

## Imagining Spaces: Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Identity Production in the Conceptualization of Europe

Romanian poet and literary critic Mircea Cărtărescu wrote: 'There are many Europes in space and in time, in dreams and in memories, in reality and in the imagination. I pretend for only one of them, my Europe, easily recognisable because it has the shape of my brain.'<sup>1</sup> In his conception of the continent, Cărtărescu reflected a highly complex relationship that continues today to plague our sense of self and belonging, that being the role of geographies in the production of identity. Definitions of Europe are not, and have never been, objective. Terms used today to describe various European geographies – 'east', 'north', 'west', 'south', 'central' – conjure up a whole host of cultural and political associations that have morphed and altered in meaning and significance throughout history. Placing geography under the historical microscope, it becomes apparent that spaces and boundaries that may have appeared self-explanatory and impartial are in fact palimpsests of a host of cultural and social constructs used in part to aid Europeans' understanding of their place within local, regional and national communities as well as their view of the world as a whole.

The imprecise and unstable nature of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European geographical definitions stems from their significance in the formation of human perceptions of the world.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence the fluidity of 'Europe' and its regions in their definitive sense generates many different ideas. The existence of multiple

'Europes' can be attributed to the manipulation, misinterpretation and invention of European identities. This took place through popular discourse, political intervention, travel literature, region and territory building, and even memory, whether intentionally or subconsciously. The following examines the production of European geographies throughout the *fin de siècle* via internal and external initiatives as well as top-down and bottom-up progressions to argue that the crux of such invented or constructed geographies resides in identity and self-perception. Just as geographies were imagined differently amongst various identity groupings, those identities themselves were further facilitated through invented geographies in a sort of cyclical or symbiotic relationship. Particular attention will be given to the construction of 'Balkanism', Spanish nationalism, and the issue of the Galician borderlands of the Eastern Carpathians, among other examples.

Late-nineteenth century geographies were often created through a popular discourse of cultural stereotypes or regional misinterpretations. Such is the case in Maria Todorova's study of the Western construction of the Balkans as a specific rhetorical paradigm for the part of Europe under Ottoman rule.<sup>3</sup> By the nineteenth century, the terms 'Balkan peninsula' or 'Balkans' were more often than not used to convey political connotations rather than geographical ones, in alliance with the western view that the Balkans represented the more primitive elements of the continent.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, 'Spacing Europe: What is a Historical Region', *East Central Europe/L'Europe du Centre*, 32:1-2 (Leiden, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pagden, 'Europe: Conceptualizing a Continent', in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, 54:4 (Cambridge, 1995), p. 920.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Todorova, 'The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention', *Slavic Review*, 53:2 (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 453-464.

Historians such as Larry Wolff have argued this external construction of eastern Europe is a component of or in some way linked to the concept of Orientalism or 'demi-Orientalization' as Wolff puts it.<sup>5</sup> These sentiments distinguished between varying European identities and led to the creation of 'Otherness' which in turn resulted in the, often natural, substitution of cultural practice with geographical lexis. Perceived as being backwards or primitive, the Balkans was believed to be exempt from Europe, viewed rather as stuck in a development limbo of sorts, 'no longer Orientals nor yet Europeans.'<sup>6</sup> Equally, geographical colloquialisms sometimes broke down in the face of social change and altered contemporary perceptions of Europe. During the French Revolution, for instance, the republican state began to reprimand local idioms as subnational identification was lost to a hostile state, expanding markets, growing literacy, conscription, and improved communications.<sup>7</sup> Geographies could alter through discourse on a local, regional and national level. However, these changes can be attributed to a projected or lost identity.

The presumed superiority of the West also played a substantial role in the creation of European geographies. The Western European perspective is amplified by the fact that the majority of *fin de siècle* archives consist of narratives and journals of Westerners' travels across the continent. As Todorova's study suggests, much can be revealed about late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century geographies through travelogues. In early travel guides information is presented as a recommendation, influencing the ways in which people act in particular geographies and by extension the perception of geographies themselves. For example, in John Murray III's 1858 *Handbook for Travellers on the*

*Continent* he describes what 'ought' to be seen in an highly superficial and formulaic fashion.<sup>8</sup> This new form of consumption highlighted the ability of tourism to promote national identity and therefore national difference.<sup>9</sup> Travel journals, written by those such as Murray and Baedaker, gained popularity during the nineteenth century and began to change the perceived geography of Europe.<sup>10</sup> In an account of his visits to the Carpathians, British traveller Andrew F. Crosse wrote that the 'moorings are cut from the old familiar West [but with] all the flavour of the East', subsequently asserting his biased view of eastern-European backwardness onto the physical geography of the region.<sup>11</sup> Similar to the process of Balkanization, the bourgeois narrative apparent in these travelogues maintained an air of superiority that held a western-centric view of Europe in which 'other' periphery nations were only included under the geographic label by extension of western powers' generosity. Travel writing became a reaffirmation of the traveller's European selfhood, shown in the textual representation of 'other' distant nations.<sup>12</sup> Here the importance of personal identity within the European context in constructing geographies is again apparent, particularly with regards to nationalization.

