

# Chapter 2

## Conceptual Considerations of “Space” and “Region”: Political, Economic and Social Dynamics of Region-Building

Steffen Wippel

### 2.1 Introduction: Recent Perspectives on Regionalisation

The present volume investigates the various and changing regionalisations of Oman. Yet, for a long time in social research a static and essentialist image of “space” and “region” prevailed, which took such configurations as given. According to this mostly implicit idea, social activities went on in predefined spatial contexts. Only with the more recent dissemination of approaches based in cultural studies and social constructivism did these rigid and container-like images start to dissolve. A broad “spatial turn” developed, which included many social science disciplines. Social space is now mostly interpreted as being socially constituted, i.e. continuously produced, reconfigured and transformed by human acts, ideas and communication. There is no uniform understanding, but a multitude of perspectives complement each other and offer different possibilities to conceptualize space, leading to discussion of diverse regional contexts. Recent approaches try to apprehend the multiplicity of spatial levels and the reaches of human activities and imaginations, from micro- to macro-scales (or from the “local” to the “global”) and in diverse sub-, trans- and supranational contexts.

The diffuseness of the terms “region” and “regionalisation” results from the great diversity of definitions (shown by Miggelbrink 2002: 95), which however can also be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Different perspectives, classification procedures and fields of study condition the particular extent of regions and their limits. It will be shown that, rather than having clear-cut borders, such regional contexts intersect or gradually pass from one to the other at fluid interstices of reduced interaction. However, attempts are regularly made, especially in strategic communication, to rigidify the borders of regional entities and to match different

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S. Wippel (✉)

Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin, Germany  
e-mail: steffen.wippel@t-online.de; steffen.wippel@zmo.de

functional areas. In the general debate on space, regions can therefore be understood in a larger sense as temporally variant, rapidly shifting spatial structures constituted by material and discursive social practices, which represent, even if not always unambiguously, political, economic and other social processes and transformations. At the same time, they constitute media, contexts and arenas of social agency and discourse (cf. also Miggelbrink 2002: 155). In this general understanding, “regionalisation” encompasses a broad variety of region-building processes and geographical structuring of the world.

In the following, this chapter will highlight presently circulating ideas and current debates that will be of relevance for the conceptual profile of the book and for a large number of contributions to it. But the chapter cannot be comprehensive and remains very much linked to the author’s own institutional and disciplinary research career. Without repeatedly mentioning it, a lot of the following exposition is based on the work of Wippel (2008), which gives further details and sources.

The paper starts by examining two established spatial methodologies, “methodological nationalism” and conventional regional “metageographies”, which rely on socio-spatial containers and thereby contribute to distorting our spatial understanding of the world. The article then briefly turns again to the new conceptualizations of space in the course of the expanding “spatial turn”. It also includes constructivist considerations and helps to develop a broader understanding of regionalisation processes, which go beyond the building of territories. Subsequently, this conceptual overview will discuss the role of the state in the wave of intensified globalization and point to a more nuanced understanding of concomitant processes of de- and reterritorialisation. This in particular includes the formation of larger economic blocks. Thus, among the current trans- and post-disciplinary concepts, special reference will then be made to the “New Regionalism Approach” that goes far beyond conventional theories on regional integration to include a multiplicity of forms and actors. The “making of geography” based on processes “from below” is studied in another section. This includes remarks on the widely discussed emergence of “spaces of flows” as well as of “everyday regionalisations”. In contrast, the (re-)emergence of “geopolitics” – and more recently “geo-economics” – in the political field and new critical research perspectives on them are worth a further conceptual consideration. This is followed by new ideas on border-crossing “transstate”, “transnational” and “translocal” networks, flows and spaces. Finally, this chapter considers the multiplicity and blurredness of spatial scales.

The two subsequent chapters will enlarge and deepen this conceptual introduction to the edited volume on “Regionalizing Oman” and discuss in more detail two specific concepts. Lorenz and Mattheis will centre on the “New Regionalism Approach” in combination with concepts from critical political geography, whereas Bromber presents the idea of “translocality” as it developed in the field of non-European, mostly historical studies. Some of the subsequent empirical chapters will also present in detail their individual approaches in the framework of the broader discussion on “region” and “regionalisation”.

