



On Not Taking Language for Granted

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Ever since the “crisis of representation” erupted within the human sciences some twenty years ago, thinking about language, concepts and modes of communication more generally has become a central feature of academic research. Geography is no exception: communication within the discipline, as well as between academics and the lay public, has been subjected to critique and innovation during the period in question. And yet, sustained engagement with the theoretical contexts invoked by such themes as “everyday language,” “presentation” or the relationship between visual and textual modes of communication (especially where the former do not per se exclude GIS-driven technologies) is less frequently encountered than one would wish. It is in this context that Antje Schlottmann’s book offers a welcome broadening of the discursive landscape.

The publication is the fourth of currently five volumes published in what is proving to be an exciting series in German-speaking Human Geography. The implicit aim of the series is to provide a forum for theoretically informed analyses of geographically relevant phenomena, as well as to re-align German Human Geographie (*Sozialgeographie*) with geographical discourses abroad. Judging by the standard attained in the volume reviewed, the series is off to a promising start.

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RaumSprache focuses on the construction of regional forms of identity in post-(re)-unified Germany. Taking her cue from the persistence of the much-lamented East-West divide within Germany fifteen years after the GDR ceased to be an independent political entity, Schlottmann zooms in on the mental maps that lend credence to this divide. In particular, she concentrates on what is often described as the *Mauer im Kopf*, or wall in the heads, of Germans living on either side of the former Iron Curtain. Lamenting initially that this notion pays scant attention to the many people who have moved their place of residence across this border since 1990, the analysis soon delves much deeper and genuinely attains novel ground through a critique of the very language that is used to analyse regional differences. The main point of this critique is the taken-for-granted nature of the categories that are used to construct such regional forms of identity: the fact that they often are utterly circular in nature and thus end up becoming self-fulfilling prophecies even in academic writings is, according to the author, a little-analysed and thus neglected phenomenon.

To fill this void, the author draws from a wide-ranging set of readings, with the work of Benno Werlen, Anthony Giddens and John Searle providing the main axes along which thinking and writing takes place. The resulting trans-disciplinary position is very much in keeping with the currently prevailing consensus characterising much of Anglo-Saxon human geography: rather than seeing regions and regionalised forms of identity as being directly linked with non-discursive phenomena of whatever kind, the text proposes to see the former as being socially constructed.

The expressed goal of this shift is creatively to undermine often dichotomically constructed dualisms that contribute to the perpetuation of academic reliance on that which we seek to understand. Chief amongst the latter is the dualism between “representation” and “reality;” Schlottmann proposes to replace this well-worn dualism with insights into their mutual constitution. En route, the author achieves a thorough and interesting vindication of everyday uses of language as being both inevitable and capable of incorporating self-reflexive elements. The term coined for the resulting novel form of academic writing owes much to the work especially of Benno Werlen: *Geographie-Machen*, or the “making of geography” – a cautious neologism in the German language (and neither the first nor the last a reader will encounter in the book) – thus emerges as a novel form of academic practice. The novelty resides in the open acknowledgment that *Geographie-Machen* has to rely on material pre-givens such as language or the categories employed to describe and analyse regions (the author talks of *Tat-*

Sachen or *Facts*) while allowing, indeed welcoming, the creative (“heuristic”) use of such categories in the hands of geographers or social scientists more generally.²

To me, there is much intellectual honesty in what is being proposed here: rather than making a virtue out of necessity, the author attempts squarely to address those elements any academic cannot repudiate while exploring what’s left. The deontologisation of space that results from this exercise should be seen as a welcome bonus by every thoughtful geographer, even where such a move makes life initially more difficult. In its stead, and again I found this refreshingly honest, Schlottmann invites her readers to acknowledge that many analytical questions have a normative core and thus cannot be resolved through analytical means alone.

