

POSITIONING OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY IN THE MODERN SYSTEM OF GEOGRAPHICAL SCIENCES

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UDK: 913:910.1

COBISS: 1.02

Abstract

Positioning of regional geography in the modern system of geographical sciences

The main objective of this study is to provide a critical insight into the position of regional geography in modern geosciences, i.e. to examine the epistemological, methodological, practical and educational function of this synthetically oriented geographical discipline on a theoretical level. For this purpose, we have reviewed a number of readings selected from various published scientific papers and textbooks, which provide some sort of review of the modern concept of regional geography and the notion of region. The 1980s can be taken as the initial period of revitalization and redefinition of regional geography, when in addition to the traditional approach based on chorology, there was also the so-called new regional geography. The dominant concepts found in both these schools were evaluated by using the method of dialectical analysis and synthesis, on the basis of which the guidelines were proposed for future positioning of the spatial determination of the region within the geographical sciences. The general conclusion is that regional geography should not be viewed exclusively through the prism of idiographic concept, but the necessity would also be to aspire to discover the general spatial correlation patterns and regularities through various regional studies.

Key words

Regional geography, region, modern geography, geographical education, geographical dichotomy.

Uredništvo je članek prejelo 9.12.2020

1. Introduction

With its synthetic character, regional geography was once thought to be the main cohesion factor or connective tissue in geography as a science or a system of sciences, as well as epistemological-methodological approach that prevents its disintegration into several independent disciplines. In the meantime, the role and importance of regional geography have been re-examined multidimensionally, which has caused the emergence of plurality of perceptions within regional geography itself, but also a certain degree of degradation, which varies in time and space. However, many geographers still give regional geography a central, or at least a role that is equal to the role of general or systemic geography in the modern development of spatial scientific thought. Along with its methods, regional geography has a very important function and task in the study of spatial reality in its integral and complex manifestation (Nurković Mirić 2005; Mirić et al. 2017). There are several definitions of regional geography, but most of them are inextricably bound with the concept of region. So, for example, the Oxford Dictionary of Geography defines it as a geographical study of regions and their features (Mayhew 2009).

Therefore, a precondition for an analysis of the terminological and conceptual definition of regional geography and its scientific scope is to define the term region as a mere spatial phenomenon. Etymologically, this term originates from the Latin word *regio* which means area, and in the Roman period it stood for an administrative territorial unit within the empire. Today, the term region most often refers to a unit-area of the Earth's surface that has natural or social characteristics that differentiate it from its surrounding areas (Mayhew 2009). However, in geography there is often a sharp confrontation between two opposing views of the region. According to the first view, the region is only a mental concept, i.e. construct or model that facilitates the understanding of geographical reality, while according to the second view it is an actual or existing spatial phenomenon that serves as a subject of study for regional geography (Nir, 1990). In some more practical terms, regions are usually classified into two groups: formal and functional. The former are based on homogeneity and the latter on connectivity. Regions can be distinguished on the basis of one or more geographical elements. Thus, some authors acknowledge: geomorphological, climatic, ecological, demographic, linguistic, mental, political, economic, resource, urban and other regions (Getis et al. 2000).

Seen from a non-geographical perspective, the region is first identified as a primarily geographical term, although the regions are dealt with in different ways by various experts from other fields. So, for example according to Sadiković (2014), an author in the field of political science, this term clearly means a certain geographical area or an area designated by common natural, historical, cultural and other characteristics. Therefore, if the region is recognized in wider scientific and public circles as a geographically defined phenomenon, there is no justifiable reason for geographers to renounce the regional approach to scientific knowledge, which was otherwise a dominant trend in the third quarter of the past century. Despite the attempts to express considerable criticism, both substantiated and unsubstantiated, regional geography has kept its great educational significance in most countries across the world, as its synthetic approach is indispensable in explaining spatial phenomena and processes on Earth.