Between regions however, identities became trickier to distinguish. For some, regions are ethnic and cultural units, for others, they are economic areas, physical locations, or simply political subdivisions.<sup>13</sup> The development of regionalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries therefore became not so much a physical distinction as it was a culturally constructed one. Regions are however most easily determined by outlining their borders, and so the distinctions between geography and identity were blurred as a

<sup>5</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: the map of civilization on the mind of the enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Todorova, 'The Balkans', p. 476.

<sup>7</sup> Stephane Gerson, 'Une France locale: The Local Past in Recent French Scholarship', *French Historical Studies*, 26:3 (North Carolina, 2003), p. 540.

<sup>8</sup> Rudy Koshar, 'What Ought to be Seen: Tourists' Guidebooks and National Identities in Germany and Modern Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33:3 (London, 1998), pp. 323-324.

<sup>9</sup> Koshar, 'What Ought to be Seen', p. 325.

<sup>10</sup> Rudy Koshar, *German Travel Cultures* (Oxford, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew F. Crosse, *Round About the Carpathians* (1875), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Hagen Schulz-Forberg, 'Introduction: European Travel and Travel Writing Cultural Practice and the Idea of Europe' in Hagen Schulz-Forberg, ed., *Unravelling Civilisation: European Travel and Travel Writing* (Brussels, 2005), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Celia Applegate, 'A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times', *American Historical Review*, 104:4 (Oxford, 1999), p. 1158.

disentanglement of entities took place.<sup>14</sup> Such can be said of the Carpathian Mountains which historically marked the border between countries or political entities rather than laying within them.<sup>15</sup> As a result of their physical location, the Carpathians switched hands many times. After the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the mountains became the southern border of the Habsburg Province. But by the Compromise of 1867 they instead marked the boundary between the two halves of the empire of Austria and Hungary.<sup>16</sup> By the late-nineteenth century, the Carpathians drew the interest of various lowland peoples.<sup>17</sup> The idea of discovering and claiming land in this way influenced European geographies through the creation of new borders and the changing perception of spaces. Those who had 'discovered' the Carpathians had seen its potential and constructed new regional identities. As opposed to the externally produced concept of the Balkans asserted by Todorova, the main actors shaping identities in the Carpathian region came from the area itself as they reacted to the political circumstances of their homeland, to create new geographies.<sup>18</sup>

Defining the nation-state also gave rise to the invention of geographies. The shrinking of frontiers gradually forced upon the European consciousness a greater sense of the boundaries that lay between them and the rest of the world, resulting in increased nationalism and territoriality.<sup>19</sup> Often this occurred in the process of 'right-sizing' by which political agents at the centre of regimes provided 'appropriate' external and internal territorial

borders.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, internal territory could change as a collective identity broke down. As defined by Charles Maier, the two components of territory are the frontier and the lands within, but a territory may only retain its title as such through a shared sense of loyalty and identity.<sup>21</sup> Spain began to lose its own geography of allegiance during the last third of the nineteenth century as several peripheral nationalisms emerged: Catalan, Basque and Galician.<sup>22</sup> Each of these regions denied the existence of a Spanish nation as identified with the territory of the state and altered the perceived geography of Spain by breaking the country into smaller domains as opposed to the mighty nation-state that was so desired by the political elite at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Historian Xosé-Manoel Núñez asserts that the invention of the region in Spain was a top-down process carried out exclusively by intellectual elites of the professional and middle classes and conservative-traditionalists.<sup>24</sup> But, national culture does not simply respond to and carry out such initiatives. The nation is ultimately built upon invented traditions which convey a false sense of belonging and affinity.<sup>25</sup> For these stimuli to create borders, this shared sense of identity must also collapse.