Empirically, the study presents a well-rounded reading of material gathered from the two main weekly newsjournals in Germany, *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, as well as one of the most respected newspapers, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Analysing in turn the way that unification “issues” were reported in these *mediae*, the author sees these – in keeping with the theoretical premises outlined above – not as reflections on social realities but as embedded documents speaking more about the time in which they were produced and the various positionalities involved than representing objective forms of regional identities. In this context, given the proximity of these reflections to the world of hermeneutical and especially phenomenological discourses, the all-but complete absence of references to the latter from the text is somewhat surprising indeed. What emerges from these “empirically minded” pages is a variety of differently negotiable concepts that individual and collective actors draw from when regionalising their own identity – or those of others. This I found rather interesting indeed for it presents the reader with a concrete attempt to operationalise those taken-for-granted (and thus so eminently powerful) ideas and concepts that ground individual constructions of identity. Importantly, the latter thus not only become discursively available for perhaps the first time, but their formative (“enabling”) power can be understood in the context from which it emerges and within which it makes sense. For anyone interested in changing geographical perceptions, rather than merely analysing them, such a move could prove to be a highly productive one as it provides an opening for both critique and self-reflexivity at one and the same time while – and this is crucial – levelling the distance between academic and lay modes of writing. Both emerge as capable of “presenting” world(s) – and thus become constructive possibilities. The point here, as Schlottman stresses repeatedly, is not to dismiss concrete, existing social constructions of reality or seek to replace them with

² A brief and interesting introduction to the notion of *Geographie-Machen* can furthermore be found in volume 2 of the series Sozialgeographische Bibliothek, of which *RaumSprache* is volume 4 (Lippuner 2005).

(academically) sanitised alternatives but to work through and with those linguistic constructs towards alternative ways of constructing “worlds.” Not words per se but the context from which they draw their meanings (Schlottmann uses the word “grammar” here, see page 324) thus becomes of paramount importance; “contingency,” or rather the *recognition* and *unveiling* (*Offenlegung*) of “contingency,” thus becomes the chief task for a linguistically minded future geography. Readers are invited to remember the writings of Allen Pred, with their insistence on the “becoming” nature of analytical discourse and perhaps add a more contemporary bite to those familiar and cherished texts; voilà: the Schlottmann universe.

Um mit Beispielen zu reden: Im Kontext der vielerlei Reden und Schriften über den sogenannten „Ost-West“ Gegensatz ist auffällig, wie selbstverständlich in der deutschen Diskurslandschaft über das Fehlen einer eindeutigen Bezeichnung für die Ereignisse der Jahre 1989 und 1990 hinweggegangen wird. Erschien damals für ein paar kurze Monate die Frage der Form der Annäherung zwischen BRD und DDR zumindest als eine offene – erinnert sei in diesem Zusammenhang u.a. an die Interventionen von Günter Grass für eine neue Verfassung im öffentlichen Diskurs – so ist der nicht unwichtige Unterschied zwischen „Vereinigung“, „Wiedervereinigung“ oder „Vereinnahmung“ als solcher diskursif inzwischen nicht mehr sichtbar. Der „Ost-West“ Gegensatz ist hier dann gewissermassen das zwanghafte Ergebnis einer solchen Diskursausblendung, selbst wenn derselbe durch konkrete geographische Realitäten in den Hintergrund gedrängt wird: ich denke hier insbesondere an die doch eindeutigen Karten, welche im Zuge der Bundestagswahlen im September 2005 auf einen weitaus durchschlagenderen „Nord-Süd“ Gegensatz im Gebiet der BR Deutschland hingewiesen haben. Auch zwischen verschiedenen „Container-Metaphern“, um einen zentralen Begriff des voliegenden Textes aufzugreifen und auf welche der Text vielzählig hinweist, findet eine Gewichtung immer nur im Kontext eines medial konstruierten ‚Nutzwertes‘ statt; deren Vergenständlichung als plausible (und als solche Handlungskontexte bestimmende) Regionalisierung dürfte also nicht wirklich überraschen.

Finally, a minor point of critique regards the writing itself – which is very much in keeping with standard Continental and, in particular, German academic writing style. In other words, the book epitomises a distinguishing feature of many doctoral dissertations or *Habilitationschriften* in being densely crafted, occasionally convoluted and written without the outward signs of external editing. I would have furthermore wished for the volume as a whole to be presented with an index better to be able to chart the intellectual trajectory contained therein. But these are moot points to raise when addressing what is often a genuinely intriguing and always a path-breaking approach to the nexus between geography, sociology and socio-linguistics. The book is furthermore well researched and conscious of its

own limitations and positions. One would hope that the author would publish her findings in languages other than her native German to make key insights available to a wider readership; with the immanent publication of “On the everyday containerization of space: The case of ‘East-Germany’” in *GeoJournal* and the recent publication of "Langage, média et régionalisation symbolique: la fabrication de la Mitteldeutschland" in *Géographie et cultures* ([2005] vol. 47, p. 85-102), this wish appears to have been granted already.

References

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