

Research Group for Regionalities (first)

Conceptual framework¹

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1. Introduction and general objective

We constantly encounter the terms “region”, “regional” and “regionality” in everyday life—for example when confronted with calls to buy regional products²—but also in political discourse—for example with regard to a “Europe of the regions”.³ In a campaign with advertising posters for the International Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Management and Communication at the University of Applied Sciences of the Vienna Chamber of Commerce (FH Wien WKW), the adjective “regional” was contrasted with the adjective “international” (Fig. 1).⁴ The omnipresence of the above-mentioned terms suggests an academic examination of them: on the one hand due to their current relevance and the associated social challenges, on the other hand due to their openness to semantic charges with the “simultaneous suggestion of

¹ The text of this conceptual framework represents the documentation of numerous rounds of talks and discussions between the members of the *Research Group for Regionalities* and provides the basis for the activities in the research group.

² See, for example, the “Regional shopping” platform of the *Austrian Federal Economic Chamber* (WKO), online: https://firmen.wko.at/suche_regionaleinkaufen (last accessed: 27 February 2023).

³ On “Europe of the regions”, see also PAASI–METZGER, Region 24; STAUBER, Regionalgeschichte 230, 234.

⁴ Posters in May 2023, for example at the Breitensee S-Bahn station in Vienna.

a consensual core of understanding”.⁵ Depending on the context, the supposedly unambiguous terms are instrumentalised to distinguish them from national states and their fixed borders or for patriotic purposes.

“Regional actors try to transform regions into products that are marketed as attracting packages to individuals, families or businesses that are seduced to regions in various roles: as tourists, workers, employees, etc. Marketing/promotion everywhere uses such strategies in fetishizing region/place.”⁶

Accordingly, the main interest of the *Research Group for Regionalities* lies in the critical examination of the (historically grown) ambiguity of the conceptual complex “region” / “regionality” / “regional”,⁷ its utilization as a category of analysis for the scientific disciplines represented in the research group as well as for transdisciplinary studies. Subsequently, the research interest lies in questions about the dynamics of current and historical regions.



Fig. 1: Advertising poster of the FH Wien der WKW (credits: Sabine Miesgang).

Although the term “region” implies precisely this, regions are not static entities that are sharply demarcated from their surroundings existing autonomously.⁸ The *Research Group for Regionalities* understands regions as spaces of condensed communication and the attribution of identities made possible by this, as well as spaces of political and economic interests that are constituted through social action and represented and reproduced by media.⁹ On this basis, research can investigate the phenomenon of “regionality” by means of comparative studies from a historical, social and cultural-scientific perspective. “Region” becomes a category of analysis for interaction processes that relate to a specific space. This approach enables a system-

atic examination of the perception and experience of borders and border areas, local/regional characteristics, the formation, consolidation as well as de-stabilization and questioning of power structures, economic relationships, infrastructures and social institutions along with the

⁵ KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 8, 10. See also the comparison with the term “sustainability” made by the authors at this point.

⁶ PAASI-METZGER, *Region* 24.

⁷ On the ambiguity of the term and the associated problems for research, see fundamentally STAUBER, *Regionalgeschichte* 227–233.

⁸ KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 8.

⁹ For the significance of media for the constitution of (social) spaces, see the articles in ZIMMERMANN-MAHLERWEIN-MALDENER, *Landmedien*, especially the introduction (S. 7–19) as well as THIELEN, *Kommunikation*, and TRUMMER, *Bavaria*.

interactions between physical space and culture (in the broadest sense as everything created by humans, but also the impact of humans on their environment—for example animals¹⁰).

Regions are actively and passively constituted, shaped, reproduced and received through the interaction processes of individual and collective actors. The mediation of regions and their anchoring in the collective or cultural memory depend on the media.¹¹ As instruments for developing and interpreting realities, the media play a decisive role in region-forming processes. Media are by no means context-free products, but must be viewed as the available media in their context of impact as the result of semiotics (language, signs and symbols), technical dispositives (such as the development and dissemination of the printing press) and the underlying social institutionalizations (such as companies).¹²

The reception and thus the recipients have a central meaning-making function here, because only in the respective reception media can produce meaning.¹³ The medial shaping of regions is thus context-dependent and goes hand in hand with questions of power and interpretative sovereignty. In this respect, the research groups's interest lies in demonstrating how different actors use (supra-)regional communication techniques and media formats for the constitution and transformation of "regions".

