

Contesting Europe: representations of space in English School Geography

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Abstract:

The development of national education systems was premised on the assumption that they would offer particular representations of the 'national space', and school subjects such as geography and history offered pupils specific accounts of space and time. The project of European integration suggests the need for school curricula to offer alternative ways of imagining space. This essay examines the representation of European space in school geography textbooks. The analysis suggests that the texts contain different versions of the 'politics of space' and that there is a need for a critically-reflexive stance on the 'geographies of Europe' as taught in schools.

Orientations

This essay is a reflection on the ways that European space is imagined in geography teaching in England. It is concerned with the foundational question in the field of curriculum studies, which, according to Jenkins (1976), 'takes as problematic what should be planned, taught and learned in our schools'. My argument is any teacher charged with the task of teaching about Europe's geographies faces the challenge of understanding the conceptualizations of space that underpin representations of Europe. The essay suggest that there is currently a disjuncture between a cosmopolitan geographical imagination that posits the gradual erosion of the

‘artificial’ or socially constructed boundaries of political geography and an older ‘territorial’ geographical imagination that clings to the idea of the nation-state. This tension runs through current debates about the nature of Europe as a political entity, and, though not the most influential location for this struggle, the school curriculum nevertheless remains important, since, as Michael Billig (1995) argues, national identity is unremarkably produced in the routines of everyday life – through knowing about flags and anthems, making distinctions between home and foreign news, absorbing national histories and languages, and having a sense of political geography. I would add the school curriculum to this list, and in particular geography education, where children learn to understand and accept divisions of national and international space. As Ross states:

“The subject of geography necessarily defines social space and territory, given its concern with boundaries (national and physical), zones of activity and notions of regionality: these are inevitably part of the process of identifying people with places, in terms of the identity and nature of a nation.” (Ross 2000: 154)

This suggests that school geography provides students with specific ways of imagining and making sense of their place in the world. In what follows, I first discuss some school geography textbooks that, I suggest, encapsulate the geographical imagination that has traditionally informed geographical teaching about Europe in English schools. I then suggest how these representations are increasingly challenged by new ways of imagining European space. At that point, I review recent calls for a

critical approach to Europe, using this as the basis for some concluding comments on the practicalities of teaching about Europe.

Europe and the geographical imagination

This essay starts from the acceptance that spaces are imagined, socially constructed, and endlessly represented and consumed, and therefore we cannot assume that 'Europe' has a pre-existent identity. This is a common position in recent geographical discussions of Europe, where the term *geographical imagination* is increasingly used as a short-hand way of recognising that there is nothing natural about the frameworks through which we understand space. Our geographical imagination draws upon different forms of geographical knowledge.

First, there are the visible landscapes and different ideas of territorial shape that allow us to make sense of space. Second, there is the knowledge gained through mobility and movement. Third, there is the knowledge gained through various representations. Together, these shape our understanding of space. These spatial imaginaries are not fixed – they change over time, and though they may be individually held, are often shared by large numbers of people, not least because they are shaped by institutions such as the media and education.

In this section I discuss ways of imagining European space that have been influential in geography teaching in England in the post-war period. The point here is to show how the geographical imagination can be complex, yet offer highly recognisable ways

of seeing the world. I focus on a number of textbooks which, I suggest, are representative of the different ‘approaches’ that have dominated school geography in this period. I am not seeking to claim that all geography textbooks dealt with European space in this way, but simply to show how commonsense understandings of the world as taught in schools reflect particular ideas about space.