One could claim that the dichotomies that exist within geography create numerous methodological problems for the modern development of this science as a whole, and

constantly call into question the place that regional geography occupies in the system of sciences. In addition to the often pronounced dichotomies between physical and human, but also between general and regional geography, there is also a cognitive dichotomy associated with induction and deduction, then a conceptual one which is reflected in the idiographic and nomothetic approach, a methodological one between quantitative and qualitative research, a subject-matter dichotomy between place and space, etc. Some of them, such as e.g. the mutual opposition of idiographic and nomothetic approach, have some particularly adverse effects on regional geography. However, as Nir (1990) points out, all these dichotomies are in fact quintessentially apparent, and there is no need for their rigid interpretation, but they should instead be understood only as different ends of the same system. The fact that geography can be studied from a general and regional aspect, i.e. that it is possible to focus on general laws and patterns, but also individual examples, does not necessarily mean that one approach rules out another. In fact, their complementarity is something that imposes itself as an effective systemic solution for studying numerous problems of our time. The same applies to the other types of mentioned dichotomies.

2. Regional geography at the end of the 20th century

After the marginalization of regional geography that took place during the outbreak of the quantitative revolution in geography in the middle of the past century, the interest in regional studies was renewed during the 1980s. This was an expected consequence of the fact that the quantitative approach could not provide answers to some very topical questions at the time, primarily of a political, economic and environmental nature. The paradox of great popularity of regional publications in the general public, despite the marginalization within academic circles, also contributed to the revitalization of this geographical approach. Revitalization of regional geography was not a uniform process, but it was approached from two different angles – traditional and new. According to Pudup (1988), the aspiration of traditional regional geography is to return this discipline to the basics, i.e. to a chorological description. By contrast, the newly reconstructed regional geography places regional research as *avant-garde* in terms of its contribution to the social sciences. In any case, it has become evident that regional geography has not disappeared in spite of some expectations and forecasts.

Yet another reason for re-actualizing the regional concept lies in the fact that many geographers were unable to fully accept the principles imposed by the quantitative revolution, since reality proved to be too complex to be brought under mere generic models. Geographers have thus rediscovered the 'study of the specific' (Gilbert 1988). Also, approaches that aspired to replace regional geography did not offer a new comprehensive paradigm. Re-emphasizing cause-and-effect relations within the structure of social sciences, and a more pronounced focus on social differences, are trends that were beneficial for regional geographers, but at the same time they also opened the way for pluralization within this discipline, as well as in geography in general. This means that the exclusivity maintained by traditional regional geography until the middle of the 20th century could not be achieved again. The attempts of some traditionalists who went in that direction were sharply criticized even among the regional geographers themselves, especially the main leaders and advocates of the school called 'new regional geography'.

According to the understanding of some modern regional geographers, the region has a primarily subjective character, and as such is suitable for individual and singular

approaches to its study. The standard definition of a region has become questionable, as have the universal principles for its recognition, delimitation, and description. Purposeful regional geography should be based on the dominant themes of each individual region. In such a loosely conceived concept of regional geography, only three items can be taken as common to all regional research: respect for the time dimension, the correlation between the degree of description and the regional level being researched, and the recognition of physical factors as an important element of geographical space (Hart 1982). However, this attitude implied that geography could not be viewed exclusively through the prism of science, which is why it encountered a number of counter-arguments from those who tried to place this discipline on a solid scientific foundation. Emphasis on the time dimension, i.e. regional changes that occur over time, particularly taking into account the genesis of the region, is a characteristic of many scientific studies that have dealt with the modern concept of regional geography.