In line with the programme of the *Research Network Interdisciplinary Regional Studies (first)*, the *Research Group for Regionalities*, which was launched in 2021, sees itself as a research platform for the cross-cutting topic mentioned above. It also opens up opportunities for networking in relation to (comparative) regional history—not only among the participating departments, but also with other national and international research institutions. The research group focuses primarily on historical and contemporary regions and border regions in Austria and Lower Austria as well as their constitutions and transformation processes in order to identify specific characteristics and make them accessible and usable for further research based on them. This spatial focus can also be explained by the participating institutions' research priorities and research interests.

¹⁰ For examples of animal production economies, see NIERADZIK–SCHMIDT–LAUBER, Tiere.

¹¹ KNOLL–SCHARF, Regionalgeschichte 36; ZIMMERMANN–MAHLERWEIN–MALDENER, Einleitung 9–25.

¹² SCHMIDT, Medien 40f.

¹³ On the active role of recipients in the communication process, see HALL, Encoding.

2. Terminology and state of research

“Country” and “region” are terms that imply a certain understanding of space. In common understanding, the term “region” conveys tradition and originality, but an analytical examination reveals the recent (or even centuries of) human construction behind it. While “country” can be clearly applied to politically and legally organised spaces,¹⁴ the term “region” is far more open and ambiguous.¹⁵ Although it has a political meaning in its origins,¹⁶ it is currently used primarily for socially, culturally and/or economically constituted spaces.¹⁷

The Latin term *regio* was already applied to administrative units in antiquity—above all as a term for the 14 administrative units of the city of Rome and the eleven administrative units of the Italian peninsula (which largely followed geographical features) in the Roman imperial period.¹⁸ Other translations include “direction”, “location”, “border”, “area” and “landscape”.¹⁹

The term “Region” was hardly used in German until the middle of the 18th century. In Johann Heinrich Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon*, which was published in Halle an der Saale and Leipzig between 1731 and 1754, there is no entry for “Region”—but there is the lemma “Land”, which is rendered as *terra* and *regio*, whereby a distinction is already made between the geographical and political meaning of the word.²⁰ In 1812, however, the lemma “Region” appears (albeit only briefly) in the *Oeconomische Encyclopädie*,²¹ which was largely published by Johann Georg Krünitz. In this dictionary, *region* is viewed primarily from a scientific perspective, as a specific area of the earth, the sky or even the human body.

The entry on “Land” is much more detailed and defines the meaning (1) as land as opposed to areas of the earth covered with water, (2) in relation to its use as farmland as opposed to cities and (3) as an area defined by manorial activity (i.e. in the sense of the meaning of land as *regio* already mentioned by Zedler).²² An initial upswing in the use of the term “Region” in German can be observed in the 19th century, with a further increase after the Second World War (Fig. 2

¹⁴ However, the term “country” has more ambiguous connotations when, for example, differences between “city” and “country” are discussed, whereby political and legal implications also resonate here. In the area of the legal distinction between “city” and “country”, for example, city law, which often had an identity- and tradition-forming effect, already played a role in pre-modern times. On the source genre of city law reformations, see the articles in DEUTSCH, *Stadtrechte*. For a comparison of city and rural rights in the early modern period, see SCHRÖDER, *Konkurrenz*.

¹⁵ HAUG-MORITZ, *Landschaftsgeschichte* 27.

¹⁶ STAUBER, *Regionalgeschichte* 227–233.

¹⁷ KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 28. The most famous example here is probably the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* in the wake of the Peace of Augsburg (1555).

¹⁸ SARTORI, *Regio*.

¹⁹ KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 25.

²⁰ ZEDLER, *Universal-Lexicon* (Bd. 16) 376–379. See also KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 27.

²¹ Published between 1773 and 1858.

