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By

Leon Julius Biela

Abstract

While historians frequently use the term "region", little thought is given to what "regions" are. This methodological essay explores the concepts of the "region" used in current historical scholarship and especially in global history, discussing their problems and potential. Drawing on ideas from spatial theory and human geography, the essay considers how an analytically viable conceptualization of the "region" would look. Overall, the essay contends that working out theoretically informed spatial concepts is essential for (global) history, and argues that a more reflective use of the "region" will open up new perspectives for (global) historical research.

About the author

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Introduction

In his introductory volume on global history, Sebastian Conrad argued that global history, as well as any approach that analyzes global processes at the macro-level, runs the risk of becoming too abstract and detached from realities on the ground. Therefore, for him, global history "remains unsatisfactory unless it is anchored in regional studies and their research results."[1] For him, developing "regional" expertise or drawing on 'regional' research is essential to remain aware of "local" and "regional" specificities and to tie the analyses of abstract processes to micro-level contexts. Conrad also noted that many studies by global historians already develop their research interests proceeding from a "local" or "regional" context.[2]

(Global) historians would probably agree that a history of flows, connections, and transfers takes place somewhere and thus, necessitate spatial units, ideally ones that are not just discursively constructed container-spaces like the "state" of national histories. For Conrad, as for many other global historians, especially those working with "transregional" approaches, the "region" seems to be a good way of anchoring connections and flows in space without having to resort to the nation-state.[3] Even studies less concerned with finding spatial concepts for analyzing cross-border or global processes use the term "region" surprisingly often.[4]

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a wide and diverse range of sometimes contradictory understandings of the term "region", which are seldomly informed by spatial theory. Often, what exactly is referred to by the term "region" remains vague. Conrad, too, never explained in his introductory volume what he meant by the "region". Nonetheless, the "region" remains a spatial signifier and is thus connected to at least implicit understandings of space. For a historical analysis that is aware of the importance of space, it is thus necessary to reflect more thoroughly on the term "region". Thus, it is crucial to ask: What is the "region" and how can it be fruitfully used in historical analysis? Other disciplines like sociology and especially human geography have explored the nature of the "region", yet these works have neither been broadly received by historians nor has the historical discipline itself thoroughly discussed its understanding of the "region".

Therefore, this essay will reflect on what constitutes a "region" and how to use it in (global) history by drawing on concepts from other disciplines and suggesting how to think differently about "regions" in historical research. The essay will start with discussing some of the most prevalent understandings of the "region" in current historical scholarship and the key problems of this current use. I argue that despite these problems, the "region" still has potential uses for historical research. Thus, we should not abandon, but re-think it.

The current use of "region" and its Problems

In its everyday use, the word "region" is often associated with the idea of clearly definable spaces characterized by a more or less homogeneous population or natural environment.[5] This essentialist conception of the "region" has long been present in historical scholarship, and to some extent, still is.[6] That is not to say that the "region" should never be used for historical analysis. However, in order to pave the way for the use of the "region" as a methodologically thought-out and flexible spatial concept, it is first necessary to discuss the current usage of the term in historical scholarship and to identify its most central problems.

1. The diversity of conceptions of the "region"

It is striking how many different conceptions of the "region" exist among historians, and how much the spaces labelled as "regions" differ in size and nature. In general, there are two main understandings of the "region". On the one side, historians like Martina Steber understand "regions" as "medium-sized spatial units",[7] whose size lies between towns and cities on the one hand, and the nation-state on the other.[8] Examples for this could be territories as different as the Palatinate in Germany, Provence in France, or Khuzestan in Iran. The interdisciplinary journal *Regional Studies* also defines its subject as "subnational".[9] This understanding is especially prominent in German historical research, in which "regional" history is often equated with *Landesgeschichte*, i.e. the history of federal states or former administrative units. While these approaches have been criticized for their tendency to treat these units as essentialized spaces, past and present political borders are still influential for German regional history.[10] More generally, the understanding of "regions" as sub-national units still takes the nation-state as its spatial point of reference, with all its problematic methodological implications.

On the other side, many historians understand "regions" in the sense of "world regions", that is, as spatial units comprising multiple states (or parts of multiple states). For instance, Austrian global historian Andrea Komlosy described "world regions" as supranational spaces formed by shared historical interactions and experiences, or common cultural characteristics like similar languages.[11] Unfortunately, hers and similar approaches to the definition of "world regions" remain somewhat vague and without elaborate theoretical or methodological foundations.[12]

Besides these two broad and general concepts of the "region", various other, more specific approaches to the "region" have been used in historical research. One example for this is the concept of "historical meso-regions", which seeks to provide a heuristic tool for identifying cross-national and cross-cultural spatial units with shared historical and cultural characteristics over time. According to Stefan Troebst, for example, "historical meso-regions" include the "Black Sea World", the "Levant", or "East-Central Europe".[13] However, since these "regions" are discursively constructed inventions with their own complex histories, their use as heuristic tools can be criticized. Still, the concept's emphasis on the potential

independence of "regions" from states and nations, as well as the understanding of "regions" as "clusters of structural characteristics over longer periods,"[14] are both intriguing ideas.