Despite the revitalization of regional geography, problems of an epistemological nature within this discipline have not yet been fully solved. So, for example, the issue of the region as a subject of study is often problematized. One of the most popular dilemmas within modern regional geography arose from that question: Does the region objectively exist in reality or is it a mere mental construct, i.e. the fruit of the thinking process? Yet another problem encountered by modern regional geography is the question of connectivity and interrelationships between different geographical levels. The fact that contemporary geographical reality is often a result of global rather than local or regional processes is not adequately addressed within the traditional concept in regional geography. Therefore, modern regional geographers suggest that meaningful cause-and-effect regional studies need to determine how these global and national processes are reflected in the local level (Sayer 1989). The issue of descriptiveness has also remained one of the most important problems of this discipline, although the authors in the field of regional geography constantly emphasize that description is only the starting method, and that it is necessary to search for general patterns and laws applicable to the distribution of spatial phenomena, underlying the regional structure.

Revival and revisiting of some arguments by regional geography traditionalists has encouraged the return of chorology to geographical academic level. However, resistance to such an often static approach has remained quite strong, especially in the context of modern transformations in scientific research, where the boundaries between the study of space, time and society are becoming less and less constant. So, for example, Wishart (2004) compares a region (as an abstracted segment of space) with a period (as an abstracted segment of time). On the other hand, Passi (1991) suggests that the distinction between region and place, based on the principle of historicism and culture, which is both collective and individual, truly promotes an understanding of the historical evolution of regions and regional transformations, along with the role of human experience in that process. On this epistemological plain, the so-called new regional geography was created, which differs from the traditional regional concept primarily in its social orientation, but also in its attempt to rise to a higher level of scientific foundation.

The development of the new regional geography was strongly influenced by a number of factors, which can be divided into internal and external. Internal factors arise from geography as a science itself. Through the quantitative revolution geography became burdened with statistical analyses that often did not provide adequate explanations.

Critics of such an approach have pointed to a narrow field of interest, a neglect of the physical environment and a lack of synthetic analysis. It was the need for synthesis that proved to be the most important internal factor for the revived interest in regional geography. External factors have also had their stimulating effect. Some of the more important are the restructuring of capitalism as a system, economic development, the expansion of information systems and globalization in particular. Local, regional and national changes take place within these processes, which can have a political, cultural or economic character. In this context, there are two emerging mutually opposing interest groups – socio-economic and socio-cultural. The former diminish state sovereignty and identity, while the latter tend to strengthen them. This type of changes and processes is a real challenge for geographers, and it imposes regional research as an imperative. The impact of other sturdy fields and their theories should not be disregarded, which holds true for sociology in particular (Vresk 1997).

The new regional geography, therefore, focuses on social structures and processes, often neglecting the natural basis. This approach was adopted for several reasons, most notably because of the realization that human society is less and less dependent on the natural basis, i.e. that the advantages or disadvantages it provides can be countermanded through social circumstances. Also, the connection and interaction between individuals and groups are increasingly pronounced in the modern age, as a result of which this dynamic process has attracted more attention from followers of the new regional geography compared to much more static processes that exist within the natural environment. Development processes are increasingly homogenizing the landscape and socially differentiating the population. This trend has changed the basic paradigm of regional geography with a shift from the man-nature to man-society-space relationship. Instead of the previously dominant descriptive method, pluralism in the research approach came to the fore in the new regional geography, together with structuralism and humanism as the leading ideas (Vresk 1997). According to Wood (1999), the key features of the new approach to regional geography compared with the traditional school are associated with the theoretical dimension and can amount to three items: the explicit reference to theory, the reciprocal relationship between theory and empirical evidence and the resultant development of theory.

Vresk (1997) highlights three groups of new characteristic approaches to regionalization and regional geography. The first is the political-economic approach, within which the region is treated as a local response to global capitalist processes. It is understood as a space where social processes related to the economic structure are organized, i.e. with the methods and volumes of production. To that effect, many authors highlight the fundamental role of circulation of capital in regional differentiation. Within this concept, the regional centre-periphery model is often put to use, while neo-Marxist theories come to the fore in a large number of scientific studies. The second group presents a range of humanistic-phenomenological approaches. In this context, the region is seen as an identification focus, while culture is given a central importance in regional differentiation. These approaches arise from humanistic geography, and appear mostly as a counterbalance to positivism. They are based on hermeneutic epistemology, on the basis of which numerous regional studies have been made. The third group includes structuralist-theoretical approaches, which conceive the region as a medium for social interactions, assuming that it has a fundamental role in their encouragement. Several theoretical works have been written in this field by authors such as Giddens (1984), Gilbert (1988) or Passi (1986; 1991), who have had a considerable impact in much wider scientific realm than the one of (regional) geography.