²² KNOLL-SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 28.

and Tab. 1).²³ This is presumably the result of spatial differences in terms of development and population within politically organised national borders.²⁴

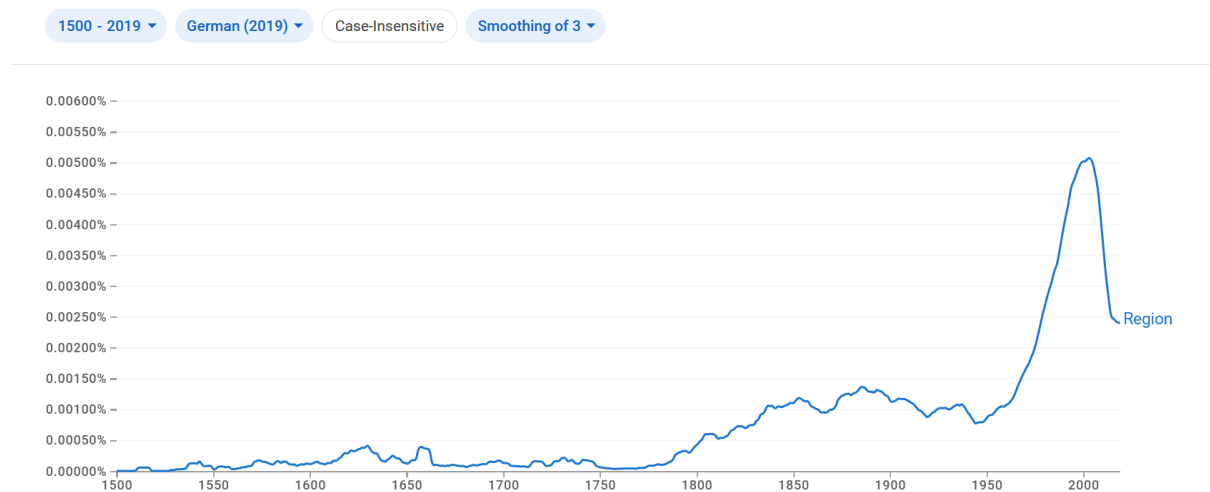


Fig. 2: Frequency of use of the term “Region”, analysis using *Google Ngram Viewer* (period 1500 to 2019, text corpus: German [2019], degree of smoothing 3 [out of 50]).

Time range	Hits
1666–1735	187
1736–1806	1.661
1807–1877	15.964
1878–1948	18.332
1949–2020	4.503

Tab. 1: Chronological distribution of hits from the full-text search for the term “Region” in the ANNO journal and newspaper database of the Austrian National Library.

In the 1970s, the study of “regions” was established as a framework for historical research in (self-)differentiation from the discipline of “Landesgeschichte”.²⁵ In the 20th century, scholarly

²³ KNOLL–SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 26. – For information on the data basis, data processing and use of the Google Ngram Viewer, see Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info> (last accessed: 4 December 2023). – For information on ANNO see: ANNO Historische Zeitungen und Zeitschriften, <https://anno.onb.ac.at/node/15> (last accessed: 4 December 2023).

²⁴ PAASI–METZGER, *Region* 22.

²⁵ In detail and taking into account the regional history of the GDR: STAUBER, *Regionalgeschichte* 227–250.

interest turned to “small spaces”. In addition to the significance of the national for the construction of identities, fields such as “regional politics” created new spatial points of reference.²⁶ A region is to be understood as a homogeneous spatial unit with certain characteristics, which can be delimited from one another (even if the boundaries can be blurred and permeable) and which are generated by human activity in relation to space. The decisive factor here is that a region cannot stand on its own, but is related to other spatial units.²⁷ While “Landesgeschichte” adheres to its predefined boundaries, Regional Studies approach their object of investigation by focussing on processes and structures.²⁸ Regions can therefore also be regarded as something created in the research process.²⁹

Johanna Rolshoven warns against an inflationary use of the concept of space, arguing against a “realistic” conception of space, which still prevails in cultural and social anthropology.³⁰ She achieves an overcoming of the territorial concept of space by understanding spaces as culturally and socially constructed. Space is thus understood as a product of actions and ideas and threshold spaces or transitory spaces such as airports, supermarkets and leisure parks—with a reference to the French ethnologist Marc Augé (“non-places”) with reference to Michel de Certeau—are described as “inauthentic spaces”.³¹ She formulated her understanding of space succinctly as follows: “Space not only describes culture as a process, it is culture.”³²

The dissolution of boundaries in social space research through metaphors such as “network” and a relational understanding of borders—i.e. border demarcation as relational work—are concepts that are applied in the research of Martina Löw and Gunther Weidenhaus.³³ A social understanding of space prevails here, which is also reflected in the idea of border areas as social spaces.