The first text I consider is *Modern Geography: Book III. Europe* (Preece and Wood 1954). The book was originally published in 1939 and by 1954 was in its fourth edition. It is an example of a ‘classic’ regional geography textbook in that it provides a country-by-country account of Europe. The book takes the form of a regional survey, carefully delineating the resources and economic activities of nation-states within Europe. Though the tone is apparently factual and non-judgemental, there is a clear set of geographical values informing the text. The focus is on careful and ordered regional development. This can be seen in the way that certain landscapes and features are seen as ‘emblematic’ and selected as photographs. These focus on large-scale transformations of the natural environment. For example, the Kirunavaara iron mines in Lapland or the United Steel Works in Dortmund; hydro-electric power station at Vernayez, Switzerland. The focus here is on European modernity and its ability to transform nature. For example, *Modern Geography* highlights the achievements of an increasing intensification of farming. The reader of this textbook is left in little doubt as to the productivity and industriousness of European nations in recovering from the interruption of the Second World War. The tone of the text is optimistic and forward-looking.

The geographical imagination that informs *Modern Geography* has a number of features. First, it assumes the ‘natural’ existence of the nation-state. Europe is a distinct place. It has clear external boundaries that mark it off from other continents. It also has strong internal boundaries (there is little flow across national boundaries). These nation-states are the ‘containers’ of distinctive activities. In this way, space is written in a way that stresses its neutrality and its timelessness; stability and order are important features. In its organisation and approach, the book reflects the way in which geographers have traditionally understood Europe in ‘structural’ terms, endowing primacy ‘upon the eternity of the soil’ (Lee 1985:86). Thus, the book offers a spatial division of Europe based on ‘natural’ regions (these include: North-West margins; countries bordering the Baltic Sea; The Danube Lands; The Mediterranean region; and the USSR). Paasi (2001) argues that such representations or images of the geographical subdivisions of Europe have been important in shaping the consciousness of the territorial shape of Europe.

An alternative way of conceptualizing European space in school geography is to see it as an ‘economic cost-surface’. This stresses questions of distance, accessibility and transport, with the aim as finding the optimal location for economic activities. This is evident in one of the most popular courses for pupils aged 11-14, the *Oxford Geography Project*. Book 2 in the series was called *European Patterns* and involved pupils in studying a series of themes or topics, including: settlement, rural land use, urban problems, ports, industry, employment and communications.

The chapter on rural land-use illustrates the type of geographical imagination that underpins the approach. It starts with a discussion of a normative land-use model that

had recently been rediscovered by human geographers¹. The model assumes the town of ‘Monoton’, ‘situated in a flat area where all the soils are of similar quality. The farmers in this area have a choice of various types of farming’. Pupils have to decide which of the agricultural products will be more difficult to transport to market, and thus get the idea that land use changes with distance from the market because of variations in the cost of transport. There is a particular view of space contained in this chapter (and that pervades the whole of the book). It is the search for an abstract spatial order and principles that underlie that order. The assumptions are those of an ‘isotropic plain’ – one that is uniform in terms of soil quality, relief – and a landscape populated by ‘rational economic man’, busily going about his business calculating the ‘least-cost’ solution to his farming problems. The Oxford Geography Project followed academic trends in geography that favoured the search for generalisations over concern for the particular, and for (neo-classical) economic rationality over the meanings of experience.

The European space that is described and explained in the text is one that is shaped by economic processes. These are shown to be operating across Europe and leading to distinct and predictable spatial patterns. Where actual space does not exactly fit the ordered and symmetrical shapes of the models, it is explained as the result of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’. The economic processes at work are of course based on neo-classical economics, which effectively denies the possibility of other ways of organising European space. In this version, we are asked to imagine Europe as a place where physical barriers and cultural traditions are to be overcome in the interests of uniting diverse places and peoples. The book encourages pupils to imagine European space as

¹ The model is based on the work of Johann Von Thunen.

essentially a backdrop to a rationally ordered economic landscape. The problems they are asked to solve resolve around making that space more ordered and logical.

