

## **The cultural dimension of the EU enlargement to the East: a geographical perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The interactions between Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union will continue to grow in importance as EU-enlargement proceeds apace. While academic debate on the political and economic dimensions of these interactions is already well underway, analysis of the impact exerted by culture has so far remained relatively general. But a systematic view of culture that takes into account the implications of globalisation can provide a conceptual foundation that enables geography to come to grips with this neglected field of cultural research.

**Key words:** culture, cultural geography, EU-enlargement, cultural globalisation

### **Introduction: the importance of culture in the EU-enlargement process**

Europe is currently undergoing historic changes. Following the decision taken by the European Council in Copenhagen, certain Central and Eastern European countries will join the European Union in May 2004, giving it a new dimension. More than 450 million people of differing geographical origins will then belong to a single market and to a new political union.

The implications of this process confront geographers with a wide range of tasks.

One of the most important research priorities for geographers lies in investigating the links between geography and economics. Geographical economists use mainly quantitative methods to try and assess the opportunities and risks associated with a growing domestic market. They attempt to determine the advantages offered by certain locations in different regions or to explore forms of cross-border co-operation. In this process, the quality of the mutual contacts between the prime movers in different states and regions come to acquire a central role in all areas. Up to now, however, the cultural backgrounds of the people involved has, with just a few exceptions, not been given the attention it deserves.

Thus, culture represents an important dimension in the economic field, one which can be very relevant for a company's personnel managers, in communications with the authorities or for cross-border planning in general.

At the same time, both national and regional cultural differences are extremely important for companies interested in marketing products in ways that take account of the specific characteristics of cultural regions.

For many years, the East-West conflict in Europe overlaid people's cultural diversity, but now, as the level of integration grows, this diversity is becoming increasingly evident. All in all, the variety of European cultures bears the potential for triggering both a large number of conflicts and a range of creative opportunities, none of which have so far been sufficiently discussed in geography. Thus, the following article will attempt to discuss the opportunities available for making culture an object of academic research in geography, especially with a view to the enlargement of the European Union eastwards.

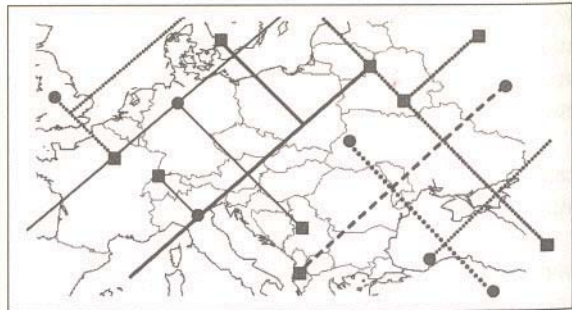
### **The difficulties involved in distinguishing regional cultures**

Taking a geographical approach to culture involves 1) making the spatial (regional) distribution of culture, and the regional form it takes, the object of academic research. Having separated regions into cultural entities one would then need to 2) identify the significance of such regional cultural features for a range of political, social and economic issues. Thus, in the field of economics one would, for example, want to determine what cultural characteristics were important for what business issues, what characteristics favoured co-operation in the economic process or to what extent the cultural potential boasted by the inhabitants of a particular area could be utilised to promote economic progress.

These questions alone raise considerable problems, but further difficulties emerge in the course of the "regionalisation" of culture that first needs to be undertaken. It is difficult to fully grasp the interplay of values, behaviour and feelings that are shared by a community and referred to as its "culture" and the diffusivity of its geographical demarcations makes assigning a well-defined territory to such a culture well-nigh impossible.

The sheer number of cross-border contacts destroys the unity of cultural regions and seems to work against any attempt to distinguish cultural regions.

A systematic look at culture at a time of globalisation makes this clear. If one defines culture generally as "the standardisations (or habits) of a society" (Hansen 2000), then one needs to take account both of the mobility displayed by those who are the bearers of a community's culture and of the dynamism that certain standardisations can acquire quite independent of individuals. As communities with shared cultural characteristics do not necessarily have to live in neighbouring or contiguous areas, culture can logically only be understood as a supra-regional network (Fig. 1) (Barth 1989, Hannerz 1996, Wimmer 1996).