Other approaches have focused on the natural environment instead of cultural characteristics to define "regions". They focus either on landscapes that provide a shared and distinct habitat for communities across political borders, such as mountain ranges, or on rivers, seas, and oceans that connect various communities along their shores. Many of these approaches are inspired by the works of the French *Annales* school.[15] *Annales*-historian Lucien Febvre defined "natural regions" as "simply collections of possibilities for society which makes use of them but is not determined by them."[16] Studies focused on the connecting quality of bodies of water have burgeoned in the last decades. However, these approaches have been criticized for their often one-sided focus on the natural space, their underestimation of disconnecting forces, and their frequent lack of spatial-theoretical foundations.[17]

This has only been a very brief and selective overview of the various understandings of the "region" relevant to (global) history.[18] It shows that historians do not share a common understanding of the "region". Thus, the exact meaning of the term "region" in historical studies is often unclear. Especially the use of the term "region" in various contexts without defining it can be confusing for readers and deprives the "region" of analytical value. For instance, Domenic Sachsenmaier wrote in an essay on the methodological implications of critiques of Eurocentrism for global history on one page about both "world regions" like the "Islamic World" or "East Asia", and "regions within India".[19] This makes it quite unclear what kind of spaces he is referring to when he later mentions "the effects of globalizing sugar trade on regional markets."[20] Similarly, Matthias van Rossum, in his article on "regional" price differences in the global slave trade, used "regions" as the central spatial unit in his study (and words like "region" or "regional" over 150 times). However, he never explained just what a region is to him and refers to spaces and territories as different as the Western Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, Timor or Makassar as "regions".[21]

2. "Region" as a fallback term

Perhaps it is precisely this terminological vagueness of the "region" that makes the term attractive. In political-diplomatic negotiations, the term "region" is used whenever it is preferred not to be spatially-territorially specific.[22] The same may be true in historical writing. Especially when a spatial entity is referred to incidentally, in passing, historians frequently resort to the term "region", which, due to its mundane nature, makes it possible to avoid the complex and laborious introduction of a thought-out spatial unit. This, again, deprives the "region" of any real meaning. When, for example, Craig Lockard in his textbook on global history referred to spaces as different as Egypt, the Sahara, Southeast India, the coasts of Sri Lanka, or the Middle East as "regions", it seems that "region" is just a convenient "spatial word" used for all kinds of spaces which are not a nation-state or another clearly defined territory.[23] Consequently, in sentences like "Arab slave trading badly disrupted some East African regions," "region" seems to mean nothing in particular.[24] The "region" serves as a fallback term in a different way when "world regions" are

concerned. Often, the existence of spatial entities is presupposed –like by Mariola Espinosa, who argued for the decentering of the global history of public health and thus advocated a focus on "Latin America"– and these entities are conveniently named "regions", making them appear somehow natural.[25] This kind of usage of the term "region", in turn, results in statements like "regions other than the United States, especially Latin America".[26]

3. Return to essentialist understandings of space

This poses the danger that the essentialist container-space returns by way of the "region".[27] Susanne Rau, for example, warned that the insights generated by the spatial turn have not fully taken hold in the historical discipline. She saw the "region" as one example of spatial constructs that are frequently "examined all too reductively or only with a view to their territorial components."[28] The danger of essentializing space arises in particular when the concept of the "region" is not critically questioned, but instead clear territorial delimitations are posited, which in turn rely heavily on existing territorial political-administrative constructs. Inconsiderate uses of the "region" carry the risk of reviving, albeit often unintentionally, outdated essentialist notions of space, and perpetuating nations, states, and countries as territorial paradigms.[29]

In this context, "world regions", as based on the "areas" of *Area Studies*, seem particularly problematic. Many authors have analyzed how *Area Studies*, now institutionally intertwined with global history, was established in the early Cold War, when the United States government needed in-depth expertise on foreign countries for geopolitical and strategic-operative purposes.[30] These "areas" encompassed multiple nation-states or other polities deemed to be culturally and historically similar. In this way, they are often nothing more than container-spaces that foster a homogenizing, orientalizing, and essentializing view of the people located in them. Many of these "regions" are moreover remnants of European imperialist discourses, as the rich body of scholarship on the imperial genesis of such "world regions" as Latin America, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia has shown.[31]

