SORIN ANTOHI

INTRODUCTION: SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHIES, COMPARATIVE HISTORIES

Over the last two decades or so, old and new visions and representations of the world(s) we live in have come (back) to haunt us. While Marxist prophecies about the “withering away” of the state, like most other prophecies, have not been fulfilled, the Cold War organization of the world (both cognitive and geopolitical) did eventually wither away. Globalization, as well as new local and regional dynamics, from (cross-border) “regionalization” to (intentional, non-territorial) “localization” to “globalization,” have radicalized the questioning, critique, and contestation of traditional Weltanschauungen and practices of spatialization. Recovering at long last after their associations with the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, fields such as geopolitics, cultural geography, human geography, cultural morphology, and the like have been reshaped and have generated a huge new corpus, as well as lively scholarly and public debates.

At the center of these debates, late modern or postmodern critiques of what we all call discourses or discursive practices since Foucault, have devastated most hegemonic representations of the world, and of its various fragments. Edward Said’s seminal Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (1978) is probably the single most influential such work; in the 1980s and 1990s, similar works have analyzed, extended to other parts of the world, or tried to recuperate and politicize the notion of Orientalism. Combining Foucault’s and Said’s inspirations with painstaking research in the archives and libraries of other parts of the world, scholars such as Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova have produced an impressive and influential series of works on Eastern Europe, Venice and Dalmatia, and the Balkans, respectively.

All in all, the discussion on globalization in the early third millennium seems ready to tackle such issues in a transdisciplinary, intercultural way: geographers have a renewed interest in the traditions of cultural/mental/philosophical geography (with new readings of the classics, from Ritter to Vidal de la Blache and beyond); the comeback of geopolitics in the field of international relations (with fresh interpretations of all controversial founding fathers such as List or Mackinder); the “revelation” of culture in American political science (Huntington), that relaunched the conservative idea of a “clash of civilizations” (embraced by many after September 11, 2001); the insistence on space, spatiality, (dis)location, locality, and territority in the study of individual and collective identities; the challenges facing the paradigms
and even the very existence of nation states (old and emergent); the recent discussions on mental mapping, facilitated by a social and cultural turn in the cognitive and neuro-sciences, after decades of awe in front of the "hard-wired," non-social mind/brain; the renewed emphasis on space in most humanities and social sciences, from literary theory to cultural theory to subaltern and postcolonial studies; the "discovery" of the symbolic sphere by major economists; the recent symbolic turn in nationalism studies, and the associated rediscovery of sacred/mythical/eschatological geographies; and so on.

Thus, symbolic geography and its related fields have become a pivotal intellectual and academic approach to the world(s) we live in, both real and "invented" or "imagined". Somewhat paradoxically, as these fields were not necessarily sites of theoretical and methodological innovation, Central European, East European, and Southeast European Studies have witnessed a massive production of books and articles on topics ranging from the theory of symbolic geography to the redefinition of the very notion of region.

A similar "revolution" happened in the field of comparative history. While still way behind related fields such as comparative literature (perhaps the most sophisticated of them all, and still not used by its epistemological neighbors as much as it could), comparative history is on the rise, both in Europe and elsewhere, and seems to be on its way towards finally breaking the almost metaphysical framework of the nation and of the nation state. From what I call long-distance entangled histories (connecting the core of colonial empires to their liminal spaces) to short-distance palimpsestic entanglements (e.g., the histories of groups sharing the same territory, at the same time or successively), from histories of transfers and histoire croisees to various forms of asymmetric comparison, and ultimately to more and more intricate and complex comparisons of variously defined units, the field is growing fast. Once again, Central European, East European, and Southeast European Studies are among the most thoroughly compared regions. And they should be. They are traditional sites of ethnic, linguistic, religious, social, economic (etc.) diversity and interaction, of tension and conflict, of mutual recognition and tolerance, and are thus an ideal terrain for the comparative scholar. However, the internal diversity of every (sub)region is already very difficult to handle, let alone the diversity of larger regions and areas; the required scholarly skills and instruments of the comparative historian are hard to acquire, and serious comparative scholarship is rare. Nonetheless, fueled by the endemic, constitutive comparison to the West, these regions have been framed in comparative terms for many centuries, and have contributed very precious notions, ranging from local versions of the Spenglerian theory of pseudomorphism to radical positions for or against models, imitation, emulation, protectionism, authenticity, ethnic ontology. Adding more comparative units, such as the North and South of Europe, the Mediterranean, Latin America, and others, while rethinking the theoretical, methodological, and empirical work in comparative history, new networks of innovative com-