The category “region” serves as a social and cultural science research framework and offers a starting point for systematically analyzing complex structures that are made up of several differently constituted spatial levels. Accordingly, plurality and coexistence as well as overlapping and entanglement of different spatial structures can be taken into account with such a

²⁶ HAUG-MORITZ, *Landschaftsgeschichte* 27; PAASI-METZGER, *Region* 20 (with a summarizing research history and further literature on pp. 21–23).

²⁷ HAUG-MORITZ, *Landschaftsgeschichte* 35f.; Knoll–Scharf, *Regionalgeschichte* 35f.

²⁸ KNOLL–SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 16, 21.

²⁹ HINRICHS, *Regionalgeschichte* 22.

³⁰ ROLSHOVEN, *Raumkulturforschung* 213 (English summary): „[...] still a realist notion of space prevails [...]“.

³¹ ROLSHOVEN, *Raumkulturforschung* 195.

³² ROLSHOVEN, *Raumkulturforschung* 203.

³³ LÖW–WEIDENHAUS, *Borders*.

research approach.³⁴ The study of “regions” also offers horizons of knowledge that extend beyond the regional and local level, for example by making national, international and global interdependencies visible. Producing several isolated, juxtaposed, region-related individual studies cannot be the aim of Regional Studies. Rather, the aim should be to show how regional factors influenced developments at both the micro and macro levels and how they were linked to them.³⁵ Habsburg research utilized this concept for the study of individual Crown lands as spaces in relation to one another.³⁶ For the Crown land of Lower Austria in the 19th century, Oliver Kühschelm demonstrated the opportunities of a regional historical approach for the Crown land of Lower Austria in the 19th century by looking at the development of statehood with a view to the rural regions.³⁷ Because regional historical approaches are particularly suitable for researching longer-term processes and phenomena, local and regional studies on the period of National Socialism, which can be described as a comparatively “short-lived” phenomenon, require specific approaches, with Andreas Wirsing identifying five overlapping strands of development in historical scholarship: 1) regions as case studies, as conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the Anglo-American region, 2) studies on the region and the “total state”, which primarily led to a move away from approaches based on totalitarianism theory, 3) studies on resistance in the region, which first emerged in the area of (labour) resistance in the GDR³⁸ as well as in the West under the aspects of church and military resistance to the Nazi regime, 4) studies of the region between structural and experiential history, which can be justified above all by a deficit of contemporary history as an independent period of investigation in regional history, and 5) as well as questions of region and “milieu”, which take into account subjective real-life experiences and social units (such as Catholicism/Protestantism, social democracy).³⁹

The importance of Regional Studies/Regional History in academia is now also reflected in the institutionalization of the disciplines. Professorships have been established at universities in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, while journals and series provide a publication platform for research focussing on regions.⁴⁰ Compared to the subject of global history, the institutionalization of which began in the 1980s and developed its own form of regional studies—the

³⁴ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, *Fraktalität* 704, 706; KNOLL–SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 31.

³⁵ KÜHSCHELM–LOINIG–EMINGER–ROSNER, *Einleitung* 23f.

³⁶ For example KAPS, *Entwicklungen*.

³⁷ KÜHSCHELM, *Staat*.

³⁸ However, these studies were primarily produced against the background of the political legitimization of the SED regime and should also be understood in this respect.

³⁹ WIRSCHING, *Nationalsozialismus* 27–46. See also the case study POTSCHER, *Mauthausen*.

⁴⁰ For an overview, see KNOLL–SCHARF, *Regionalgeschichte* 167–179. On the importance of establishing it as an academic discipline, see also PAASI–METZGER, *Region* 27.

study of “world regions”—with Global Area Studies,⁴¹ the subject of Regional History in Austria is much younger.⁴² At the University of Vienna, the Research Focus Global History (FSP Global History) was already being formed at that time and still exists today, bringing together researchers and students in this field.⁴³

Martin Knoll’s study on the Salzkammergut provides a vivid example of how the analytical category “region” can be used to gain knowledge in Cultural Studies. The status and geographical extent of the Salzkammergut region are described as the product of negotiation processes and the room for manoeuvre of tourism industry institutions, whereby the link between human interactions and the physical materiality of the aesthetic alpine landscape and the structure of mountains, hills and lakes is also taken into account.⁴⁴