4. Perpetuating mental maps

In the case of the "areas", it becomes very clear that the inconsiderate use of such spatial entities in current research tends to reproduce imperialist mental maps. Conventionally used concepts of "regions" are thus never "innocent". At worst, they shape present spatial discourses and lead to the perpetuation of orientalist imaginations.[32] The discursive production of "regions" is almost always linked to power relations and imaginations of identity and alterity. This is particularly evident in the case of those "regions" constructed by European imperialists. Here, "regions" were a useful tool to order imperial knowledge for homogenizing and othering societies outside of the imperial metropoles. Mental Maps structured in "regions" thus helped to facilitate ideas of "civilizational hierarchies" and ultimately to construct "European" or "Western" identities by dissociation. In light of this, writing about formerly colonized territories and societies in general terms as "regions

earlier marginalized as colonies"[33] or "non-Western regions"[34] might not be the ideal choice of words.

Power relations and imaginations are, however, not only relevant for these "world regions" but for all "regions" conventionally taken as given entities. For example, John Straussberger, showed how ideas of "regional federations" were used by exiled politicians in western Africa after decolonization.[35] Interestingly, Straussberger never questioned the "regional" discourse as such but adopted the "regional framework" for his analysis. On a sub-national level, politicians or other actors can use the notion of a "region" for their own agendas, for example, to gain more autonomy from a central authority or to make the political ordering of spaces appear "natural". It is the task of historians to analyze the formation of these "regions", not to reproduce them in their own analyses by uncritically using the territorial delimitations produced by past "regional" discourse.

It is important to note here that Eurocentric power relations are important for the conceptual history of the term "region", too. Of course, not all spatial concepts that could be described as a "region" actually use the term "region", especially if they originated outside of or preceded the European concept of the nation-state and its claim to be the primary ordering category of space.[36] As pointed out above, however, current understandings of the "region" use more often than not the nation-state as a spatial point of reference, regardless whether the "region" is defined as a part of or as a group of states. The conceptual history of the term "region" is thus also a history of the Eurocentric reordering of spatial knowledge in relation to the nation-state. This essay seeks to raise awareness of this issue and argues for an understanding of the region that is independent from the nation-state and thus more suited to cast off the Eurocentric implications of the "region".

Why using "region" as a spatial concept should not be abandoned

In light of these significant problems accompanying the current use of the "region" in historical scholarship, it would seem reasonable to abandon the use of "regions" in (global) history altogether. However, the various understandings of the "region" have also given rise to many intriguing and potentially fruitful ideas. In the following, I will offer some reasons why a complete abandonment of the "region" is neither feasible nor sensible.

The use of "region" to refer to spatial units, both in everyday language and in academic research, corresponds to the human need to order and categorize knowledge.[37] Since it is neither possible nor sensible to do universal history, there must be specializations and subdivisions within the historical discipline. As discussed above, the emergence and institutionalization of these subfields is, however, in many cases connected to power structures. History department chairs, research projects, conferences, introductory lectures, textbooks, and many other areas of institutionalized production and dissemination of historical knowledge are organized according to spatial units such as "regions", embedded within Eurocentric frameworks of power and knowledge, thus often implicitly reproducing notions of essentialized container-spaces and Eurocentric orderings of spatial

knowledge. Still, to make historical research work, it is inevitable to divide the overall space into specific parts, and the "region" can be a way to do just that.

Moreover, the "region" is an element of social, cultural, and political discourse and thus necessarily shapes the ways in which individuals and communities, of the past and present understand, imagine, and interact with the world and the space that surrounds them. We encounter and use the term in everyday and scholarly language, it is present in administrative structures, in fiction writing, and in travel advertisements. Often, however, it is highly political and used as a space of reference for political agendas seeking to promote a "regional" identity.[38] All of this makes it necessary not to ignore the "region" but to analyze the power structures behind the emergence of "regional" discourses and to ask how these discursive formations can be distinguished from analytically useful spatial concepts.

Overall, it is therefore necessary to use concepts of spatial units in historical research to do justice to space as an integral element of historical processes. Any historical investigation must simultaneously locate its subject in some spatial framework and deal with the spatial imaginations of historical actors. This requires a thoughtful approach to concepts of space and spatial units. Since most conventional spatial units can be problematized and critiqued in the same way as "regions", there is no reason why the "region" should not become an analytically meaningful spatial concept, especially since the term already exists and is widely used. However, an analytically meaningful and fruitful use of the term requires a concept of the "region" grounded in methodological and theoretical considerations, thus overcoming the shortcomings of the understandings of the "region" currently in use in historical research.

