ended up spending most of his leave at the University of Vienna library working on the reply rather than investigating political boundaries of the mid-Danube (his original plan). Nature finally weighed in at 600 manuscript pages.

The book was an elaboration of the Germanic regional regimen. It drew especially on Hettner, making “chorology” key. In fact, Hartshorne wrote to Hettner after he arrived in Vienna to tell him that Nature was “primarily an exposition – in considerable part a literal translation – of your studies in this field” (Hartshorne quoted in Harvey and Wardenga 2006: 423). In the end it wasn’t quite that (Harvey and Wardenga 2006), but Hartshorne, like Hettner, made the region the disciplinary epistemological bedrock. Here the region was an assemblage of elements – an “element complex” – composed of unique combinations of objective geographical entities.

But defining the region as a unique combination of elements meant that traditional natural scientific explanations based on physical laws could not apply. Scientific laws pertain only to classes of phenomena that are homogenous. Because one atom of hydrogen gas is like every other, applying pressure to any sub-set of atoms that form the larger class “hydrogen gas” necessarily produces the same
effect. But regions are not like hydrogen atoms. The mixture of constitutive elements forming them is always different from one case to another, producing heterogeneous responses to common causative factors. No law-like generalization is possible. As Hartshorne (1939: 446) summarized, “We arrive, therefore, at a conclusion similar to that which Kroeber has stated for history: ‘the uniqueness of all historical phenomena. … No laws or near laws are discovered.’ The same conclusion applies to the particular combination of phenomena at a particular place.” Geographers, therefore, cannot do any of the things that natural science is able to accomplish because of its recourse to physical laws; that is, to explain, to predict, and knowingly to intervene. In the Hartshornian conception of the region, geographers only describe. “Regional geography, we conclude, is literally what its title expresses: … It is essentially a descriptive science concerned with the description and interpretation of unique cases. …” (Hartshorne 1939: 449).

In retrospect, however, the timing of Hartshorne’s argument for a science of geography based on the descriptive study of unique regions could not have been worse. 1939 was at the very threshold of a fundamental transformation in US social sciences and humanities to general explanation, prediction, and policy intervention. Doubly ironic, within two years of writing The Nature, Hartshorne was playing a central role in the organization that helped shift American geography away from “mere description” of unique regions to precisely general explanation, prediction and intervention. It was a move from an old regional geography to what was later called “the new geography” in which regions were still present, but conceived utterly differently, not as unique places but as abstract spaces to be rearranged, manipulated, formally represented, and used as a tool to achieve instrumental planning objectives.

As the Regional World Turns
The American geographer Kirk Stone said:

World War II was the best thing that has happened to geography since the birth of Strabo. (Kirk Stone 1979: 89)

For the purposes here, the Second World War produced two main effects that transformed the conception of the region, culminating from the late 1950s and early 1960s in the development of a “new” geography of regional space.

The first, at least in the United States, was setting geography within the social sciences, and increasingly infused by what Carl Schorske (1997) called “the new rigorism.” An early site where geographers encountered both social sciences and “the new rigorism” was at the wartime Research & Analysis (R&A) Branch of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS (the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency) was inaugurated in 1941, charged with gathering, analyzing and disseminating information in matters relating to national security.1 Its “heart and soul” was R&A (Winks 1987: 114), in effect a social scientific research institute that assembled, dissected, interpreted, manipulated, and instrumentally deployed knowledge (Katz 1989). Richard Hartshorne occupied a central administrative role, responsible for overseeing the assignment, production, vetting and distribution of
all research reports. In researching and writing those reports, geographers at OSS (there were more geographers at OSS than at any other branch of the US government) interacted closely with other social scientists (Barnes 2006). That’s where the trouble began. Especially younger geographers felt ill-equipped and poorly served by their disciplinary training, and more broadly by geography’s older regional imperative (Ackerman 1945; Committee 1946). Geographers could catalogue geographical information, insert it within classification schemes, and describe it, but that was it. They lacked systematic methods to collect information, theories and models to interpret and explain what they had collected, and a vocabulary and set of tools to realize instrumental ends.

After the war was over, some of those younger geographers began to practice a different kind of geography, aligning it with a post-war social science that emphasized analysis, quantitative methods, model-building, and theory. In the process, the very meaning of the region changed. Stressed was not a region’s uniqueness, its bill-of-laden list of singular features, but its formal spatial character, its functional similarities, its pragmatic potential to realize policy ends. Such a shift was given further momentum during the Cold War (Barnes 2008). The US “military-industrial complex” and concomitant “Cold War University” prized scientific, applied knowledge above all else. Moreover, it could get exactly what it wanted by the judicious disbursement of research funds from its financial wing, primarily the Office of Naval Research. The only mystery was just how long it took American geographers to get with this new agenda given its overwhelming impress.

