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**Book review of “The Europeans, A Geography of People, Culture, and environment.
By: Robert C. Ostergen and Mathias Le Bossé.**

2011 was a dangerous year to publish a new edition of a regional geography of Europe. When the submission deadline to the editors arrived, probably somewhere in 2010, the eurocrisis still seemed like a technical peripheral ‘bank’ issue for the regional geographer. However, by the time the book came out, this very same crisis spun into an existential issue for the European Union that could challenge many of the core assumptions of this recently released book. On the other hand, if the book is able to elucidate events that were not yet fully apparent at the time of writing, it is a testimony of the quality of the narrative. In that case the authors have probably made the right choices in the difficult challenge of selecting the most relevant layers to construct a regional geography. As such, the current eurocrisis, functions as a litmus test for the books’ contents.

Unfortunately, Robert C. Ostergren and Mathias Le Bossé’s new edition of “The Europeans: a geography of people, culture and environment” does not live up to that challenge. It does not readily identify the social, political, and economic cleavages between, and within, European countries that were to become the core of the eurocrisis. Instead it offers a somewhat one-sided feel-good narrative of a European project that “represents an unprecedented and unparalleled endeavor at bringing ever closer together the peoples and resources of the area in common enterprises and the emerging sense of collective destiny” (p.245). The book is primarily aimed, it seems, as a supportive textbook for courses in European Geography for undergraduate students in the USA. Clearly it was not written to provide the specific backdrop to understand today’s European newspapers. At the same time, it is that very task the book is suddenly asked to address by both the casual reader and it is a question that ought to be asked by every critical US Geography student following a course in European Geographies.

The task of the reviewer then becomes to clarify why the book, in which clearly a lot of effort was put, is not able shed more light on contemporary Europe than it does. The authors intention is to “define and delimit Europe as a cultural space as to examine the cultural variation within that space”. They want to understand “the cultural traits and historical traditions that they believe that lend Europe its distinctive regional personality and help to define the important subregional differences that exist among it’s people and it’s places” (p.3). The authors warn for a stance of blind Eurocentrism and that we should not assume a single ‘integrated’ Europe. They stress that “in so many perspectives and comparison Europe tends to suggest a uniform, cohesive and almost homogeneous area and culture. One ambition of the book is to qualify such superficial or convenient

perceptions by focusing not only on what currently gives the idea of Europe meaning, but also on the very real diversity and complexity of the contemporary European scene” (p.35). So far so good, with such a mission statement the authors position themselves somewhere where they can write the kaleidoscopic geography that maps Europe’s -in 2010- latent cultural, economic, and political conflicts. Unfortunately, they do not fully follow their own mission statement and instead tend to provide a narrative of harmony that resonates with the official communiqués of the EU institutions. However, to understand Europe is to understand contention. Contention about ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’ Europe is. Contention about ‘what kind of’ Europe the EU institutions are. Contention about what is to be considered ‘the centre’ of the continent; etcetera. It is in the pacification of that contention, and the challenges that it poses for self-identification, that we can find some of the cultural roots of why contemporary Europe is the way it is, at least from the cultural viewpoint that the authors embrace. From this contention perspective, the book’s title “the Europeans” reads like an interesting provocation. Is there something like a ‘European’ identity? And what does that entail? And to what degree is that identity challenged by other interpretations of ‘being European’? Unfortunately, the authors do not elaborate much on their intriguing title; instead it is regarded a mere descriptive category. They do shortly address some of the issues of geographical delimitation of the continent and outline some of the linguistic, religious and cultural diversity that is the hallmark of Europe in the introductory chapter. However they insufficiently stress how deeply political struggles over the continent’s ‘in’ and ‘outsides’ actually are. Instead of being contentious, the book appears somewhat de-politicized. As a result contentious issues are sometimes being reported as one-sided facts.

For example, the authors themselves create a ‘regionalization’ of European culture in which they clearly define a ‘heartland’ in the West of Europe that according to the authors can “be considered the headquarters or cornerstone of Europe” (p.21). This ‘heartland’ consists broadly of the so-called European Pentagon of the axis London-Milano. As such the authors in their introduction unreflexively reproduce exactly the center-periphery geography that is informing the superficial and convenient popular imaginations of Europe that the authors want to question. Moreover, this is the sort of geopolitics any contemporary academic geography should approach cautiously. It also leads the authors to make remarkable statements such as that “the Iberian and Scandinavian peninsulas have for most of history lain outside the mainstream of European life” (p.29). Whose history are they telling here? And shouldn’t in particular a cultural geographic perspective be sensitive towards exactly these sort of fallacies? This synthesis in the introductory chapter made me somewhat skeptical about the subsequent ten topical chapters. These chapters are organized in four parts: People and environment, culture and identity, towns and cities, and work and leisure.