Re-thinking the "region"

In the following section, I do not intend to provide an elaborate conceptualization of the "region", but rather to propose a way of thinking about "regions" in a way that incorporates various insights from the approaches described above, as well as ideas from other disciplines, particularly human geography. Ideally, the following discussion of the "region" can provoke new ideas about how we might use the "region" in (global) history.

1. The "region" as a spatial concept of analysis

Following the relational concept of space developed by spatial sociology, space is understood here as the arrangement of individuals and their actions, whose relations are formed through interactions. The various types of actions and interactions form layered nets of relations, thus constituting a complex relationality. In these nets, interactions lead to the transfer and collectivization of modes of action and thus to processes of spatial ordering, which are expressed in the continuous intersubjective institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of these modes of action.[39] This perspective on space owes much to thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, who emphasised the socially constructed nature of space, and

Bruno Latour, whose Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) argued for a sociological network formed the relations within and between actors and their interactions.[40]

Most concepts of "regions", including essentialist ones, share the idea that the "region" is characterized by the specific cultural characteristics of its population and thus represents an aggregation of cultural phenomena. This quality of a "region" is also part of concepts based on relational understandings of space from human geography and historical approaches inspired by it, albeit with a different twist. Here, the "region" is commonly understood as a spatial structure that manifests itself as a densification or cluster within the relationality of space.[41] Thus, on the one hand, "regions" describe the spread of a specific manifestation of an institutionalized mode of action in relational space or of a specific set thereof.[42] On the other hand, they can refer to a cluster of relations, i.e. interactions.[43] In his work on the spatial dimension of knowledge production, Latour uses the term "centers of calculation" to describe centers in social networks, which accumulate knowledge about the network in circular movements and thereby define the network's relations.[44] Building on top of the ANT, Christoph Antweiler noted: "A region thus could be determined as an accumulation of actors [or rather their institutionalized actions] or as higher densities of relations, that is, as a relational cluster."[45] However, these two analytical perspectives are interdependent, as a clustering of interactions in the network often produces a clustering of modes of action.

In such an understanding, which focuses on clusters in relational space, a "region" has no clear boundaries. These are only constructed through interpretation, that is the selection of the specific types of interactions and institutionalized modes of action that make up the cluster and the definition of what counts as a cluster. Moreover, building on the ANT's insight that any structures are fundamentally unstable, Varró and Lagendijk argued that these clusters are by nature in continuous processes of formation and dissolution.[46]

Moreover, a "region" can never stand alone, but must always be defined as part of or in relation to some other spatial entity. If a densification or cluster in a particular spatial network is described as a "region", it is necessary to specify which larger part of the network this cluster is a "region". In other words, there are clusters within the entirety of relational space that form its "regions", which, in turn, comprise some smaller clusters that form their "regions", and so on. Moreover, the respective "regions" are also vertically entangled with each other since they are clusters in a continuous relational space and not separate entities.[47] From an ANT perspective, the "region" cannot be understood apart from the network of relations but is to be defined as "an interactive effect of humans and non-human materials" within this network.[48] In such a relational understanding of "regions", their size is not a constitutive element of the concept, which is why it can include several of the concepts outlined above.[49]

A "region" can also be specified functionally with reference to specific institutionalized modes of actions or interactions relevant to the analysis.[50] Thus, a "region" in the net of economic relations needs not be congruent with a "region" defined

by the spread of a particular cultural phenomenon, such as a language. Individuals and groups can thus be located in multiple analytical "regions", depending on the type of action or interaction on which the identification of the cluster is based. From an ANT perspective, not only interactions between humans are relevant here, but also interactions with non-human "actants", which are part of the regional cluster's relations.

Spatial sociologist Martina Löw has argued that actions and interactions taking place in one geographic location can belong to different, territorially overlapping "regions" within a spatial network.[51] Thus, although the concept of the "region" developed here is decidedly not based on a physical-natural understanding of space, it should not be seen as completely detached from physical space. First of all, the interactions and actions which constitute space and "region" take place not only in certain locations within the relational space, but also in geographically determinable places.[52] Thus, the "region" acquires a geographical component, though this should not be understood as rigidly territorial, but rather in a permanent process of transformation. At the same time, it is crucial to be aware of how this geographic dimension can shape the interactions and actions which constitute the "region". Examples of this are interaction-limiting mountain ranges, interaction-promoting rivers and seas, or specific interactions and institutionalizations generated by the presence of natural resources such as coal deposits.[53] Conversely, a "region" defined by the spread of certain economic or cultural practices can have an impact on its environment, for example, through the usage of a specific kind of water management system, and thus create a geographical-natural "region".