Exploring Europe: The UK within Europe (1991), offers its young readers a very different view of Europe. For a start, it makes clear that Britain is very much part of Europe. As such, it can be read as part of the broader project called the 'Europeanisation of Europe', by which is meant the process whereby people are encouraged to see themselves as belonging to something called 'Europe'. The opening spread is an account of Britain's membership of the European Community. It rehearses (uncritically) a 'pop geography' of Europe based on stereotypical views of people and environment. Though Britain is seen as 'different', it is clear that the same 'problems' and 'issues' are shared, and the focus is on similar processes and experiences. For instance, England's north-east region and Germany's Ruhr are seen as experiencing the same process of deindustrialisation. In reading this book alongside *Modern Europe*, it is possible to suggest that the two texts present very different geographies of Europe, which are in some ways similar to Paasi's 'fast' and 'slow' Europes (there is a distinction between the 'fast geography' that sees flows of capital, goods and people undermining traditional notions of territoriality and a 'slower geography' where territoriality and place-bound loyalties continue to shape the politics and daily lives of ordinary people). This can be seen through looking at the photographs used in the two books. In *Modern Europe*, there is a focus on industry (primary) and production, whilst in *Exploring Europe*, the focus is on consumption landscapes. It is also interesting to note the different types of maps found in the texts. Whereas the first book treated each country separately, *Exploring Europe* contains a number of maps that transcend national boundaries and stress the unity of European

space. For example, the map of the Euroroute highlights how Britain's motorway network is linked to Europe. It has been argued that transport and mobility are key themes in the construction of the European idea, since as a political project Europe is predicated on movement and removal of sticky boundaries and barriers to movement. One reading of the text is that it presents development transport and communications as the key to opening up Europe to the future consumers of Europe's places and environments in the form of leisure and tourism. An interesting example of the imagined geographies of Europe can be seen in the chapter on transport in *The UK within Europe*. The chapter starts by asking:

“Imagine life without roads, railways or canals. How would we travel from place to place? Across Europe there is a vast network to make our journeys easier” (p.41).

Transport and travel are thus seen as central to what Europe *is*. The chapter provides a number of 'case studies', including the plans to link Sweden and Denmark, high speed rail networks and the Channel Tunnel, There is a map of the 'Euroroute Network' in which the bold lines that show the motorways are more prominent than the faint lines that represent national boundaries. The map stresses the interconnectivity afforded by these roads. The overall impression offered by the chapter is one of technological development leading to the creation of a unified European space.

Finally, the text accepts without question the 'fact' of Europe as a political space. As such, it adheres to what Lee calls the institutional approach to Europe which has as its

starting point the notion that European unity is a virtually accomplished fact and an unquestioned good. However, Lee notes that this approach ‘either ignores place and time altogether or, at best, treats them merely as containers abstracted from their social context’ (p.85). From a purely empirical perspective, it is interesting to reflect on what Europe is according to the text. Northern Europe and Eastern Europe are virtually neglected.

One final example of how school geography imagines European space is provided by (1994) *Issues in the New Europe* which attempts to recognise the conflicts and tensions that face the European project. The ‘new Europe’ in the title refers to the post-1989 re-drawing of the political map:

“Since the end of the 1980s Europe has experienced rapid and profound changes. Europe in the 1990s is a very different place to the Europe of the 1980s –hence the term ‘The New Europe’.

Issues in the New Europe can be seen in the context of attempts to ‘redraw the imagined map of Europe’. At a time of considerable changes in the shape of the European map, and debates about who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out’, the book tries to fix some order on the chaos. This is a problem that faces any attempt to write a geography of contemporary Europe. For example, Stenning (2000) reviewed three textbooks on the ‘New Europe’ and argued that the books fail to address issues of coverage. Whereas previously it may have been possible to justify writing books about one half of a divided continent, today it is necessary to write about ‘Europe’ with all its many parts. *Issues in the New Europe* samples widely from Europe, but

takes as its central argument the idea that all of the nation-states of Europe are moving in broadly the same direction, albeit at different rates and facing different challenges:

“All the former Communist countries of eastern Europe are in a period of transition. Some are moving more quickly and successfully than others towards a free market economy, but all the eastern countries have a broadly similar goal – to create a free market economy similar to those found in western Europe and to privatise much of their state-owned industry”.