In the three chapters of Part one of the book, it basically sketches a physical, environmental and demographic geography of the European space. The pan-European approach chosen for the description in particular works well for the environment and physical geography sections. It provides a convincing description and explanation of the

environmental diversity of European landscapes and some of the contemporary environmental issues. The demographic chapter is somewhat one-sided and lacks an elaboration on European colonialism. The rise and fall of Rome and the bubonic plague get ample attention at the expense of the Columbian exchange and 19th century colonialism. As a result, the United States appears out of nowhere in the argument as a recipient for demographic surpluses. Nor, does this chapter -or any other- provide any starting point to understand European imperialism.

The second part again consists of three chapters: one on language, one on religion and values and one on the 'political landscape'. The chapter on language goes at great length to explain the intricacies of all the different language subfamilies that can be found within Europe and concludes with a short section on language policy in the EU. The chapter is testimony to the sort of meticulous effort the authors take to describe some aspects of European culture. This works relatively well for the topic of language, but misses the mark when religion and other values are discussed in the subsequent chapter. Again, in meticulous detail the geographical spread and ruptures of the monotheistic religions in Europe are narrated, up to the point of spending eleven pages on religious architecture around Europe which could as easily have fitted in a travel guide. However, any narration of the complementary secular cultural traditions of Europe is lacking. The socialist and labor union legacy is almost absent from the book, let alone that the book gives any mention to the various consociational and corporatist arrangements that have been so defining for the shape of the European welfare states and national identities in the 20th century. A missed chance, in particular when you mainly address an audience that comes from a country where this part of European culture is repeatedly misrepresented. The least the book could have done is to take something like the European Values Survey and provide an interpretation of its results through a broader cultural lense than religion alone. A similar skewness is found in the subsequent chapter on the political landscape. The three main sections discuss the specter of nationalism, the EU project as a supranational institution and the Europe of the regions. As much attention as there generally is for the historical narrative in the previous chapters, the canonical political geography of the Westphalian state system is not mentioned and the pre-1945 political history of Europe is narrated within four pages. The book does feature a long treatise on the genesis of the European Union and the various waves of 'broadening' and 'deepening' of the EU. At the same time, it fails to give proper introduction as to how the EU exactly works: the differences between and the roles of the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament are not explicitly mentioned. As such, the reader does not get an accurate view how politics within the EU work and how the interdependencies and conflicts between the European level and the states actually revolve. As a result, this 2011, 400 page regional geography of Europe still does not provide an answer who Henry Kissinger needs to call if he wants to call 'Europe'.

In the final two parts of the book: 'towns and cities' and 'making a living' the geographical focus scales down immediately from the European to the urban and livelihood levels, bypassing the national scale as the predominant focus in any chapter. This implies that all

economic issues are discussed from a small scale perspective. Such an approach does really work well for descriptions of leisure and tourism and fits the authors' aim to focus on the Europeans' individual livelihood. However it comes at the expense that 19th century industrialisation, modernisation and the post-socialist transformation in Eastern Europe are mainly captured through an urban lense. As such it tends to lose some focus on the bigger picture and the macro level socio-economic imbalances that exist in Europe but predominantly become visible on a national scale. It are exactly these imbalances that would have been insightful for any casual reader which is looking for data on the current eurocrisis.

It should be admitted that one probably expects totally different information when reading European regional geography now as compared to just one or two years ago. By now, political-economic geographies would be considered indispensable layers. However, even when judged by the standards of a culturally focused geography I think the book is falling short of its aims. Too much antiquity, too little contemporary culture, and a strange privileged position of 'Western European' and religious cultural traits vis-à-vis other important aspects of culture. In the meanwhile, I will just wait for that political-economic European regional geography to be published. Hopefully with the same title, but with an ironic provocative edge. Since the question of what a 'European' is remains intriguing and insufficiently answered.

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