2. The "region" in discourse

It is, however, not enough to think about "regions" exclusively as spatial concepts of analysis, but also as elements of discourse. The idea of a "region" or of a "regional" affiliation can influence historical processes regardless of whether this "regional" discourse is connected to a "region" as a spatial concept of analysis. In discourse, a "region" is in most cases collectively imagined and discursively constructed as a human community which is defined by certain shared characteristics and which can be assigned to a certain, relatively clearly delimited territory.[54] Moreover, to create a notion of belonging, the demarcation and construction of an "inside" and an "outside" of the "region" becomes the defining element of the "region" as a discursive formation.[55] Possible political uses of this kind of "regional" discourse have been mentioned above. Nonetheless, demarcations of a discursively constructed "region" remain generally weaker than in the case of concepts such as the nation-state. Moreover, the "region" as a discursive construction allows individuals and communities to identify simultaneously with several, functionally differentiated (but still discursively constructed) "regions". An individual may feel a sense of belonging to multiple different "regions" such as a cultural "region", economic "region", or political-administrative "region".[56] Lastly, a discursively constructed "region" has the tendency to dynamically reinforce itself as it is attributed more and more distinct characteristics, and "regional identity" thus becomes increasingly powerful.

3. The "institutionalizing region"

It is useful to distinguish between these two understandings of the region: The "region" as spatial concept of analysis (i.e. clusters identified by the researcher for hermeneutic purposes) and those "regions" imagined and discursively constructed by the historical actors themselves. By emphasizing the difference between these two understandings, the historicity, discursive construction, and imaginary nature of the latter become clearer and can be made subject of historical analysis.[57] Nonetheless, it can be even more fruitful to bring the two understandings together, as for example, the concept of "institutionalizing regions", pioneered by human geographer Anssi Paasi.

Paasi argued that, on closer inspection, the "region" as a spatial concept of analysis and "regional discourse" are hardly independent of each other, but enter into a complex reciprocal relationship and mutually influence each other. He has termed this process "institutionalization", a concept that has been revisited by a number of scholars from various disciplines. According to Prasenjit Duara, this process of institutionalization can take two forms. Firstly, the contingent emergence of several "regions" in relational space, largely overlapping in both relational and geographical space, can lead to the subsequent discursive construction of an imagined "region". This can be the case when this process of spatial reordering and the subsequent intensification of action and interaction in one part of relational space is felt by the affected communities in their lifeworld and thus leads to "regional" discourse. Secondly, the imagined "region" created in discourse can spill over into relational space as individuals and communities act and interact according to this imagined "region". The "region" as discourse formation thus has a structuring effect on relational space. Duara therefore distinguished "between the relatively unplanned or evolutionary emergence of an area of interaction and interdependence as a 'region', and the more active, often ideologically driven, political process of creating a 'region'."[58] In many cases, however, the process of "institutionalization" will be complex and include elements of both forms. Regardless of its specific configuration, the process of "institutionalization" means that the "regions" of relational space and the discursively constructed "region" adapt to each other, thus causing their mutual consolidation.[59]

Drawing on sociological perspectives concerned with the "production" of space, this process of institutionalization and its two elements are deeply connected to power relations. Pursuing questions such as how ideas of "regions" emerge in discourse, who promotes these ideas and why, what forces are behind the formation of an analytic "region", how social space is reordered by an institutionalizing "region", and what processes of inclusion and exclusion are involved are instructive ways of analyzing the workings and historical diffusion of power structures.[60]

4. The "region" in (global) history

Thinking about the "region" in relational space, "regional" discourse, and the institutionalization of "regions" can be fruitful for global history. The "region" can provide a

spatial concept to locate global phenomena and connections, and to study their impact on processes of spatial ordering. Jürgen Osterhammel argued that global history needs to think about "regions" since historical actions over long distances take place rather between "smaller" spatial units than nation-states. Thus, he defines "regions" in global history as "spaces of interaction, constituted by their density of traffic and migration, communication and trade."[61]

If the "region" is understood as a cluster of institutionalized modes of (inter)action or of a set thereof, it can be used as a framework to study the (global) interactions between these clusters and to analyze how these interactions between region-clusters change these clusters by introducing new modes of (inter)actions or by changing configurations of a specific cluster, leading to its consolidation or dissolution. In other words, global historians might ask how specific clusters change over time as a result of shifts in larger networks of relational space or their specific interconnections with other clusters. Consider, for example, a largely institutionalized coastal "region" with an agrarian hinterland and some coastal towns, integrated in a region-cluster of cultural, economic, and political interactions. When rising global demand for a particular commodity leads to the intensification of interactions of these coastal towns with communities outside of the region, this will restructure interactions and thus space within this region, thus causing its dissolution. This is just one way in which thinking of "regions" as spatial concepts of analysis can provide a framework for closely analyzing and spatially locating the effects of global or inter-regional processes or for modeling the spatial reordering caused by these processes.