The book paints an optimistic picture of ‘the’ transition from Eastern European Communism to ‘Capitalism+ Democracy’ but reproduces (without comment) the neoliberal view of transition as ‘a relatively unproblematic implementation of a set of policies involving economic liberalisation and marketisation alongside democratisation’ (Pickles and Smith 1998). This view tends to ‘reduce the complexity of political economic change in Eastern and Central Europe’ by proposing a simple, linear model of ‘transition to capitalism’. The possibility of other paths, other alternatives is downplayed. The textbook presents European space as becoming increasingly harmonised around a dominant form of economic relations.

The discussion in this section has sought to identify the meanings these texts attach to European space. Clearly the texts span over a fifty-year period and reflect ideas about how to represent knowledge and involve pupils in their learning. The possibility of changing the course of European development is never contemplated. The Europe found in school geography texts is one founded on assumptions of capitalist democracy and all that follows from it – high mobility based on energy-intensive

transport systems and high levels of personal and collective consumption. Rarely do the texts raise the issue of how far this version of European development is sustainable in the medium or long-term.

New ways of imagining European space

So far I have discussed some of ways in which geography teaching in schools represents European space to students. The texts reflect the fact that it is common to think about places as discrete, bounded, and nationally-constituted. However, as Delanty and Rumford (2005) argue, in a Europe in which governance no longer necessarily coincides with national borders, and people, politics and societies are no longer constrained by territory, space can no longer be taken for granted. In this context, a new spatial vocabulary has emerged with which to understand the nature of European spaces. As Delanty and Rumford state:

“The idea of network Europe has come to stand for a European Union characterized by connectivity and mobility: a networked polity able to stake its claim in a networked and globalized world” (p.121).

If education has traditionally been concerned with nation-building, the project of European integration inevitably involves new ways of imagining the national space. The right of nation-states to promote citizenships within their borders is accompanied by the emergence of new ways of imagining European space. As Jensen and Richardson, in their analysis of the development of the European Spatial Development Programme (2004:iv) note:

“In the 1980s, a new discourse of European space emerged, combining ideas about mobility and transport with the political integration of Europe, and the completion of the Single Market”.

This project is essentially based on forms of neo-liberal capitalist development; it is the vision of a wealthier Europe that drives the project of European integration. The European Union is in the difficult position of competing as a global trading power and at the same time securing balanced development across the disparate regions that comprise European space. At the heart the project of European integration is mobility. The four freedoms at the heart of the European Treaties are based on movement: of people, goods, capital and services. Jensen and Richardson (2004:61) argue:

“It could be argued that Europe is as much about movement as it is about place, as the European project seeks to break down the barriers to free movement: the great distances between the core cities and the peripheral dispersed communities, the natural barriers which are not crossed by high speed roads and railways, and the national borders across which transport systems do not mesh”.

One of the important lessons of the project of European integration is that it will falter in the absence of a ‘shared and mobilizing cultural commons’ (Amin 2004), and there are moves to ensure that this vision is promoted through education. This is happening at the level of the school curriculum, where attempts are made to develop the European dimension. For example, Norman Davies (1996) describes attempts to write a ‘common European history textbook’ in the 1980s, with funding provided by the European Commission.

In geography, an attempt to ‘Europeanise’ the curriculum can be found in the French-led initiative to use the European Spatial Development Perspective to produce a standard textbook on European geography for secondary schools across Europe:

“I dream that one day young Europeans will learn European geography, their new common territory, in the same way that French youth have learnt – and continue to learn – the geography of their National territory. Already, reading these pages shows what we share with other Europeans; the wealth of an immense diversity of towns, of landscapes, peoples, cultures; the memories of a tumultuous, often painful past; but also a wide-open future, with a project in which together we value our differences by integrating them into the vast European space..” (J.-L. Guigou 2001 cited in Jensen and Richardson, 2004:207)

Jensen and Richardson note that it is important to understand how, ‘through subtle, informal and largely unaccountable ways, a policy discourse of monotypic European space can reach beyond the confines of policy making and shape the minds of

citizens’(p.208). The ‘Europeanisation’ of the curriculum involves an attempt to control and frame the way the perception of European territory is shaped for young minds. Looked at in this way, the new spatial vocabulary offers a significant challenge to the ways of imagining European space discussed in the previous section.

