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THE CONCEPT OF THE CULTURAL REGION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COINCIDENCE BETWEEN ADMINISTRATIVE AND CULTURAL REGIONS

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ABSTRACT - After browsing the principal terms of geographical regions like structural and functional regions, the paper highlights the term “cultural region” as a manifestation of a certain culture in the landscape on the one hand and as a factor of shaping cultural identity on the other. The very point and message of the paper is to emphasize that it was an advantage, if administrative regions, i.e. a subtype of functional regions, would coincide with cultural regions, i.e. a subtype of structural regions. It offers several explanations for why this coincidence was favourable, hints at successful historical examples and recent attempts to achieve such a coincidence.

Key words: cultural region, administrative region, structural region, functional region

GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS OF REGION

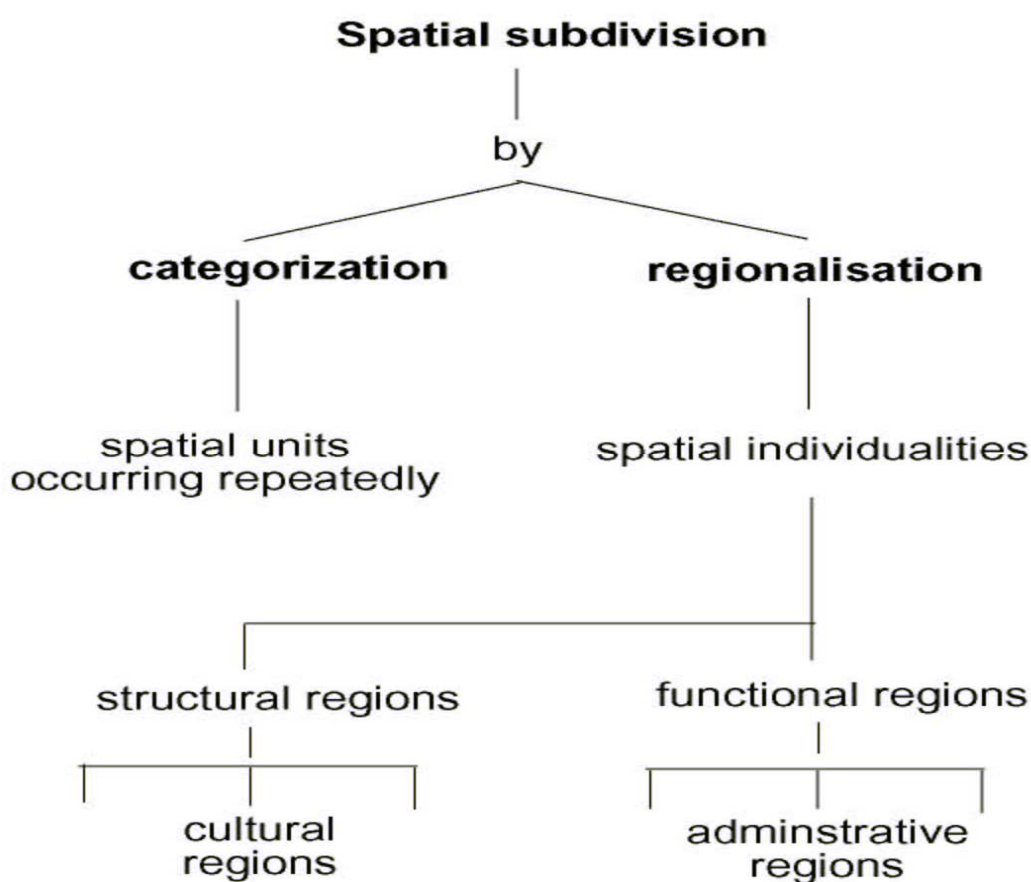


Fig.1: Geographical terms of region

When geographers speak of regions, it is always difficult to find out what they really mean: Which category of size? Regions defined by criteria of nature, by criteria of culture or by both? Spatial types or spatial individualities?

Processes of spatial delimitation

First of all regionalisation must not be mixed up with categorization or defining types. **Categorization** results in types of spatial units that may occur repeatedly at different places. Natural landscape types, e.g., are classified according to the characteristics of landforms, soils, vegetation, etc. The same type of a hilly landscape on brownearths, grey-brown podzolic soils, chernozems and with a natural vegetation cover of xerophilous oak forests may occur in Transylvania as well as in southern Slovakia and Lower Austria.