The analysis of connections between "regions" should, however, not presuppose these "regions". Global historians should always ask whether the "regions" they identify have really existed before the interaction they are interested in had emerged. In many cases, "regions" are not only entangled in global interconnections with other "regions", but they are the "result" of those interconnections. For example, global historians might not only ask how the emerging transatlantic trade has affected the (economic) regions of the Atlantic coasts but also how the emerging trade has produced these (economic) regions. In the case of Matthias van Rossum's above-mentioned article on "regional" differences in slave-prices in the Western Indian Ocean,[62] this would mean not just presupposing the existence of "regions" with different respective functions, but rather to ask how the emergence of the slave trade created these "regions" in an interdependent process. It cannot be the task of global history to ask "how did the transmission of material culture and useful knowledge across regions of the world affect the economic and cultural developments in any one of these regions,"[63] without asking how "regions" are made and unmade by such transmissions.

Global processes and interactions, and thus the expertise of global historians, are not only important in respect to "regions" as spatial concepts of analysis. "Regional" discourse, too, can be influenced by the experience of global interactions or by global trends, which can encourage the emphasis of "regional" discourse vis-à-vis other spatial imaginaries such as the nation or provoke it as defensive reaction to the experience of globalization.

Moreover, processes of institutionalization are not understandable without paying attention to inter-regional and global factors since both "regions" in relational space and "regional" discourse are always connected to these factors.

An additional advantage of the "region" as a spatial concept of analysis is that this concept makes it necessary to select a specific kind of (inter)action which forms the region-cluster. This gives global history studies interested in networks or interactions of a specific kind the possibility to operate with the spatial concept "region" without assuming that a "region" relevant for one kind of (inter)action is necessarily also significant for various other kinds of (inter)action. For example, when Terje Tvedt analyzed the connection between industrialization and certain water-management systems in "regions" around the globe, it is a crucial distinction, whether the water-management systems in a certain, presupposed "region" are analyzed or whether the region is defined by the spread of a specific system.[64] A very similar thought is aptly expressed by Fa-ti Fan with reference to the global history of science:

> What may be meaningfully defined as a region depends on what a scholar aims to study. There isn't one 'East Asia' ready to be discovered. There are only multiple regions superimposed on each other. The region of a vernacular tradition of science, technology, or medicine is likely different from that of an elite written tradition.[65]

Not trying to find a specific (inter)action of interest in a presumed "region", but to seek the "regions" within the network of specific (inter)actions effectively prevents unintentional thinking with essentialized spaces. This does not mean, however, that a "region" in a specific network of (inter)actions is only relevant to this network. On the contrary, the specific (inter)actions in one "region" can affect other (inter)actions and thus lead to the accumulation of functional regions mentioned above. In the example of the slave trade in the Western Indian Ocean, this means asking whether the regions of the slave trade network have led to intensification, densification, or re-arrangement of other kinds of (inter)actions and thus were the starting point for the accumulation of clusters, "regional" discourse, and ultimately processes of regional institutionalization or just added a layer to preexisting institutionalized regions.

The research questions associated with "regions" and their relationship to global processes and interconnections are many and varied. "Regions" might be a useful spatial framework for analyzing and explaining processes of spatial (re)ordering, territorialization, and de-territorialization in a globally interconnected world. Moreover, re-thinking the "region" in the way outlined here is also a way to address the problems of the current use of the "region" pointed out above:

1. "Regions" as spatial concepts of analysis cannot be understood as a specific spatial scale.[66] Spaces of very different size and nature can be understood as "regions" without creating confusion, since the use of the "region" as a spatial concept of analysis always makes it necessary to define which kind of (larger) network of (inter)actions the "region" is part of.

2. By explicitly conceptualizing the "region", the use of the "region" as fallback term almost ruled out, while the term can still be flexibly used.

3. Similarly, operating with essentialized container-spaces, or spatial units taken from (historical) discourse is likely to be avoided. This also makes it possible to emphasis a person's or community's affiliation to multiple "regions" and thus to include these multiple affiliations and "regional" overlaps in the analysis.

4. The "region" as spatial concept of analysis also avoids Eurocentric spatial categories and provides a spatial framework that is globally applicable. This makes it even more attractive to global history. Moreover, the notion of "institutionalizing regions" as a fusion of both the "region" as spatial concept of analysis and the examination of "regional" discourse, always includes a critical perspective on discourse and power relations.