Further development of the new regional geography has led to the emergence of some completely new trends. Wood (1999) defines five of these trends, which he argues provide a solid foundation for future scientific research in this area. The first trend has a political-economic basis, and refers to the study of the process of spatial restructuring, i.e. regionalization processes. This, inter alia, implies the erosion of significance of the national geographical level, with the strengthening of the supranational and regional. The second trend treats regionalization as a 'way of living', since more and more individuals and groups have organized their lives on the regional level, as a result of increased mobility. For the socio-cultural aspect as one of the dominant trends in the new regional geography, it has already been pointed out that it has a fundamental importance in the modern understanding of the region and the development of regional geography. The following factors are closely associated with this trend - the production and reproduction of regional identities. However, it is of vital importance for this systematization to include also the fifth trend, which is associated with environmental debates, which are of growing importance on the regional level, particularly in terms of exploitation and circulation of economic resources. In this way, it was pointed out that the new regional geography cannot and must not completely push the natural environment out of its epistemology.

In the meantime, there has been even greater pluralization in regional geography. Among other things, many authors saw a number of shortcomings in the neglect of the natural basis, so some of them began to take a midway between traditional and new regional geography. In this context, Nir (1989) advocated the concept of the region as a holon. Holon is a term that originates from ancient Greek philosophy, and in the modern regional sense it represents the idea of a single whole in which each of its constituent parts has a clear place defined in line with its structure. Also, each of these parts can in a sense be considered a separate whole. Holon therefore has an introverted character, because it is considered a coherent and complete entirety, but also at the same time it has an extroverted character, since it is viewed as part of a larger entirety. In this way, it is possible to designate a region – as a finite entity, but at the same time as part of something bigger. The same author emphasizes that the region should be viewed as a system. This approach is an attempt to overcome a number of dichotomies that exist in geography, but also to challenge the claims about regional geography as an exclusive 'study of the specific'. Namely, the region understood as a holon and a system can find its place in the study of general spatial laws.

3. Regional geography in the 21st century

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was more talk in geographical circles about the absence of geographers from public debates on topical issues. This discussion was originally initiated in the United States, where a very low level of geographical literacy and knowledge of geographical facts was observed in the general public. There are many indications that regional geography has the greatest potential to reaffirm geographical views in the general public and contribute to a greater presence of geography in public space. Some authors claim that the revived interest in regional geography and the man-nature relationship can bear fruit, both in the academic and in the popular spheres. It has been observed that traditional regional geographers, although they have been burdened with a bad reputation since the time of the quantitative revolution, can very easily attract and arouse interest of a large number of college students. In addition, their work and knowledge are appreciated by a number of government agencies and private companies. Back in the 1980s, some

geographers warned that in the event that regional geography was not reinstated to its rightful place within the system of geographical studies, one crucial segment of geography could become lost irretrievably. This would create a vacuum, which would be exploited by other disciplines (Murphy et al. 2005).

In this light, it is worth noting that most people come into first contact with geography through regional content, through education or popular media. In this way, geography gains a large number of admirers; so, there have been growing differences over time in the understanding of this scientific discipline between professional geographers and laymen. The well-informed segment of the public still believes that geographers have a specific approach to the study of foreign and distant places, as well as of spatial relations on the national level, and that due to this comprehensive and complex view they are capable of explaining 'how the world work' (Murphy et al. 2005). The explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the establishment of regional geography as an important field of general education, which is widely recognized as such, although it is sometimes misperceived as a synonym for the overall geography. This claim is also supported by the fact that the publication of popular geographical studies, textbooks and atlases, which essentially have a regional character, has not experienced a declining trend. Some authors also attach importance to regional geography in terms of breaking the established Eurocentric view of the world (Mayhew 2009).