3. Guiding questions of the *Research Group for Regionalities*

Spatial concepts play an important role in the organization and order of the world.⁴⁵ The *Research Group for Regionalities* is dedicated to a specific spatial concept, namely that of the “region”. Now that the examination of space has increasingly become the focus of the social and cultural sciences in the course of the *spatial turn*, the question arises as to the added value of dealing with regions (and how these differ from the general concept of “space”). One answer to this question could be, for example, a deeper understanding of the development of political attitudes and funding (e.g. for neglected regions) through regional history studies.⁴⁶

The focus of the *Research Group for Regionalities* is not to work out and define what a region is, but rather to “describe regions ‘densely’ on the basis of the actors’ logics of action that extend to all [their] levels”,⁴⁷ taking into account the diversity of the affiliations and interaction contexts involved—both internally and externally. The aim is to avoid essentialist definitions and definitions that are predetermined by research. It is in the interest of the research group to

⁴¹ Also known as „World History“.

⁴² See also the series “Beiträge zur Globalgeschichte” edited by Markus A. Denzel and Mark Häberlein. For the institutionalization of Global Area Studies in the German-speaking world, see the German Institute for Global and Area Studies in Hamburg (GIGA, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de> [last accessed: 3 November 2023]) as well as the Central Institute for Latin American Studies at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (ZILAS, <https://www.ku.de/forschung/forschungsinfrastruktur/forschende-institutionen/zentralinstitut-fuer-lateinamerikastudien> [last accessed: 3 November 2023]).

⁴³ See also ZIMMERMANN, Global History

⁴⁴ KNOLL, Salzkammergut 241, 244.

⁴⁵ PAASI–METZGER, Region 20.

⁴⁶ KOMLOSY, Niederösterreich 601–608; KOMLOSY, Rand.

⁴⁷ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, Fraktalität 732. On the concept of “dense description”, see GEERTZ, Beschreibungen.

show the dynamic interdependencies of actors, dispositives and practices and to make transformation processes of regions comprehensible. In this way, common characteristics of regions that distinguish them from other spatial-social entities, such as states or nations, but also villages and municipalities, can be developed and serve as a basis for further comparative studies—also of a transdisciplinary nature.

The constitutive function of communication and the medial dissemination and reception of regions form a further central research interest of the research group. Following Siegfried J. Schmidt, the focus here is on questions of systematic connections between semiotics, the possibilities of their distribution and the underlying social institutionalization⁴⁸ as well as reception (taking the active role of recipients in the production of meaning into account⁴⁹) and thus their effect on region-forming processes.

The *Research Group for Regionalities* therefore addresses a bundle of questions that outline the topics of *making regions* and *maintaining regions*: Who makes regions? How do different actors “make” and “maintain” regions? Which scopes of action and communication are involved? What natural features (mountains, rivers, etc.) influence the formation of regions?

4. Methodical approaches and theories

Following the ideas outlined so far, the discussion of regions can be approached from different angles. Regions are not isolated and static entities. Rather, they are spatial products of social action, which in turn are linked to spatial conditions and effects.⁵⁰ The linking of interactions to a physical space is essential. If the perspective on regions as social constructs dominates, in extreme cases the territorial concept of space is ignored⁵¹ or the territorial component only appears as a result of social interactions and the associated network formation.⁵² Another challenge lies in dealing with regions as spatial units, which often do not have a hierarchical or symmetrical organizational principle and which—unlike countries, for example—do not have a central authority with decision-making powers.⁵³

“Work of regionalization and ‘region-building’ is performed not only by economic, political and cultural/media elites in the production/eproduction of regions and identity narratives, but also in everyday

⁴⁸ SCHMIDT, Medien 40f.

⁴⁹ HALL, Encoding.

⁵⁰ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, Fraktalität 734.

⁵¹ See also the overcoming of the territorial concept of space in ROLSHOVEN, Raumkulturforschung.

⁵² PAASI–METZGER, Region 23.