Second, the World War II also helped produce a different conception of the region by its emphasis on state planning. The seed of that idea had already been planted by the English economist John Maynard Keynes in his *The General Theory of Employment* published just before the War began. *The General Theory* was a how-to manual for government intervention, for planning the economy, for saving it from itself. Subsequent war-time experience amply demonstrated the effectiveness of the state as a planner, and later taken up by the military-industrial complex during “peace” time. In this brave new world of Keynesian military-industrial planning, economists devised an ever burgeoning array of models, measuring techniques, theoretical precepts and predictive tools to accomplish state intervention and control like activity analysis, cost-benefit analysis, and game theory (Mirowski 2002). They were inventing (Mitchell 2002 would say “performing”) a new economy.

Not that most economists were interested in the regional character of the economy. But there were some, and, of course, geographers had a longstanding interest. But the Hartshornian Germanic regional regimen wasn’t going to cut ice in this new conversation. A different conception of the region was necessary involving both a new vocabulary and set of analytical instruments for achieving practical ends. An economist at Harvard, Walter Isard, saw the possibilities of what he called “regional science,” later inaugurating a Department of that same name at the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 (Barnes 2004). It was concerned with providing exactly that new vocabulary and set of analytical instruments, conceiving the region as an abstract theoretical object, and providing a manual of formal techniques capable of realizing Keynesian state planning objectives. By the mid-1950s, several American geographers beyond those who were at OSS began to re-conceive the region along similar lines. But given geography’s internal disciplinary power struc-
ture and history they kept close to Isard and regional science (not that Isard was especially sympathetic given his view of geographers as only hewers and drawers of data for regional science theorists; Isard 1990: 304–305).

Among these geographers, especially notable were “the space cadets” at the University of Washington, Seattle. They were a group of talented, energetic and ambitious graduate students who serendipitously arrived at “U Dubb” Geography Department around the same time, *annis mirabilis* 1955, to work with either one of the former OSSers, Edward Ullman, or a young Assistant Professor from North Western University, William Garrison. As a graduate student in the late 1940s Garrison had been a Teaching Assistant for Clarence Jones’s economic geography class that used his textbook. But it was not a happy experience, with Garrison later saying about Jones’s lectures: “they led me to keep asking: ‘What’s the theory? What’s the theory? What’s the theory?’ ” (Garrison 1998). Specifically, “… a systematic approach was in order. …” (Garrison 1979: 119). It was a systematic approach to the region that Garrison pioneered with the cadets in the late 1950s. With money from the Office of Naval Research and the Federal Highways Commission, courses in statistics and social physics, use of the newly installed IBM 650 computer in the attic of the Chemistry Building, Garrison and his students produced what Richard Morrill (1984: 61), one of the co-authors, called a “revolutionary book,” *Studies of Highway Development and Geographic Change* (Garrison et al. 1959). It remains a remarkable volume, crammed with calculations, data matrices, statistical techniques, costs curves and demand schedules, and conventional maps overlaid with numbers, arrows, starburst lines, and balancing equations. Its real revolution was the changed conception of the region as a theoretical spatial object: now generalizable, mathematical, explainable, abstract, rigorous, and bearing upon “significant, theoretical, policy and/or practical questions” (Garrison 1959: 232).

Although I made Peter Haggett the exemplar of this new conception of the region in my introduction, in the scheme of things he was a latecomer. While his book *Locational Analysis* (1965) was a brilliant summary and synthesis, it was a review of work that had been mainly already carried out in North America. As Haggett reflected later, “there was very little of my own research reported [in *Locational Analysis*] … It is rather like a kind of Alistair Cooke commenting on the American scene” (Browning 1982: 47). More generally, British geography was slower to move towards the new conception of the region, even though compared to the United States regional planning was more entrenched in the UK, and the state more interventionist. Isard tried to bring regional science to the UK in 1964, giving a pep talk at the London School of Economics (LSE). But there was resistance from traditionalists like then President of the Institute of British Geographers, William Kirk, who wrote to the *Guardian* where the story of Isard’s LSE appearance appeared: “I am at a loss to differentiate between what Professor Isard calls a regional scientist and what I would call a regional geographer” he said tartly.2 But there was resistance also from a group of younger British geographers who while seemingly sympathetic to Isard’s intellectual project thought it smacked too much of Americanism. It needed Europeanizing. The Regional Studies Association (RSA) was born the following year at LSE, and attempted to stake out a middle ground somewhere between traditional regional geography and Isardian regional science. Peter Self, one of the original RSA members, said at the meeting that led to the new organization’s
formation, it would offer “a more distinctive approach [than regional science],” one
that “would follow its own line,” and would be “more modest,” concerned with
representing at best “Europe rather than the world.”