Towards Critical Geographies of Europe

All of the accounts of European space discussed so far in this essay have in common the fact that they purport to be true and realistic accounts of the organisation of European space. One of the advantages of putting them alongside one another is that they raise the question of what is at stake in each of these ‘geographical imaginations’. This has important implications for the content of the curriculum, since it focuses on questions such as: How is Europe to be defined? What are the boundaries of Europe? What features of the social and physical world are to be seen as central to a European geography? The answers to these questions are not clear cut. As Pickles (2005) puts it:

“What then are the transformations currently underway in what we have for so long called and taught as ‘*the* geography of Europe’? How are we to think about the scope and form of geographies of Europe, European geographies, and the possibilities and constraints of emerging Euro-geographies, particularly in the light of the expansion of European projects of political, economic and social integration and the parallel reworking of nationalism and citizenship attendant upon the emergence of a post-colonial Europe?” (p.335)

Pickles suggests the need for geography educators to be aware of the consequences of producing geographical knowledge in particular ways. How we define space and the content of geographical teaching and curricula are shifting as a result of processes of European expansion and integration. This requires attention to the ‘critical geographies of Europe’. McNeill (2005) suggests that such critical geographies share a number of features. First, they are interested in examining the imagined and constructed geographies which feed the discursive categories of what we understand as knowledge about Europe. This means that terms such as ‘Europe’, ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ are not accepted as unproblematic descriptions of what is found in places, but as concepts with particular histories and genealogies. Second, critical geographies of Europe share an awareness of the importance of standpoint and position in the production of geographical knowledge. An important issue here is language – the dominance of English means that knowledge about Europe stored in libraries tends to be partial. Whilst it may be difficult for educators to overcome this barrier, it is important to be aware of the limits that this poses for understanding. Third, critical geographies of Europe are concerned to avoid the ‘territorial trap’ of international relations. This means thinking through a ‘Europe of flows’ of transnational and transurban movements of people, ideas, and things moving into, through and beyond the European space, whilst at the same time recognising the continued importance of fixity and embeddedness. Finally, there is an interest in how geographers teaching about Europe should avoid a colonizing form of ‘area studies’ which leads to the exoticization or romantic portrayal of people and places.

This is a challenging agenda for geography teachers, but taking note of what it might mean to produce critical geographies of Europe is useful in that it seeks to go beyond

the approach, commonly found in school geography, that teaching offers students a transparent ‘window’ on the world. For instance, it avoids the assumption that there is an entity we call ‘Europe’ that, although made up of a collection of individual places, nonetheless has a distinct and coherent identity – whether this is based on a physical geographical basis (the Ural mountains signalling the boundary of Europe in the east, the Mediterranean Sea in the south), or institutional basis (belonging to the European Union). A critical approach to geographical knowledge guards against this view, and insists that geography teachers ask challenging questions about the production of geographical knowledge. This is important because, as Ross reminds us:

“Geography can be defined to justify frontiers, typologies of economic activity and transportation and settlement patterns that ‘explain’ differences between nations. Teachers and educational systems will be used in this process – and will in many cases willingly be used – to assert differences and to create new traditions”(Ross 2000:156).

The important point here is that school subjects are constitutive rather than reflective of reality; in other words, instead of acting as ‘mirrors on the world’ school subjects actually construct frames or discourses through which the world is imagined. If this is the case, then the content of school subjects becomes very important indeed since it suggests that the decision to teach (or not to) teach about Europe is to bring into

existence and cement the existence of Europe as an entity. Spending time in geography lessons looking at a map of Europe, studying the industrial employment figures of countries within Europe is a means by which our images of Europe are shaped. Just as growing up in Europe in the 1980s I was taught about the 'Iron Curtain', which seemed to be a rigid and fixed structure, new images are currently being discussed and represented in school geography. These may include the Blue banana or the 'bunch of grapes' or the 'core and periphery'. The important thing about these images is that they are simply that – representations that capture some truth about the world but deny others.