⁵³ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, Fraktalität 734.

practices and in the work of, for example, regional planners and developers, as well as through such mundane material structures such as transport infrastructures.”⁵⁴

Accordingly, regions are complex constellations of materiality, agenda, social networks and interactions as well as power that are subject to a constant process of transformation. Discursive and non-discursive practices and patterns come together, as do heterogeneous social institutions and media offerings that come into play in the representation and reproduction of regions.⁵⁵

Instead of models and theories that claim to be universal and methods that can be universally applied to regions and regionality, it is more expedient to think in terms of interdependencies, i.e. process systems. This also corresponds to the transdisciplinary orientation of the *Research Group for Regionalities*. Here, space and time are not dichotomized, but are linked to each other and serve as descriptive instruments. Similarly, physical and social space do not represent a pair of opposites, but rather relate to each other dialectically.⁵⁶

The disciplines involved in the research network look at regions from different perspectives and use different sources. While pilgrimage studies approach the phenomenon on the basis of pilgrimage signs,⁵⁷ amateur films⁵⁸ can serve as units of investigation for European ethnology and contemporary history. One project idea that emerged at the Institute of Rural History (IGLR) is to relate the cine film cataloguing project “Niederösterreich privat” to the analysis category “regionality”.⁵⁹ Cine films are a medium that can visualize certain characteristics of regions over the course of time. Together with other sources such as interviews with the filmmakers, links between the construction and reception of regions and personal as well as family memories can be analyzed. One example of this are so-called house-building films, which on the one hand represent a decisive moment for the filmmakers, the completion of their own home, but on the other hand can also be interpreted regionally through region-specific characteristics of house construction. In his ongoing research on fire brigade books and newspapers Benjamin Grilj (Institute for Jewish History in Austria) shows the development of specific fire districts, but also the districts’ momentary dissolution in the event of a crisis and the fluidity of regions. In her dissertation project “Mobile Women/Theatre/Life. Female Theatre

⁵⁴ PAASI–METZGER, Region 26.

⁵⁵ PAASI–METZGER, Region 26.

⁵⁶ SCHMIDT, Medien 38–40, 48.

⁵⁷ See the articles in KÜHTREIBER, Wallfahrt.

⁵⁸ For example SEMANEK, Zuhause.

⁵⁹ SEMANEK–SCHWARZ–GRÄBER–RIBISCH–HUFNAGL, Landbilder.

Entrepreneurs in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1850–1914”, Margret Berger focuses on female theatre entrepreneurs and follows their mobile biographies.⁶⁰

In the transdisciplinary exchange, the individual studies benefit from impulses that emerge from the network within the research group. In addition, a comparative approach can provide the opportunity to broaden one’s own view of the “region” phenomenon.

Dealing with regions brings other concepts into play that need to be taken into account. The role of the media has already been mentioned, and the significance of borders is just as essential. Aspects of research on the topics of regions and regionality that are relevant to the disciplines involved in the research network and that have been jointly developed are listed below and explained briefly. They serve as orientation and as an aid to approaching “regionality” from a social and cultural scientific perspective. For the most part, they are by no means mandatory and do not necessarily apply to every region created in the research process or used as the object of investigation.

However, one characteristic that underlies all regions is their **relationality**. This is also where the cognitive value of the analytical category “region” lies, as it simultaneously addresses a supra-regional interest when dealing with questions of regional history.⁶¹ A region cannot exist on its own, because it needs an **area of reference**—either on a macro or micro level.⁶² Questions of center and periphery also play a role here.⁶³ Regions therefore represent a **meso-level**. In this respect, the concept of regions can also be applied in the disciplines of **micro- and global history**.⁶⁴ Research approaches that can be utilized here include **transregionality**, i.e. the linking of regional phenomena on a global level, as well as “networked narratives”, i.e. the description of social phenomena on a local or regional level and their points of contact with the global level, instead of the execution of causal chains.⁶⁵ Dietlind Hüchtker’s study of “rural societies” as historical phenomena (as opposed to anthropological constants) based on their relational relationships to the phenomenon of the “city” is an example of the application of such a link between social phenomena and space.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Presentation of the project on the website of IGLR, <https://www.ruralhistory.at/de/projekte/seit-2022/mobile-frauen-theater-leben-theaterunternehmerinnen-in-der-habsburgermonarchie-1850-1914> (last accessed: 3 November 2023).

⁶¹ See the thoughts on this in KÜHSCHERM, Staat 27f.