Something very different is **regionalisation**. It outlines spatial individualities under the pretext that such individualities exist. Not all geographers accept the existence of spatial individualities. By the process of regionalisation the geographical space is subdivided into individual entities, each of which occurs only once and is very frequently attributed a name. The underlying assumption is that every single spot on our globe is unexchangeably specific.

Also regionalisation is based on certain criteria (of course), but these criteria may (but must not) vary from unit to unit. Transylvania, e.g., may be discerned from Maramureş by other criteria than Oltenia from Muntenia. A result of regionalisation in the physical-geographical sphere is, e.g., the Pannonian Biogeographical Region; in the human-geographical sphere, e.g., the catchment area of Cluj-Napoca as a central place, the region of the Štokavian dialect group, the Banat as cultural region or landscape based on a set of cultural criteria.

Kinds of regions in the human-geographical sphere

If we concentrate on regionalisation in the human-geographical sphere we meet again different kinds. One kind is the **structural region** in the sense of a region in which a set of similar characteristics occurs all over the region.

An example is the cultural region. It may be characterised by similar types of farmsteads and villages, similar land use types, etc. Socio-economic regions, as a second example, are characterised by a similar economic and employment structure. Thus, we arrive at agricultural regions, industrial regions, tourism regions, etc.

Structural regions display a certain extent of homogeneity related to the criteria in question which does not mean that they are completely homogeneous. But they are not necessarily functional units. Parts of an agricultural region, e.g., may gravitate to a centre A, while other parts of the region gravitate to a centre B.

A **functional region**, on the other hand, may be rather inhomogeneous (and it mostly is), but its parts are functionally related to each other. The classical examples are catchment areas of central places in the sense of Walter CHRISTALLER. The central place (urban centre) provides for the supply of its catchment area with higher-ranking services – in the fields of education, health care, transportation, administration, goods and services – and receives in turn resources from its catchment area (labour force, raw materials, space for recreation).

A subtype of functional regions are administrative regions. A region is attributed to an administrative centre, which constitutes a functional relation between the centre and the rest of the region: by the responsibility of official authorities in the centre for this region, by elections to representative bodies, by financial transfers from the region to the centre (taxes, fees) and from the centre to the region (transfer payments, investments, subsidies).

For administrative regions it is a great advantage, when they coincide with the central place system, i.e., when they have functional relations not only in the field of administration, but also in all the other economic and extra-economic fields mentioned before (education, health care, transportation, supply with goods and services, labour force recruitment, supply with raw materials, recreation). This has a lot of synergetic effects and contributes to the efficiency of administration, spatial planning, etc.

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Where the system of administrative regions does not coincide with the central place system the difficulties are obvious and must be counterbalanced by additional measures (planning associations etc.). Striking examples in this respect are the city of Vienna, which is administratively separated from its catchment area (comprising at least Lower Austria) by provincial boundaries; and the city of Berlin, which is also separated from its catchment area Brandenburg by provincial boundaries.

It was therefore a major goal of the recent and ongoing EU-driven decentralisation and administrative regionalisation process in the eastern part of Europe to adapt administrative regions to the central place system. This attempt was (with the major exception of Slovakia) in general successful.

Also in Romania, the county (judet) system which originates by spatial configuration in the Communist era, corresponds to the central place system of the meso-level, but not of the macro-level (the level of larger regional centres like Cluj-Napoca).

THE TERM “CULTURAL REGION”

Cultural regions may be defined by a set of cultural criteria such as traditional farm and village types, traditions of land use (e.g. viticulture) and farming, traditions of nutrition, everyday practices and attitudes, traditions of celebrating holidays and festivities,¹ a common historical consciousness, language – not so much the standard language, but dialects, which frequently form a continuum even between different standard languages² – religion and the material manifestations of religion (churches, chapels, crosses, places of pilgrimage etc.). There may be several other criteria. Many of them are rather symbolic, but they shape the identity of people raised and living in this region and contribute to a common consciousness.

Yi-Fu TUAN, an American Chinese and prominent cultural geographer, a disciple of Carl SAUER, the founder of the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography, has expressed this by these very colourful words: *„[Place] is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones”* (TUAN 1977, p. 183 f).

