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Book Review

Transregional Europe

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Abstract

The book explores the transregional dimension of both the conception of European spatial planning as well as the activity and praxis of transnational collaboration in Europe. A particular emphasis is put on the EU's 'macro-regions' which have been developed since 2009 in an attempt for forge functional collaboration across large-scale territories above the nation-states and going beyond mere cross-border cooperation.

Keywords

Trans-regional; European Spatial Planning; EU Macro-regions; EU Macro-regional Strategies; Territorial; Discursive Institutionalism

"Do Europeans actually feel European?" This is a question that has regularly been put forward in Eurobarometer surveys and policy reports; it has also featured prominently as a research question in scholarly literature seeking to measure the depth and breadth of identity amongst citizens in Europe. What has been missing thus far, however, is an account of how much Europeans have begun to feel themselves attached to broader geographical concepts that transcend national borders and could be likened to North American ideas of 'the Mid-West', the 'West Coast' or 'Cascadia'. Have Europeans of the Baltic, the Danubian or the Atlantic areas developed any comparable sense of belonging and identity *vis-à-vis* these 'macro-regions'? Such questions are at the centre of *Transregional Europe*, William Outhwaite's theoretically well-informed and short book which nonetheless provides an in-depth account of what transregional Europe entails.

The first chapter paves the scholarly ground by dissecting the 'mental maps' that have emerged in both the European elite and European peoples. As the chapter demonstrates, the sociological literature on the idea of 'imagined communities' is as abundantly rich as that which is concerned with the role of regions in Europe. Outhwaite provides a succinct analysis of how, over recent decades, European spatial planners have sought to inform and construct a new regionalism in Europe. Most recently this has taken the form of so-called macro-regions, new planning tools that rescale territorial spaces, such as the Danube region, cut across EU/non-EU binaries and include both public and private sector stakeholders. Although these planning tools seem primarily aimed at building a new governance architecture to address transregional policy challenges (such as river navigation, pollution and economic development) they are also underpinned by the ambition of both tangible and intangible Europeanization. By drawing on new regionalism thinking, particularly discursive institutionalism (Vivian Schmidt, 2008) and by focusing on the interplay of ideas and discourse that underpin policy processes, the author seeks to trace the stickiness of historical and cultural characteristics that inform the contemporary EU's macro-regional efforts. Based on the theoretical context and frameworks in chapter one, in the three subsequent chapters, the author provides a detailed history, explanation and analysis of macro-regional planning policies that the EU introduced after 2009.

Chapters 2 to 4 provide the reader with some thorough background on the development of 'regional conceptualizations' in Europe. In doing so, Outhwaite traces the history of broad regional conceptions in Europe, the author argues that there is a dual determinism that derives from the political philosophy of Charles de Montesquieu¹ who believed (1) that regions are geographically determined by climate and (2) that future developments are, by and large, historically determined. Outhwaite then provides concise analyses of long-standing conceptualizations such as 'Central Europe', 'the Balkans', 'Norden' and 'the Mediterranean'. Following this, the author traces the origins of conceptions of a 'united Europe' as they can be found in the writings of Victor Hugo, Henri de Saint-Simon² and other renowned proponents of pan-European thinking. From here, the author moves to discuss the constituent features of European regions based in natural, linguistic and religious demarcations. By doing this, the author discloses the pre-political dimension of European regionalism; it becomes clear through this discussion just how different the conceptualisations of macro-regions are – Outhwaite identified nine biogeographic regions in the contemporary EU based on a characteristic blend of vegetation, climate and topography. Interestingly, with the exception of the Alpine region, none of these nine macro-regions align with the macro-regional planning that the EU introduced in 2009. Notably, the four EU macro-regional strategies – for the Baltic Sea Region (2009), the Danube Region (2011), the Adriatic-Ionian Region (2014) and the Alpine Region Strategy (2015) – have been endorsed to date and each are at different stages of implementation. Areas of cooperation in the current macro-regional strategies range from navigation, climate change, biodiversity and infrastructure to economic development, education, tourism and civil security.