Yet, shared identity can also be forged through collective memory and in turn construct geographies. By the end of the Second World War, forms of identity associated with the concept of 'European' were being reshaped at Yalta along with the desire to forget the recent past and forge a *new* continent.<sup>26</sup> Equally, aims to modernise the post-war

<sup>14</sup> Todorova, 'Spacing Europe', p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Patrice Dabrowski, 'Discovering the Galician Borderlands: The Case of the Eastern Carpathians', *Slavic Review*, 64:2 (Cambridge, 2005), p. 380.

<sup>16</sup> Dabrowski, 'Discovering the Galician Borderlands', p. 380.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Storm, 'Nation-building in the Provinces: The Interplay between Local, Regional and National Identities in Central and Western Europe, 1870-1945', *European History Quarterly*, 42:4 (London, 2012), p. 660.

<sup>19</sup> Pagden, 'Europe', p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Brendan O'Leary, 'Introduction' in Thomas M. Callaghy, Ian Lustick and Brendan O'Leary, eds., *Right-sizing the State: the politics of moving borders* (Oxford, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Charles S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era', *American Historical Review*, 105:3 (Oxford, 2000), p. 816.

<sup>22</sup> Xosé-Manoel Núñez, 'The Region as Essence of the Fatherland: Regionalist Variants of Spanish Nationalism', *European History Quarterly*, 31:4 (London, 2001), p. 483.

<sup>23</sup> Núñez, 'The Region as Essence of the Fatherland', p. 483.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 495.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Jacobson, "'The Head and Heart of Spain': New Perspectives on Nationalism and Nationhood", *Social History*, 29:3 (London, 2004), p. 402.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Judt, 'The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe', *Daedalus*, 121:4 (US, 1992), p. 83.

Western economy provoked initiatives to reconstruct the European continent. But perhaps more significant was the changed perception of the relationship between national and continental identity that resulted from the horrors of extensive warfare.<sup>27</sup> Feeling a sense of belonging to one nation became an important element in altering identification with the continent as a whole. Prior to this period, one may have referred to themselves as European, rather than French or British for example, but the horrific nature of the war experience reaffirmed people's association with the nation-state and created multiple geographical spheres. One could be Valencian, Spanish, and European simultaneously and act differently in each of these geographies.<sup>28</sup> The geography of territory played an institutional role during this period as an 'us and them' mentality broke out between opposing powers through recollection of the war.<sup>29</sup> It was a universally-acknowledged claim that responsibility for the war lay with the Germans and the process of de-Nazification manufactured a profoundly different European geography in the loss of European identification with the German nation.<sup>30</sup> The idea of 'Europe' was reinvented as a substitute for the sorts of national identifications which had caused such wounds in the recent past.<sup>31</sup> Europe itself became a sort of *lieu de mémoire* bound in the collective memory of the war so much so that its geography started to alter in spite of the lack of physical change.<sup>32</sup>

Defining geographies has formed an important part of the European human consciousness for and has been a determining factor in Europeans' perceptions of the world around them.<sup>33</sup> By identifying and constructing specific European geographies on continental, international, national, and regional scales, turn-of-the-century Europeans created various identities, perceptions of themselves that became so solidified and definitive that their chosen geographical terms pertained more to cultural and political connotations than objective

physical spaces. The construction of identity can therefore be viewed as integral to the invention of geographies throughout this period. Aside from the obvious and strictly topographical distinctions between separate regions, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century concepts were synonymous with or at least substituted for a sense of identity within the European world. Throughout the period traditional and established identities were adopted, adapted, modified and rejected. The re-invention of geographies may have sometimes taken place at the behest of the elite but only the grassroots construction of local and personal identities could cement new borders and territories. The perception of the majority had to remain congruent with the imagination of space for new boundaries to be drawn. Changing social, territorial, and cultural definitions of group identity fuelled the construction and collapse of European geographies, whether through a common dialogue of belonging, a reaffirmed sense of selfhood upon visiting other European regions, claiming regions as their own, territorial opposition or collective experience.<sup>34</sup> As a result, geography became more of an imagined definition of what it meant to be European, or British, or Spanish, or Galician as opposed to location and relative space. This often stemmed from 'othering' at various scales as for one group to claim an identity by geographical definition, they had to identify who did not belong as much as who did. Perhaps drawing more parallels to our current worldview than we would care to admit, European geographies were key in the production of *fin de siècle* European identities and vice versa. And this continuing trend makes one think, perhaps there are not many 'Europes', but simply many perspectives.



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<sup>27</sup> Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Pagden, 'Europe', p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History', p. 834.

<sup>30</sup> Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (Berkeley, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Todorova, 'Spacing Europe', p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 48.

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