*Fig. 1* Culture as a network



In the theoretical discussion about regional separation scientists refused to ascribe abstract circumstances to real areas as an inadmissible reification (Werlen 1995, 1997).

Another problem which no cultural analysis can ignore is associated with these theoretical considerations: any statement made about the cultural make-up of an area must inevitably lead to inappropriate standardisations. It is difficult even to determine what proportion of characteristics displayed by a person are of an individual nature and how many are those shared by a community (standardisations). Each individual influences the cultural region in which he or she lives in a more or less individual way. Assigning a complex of uniformly disseminated characteristics to a whole region thus appears, in view of people's diversity, distinctly problematical. Such an approach would simply give impetus to the spreading of stereotypes and clichés.

Since culture may, at times, be related to economic issues, such a course could even lead to certain regions or countries suffering unmerited treatment.

Any comparison of Central European cultures would probably be oriented along national borders and describe cultural characteristics of the countries in grossly simplified terms. To tackle the economic issues mentioned above, it would then be necessary to choose between an accurate description of cultural elements and an accurate delineation of borders. For the more precise the information regarding culture, and the clearer the separation of cultural regions that is undertaken, the more pronounced would be the "inward" standardisation of the population. Both approaches – a more general description (cf. overview in Kaufhold 1996) on the one hand and a more precise survey of the relevant cultural elements on the other (Hall 1969, Hofstede 1980) – are already being pursued in many fields, for example in economics, economic psychology and ethnology. Geography has hardly contributed to this debate so far.

#### **The discovery of standardisations**

The difficulties of describing cultural regions (mentioned earlier in the text) and their doubtful utility makes it necessary to seek alternative approaches.

It is obvious that notwithstanding the trend for culture to become "disembedded" certain cultures still predominate in certain regions. No doubt some cultural characteristics are experiencing cross-border dissemination and thus triggering a tendency towards standardisation (Latouche 1989) or towards a fusion with other cultural entities (Hanerz 1987, Nederveen Pieterse 1998). But not all cultural entities are, by any means, affected to any considerable extent by these tendencies.

Thus, a multitude of languages and dialects are still used in Central European countries, despite the global spread of the English language. Languages, in particular, can easily be separated into (cultural) regions for the most part. Food specialities in many Central European regions are continuing to defy a culinary "McDonaldisation" (Ritzer 1993), and a number of traditional habits can be found only in certain regions. It is important for economic reasons to be aware of the fact that people's mentality differs greatly in cultural regions and that the way in which people think and act varies considerably not only between, but also within countries like the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Poland (Crane 2000, Jordan-Bychkov, Jordan 2002).

But how can one come to grips with these differences?

The definition of culture as "standardisations shared by a community" given earlier in the text offers a good starting point. If culture, as a totality of standardisations, is no longer tied to a specific territory, as globalisation progresses, but if certain cultural elements are still regionally concentrated, then it is possible to describe these regional aspects of culture. It is not the distribution of the often disembedded communities that is of interest in this connection; instead, it is the description of those standardisations that remain regionally concentrated.

Thus, even if one cannot claim to describe culture in its totality, this line of action makes it possible to tackle constructively those issues that are thrown up. On the one hand, focussing on "areas with concentrated standardisations" ensures that cultural aspects are illustrated at a general level, without overall negating processes of cultural change. By restricting oneself to specific cultural elements which dominate an area, one creates the chance to ascribe exact qualities to cultural regions. On the other hand, the selection of specific cultural characteristics reduces the danger of promoting stereotypes and clichés. It is precisely because no claims are made to be grasping a culture in its totality that statements made about a culture cease to be treated as absolute. The measures used can be differentiated, too. Areas with concentrated standardisations can assume local, regional or national dimensions. They can correspond with, or differ from, other standardisations. And they can also transcend borders fixed along traditional (often state) lines. Thus, depending on the choice of cultural elements, different regions must be identified, which will either break up, specify more precisely or roughly confirm the borders of traditional cultural regions (Fig. 2).