But this did not stop Isard. Plan B involved sending Allen Scott, a faculty member
at Regional Science at Penn, to the UK as a roving European ambassador for the
movement (and based at the Bartlett School, University College London; Barnes
2004). This brought converts, and was especially successful in publication, netting
an alliance with the publisher Pion Ltd. that agreed to put out the London Papers
in Regional Science (under Scott’s editorship) and also in effect a British regional
science journal (at least initially), Environment and Planning (edited by Alan
Wilson). All this resonated with Haggett’s Locational Analysis.

Specifically, Locational Analysis was divided into two main parts. The first
(“models of locational structure”) was about theoretical forms and explanations of
abstract regional space. There were no boxes labeled “relief,” “rivers,” “settle-
ment.” Instead, Haggett’s regional space was divided into “nodes,” “hierarchies,”
“surfaces,” “networks,” and a category that admittedly does not fit the geometrical
designation but remains spatial, “movement.” Further, those categories were not
stuffed with the brute facts of the region (in spite of the book’s separate “Locational
Index;” Haggett 1965: 329–332. Instead, they were crammed with theories, models,
equations, and above all graphs, maps, schematic illustrations, bar charts, and poly-
gons of various forms (there were 162 numbered diagrams in 310 pages of text).
Regions were turned on the page into a series of miniature diagrammatic abstract
spaces that could be controlled, dominated, rearranged and manipulated. In com-
parison, Clarence Jones’ regional descriptions of “Eskimo land” and the “Amazon
forest” appeared as if they were from a different planet. The second part (“Methods
in locational analysis”) was the toolbox. It was about showing how you got things
done, how you intervened, how you improved reality. It was full of formal tech-
niques, procedures, algorithms, and flow charts for realizing specific spatial ends.
They read as the epitome of rationality and expertise. How could they go wrong?

Regional Worlds
But they did. Charles Jencks (1989: 9), the architectural historian, dates the end
of modernist architecture that like Haggett’s locational analysis was all about rational-
ity, efficiency, purified space, and technical expertise with the dynamiting of the
infamous Igoe Pruitt public housing project in St. Louis on July 15th, 1972. The
prize-winning building opened in 1955, and was the very model of modernist archi-
tecture. But it went horribly awry with the building afflicted by crime, poverty, social
segregation, vandalism, decay, and mechanical breakdown. It was best just to blow
it up and start all over again.

It wasn’t quite so dramatic for spatial science and its conception of the region
(although Isard’s Regional Science Department at Penn was closed in 1993). But
throughout the 1970s Haggett’s conception of the region began to fail, to stop
working, to be dismantled and abandoned. Partly it was too singular an approach
in a discipline that historically was open-ended and pluralist. Partly it was the force
of an internal critique that revealed assorted contradictions, inconsistencies and
aporías within a supposedly impregnable regional logic, and made often by those
who were proponents of that logic only a short time before (Gunnar Olsson 1975 was perhaps the best example). But mainly it was because the times no longer seemed to fit. A former colleague of Haggett’s at Bristol University, David Harvey, and also formerly Secretary to the British section of the Regional Science Association, expressed it well as early as 1972 (but by then he had moved to America):

There is a clear disparity between the sophisticated theoretical and methodological framework we are using and our ability to say anything really meaningful about events as they unfold around us. There are too many anomalies between what we purport to explain and manipulate and what actually happens. There is an ecological problem, an urban problem, an international trade problem, and yet we seem incapable of saying anything of any depth or profundity about any of them. When we do say something it appears trite and rather ludicrous. In short, our paradigm is not coping well. It is ripe for overthrow. (Harvey 1972: 6)

Harvey’s litany of problems misses out one, but it was to prove crucial in the reconstruction of the region as a conceptual idea and a relevant unit of analysis: the economy. The late 1970s and much of the 1980s in North America and Western Europe saw a profound economic restructuring as traditional Fordist manufacturing was variously cast off, radically rejigged, or replaced by something completely different. Moreover, once the dust settled, it was a different world. Globalization had taken hold, but rather than eradicating space (as some economists suggested), it left sub-national regions more important than ever. It was now a “regional world” as Michael Storper (1997) described it.

The whirlwind destruction that ripped through North America and Western economies as deindustrialization and economic restructuring was geographically uneven, distributed in distinctive regional patterns. In some cases, capital upped and left the region leaving workers bereft; in other regions one sort of capital departed, but another sort arrived, sometimes employing former workers, other times hiring a brand new set; and yet in other cases, new capital arrived but fundamentally changed the working conditions of existing workers. In all of this change, the region was the arena in which new relations between capital and labor were worked out. Understanding this regional process could not mean returning to Hartshorne’s and Hettner’s chorology, however. Regional specificity and unique outcomes were important. But arranging such specificities and outcomes in seriatim rows of a common classification scheme was not the answer. The intent was not regional description for regional description’s sake. People were traumatized, suffering, old patterns of social reproduction turned inside out, with whole communities unraveling. There needed to be analysis, theoretical scrutiny, explanation, a calling to account. But analysis could not be based on Haggett’s regional science either. That was too purified, antiseptic, and removed; too rational for the resulting irrational outcome, too politically neutral for events saturated in politics. It needed to be theory that was muddied, politicized, passionate, grounded in the thick of things. It needed to be social theory.