## 2.2 “Methodological Nationalism” and the Emergence of the Territorial Nation State

In terms of space, the study of human agency and social relations is still rather often limited to the dimension of the territorial nation state (TNS). This perspective is due to the fact that modern mainstream social sciences fundamentally understand the social world through the lens of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) – or, in almost coinciding terms, of “state centrism” (Brenner 1999; Beck 2002) and “methodological territorialism” (Larner and Le Heron 2002: 754).<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this basic research programme essentially equates or merges nation, state and territory into a single phenomenon. On the other hand, the TNS is conceived as preceding society and encompassing all areas of social life. States constitute discrete, contiguous geographical containers and define mutually exclusive fields of social, economic, political and cultural interaction, relations, flows and movements. Only a restricted number of passages allow – and help to regulate – interconnections between them; this includes a strict separation of “domestic” and “foreign” affairs, in which states are considered the only and homogenous actors. The state and its territory became the reference point for all other (sub-, trans- or supra-state) processes that are classified in relation to it. Even if the ideal of the TNS has rarely corresponded to actual control and regulation on the ground, it became so seemingly perennial and natural in the contemporary social imaginary that its rather unique and recent coming into existence was rarely made an own object of investigation.

In contrast, especially critical approaches in Political Geography and International Relations theory warn against the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994; Agnew and Corbridge 1995). Their intention is to understand territories as historically and socially produced artefacts that are the result of discursive practises as well as of political, economic, cultural and social agency (cf. also Delaney 2005; Paasi 2003). Territorial arrangements are regarded as becoming effective only after their social formation. Social groups create and appropriate territories to exert power, to control the area in question and to enforce norms and rules on human beings. Closely linked with a state’s territoriality is its exclusive sovereignty, which well-established ideas regard as constitutive for its capacity to act (Taylor 1995; Delaney 2005; Agnew 2005).

Several authors historicise the modern TNS and describe it as the long-term result of multiple structural changes from approximately the thirteenth through twentieth centuries (Schroer 2006; Agnew 1994, and authors cited in the following). It replaced previous political forms including empires that showed complex, often unstable and hierarchical spatial structures (e.g. Murphy 1996; Taylor 1995). Blurred, expansionist

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<sup>1</sup>There were always heterodox strands that showed a preference for other spatial and social scales of analysis: the Marxian tradition in particular was preoccupied with “global” capitalism and “world” system theory; in contrast, “methodological individualism”, in particular in (micro-) economics, represents the other end of the spectrum.

frontiers and fluid, permeable borderlands gradually developed into rigid and linear boundaries that defined the limits of society and community. Increasingly, the modern state started to bundle sovereignty over all aspects of social life on a territorial basis, thus developing from a power (and initially also a religious) container into a wealth and finally a cultural and social container (Taylor 1994, 1995). In the nineteenth century, “interstate” relations also became “international” as well as “interterritorial” after the division of land surface was completed.

The territorial characteristics of the post-war order impacted considerably on general perception and, in particular, on social research and made the state container the privileged unit for analysing social phenomena (Murphy 1996: 102 f.). This conceptual preference also reflects the close intertwining of the formation of modern social sciences with the culmination of TNS development in the Western world (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Brenner 1999). Last but not least, the pervasive representation of the state’s territorial organisation in maps has shaped our understanding of the world from childhood on (Taylor 1995: 8 f.; see also Ben Arrous 2009); and most statistics, used as an essential basis of research, are produced by state institutions on a territorial basis.

Yet, with its focus on describing and analysing social processes within the TNS context, methodological nationalism impedes the understanding of important phenomena, especially in an era of accelerated globalisation. For a long-time, social sciences largely ignored and cut off trans-border connections, relations and processes unfolding between predefined territories. This also limited the ability of social scientists to adequately perceive on-going processes above or below the level of the TNS. Therefore, to overcome established methodologies, we need to come to a more appropriate image of a complex mosaic of overlapping and interpenetrating morphologies, scales and nodes that fill up the world.