The criteria applied to define a cultural region may also vary from case to case. Many common characteristics of a cultural region are rooted in the past, in history. They can mostly be traced back to a historical political unit; to an individual state like it is with Montenegro, with many parts of Germany and Italy; to a former autonomous region like it is with most Austrian provinces and the Czech lands Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. In such cases the historical functional relations may have persisted up to the present day, so that the cultural region is at the same time a functional region.

But regional cultural identities may also evolve if such historical preconditions do not exist; and this can happen within a surprisingly short time. Regional identity building has, e.g., been very successful in the German provinces of Nordrhein-Westfalen and Hessen or in the Austrian province of Burgenland. This easternmost Austrian province was an integrated part of the Hungarian Kingdom from its very beginning around the year 1000 up to 1921, when it was awarded to the newly established Austrian Republic. It was even subdivided among several Hungarian counties – so it had not been an administrative unit within Hungary. But as a self-governing federal province of Austria from 1921 onward and by propagating a “Pannonian identity” by all means a political unit has at its disposal (educational system, media, tourism promotion) a specific cultural identity of Burgenland developed within a few decades. It is currently more distinct than the identities of some other, really historical Austrian provinces.

The notion of the cultural region differs from what is described by “mental space”, since mental space is in principle related to an individual and may vary in extension and content from person to person. There may be inter-personal convergence of personal mental spaces to the extent that the mental spaces of all persons of a cultural community coincide and are thus identical with what is perceived as a cultural region. The essence of a cultural region, however, is that it constitutes the material, by all human senses perceivable impact of a cultural community. A human community with a specific culture has shaped it in a certain (if not

¹ The Bay of Kotor [Boka Kotorska] cultivates, e.g., the Dalmatian and Catholic tradition of carnaval, although it is now a part of Montenegro and Catholics have been reduced to a tiny minority.

² (like it is, e.g., between Slovene and Croatian; or even between Slovene and German in Carinthia). Also the Hungarian colloquial language or dialects spoken in Transylvania comprise many Romanian words and vice versa.

homogenous) way. By continued perception of it, this community strengthens in turn its common identity and consciousness. A cultural region also helps with trading such an identity and consciousness from generation to generation.

This is even true in our era of globalisation and excessive spatial mobility. On the one hand most permanent migrants are inclined to assimilate to the culture (and cultural landscape) of their new homes; on the other they preserve a special feeling of familiarity for the cultural landscape, in which they have been raised – even decades after having left it.

COINCIDENCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND CULTURAL REGIONS AS A POLITICAL GOAL

Why to strive for coincidence?

It would be an advantage, and this is the very point and message of this paper, if administrative regions would coincide with cultural regions. The advantages of such a coincidence are in the author's opinion:

A common cultural identity and a common consciousness within an administrative region makes it much easier to make people engaged for the region, for common regional goals.

A common cultural identity forms a good basis for social solidarity among the population with disadvantaged parts of the region. This may result also in economic benefits. It is, e.g., certainly easier to make Transylvanians running and engaging themselves for Transylvania than the citizens of the county of Cluj for the county of Cluj or the inhabitants of the Northwest Development Region for the NW-DR.

Ethnic and national identities may step into the background. If, e.g., a common cultural identity of Transylvania is also supported by an administrative region called "Transylvania", this may well have the effect that Romanians, Hungarians, Roma, Germans and other ethnic groups of this region feel and act in the first line as Transylvanians and not as Romanians, Hungarians etc. Very good examples in this respect are the Austrian federal provinces of Burgenland and Carinthia where in a multicultural situation ethnic majorities as well as ethnic minorities engage themselves for common regional goals because of their common regional identity (however, with some problems in Carinthia due to a very specific situation). Another good example is South Tyrol, where the common regional identity is so strong and the advantages of an administrative region with strong competences of self-government are so obvious to everybody that national animosities and antagonisms between Germans, Italians, and Ladins have calmed down essentially.

The problem is that cultural regions are in principle structural regions and not functional regions. So it may be difficult to have the two assets of an administrative region combined: to coincide with the central place system as well as with cultural identities.

Recent attempts of bringing administrative and cultural regions into coincidence

Looking again at the current decentralisation process in the eastern part of Europe, one has to admit that bringing administrative regions into coincidence with cultural regions was not really successful.

The only major exception is Poland, where the new 17 voivodships [województwo] implemented in 1999 coincide indeed in many cases with cultural regional identities and have also (very symbolic!) traditional names: Greater Poland [w. wielkopolskie], Lesser Poland [w. malopolskie], Silesia [Śląsk], Masovia [Mazowsze], etc.