Concluding Suggestions

The preceding thoughts on how the "region" might be conceptualized for historical research have shown that a methodologically and theoretically informed concept of the "region" can be rather abstract and complex. Its implementation in actual research will undoubtedly be challenging. For example, a lack of sources may mean that large parts of (inter)actions cannot be captured, making it difficult to identify "region"-forming clusters. For this reason, I would like to end this essay with a few brief observations drawn from the preceding sections that could be first steps on the path to a more analytically valuable use of the "region" in (global) historical research.

First of all, inconsiderate and vague use of the term "region" should be avoided, as this opens the door to ambiguous and implicitly essentialist understandings of space. Instead, it should always be explicitly stated which concept of the "region" is being referred to, and in what functional and relational-spatial relations the referred "region" stands. This considerate dealing with the "region" is especially important since our ideas of specific regions are always shaped by past and present spatial discourse. Consequently, more research on the discursive formation of "regions", how these discursive formations shape our and past understandings of space, i.e. mental maps, and the power relations involved in the emergence of "regions" would be of great use.

On a more general level, an awareness of the complexity of the structures of relational space should always stand at the beginning of any spatially bounded investigation, so that in the best case, based on a theoretically grounded concept, an analytically meaningful space of investigation can be found for one's own research interest, thus eliminating the risk of falling back on historically conditioned or essentialist spatial constructs.[67] In research praxis, this could mean that the identification of any given "region" is preceded by an initial study of the sources, thus offering an additional safeguard against working from the outset with seemingly given spatial entities. The organization of

history as an academic discipline will continue to be based on historically contingent spatial units. This does not mean, however, that historians must simply accept these constructed spaces. They can use them as starting points for finding their own "regions" of analytical interest. This may require teamwork and make necessary the pooling of expertise, such as language skills. Overcoming the discipline's widespread skepticism of teamwork can thus be a first step toward new concepts of space.[68] This teamwork must also bridge over disciplinary divides. As the previous thoughts have shown, re-thinking the region for the purpose of (global) history works best if insights on the nature of space and possible conceptualization of the "region" from other disciplines are not only taken into account, but put in active dialogue with the research interests of (global) history. In this way, the "region" can become a useful instrument for productively deal with space in historical research.

Notes

[1] Sebastian Conrad, *Globalgeschichte: Eine Einführung* (München: C.H. Beck, 2013), 91. Here translated by Leon Julius Biela.

[2] Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*, 91-92.

[3] On "transregional" approaches, see Matthias Middell, "Transregional Studies. A New Approach to Global Processes," in T*he Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell (Abingdon: Routledge 2019), 1-16; Matthias Middell, "Are Transregional Studies the Future of Area Studies?," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 289-308.

[4] On the "region" in human geography, see Krisztina Varró and Arnoud Lagendijk, "Conceptualizing the Region – In What Sense Relational?," *Regional Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 18-28; John Agnew, "Evolution of the regional concept," in *Handbook on the Geographies of Regions and Territories, eds. Anssi Paasi, John Harrison and Martin Jones* (Chaltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018), 23-33.

[5] Antoine Sylvain Bailly, "The Region. A Basic Concept for Understanding Local Areas and Global Systems," *Cybergeo* 42 (1998): 2.

[6] Middell, "Are Transregional Studies," 301; Antje Schlottmann, "Rekonstruktion alltäglicher Raumkonstruktionen. Eine Schnittstelle von Sozialgeographie und Geschichtswissenschaft?," in *Ortsgespräche. Raum und Kommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Alexander Geppert, Uffa Jensen and Jörn Weinhold (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 130; Farish Noor, *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 16.

[7] Martina Steber, "Region," European History Online, published February 16, 2022, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/steberm-2012-en.

[8] Marcus Gräser, "Die Bedeutung der 'Region' in der Globalgeschichte," *Geschichte und Region/ Storia e regione* 30, no. 1 (2021): 239.

[9] "Aims and Scope," Regional Studies, accessed February 16, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cres20.

[10] For a critical review of the German "regional" tradition of historiography, see Johannes Paulmann, "Regionen und Welten. Arenen und Akteure regionaler Weltbeziehungen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 296 (2013): 661-664.

[11] Andrea Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte. Methoden und Theorien* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011), 168-173.

[12] On "world regions", see also Birgit Schäbler, "Das Studium der Weltregionen (Area Studies) zwischen Fachdisziplinen und der Öffnung zum Globalen," in *Area Studies und die Welt*, ed. Birgit Schäbler (Wien: Mandelbaum, 2007), 12; Christian Büschges, "Global History and the History of World Regions. An Inventory of German-Language Research," *Comparativ* 29, no. 2 (2019): 7-19

[13] Stefan Troebst, "'Historical Meso-Region': A Concept in Cultural Studies and Historiography," European History Online, published March 6, 2023, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/troebsts-2010-en; Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte*, 173-175.

[14] Troebst, "Historical Meso-Region."