David Harvey (1982) early on drew on social theory, Marx’s, making the relation of capital and labor central. But the regions that emerged were reduced only to capital and labor, with geography lost in the shuffle. In contrast, Doreen Massey
(1984) also drew on social theory, never losing sight of the pressing political obligations around the capital-labor relation, but at the same time she kept the geographical composition and particularity of the region in tact.

Her brilliant achievement was to combine regional particularity and general principles. It was both/and rather than either/or (in terms of the Ancient Greeks, both choros and geos). Central was the idea of spatial divisions of labor, that is, a changing geography of industrial specialization and always organized regionally (Massey 1984). On the one hand, she theorized the general dynamics of industrial capitalism. This wasn’t Haggett-style theory written in Greek letters, however. Nonetheless, it identified necessary features of the geographical reproduction of capitalism, for example, continued investment. They were necessary in the sense that without them capitalism would cease to exist. On the other hand, the abstract necessary conditions of capitalist reproduction always came down to earth in specific material and social forms, and when they did, geography mattered, regions mattered. It was not investment in the abstract, say, in South Wales, but concrete investment in coal mines and iron and steel mills, and producing a specific geographical region, a region with a distinctive character. Massey’s critical point, making her work a “new regional geography” (Pudup 1988: 376), was the contention that the unique geographical character of the region recursively interacted with general principles, rearranging both regions and principles. One must always be alive to both geographical specificity and general principles. The two were entangled, each changing and changed by the other.

Massey’s approach that combined both specific regional and general theoretical sensitivities prompted the UK “localities project” in which the region was central (Cook 1989). While the localities approach was later criticized, even by Massey, the region as topic went from strength-to-strength. As capitalism shed its old skin of national mass production, becoming increasingly global and high tech, the region was ever more important as an object both theoretically and substantively. There were learning regions, creative regions, new industrial regions, high-tech regions, and Global-city regions. The region wasn’t merely background atmospherics, to add color to the story. It was the story. The region was the very basis for the generation of national and global wealth, innovation, and trade and investment. Exactly how the region did all this varied by specific site and specific theory. But again that was the point: the need for theory and regional specificity.

Of course, this was in only economic geography. But versions of Massey were happening in other parts of geography. Derek Gregory’s (1978: 171) important early review of social theory finished with a call for a new regional geography (not that he actually provided it). And in the first half of the 1980s Allan Pred (1984) and Nigel Thrift (1983) drew upon the Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand, and the British sociologist Anthony Giddens to outline, and in Pred’s case later empirically fill in, a socially theoretical informed notion of the region that drew on ideas of recursiveness. Since then there have been other specific theorizations of the region (Gilbert’s 1988; Paasi’s 1986, 2002, 2009; and Pudup’s 1988, are the most important.) The important point has been to bring together theory (no more description for description’s sake) and regional detail (no more equations for equations’ sake). This is the new geographical world for regions and the discipline.
Conclusion

Danny MacKinnon (2009: 229) is surely right: the region as an idea just won’t go away. What do go away are larger external historical and internal academic contexts that shape and torque particular definitions of the region. As those contexts change, so do the usefulness, applicability, and plausibility of concomitant regional definitions. That is why there have been such varied reactions to specific definitions of the region, from applause and commendation, to embarrassment and shame, to incomprehension and anger, to a political compulsion to do something different. As Passi says:

... the contested understanding of what the “region” is has been part and parcel of … struggles [around] … entangled societal and academic power relations. (Passi 2009: 214)

Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier. As geographers it seems we can’t help ourselves but talk about regions. It is part of the furniture of our discipline. But if as this review has suggested the region is fundamentally a pluralist object, an assemblage of many different things, with “the word ‘and’ traill[ing] along after every sentence” (James 1912: 321), it is important to be pluralist about its very definition. This means the task is less one of finding the perfect definition of the region (impossible), but being open-minded and modest in our talk and aims while adhering to our geographical tradition.

Notes

1 The Office of Strategic Services was renamed in 1942. Before that date it was called the Office of the Co-ordinator of Information and founded in July 1941. After just over a year gap following the closure of OSS, the CIA was set up 1947.
3 RSA Research Meeting, no date, Folder: Annual General Meeting and Conferences 1965, Box 15, Archive of the Regional Studies Association, London School of Economics.

References