To a limited extent also Hungary is another exception, where the traditional county system has been preserved throughout the Communist era and has also only randomly been modified afterwards (fig. 2). But the counties are in most cases rather subdividing larger cultural regions and are not so much cultural regions in their own right.

This is also true for Romania, where with a few exceptions county [județ] boundaries dissect larger cultural regions (fig. 3, 4). The few exceptions are the Suceava county coinciding with the Romanian part of the cultural region of the Bucovina; the Maramureș county coinciding with the Romanian part of the cultural region of Marmaros; and the Sălaj county with a rather specific cultural identity, transitional between Transylvania [Transilvania] and Crișana. The Development Regions [regiunea dezvoltare] installed in 1998 do not respect cultural identities either.

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Fig. 2. Counties [megye] in Hungary



Fig.3. Counties [județ] in Romania

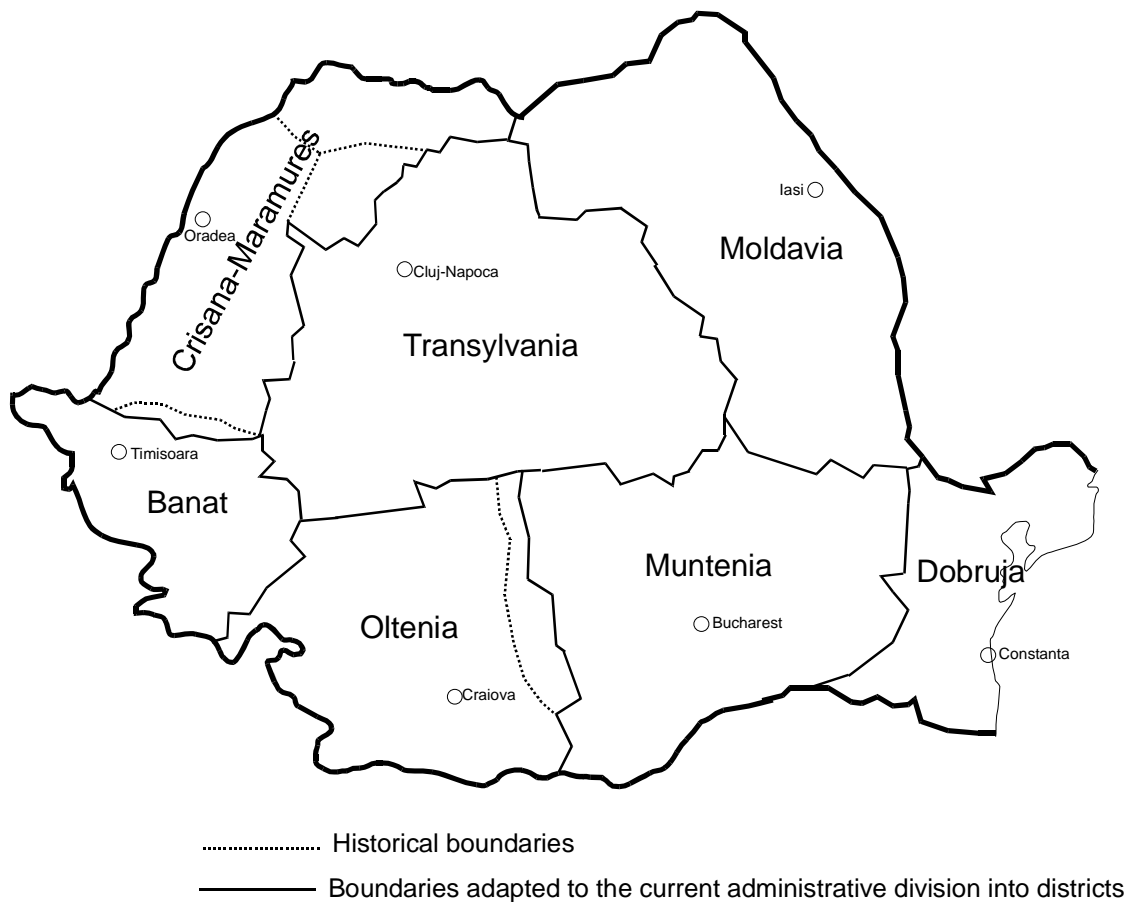


Fig.4. Historical (cultural) regions in Romania

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