[15] Most notably is the work by Fernand Braudel, see his *La méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).

[16] Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction into history*, trans. G. Mountford and J.H. Paxton (London: Kegal Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1925), 171–172.

[17] Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*, 209, 211.

[18] Gräser, "Die Bedeutung," 238.

[19] Dominic Sachsenmaier, "Global history and critiques of western perspectives," *Comparative Education* 42, no. 3 (2006): 458.

[20] Sachsenmaier, "Global history," 462.

[21] Matthias van Rossum, "Towards a global perspective on early modern slave trade: prices of the enslaved in the Indian Ocean, Indonesian Archipelago and Atlantic World," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 43, 47, 52.

[22] Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt, "Introduction," in *The Multidimensionality of Regions in World Politics*, eds. Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 5-6.

[23] Craig Lockard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History* (Boston: Cengage, 2021), 61, 62, 446, 818.

[24] Lockard, *Societies*, 405.

[25] Mariola Espinoza, "Globalizing the History of Disease, Medicine, and Public Health in Latin America," *Isis* 104, no. 4 (2013): 798-806.

[26] Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1358.

[27] Anssi Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces to Relational Social Constructs. Conceptualisation of the Region in Geography," in *The Multidimensionality of Regions in World Politics*, eds. Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 19.

[28] Susanne Rau, *History, Space, and Place*, trans. Michael Taylor (London: Routledge, 2019), 3.

[29] Otto Dann, "Die Region als Gegenstand der Geschichtswissenschaft," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 23 (1983): 655-656.

[30] Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, "Introduction. Knowledge Production, Area Studies and

the Mobility Turn," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 3-26.

[31] See James Renton, "Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient: Britain and the Invention of the Middle East, 1917–1918," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 645–667; Noor, *The Discursive Construction*, 13-16. See also Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[32] Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, "Mental Maps," European History Online, published August 7, 2013, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/schenkf-2013-en; Noor, *The Discursive Construction*, 206; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 15-16.

[33] Maxine Berg, "Global history: approaches and new directions," in *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

[34] Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History. Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50.

[35] John Straussberger, "Entangled political histories of twentieth-century West Africa: The case of Guinean exile networks," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 3 (2022): 477-495.

[36] For example, on the Qing Empire's understanding of provinces, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010), 150-154.

[37] Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 25.

[38] Anssi Paasi, "The Region, Identity, and Power," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 14 (2011): 9-16.

[39] Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 130-151. See also Eric Vanhaute, "Global and Regional Comparisons. The Great Divergence Debate and Europe," in *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell (Abingdon: Routledge 2019), 192-193; Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 19-21; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 20.

[40] Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[41] See Christoph Antweiler, "Area Studies @ Southeast Asia. Alternative Areas versus Alternatives to Areas," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 71; Gräser, "Die Bedeutung," 239.

[42] Or, in the words of Eric Vanhaute, "Within given region, people share clusters of traits or connections that are different from those that they have with people beyond that region." See Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 198.

[43] Anssi Paasi, "The Institutionalization of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity," *Fennia* 164, no. 1 (1986): 108.

[44] Bruno Latour, *Science in Action. How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[45] Antweiler, "Area Studies," 76.

[46] Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 23-24.

[47] Peter Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept of 'Region': Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction," *Journal of European Integration* 24, no. 3 (2002): 184-186.

[48] Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 23.

[49] Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 121; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 19.

[50] Antweiler, "Area Studies," 67; Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 197-198; Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 116.

[51] Martina Löw, "Vor Ort – im Raum. Ein Kommentar," *Zeitsprünge* 9, no. 3-4 (2005): 445-449.

[52] Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept," 181.

[53] Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte*, 168-169; Löw, *Raumsoziologie*, 131.

[54] Steber, "Region."

[55] Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept," 181; Paasi, "The Region," 12.

[56] Anssi Paasi, "The resurgence of the 'region' and 'regional identity': Theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on the regional dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 141.

[57] For a similar argument, see Schlottmann, "Rekonstruktionen," 132.

[58] Prasenjit Duara, "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 963-983.

[59] Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 121.

[60] Paasi, "The Region."

[61] Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung*, 156

[62] Van Rossum, "Towards."

[63] Berg, "Global History," 9.

[64] Terje Tvedt, "Why England and not China and India? Water systems and the history of the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 29-50.

[65] Fa-ti Fan, "The Global Turn in the History of Science," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 6 (2012): 256.

[66] For example, Richard Drayton and David Motadel, "Discussion: the futures of global history," *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 13.

[67] Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 201.

[68] For a similar point, see Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim, "Global history meets area studies. Ein Werkstattbericht," H-Soz-Kult, published November 14, 2017, accessed February 16, 2023, www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-4229.