⁶² COCHRANE, Thinking 81; LÄPPLE, Essay 197f.

⁶³ For example, KOMLOSY, Niederösterreich. Fundamental to the relationality of regions and their significance for regional historical studies KÜHSCHERM–LOINIG–EMINGER–ROSNER, Einleitung. For further information on the concept of relationality, see WAQUANT, Relationismus; THELEN, Wege 18–21.

⁶⁴ See EPPLE, Lokalität; MEDICK, Microhistory.

⁶⁵ As an example of such an approach, see TSING, Mushroom.

⁶⁶ HÜCHTKER, Räume, especially pp. 83–85.

Just as generic as relationality is the dependence of region-forming processes on **media**. The aforementioned media theory by Siegfried J. Schmidt is particularly suitable here.⁶⁷ Media represent a constituent factor of regions; at the same time they mediate them and make them receivable and thus interpretable in the first place. In addition, the materiality of the media and their link to distribution possibilities create media spaces that organize knowledge spatially. The involvement of social institutions in the production, distribution and reception of media subsequently determines the significance of power factors (such as financial capital or extent of coverage) for region-forming processes. Questions of mediality must also include the aspect of materiality, as content cannot be viewed in isolation from its medium (and the technology behind it). The research perspective *Material(i)ties* at the Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Material Studies (IMAREAL, University of Salzburg) is leading in the field of analyzing material culture, and its findings can be applied to regional history studies on a conceptual and methodological level with corresponding added value.⁶⁸

It is important for regional studies to distinguish itself from other concepts of space or from the general and less concrete concept of space. Space is “a variable of human action that gives the various forms of socialization a specific spatial form”⁶⁹—this also applies to regions, as already explained several times, although regions, in contrast to other spatial concepts, are characterized by processes of **harmonization** and **homogenization**—which links regions with phenomena such as “identity” and “culture”. Regions are subject to a constant process of negotiation and are in a permanent state of flux. Nevertheless, they give the **impression of stability, continuity and authenticity**, which can be instrumentalized by various actors and conveyed through the media and thereby reinforced.

Regions have **borders** that separate them from other regions and from the levels above and below them. These borders behave differently from the modern, linear borders of political-administrative units. In fact, the examination of regional borders opens up a rewarding view of a supposedly unambiguous topic. Just as regions are created through human interactions linked to space or specific research approaches,⁷⁰ borders are also formed accordingly as a result of social action.⁷¹ The history of terms alone can provide insights here—for example, that the modern German word “Grenze” is relatively young and is a loan word from West Slavic

⁶⁷ SCHMIDT, Medien.

⁶⁸ Research perspective *Material(i)ties*, Website of IMAREAL, <https://www.imareal.sbg.ac.at/materialities> (last accessed: 3 November 2023).

⁶⁹ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, Fraktalität 704.

⁷⁰ PAASI–METZGER, Region 21, are writing about a “bordering process by researcher”.

⁷¹ BÜNZ, Grenzen 21.

(*granica/granicia*). In Old High German, the term *marca* was used to denote both the border itself and the enclosed territory as well as administrative units located on borders. The Latin legal language even knew several terms to designate borders (*fines/confines*, *terminus*, *limitatio*, *limes*).⁷² A regionally determined research approach thus introduces alternative border concepts: zonal borders, culturally constituted borders (e.g. language borders) or even natural borders such as rivers or mountain ranges.⁷³ Likewise, a regionally determined approach enables the application of new concepts, such as that of delimitation through an understanding of region as a network of social interactions in space. The overlapping of differently constituted spaces and regions also plays a role here.⁷⁴

It is not only the nature of borders that is of interest for regional studies, but also—and perhaps even more so—**how people deal with borders**. How open and permeable are borders? How high is the degree of protectionism? How do borders manifest themselves in space? Are they perceptible when crossing them, for example as a city wall or customs station? In a further step, the question arises as to the constitution of **border or transitional spaces**.⁷⁵ How is life organized in such regions? The analysis of **transgressions** and **appropriations** seems useful in this respect in order to learn more about border areas as spaces that both divide and connect. Examinations of border regions offer a view of the **practices** (such as border controls or the recording of state affiliation in the form of travel documents) that arise there and which can subsequently serve as a basis for comparative studies.⁷⁶