Conclusions

This article has focused on how European space has been and is currently imagined in school geography. Though there is currently much talk of European education space (Novoa and Lawn 2002), it should be remembered that what is taught in schools is still determined at the national scale and thereby reflects more 'local' issues and concerns. In England, the recently revised national curriculum for geography simply says that study should include different parts of the world, including the European Union. This suggests the need for teachers to develop an understanding of the issues discussed in this article. Specifically, I would argue that there is a need to de-construct the notions of space and place that underpin ideas about Europe. This type of analysis is important because spatial discourse frames knowledge in a particular way which becomes 'installed' as the 'natural way' of perceiving European space. Education becomes an important part of how discourse comes to 'frame the minds of social agents'. As writers such as Jensen and Richardson, McNeill and Pickles argue, the

dominant spatial discourse

that has emerged in recent years is one based on increasingly mobility and movement, or what Hajer (2000) calls a 'Europe of flows'. If this attempt to imagine European space in these terms is successful, what type of identities might be available to Europeans? This is a 'fast' Europe, one in which a large space is on offer for consumption. Travel between places is easy and free from artificial constraints. At the heart of this Europe is a set of urban centers that are linked by a network of modern communications. Older identities based on 'essences' such as being a Londoner or a Berliner are eroded; people increasingly 'travel light' with their identities. They may hold onto these identities but are able to discard them as and when necessary. Landscapes and places in this new Europe would experience important changes too; traditionally landscapes are seen as the symbols of national identity. For instance, the routes of German autobahns were carefully 'landscaped' to follow the long, curving contours of local topography and to open out views across 'typical German landscape'. As Cosgrove (1998) notes:

“For Europeans, the landscapes occupied today across the continent are recognizably hybrid. This is blatantly apparent in the ruthlessly contemporary and internationalized landscapes of the 'new' Europe: airports, motorways, fast food outlets, mass tourist coastal and skiing zones and commercial retail or financial services centers that service the consumer demands of a continent which is fabulously rich by any historical or global geographical measure”(p.331).

It hardly needs pointing out that this 'Europe of flows' is based on a number of

contradictions. First, it is wholly reliant on the continued rates of economic growth that are required for consumerism. Second, this continued growth is predicated on high levels of fossil-fuel consumption and the depletion of natural resources and environments. Third, in order for some people to move, others have to remain in place. Thus the opening of borders inside the European space is accompanied by the tighter regulation of the external borders of the European Union.

At the same time as this ‘Europe of flows’ – mobility-, competitive- and growth-oriented there exists another ‘Europe of places’ or a ‘slow’ Europe. These are places where history still acts as a magnet on people’s identities. It is perhaps characterized by a commitment to tradition and difference and mobility is not the key to life.

These ideas about a ‘Europe of flows’ and a ‘Europe of places’ have implications for geographical education because, as McNeill (2004:67) argues:

“...the ‘map’ of the nation is no longer the easily defined schoolbook version with clear borders. The physical world of mountains and rivers is transformed by pollution and tourism. The economic world – never easily contained within national maps – is now almost unmappable, given the speed and virtuality of currency flows and investment decisions”.

If the map of the nation is no longer the easily defined schoolbook version with clear borders, it becomes important to ask how, as educators, we should seek to represent European space. The view of a ‘fast’ Europe full of people, goods, services and capital whizzing around a zero-friction space and in which individual’s can wear their

identities lightly is superficially attractive, but we should be mindful of Balibar's warning that 'Europe is not something that is 'constructed' at a slower or faster pace, with greater or lesser ease; it is a historical problem without any pre-established solution' (cited in Nairn 1993).

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