

## **REVIEW: REGIONS IN CENTRAL EUROPE**

*Pille Petersoo*

Sven Tägil (ed.) *Regions in Central Europe. The Legacy of History.*  
London: Hurst & Company, 1999, 256pp, £16.50, ISBN 1-85065-552-9.

*Regions in Central Europe* is, as the sub-title correctly says, a book about the legacy of history. Seven individual contributions, by various Scandinavian-born or -trained authors, are divided into four parts. The first part, consisting of one chapter, deals with 'the theoretical implications of the term [region]'. The following three parts, of two chapters each, are more empirical and discuss 'different aspects of regional developments in Central Europe', ranging in time from the early Middle Ages to today.

The book is very condensed and therefore not an easy read. It is informative and gives an excellent detailed historical background to the development of regions in Central Europe - and relevant comparisons for those who need them. For instance, for someone interested in the role of religion as one aspect of the holy trinity in sustaining Scottishness and looking for similar developments elsewhere in Europe, the book is a valuable source. In his chapter 'Region, Cultural Identity and Politics in the late Habsburg Monarchy', Lindström discusses the role of religion in maintaining a distinct cultural identity in various parts of Central Europe. The book would be somewhat less useful for someone interested in theoretical discussions about regions and regionalism per se. Nevertheless, as most nationalism literature begins with the French Revolution of 1789, Tägil's collection, going back into much earlier period (Tägil himself discusses ethno-territorial evolution in the region in the early Middle Ages), does provide valuable insight into the *tempora incognita or/and terra incognita*.

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The term 'Central Europe' itself is not explicitly defined in the book. On the back cover the publisher states that 'although the term "Central Europe" is not clearly defined or homogeneously applied, it is generally recognised that the areas included in Germany and the former Habsburg Monarchy form its core area' and that the definition depends 'on the criteria chosen - geographical, political, economic or cultural and the period under consideration'. Limiting the scope of Central Europe to the former Habsburg Monarchy and Germany only is a rather restricted definition of Central Europe. Many British scholars would apply the term also to the Balkans and Poland (Garton Ash), and the fortnightly *Central Europe Review*<sup>1</sup> covers a much wider territory as well.

The term region is defined differently in different chapters. For anyone conducting research in the field of nations, nationalism and identities, this 'undefinability' of terms is a familiar issue. Thus the difficulty of defining important terms is not unique to this collection, but it is not complimenting the book. For instance Lindström, author of the longest contribution, is interchangeably writing about 'cultural identities', 'national identities', 'national constructions', 'cultural/national spaces', 'cultural/national communities', 'cultural community and space' etc, leading inevitably to confusion. None of the terms are explicitly defined and their meaning seems to be more or less the same. In several occasions it seemed to the reviewer that authors' definition(s) of the region could just as well be applied to nations (or to put it in another way - authors' definition(s) of region and territoriality were very national). For instance, Johansson in his 'The Impact of Imagination' defines territoriality as 'a special relationship between an individual or a group and a given area'. He continues discussing 'a particular affinity' that people 'feel' with their territory, a process that 'fulfils an important psychological function' of a 'sense of belonging'. Johansson aims to show how these 'territorial' feelings of identity and affinity relate to 'other identities of primarily ethnic or national character' (pp. 2-3). One needs to be well-read in nationalism literature to be able to explain how a nation differs from a region that is 'generally understood to be marked by some internal similarities, cohesion of affinity which differentiate it from the outside world' (p. 4). Only later in his chapter does Johansson introduce the concept of functionality as more significant than the concept of ethnicity in distinguishing between regions and nations - which can overlap. Scotland,

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<sup>1</sup> *Central European Review* – the fortnightly journal of Central and East European politics, society and culture (<http://www.ce-review.org/index.html>)

*Review: Regions in Central Europe*

Johansson argues, has 'a tradition of linking territoriality and ethnicity' (p. 27); and Gullberg concludes that 'regional identities can equally serve the national ideology itself, and in the long run also the national identity' (p. 153).

Although some Scandinavian authors have their works published in English - Göran Therborn would come to mind, and Sven Tägil himself has a few books in English - a number of recent books published in Scandinavia that are possibly relevant for those interested in national identities, ethnic discourse, power relations etc., are yet unavailable for the Anglophone reader. One of the main benefits of this volume is the extensive collection of valuable references that are usually not present in an average English-language social science book. Readers who are familiar with German or any of the Scandinavian languages will find a multitude of intriguing references in the book, many of them worth looking at.

For readers interested in Scottish affairs, the book is interesting, but not necessarily extremely relevant. First of all, it is, first and foremost, an historical inquiry into regionalism in Central Europe, and not a theoretical treatise on regionalism as such. And secondly, there are very few references to Scotland. Whereas some readers may, if pushed, agree that Gaelic Scots have 'ceased to be more than exotic local colour', Scots and researchers of Scotland would probably be pushed to admit that in Britain 'today's regionalism involves the artificial resuscitation of older administrative designations' (Gerner, p. 188). Although Scandinavia, and especially its welfare-state model, is often deployed in Scottish identity construction as a positive reference point, this seems not to be reciprocated. Did the increasing demand for constitutional change in Scotland go, by and large, unnoticed in Scandinavia? But, then again, *Regions in Central Europe: The Legacy of History* is a book about history, not regionalism.

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