

Editorial: "Germany from a French perspective"

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Editorial: “Germany from a French Perspective”

The journal *Europa Regional* is devoted to empirical research and theoretical considerations on socio-spatial processes in Europe, on regional development and its structuration, on how European societies organize themselves in space. The attribute “regional” is mainly interpreted in a classical geographic manner: By far the most contributions with reference to empirical research develop their arguments as representative cases on a sub-national or local scale. With many of such observations the question arises if there is a more than individual spatial perspective, which would allow to draw conclusions on more general changes, may they occur on the national or supra national scale. While among German Geography and Spatial Sciences studies on the national scale have become rather rare, there is an upswing of reflexive regional studies among the human and cultural sciences, following the spatial turn. They emphasize the critical constitution of their research areas beyond the typical action spaces of states to bring their findings up for comparison and discussion.

Maybe more frequently than in other countries, French colleagues regularly edit special issues on a particular country/world region by systematically and almost exclusively inviting scholars from this region to contribute (e.g. special issues on Germany in *Hommes et Terres du Nord* 4/2002 or on landscape and nature preservation in Germany in *Revue Géographique de l'Est* 1/2007; see the bibliography on recent publications from French scholars in the IfL Central Geographical Library in this issue). The views of these authors complement the research done by their French colleagues, including possible contradictions or at least varying interpretations. This can lead to a fruitful dialog which the editors of this special issue of *Europa Regional* also like to stimulate - but obviously in a reverse manner.

At this point, it should also be noted that over the last two to three decades, it seems that far more geography scholars from France did empirical research on (parts of) Germany than German geographers worked on France. The few German senior academics working on France share the impression. Apart from the fact that the post 1989 Germany aroused a particular interest amongst French geographers in the 1990s, our personal impression is that a considerable number of PhD candidates, but also senior colleagues, show a continuous interest in spatial development processes in Germany. Assuming that the language barrier should be a more or less equal issue in both communities, it appears difficult to find an explanation for this disbalance. Preliminary attempts include the following reasons:

- PhD candidates in France are less often involved in large research projects and possibly dispose of less institutional support (including travel funding). This lack of financial resources may explain a preference for less remote case study destinations (with the exception of French overseas territories as well as former colonies).

- At the same time, individual bursaries for young scholars are available and partly linked to organisations committed to French-German-cooperation (e.g. the *Centre Marc Bloch* in Berlin). French geographers tend to make more use of these opportunities than their German colleagues who could access similar grants and infrastructures (e.g. at the *Maison Heinrich Heine* in Paris). A possible reason for this may lie in the fact that, habitually, French academic Geography is more closely linked with the Social Sciences and Humanities due to its institutional affiliation – that is being part of the Faculty of Arts (*Faculté des Lettres*) in most universities. Also, the traditional association with History in both teaching and research may explain a more direct access to social and cultural sciences and their networks/infrastructures.
- Another reason can be found in the different scientific cultures and institutional traditions in French universities: Thematically speaking, academic career paths in France often foresee a high degree of regional specialisations. While concepts, methods and topics may change over time, many scholars focus on particular regions for most of their career. That is, the probability that a Master student who wrote a dissertation on say Germany continues working on this country is relatively high. Being recognized as a country expert, having acquired an intimate knowledge of the regional context and being fluent in the respective language, is a core criterion for academic careers in French geography. Having “invested” once into a knowledge of region and language, the temptation to change research interests will concern rather topics than the geographical focus. And, consequently, senior colleagues who have been working on a specific region all over their career tend to have a preference for supervising candidates sharing their geographical interest.
- More generally speaking, Area Studies in a classical approach seem to have a better standing amongst French geographers, whilst the approach rather slowly re-emerged as Comparative Area Studies in German Social Sciences and Humanities, but less strong in Geography over the last years. In many neighbouring disciplines engaging with Area Studies, German scholarship seems to be clearly more intrigued by empirical research on/in France than it is the case in Geography. As editors, we are delighted to present the following contributions from our fellow geographers in France. They show that French geographers are further compelled by very different aspects of current dynamics in Germany’s geography, and that they approach them from partly distinct angles.

Since the implementation of the “Hartz laws”, an increasing social polarization has become one of the key challenges for Germany’s societal development. H  l  ne Roth demonstrates that these reforms have led to a considerably growing number of people living on social minimum income. Paradoxically, the economic upswing and the strong reduction of unemployment

since 2006 have not been mirrored by a lower poverty risk, the latter even having increased slightly. The country's remarkable economic success and the extremely low jobless rates did not suffice to actually reduce poverty. On the contrary, poverty has become a lock-in for certain districts and regions as an outcome of strong spatial inequalities.

Another main challenge particularly concerning Germany is to cope with population decline, demographic change and its manifold spatial impacts which are already perceptible. This primarily concerns the Eastern part of Germany which has seen a strong population decrease since Reunification. Nevertheless, as Christophe Quéva shows, some urban regions in the East as well as parts of the borderlands along the former internal German border benefit from remigration since about 15 years. This is caused by "Rückwanderer", that is people who left East Germany in the 1990s towards the Western part, who are numerously moving back. But these migrant flows rather concern a limited number of destinations and cannot compensate for the overall population losses.

The far reaching impact of economic, demographic social change in post-Reunification East Germany can also be found in the development of old lignite mining areas. Studying the example of Lower Lusatia, Michel Deshaies shows how these landscapes deeply marked by resource exploitation in GDR times have undergone a metamorphosis towards either landscape and nature conservation or new tourism activities. With the dynamically growing renewable energy production on derelict mining land, they have also become an emblematic symbol of Germany's energy transition.

Like other European countries, Germany is confronted with an increasing spatial disparity between the bigger cities and the more and more marginalized regions. One remediation strategy

for this evolution is the development of city networks in regions not in reach of a metropolitan urban area. This has been tried by the cities along the Baltic coast, as the example of Rostock studied by Nicolas Escach illustrates. In order to mitigate population decline, the city has launched an active marketing campaign emphasizing its central position in the Baltic region and positioning itself as an intermediary between the Northern European cities and those in the formerly socialist part of Europe.

In contrast to the risk of marginalization affecting close to half of the German territory, the big metropolises such as Berlin and Hamburg are economically significant at the European scale and profit from being well connected with the global economy. This is perfectly illustrated by the example of Hamburg as Samuel Depraz outlines in his article. Based on its port activities as well as a very strong fundament in both manufacturing and services (insurance firms, banks, and publishers), Hamburg's metropolitan dynamics strive towards developing the former docklands close to the city centre through major programs such as the Hafencity and the IBA Hamburg. Some of these urban renewal projects have incited gentrification processes that are strongly contested by social movements anchored in the working class traditions of this port city.

In the best sense and intentions of Comparative Area Studies we hope that such transnational viewing angles like those from our colleagues from France become more frequent and mutual to inspire scholarly debate as good scientific practice.

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