Migration and mobility are also topics that can be examined with a regionally defined research approach. Annemarie Steidl has successfully approached “domestic” migration with a regional historical approach using the example of spatial mobility in the area of the federal state of Lower Austria.⁷⁷ The identity-forming function of regionality also plays a role in questions of migration and mobility, as do the dynamics of **self- and external attributions and perceptions**, as well as the field of **Tourism Studies**, from which insights can be gained for regional studies in this regard. Martin Knoll’s study on tourism in the Salzkammergut is an example of a “methodologically open, practice-theoretically inspired and controlled constructivist regional historical approach.”⁷⁸ He describes transformation processes using the cluster theory from economic history while taking the infrastructural conditions (i.e. electrification, transport and

⁷² BÜNZ, Grenzen 24f.

⁷³ BÜNZ, Grenzen 26.

⁷⁴ LÖW–WEIDENHAUS, Borders.

⁷⁵ See PERZI–SCHMOLLER–KONRÁD–ŠMIDRKAL, Nachbarn.

⁷⁶ BRETSCHNEIDER–DUHAMELLE, Fraktalität 728, 731.

⁷⁷ For example STEIDL, Wege.

⁷⁸ KNOLL, Salzkammergut 239.

locations) as well as the relationship between town and hinterland into account. Here it becomes clear that **infrastructure** and the **development of the natural environment** also have a constitutive effect on regions.⁷⁹

Aspects that can also be profitably integrated into regional studies in the future include the categories of **sex and gender**,⁸⁰ especially from the perspective of **intersectionality**. Particularly in light of the fact that the social localization of gender and gender identities plays a prominent role in current political discourse, regional historical studies can contribute to understanding the dynamics and effects of this discourse. Regional specifics and interactions between region and gender can also be examined.

5. Activities planned

The institutions involved in the *Research Group for Regionalities* are in regular contact with each other. Among other things, the research group provides a platform for discussion that facilitates and promotes topic-related exchange. Internal and external activities such as workshops on research-relevant topics promote transdisciplinary exchange and guarantee the circulation of current research approaches and innovations.

The national and international visibility of the *Research Group for Regionalities* is expanded through participation in conferences, lectures and publications. Cooperation and exchange with other institutions that conduct regional research are also planned—for example with the association *Geschichte und Region / Storia e regione* based in Bolzano.⁸¹

The acquisition of third-party funds from regional (RTI program of the federal state of Lower Austria), national (FWF, ÖAW) and possibly also international (EU projects) funding bodies ensures an intensification of research activities and also enables the promotion of young scientists through the funding of dissertations.

⁷⁹ See also the 2020 “Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes” edited by Martin Knoll (“Cities –Regions – Hinterlands”) and in particular the articles MIKKELSEN, Areas, and TIZZONI, Breakthrough.

⁸⁰ See the project at IGLR “Mobile Women/Theater/Life. Female Theater Entrepreneurs in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1850–1914” (FTI 21-D-026), online: <https://www.ruralhistory.at/de/projekte/seit-2022/mobile-frauen-theater-leben-theaterunternehmerinnen-in-der-habsburgermonarchie-1850-1914> (last accessed: 14 February 2023). See also HÜCHTKER, Traktoristinnen; MASSEY, Politics; PAULUS, Dörfer.

⁸¹ Website of *Geschichte und Region / Storia e regione*, online: <https://storiaeregione.eu/de/home> (last accessed: 14 February 2023).

6. Conclusion and perspective

The social relevance of the terms “region”, “regional” and “regionality”, which are supposedly unambiguous in everyday language (and primarily have positive connotations), makes it necessary to examine them from the perspective of social and cultural studies . The *Research Group for Regionalities*, which is part of the *Research Network Interdisciplinary Regional Studies (first)*, deals with questions about practices and processes that affect the formation and constitution of regions. Accordingly, the *Research Group for Regionalities* provides basic research for the other research networks based at *first* and serves as a point of contact for questions on regions and regionality.

The research group understands “region” as an analytical category that can be used for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies ranging from archaeology and European ethnology to contemporary history. It refrains from attempts to establish universally valid definitions. Instead, the focus is on the region as a relational variable, which researchers approach according to the respective research question using adequate research approaches. Thus, within the collective of studies and projects situated in the research consortium, a history of knowledge about regions and the use of this term is being generated.

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