Chapter 5 centres on macro-regions and macro-regional planning. While some macro-regions identified are addressed in contemporary EU macro-regional strategies – for example the Strategy for the Baltic Sea region – others have instead been discussed within the existing set of discursive strategies – for example the sea-basin-based North Sea and Atlantic strategies. Macro-regional strategies were first introduced on the EU stage in the aftermath of the EU's Eastern enlargement of 2004/2007 and were intended as an initiative to consolidate old and new Member States of the Baltic Sea region as a group inside the EU. In some of the academic literature, macro-regional strategies are discussed as a response to pan-European documents such as the Lisbon, Gothenburg and Europe 2020 strategies, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and other European territorial cooperation activities. Cross-border and interregional cooperation in general, and INTERREG programmes (an important funding source for fostering territorial cooperation projects in the EU) in particular, are widely seen as a precursor the large scale macro-regional cooperation arrangements at the supra-national scale. In a nutshell, macro-regional strategies are conceived as integrated frameworks for cooperation to address common and functional challenges in the specific territories they define. The strategies aim to coordinate the development of policy goals in an international context while, at the same time, supplying a governance structure to support implementation. In contrast to the contractual frameworks evident in existing international conventions which are most often focused on environmental goals (e.g., the Alpine Convention or the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River), these macro-regional strategies are more ambitious; at least, they are on paper.

As Outhwaite succinctly argues, macro-regional strategies are also discursive strategies, employed by EU institutions to challenge the continuous preponderance of the nation state. Following Simona Piattoni's work on multi-level governance (2010), the author identifies this approach as deeply grounded in discursive institutionalism, an approach aimed at rescaling governance through narratives and discourse. Another feature of this strategy becomes manifest in the dominant narrative deployed by the European Commission which maintains the so-called "three no's", whereby, no new EU legislation, no new EU institutions, and no new EU budget should be used to provide direct or immediate support to EU macro-regional strategies, at least for now. It is only through the ongoing negotiations for the 2021-27 EU budget that macro-regional strategies are permitted to receive extra funding through the European Structural and Investment Funds rather than solely through various INTERREG initiatives as has been the case up to now. The strong variation in the achievements of the four macro-regions is partly due to their different timeframes of development, however, *Transregional Europe* argues that the more important causes of variation are differentiation in geopolitical context, organisational landscape, administrative capacity and policy priorities.

In Chapter 6 the analysis progresses to consider the competing models of regionalism at the margins of the European continent. A first focus of the discussion is the Russia-inspired Eurasian Economic Union that mimics the EU institutionally but has a different set of goals and is driven by the logic of intergovernmentalism with Russia as *primus inter pares*. A second analytical focus is devoted to various Chinese initiatives included in the so-called 'Belt and Road Initiative' that began in 2013. Contrasting these two regionalisms, the discussion notes that whereas Russia's approach is characterised by statism, China's is purely functional and, Outhwaite argues, completely detached from territorial aspects. To conclude the book, Chapter 7 discusses the role of migration and tourism, which has grown substantially as part of European integration and proposes this to be a supplementary way in which macro-regional conceptions have become increasingly relevant for contemporary Europeans.

One of the central arguments of Outhwaite's book is that trans-regional conceptions and transregional integration have essentially taken two forms: one derives from explicit planning at a policy and operational level; the other is more spontaneous and can have unintended consequences. While many of the early EU cross-border initiatives were

supported by local communities in a bottom-up fashion, post-2009 macro-regional strategies are best described as a mixture of closely intertwined top-down *and* bottom-up policy processes with the latter characterizing those initiatives that cannot rely on an existing fabric of transregional policy practices. Although the author admits that symbolism characterises much of EU planning, Outhwaite remains optimistic about the potential of EU macro-regions. Overall, this book offers a very dense, theoretically rich and interdisciplinary *tour d'horizon* of the emergence of transregional Europe which is likely to become even more relevant in light of the growing importance of subnational authorities in Europe, including the post-Brexit United Kingdom, in maintaining and furthering "transregional Europe".

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Transregional Europe

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ENDNOTES

¹ Charles de Montesquieu (1847). *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: CUP, 1989.

² Victor Hugo (1849). 'Speech at Peace Congress', Paris, 1849. *Report of the proceedings of the second general Peace Congress*, held in Paris on the 22nd, 23rd, and 24 August 1849. Compilation. London, Charles Gilpin, 1849; Henri de Saint-Simon (1814). *De la réorganisation de la société européenne*, Paris.

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