The future of regional geography is quite uncertain. New global processes open new horizons and directions in which this discipline can be further developed. Their impact is highly variable in different local or regional environments, and this fact can be understood as an opportunity for regional geography to confirm its scientific validity and competence. However, many contemporary regional geographers warn again that this discipline should by no means deal exclusively with description, but must at least include an explanation of regional phenomena as well (Murphy and O'Laughlin, 2009). The reality that also must be taken into account is that regions are in a constant process of transformation, and that they are not an isolated segment of geographical space, neither in the horizontal nor in the vertical understanding of spatial relations. In the study of globalization, a special place is dedicated to the relationship between global and local; hence the concept of glocalization. However, it is apparent that in this type of interaction between the macro and micro levels we can no longer ignore the link between them, which is nothing but a region itself.

Regional geography has therefore survived a wide range of trends that have taken turns over the past century. They influenced its transformation and pluralization, but they did not eliminate it from scientific and educational field. One can even say that the regional approach has never been so topical like over the first two decades of the 21st century, which have been marked by turbulent developments on all geographical levels – global, regional and local. Kaplan (2012) also writes about this phenomenon in his book 'The Revenge of Geography', which triggered a great deal of public attention (especially in the United States). Some criticism has been voiced at the expense of this work, so, for example, many geographers objected to Kaplan's revival of the deterministic view of geographical reality. It is precisely the transcendence of determinism that is one of the factors to be reckoned with when discussing the place of the study of environmental elements in contemporary regional geography. The balance between falling into the trap of determinism, on the one hand, and neglecting an extremely important segment of the region, such as the natural basis, on the other

hand, represents one of the major challenges of this geographical discipline in the future, with the already common problems of scientific methodology.

A new era in the development of regional geography was marked by the introduction of the Geographic Information System (GIS) into mass use around the world. The proliferation of GIS and other types of geoinformation technologies in the field of geographical education and scientific research has presented new challenges to regional geography, but equally some opportunities too. Svatonova and Mrazkova (2010) claim that the use of GIS in the educational process can realize its full potential only if students have at least a basic knowledge of regional geography. GIS enables much faster, easier and more effective research and study of global and regional correlation patterns. The widespread application of GIS technology has also confirmed the relevance and importance of regional research, thus definitively rejecting the anathema placed on regional geography as a 'study of the specific'. A number of studies have shown that GIS applications are more suitable for perceiving and solving problems in a clearly defined (spatial) context, than for elucidating general laws or theories. According to Biebrach (2007), this fact can be understood in a positive as well as a negative way. Methods by which generalization is performed on the basis of specific cases are quite questionable, but with the development of geoinformation models and the improvement of geographical skills, it is possible to achieve significant progress in this field as well.

Montello (2003) predicts further growth in the importance of the region as a concept with the development of digital geoinformation systems and science. The quantitative approach applied in this framework may modify the role of the region, but not lead to its conceptual removal. This claim is based not only on the fact that geodata processing and analytical methods have some basis in the principles of pre-digital regionalization, but also on the usability that regionalization methodology still has. The concept of regionalization is still quite effective and practical in the context of human cognition, even within the digital representation of geographical reality and computer-generated analyses. Thus for example studying the world geography in this way allows students to acquire knowledge about the special characteristics of places and regions in a geographical way. In this way, they can expand their understanding of the problems facing human communities on the local, regional and national levels. The main goal of the regional approach in geographical education has been and still is to get a holistic view of a constantly evolving world, by exploring the diversity and interconnectedness of geographical phenomena and processes. Learning the world regional geography can also contribute to a better understanding of the geographical aspects of cultural diversity, and shape attitudes towards other people and places on the planet Earth (Jo et al. 2016).