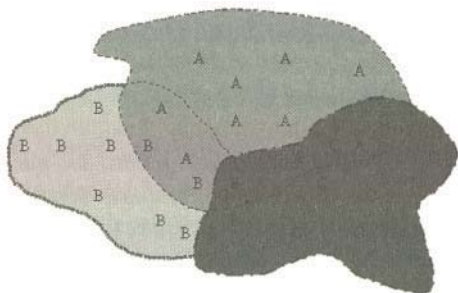


Fig. 2 Regions with "concentrated standardisations" (A, B, C)

Their depiction consists, strictly speaking, in the distribution of people sharing particular cultural characteristics and is not bound to the area itself.

Finally, such an approach to regionalising cultures offers another advantage: it permits us to examine just those cultural characteristics that are of relevance to specific (in our case, economic) issues.

#### **Geography and psychology between the Czech Republic and Germany**

The identification of cultural and social characteristics in a particular area is one of the fundamental objectives pursued by academics in anthropological geography. There is thus a correspondingly long tradition of geographers identifying regions with the aid



of cultural indicators (e.g. Schlüter 1906, Sauer 1925, Kolb 1962). These approaches do not, however, provide any foundation upon which culture could be operationalised in such a way as to offer concrete help in tackling economic issues.

Without any special attention having been paid to the spatial dimension, on the other hand, the significance of cultural determinants has been discussed increasingly often by economists over the last few years. The concept of culture, to which little heed was paid for a long time, has in the course of this revival of interest been redefined and is now included in many fields (especially in "Culture and Economic Growth", "Intercultural Management", "Culture and Advertising" etc.) (Fink, Meierwert 2001). Academics were able in their work to make use of the results gained in the course of psychological research, which has likewise for years been using different approaches to study the influence of culture on economics (Hall 1989, Hofstede 1997, Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 1998).

The various advantages and disadvantages of these approaches cannot be discussed here, any more than can the general problems associated with the identification of intangible culture. In general, however, it can be said that these concepts are also geared to the identification of individual cultural elements and that they can, as such, be used for our purposes.

Thus, Thomas (2003) describes in his conceptualisation of "cultural standards" how it is possible to create new categories and terms in order to describe cultural diversity. In this context, it is not only important to arrive at a cultural definition of large regions, but, equally, to identify those cultural characteristics which provide an explanation for the emergence of misunderstandings and conflicts in individual business and economic fields in the course of intercultural contacts. The issues mentioned earlier in the text regarding the EU Enlargement eastwards have been pursued further with the aid of this method of cultural comparisons. Schroll-Machl and Nový (2003) have carried out research on cultural differences between, among others, the Czech Republic and Germany – differences that may potentially have an economic impact and have described the principal characteristics of each of the two countries.

Thus far, however, cultural differences have been described only at the level of different countries' populations: a sophisticated depiction of cultural differences at different levels of reference has yet to be undertaken.

The depiction of such information down to the regional level could be of great significance in various areas of business and economics, for example in sales and marketing activities, in co-operative ventures or in the area of companies' in-house organisational problems.

#### **The tasks of a different cultural geography**

The breadth of the debate on culture bears witness to its current importance. The process by which the European Union has grown and developed can be taken as an exemplary in this context. From an economic perspective, it is evident that the number and depth of trans-European links will grow and that the number of joint ventures will increase, too. As this happens, the overall importance of intercultural competence will grow. The political and social dimensions of the European Union make the same

sensitivity towards cultural differences necessary, if the European Project is to succeed in creating a stable political entity and a functioning community.

An academic discourse on these issues has only recently begun to get off the ground in all the various disciplines concerned. The approach described in this article may be able to make a contribution to this discourse from the vantage point of cultural geography.

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