4. Conclusion

Despite the controversial trends present during the second half of the 20th century, it is clear that the development of modern geographical science, and consequently geographical education, cannot be adequately interpreted without properly positioning the regional studies within the same context. Removal of the regional concept from the essence of geographical ways of dealing with phenomena and processes in geospatial context brings the natural-social dichotomy to the fore, which can only result in the continuation of divergent processes within geography. Regional geography is of great importance, especially from the educational point of view, since it maintains a clear connection between physical and human elements on Earth, while

at the same time it stands out strikingly as the main method of how to get acquainted with the spatial characteristics of different parts of the Earth's surface, thus contributing most to the popularization of a wider geographical scientific field. Accordingly, the regional approach forms the basis of school geography in many countries around the world, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, regional geography should not be viewed exclusively through the prism of an idiographic concept, i.e. a study of specificity, which is often the case. Because of that, traditional approach to teaching usually does not lead to the development of higher cognitive abilities in students, such as acquisition of conceptual knowledge and procedural skills. Through the study of regional topics, one should always strive to figure out the general spatial correlation patterns and regularities, in which GIS technology can play a significant role, since its layered structure corresponds to the regional concept of the study of geographical space.

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Summary

The quantitative revolution of the mid-20th century marked a period of decadence in regional geography, but during the 1980s there was a renewed interest in regional studies. One reason for re-actualizing the regional concept lies in the fact that many geographers could not fully accept the principles required by quantitative methodology, as spatial reality proved too complex to be subsumed under mere generic models. Re-emphasizing cause-and-effect relations within the structure of social sciences, changes in global circumstances, and more pronounced focus on diversity are trends that have affected regional geographers, but also paved the way for pluralization within this discipline, as well as geography in general. Emphasis on the time dimension, i.e. regional changes that occur over time, especially taking into account the genesis of the region, is a feature of many scientific papers that have dealt with the modern concept of regional geography. Despite the revitalization of regional geography, problems of an epistemological nature within this discipline have not been fully resolved. For example, the question of the region as a study object is often problematized. A popular dilemma arose from that question: does the region objectively exist in real space or is it a mental concept?

The issue of descriptive character also remained one of the most important problems of this discipline, although the authors in the field of regional geography constantly emphasize that description is only the starting method, and that it is necessary to search for general laws on the distribution of spatial phenomena. On the basis of this issue, a completely new direction in regional geography has emerged, which was additionally influenced by some external factors, such as the restructuring of socio-economic, cultural and political relations at the global level, with numerous changes of local, regional and national character, making regional research very relevant again. From this it is evident that the new regional geography, therefore, focuses on social structures and processes, often neglecting the natural basis. Other authors, however, saw a number of shortcomings in ignoring factor of nature, and began to look for a middle ground between traditional regional geography, with the region increasingly being studied as a system, which could overcome numerous dichotomies and methodological inconsistencies within geography.

There are many indications that regional geography has the greatest potential to affirm geographical views in the general public and contribute to a greater presence of geography in public space. It is almost paradoxical that regional geography has retained a much higher reputation in the public eyes in comparison with geographical academic circles. This claim is supported by the fact that the publication of popular geographical studies, books and atlases, which in their essence have a regional character, did not experience a declining trend even in the period of the quantitative revolution, and especially not in the time after it. Regional geography has therefore survived all the trends that have changed over the past century. They influenced its transformation and pluralization, but they did not eliminate it from scientific and educational realm. It can even be said that the regional approach has never been so up-to-date as in the first two decades of the 21st century, which were marked by turbulent events at all geographical levels – global, regional and local. The regionalization concept is still quite efficient and practical in the context of human cognition, which is why regional contents still have a very important place in geographical education.