In the following, several authors in this book will point out the fiction of a united TNS vs. the endeavours to create such a homogenous entity with a common history. Existing and shifting antagonisms and dichotomies within the contemporary Omani territory – such as coast vs. interior, North vs. South, rural vs. urban areas, Imamate vs. Sultanate and central government vs. local tribes – are especially emphasised (see Nicolini, Chatty, Valeri, Mokhtar and Beaudevin). In her study, Hoffmann-Ruf explicitly challenges established national macro-historiography. She also points to fluctuating tribal territories, whereas Nicolini highlights “premodern”, less territorially bound forms of exercise of state power. Vice versa, Mokhtar as well as Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova underline that some current processes contribute to reinforce national territoriality and identity at the same time.

## 2.3 Continental World Regions and Fixed “Metageographies”

What is true for the TNS applies similarly to the common thinking in a small number of – mostly (quasi-)continental – world regions as seemingly given and fixed spatial structures. Lewis and Wigen (1997) interpret such conventionally

regarded, mutually exclusive regional containers as historically produced and mentally rigidified macro-regional “metageographies” that have been classified in accordance with seemingly objective criteria. They only allow one regional assignment that is continuously conveyed by media, politics and research as well as reproduced in the broader public. At the same time, their repeatedly communicated shapes can often be easily recognised and memorised.

Yet again, regions are not natural, aprioristic units, but changing, socially constituted geographical phenomena. Subject to political and social circumstances, ideas of regional spaces and their limits change repeatedly. Initially mostly delineated in accordance with physical features, the interference of the territorial principle made states the building blocks of world regions. However, what belongs to which specific region is heavily disputed, the more so as these attributions are normatively charged and used as worldviews, ideologies and programs to transport political ambitions (cf. also Fassmann and Wardenga 1999).<sup>2</sup> This is often part of larger subdivisions of the world into apparently clearly defined “cultural continents”, present from older German cultural geography (e.g. Newig 1986) to the realist school of International Relations (Huntington 1993), easily leading to confrontational scenarios. Specific interest groups continuously and strategically promote and negotiate the creation of such “imagined geographies” (Said 1995: esp. 49 ff.). Their institutionalisation is reflected in symbols, signs and names, as well as in increasing regional consciousness (Jauhiainen 2004; Evers and Kaiser 2000). Often several conceptions of regions compete, and their boundaries are rather fuzzy.

In the academic realm, “area studies” in particular contributed to the creation of rigid “conceptual empires” (van Schendel 2005: 276; cf. also Kratoska et al. 2005). They concentrated on world regions conceived as static and contiguous containers that became more and more reified. The connections and relationships between them were thereby increasingly ignored. Correspondingly, Khalidi complained that

[i]n the study of the ‘Middle East’, for example, complex processes which transcend regions, such as trade, capital and labor flows between countries all around the rim of the Indian Ocean, which in differing forms appear to have been quite significant for a very long time, have been given far less attention than they deserve (1998: 75).

In particular, the “Middle East” in its different shapes and designations constitutes such a metageographically fixed region. Authors like Krause (1993), Scheffler (2003) and Escher (2005) show its constructedness and multiple, changing definitions, mostly based on cultural essentialism or political interests.

Current nomenclature was imposed from outside the region, starting with older names pointing to the “East”, reflecting Eurocentric perspectives. The inherent homogenisation and dichotomization of the “own” and the “other” has famously been denounced by Said (1995). Designations such as “Near” and “Middle East” were primarily coined in Western political chancelleries in the late nineteenth century to express political aspirations in the areas between the Mediterranean, Central Asia and India.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For constructions of “(Central) Europe”, cf. for instance Schultz (1997, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Paralleling this, in the West the French colonial administration separated a “white” North Africa from “black” Sub-Saharan Africa, which shows important effects until today (Wippel 2008).

Included areas differed noticeably in different languages and changed considerably over time. More neutral terms such as “Western Asia” are mainly employed by international organisations, whereas increasingly we find the identification as “Middle East and North Africa” (MENA), which however still is not used consistently. Similar problems of clear definition occur for the “Arab world” (cf. also Popp 2004) or subregional entities (for the Maghreb, Wippel 2005), depending on the use of ethno-linguistic, institutional or ideological criteria.

Attempts to define the region in cultural terms prevail until today. Others tried to define constitutive economic characteristics such as “rentierism” (Bobek 1979; Beblawi and Luciani 1987). Finally, the problems of clear definition lead to a sample of multiple phenomenological and descriptive criteria that include several natural, social, cultural and economic dimensions of the “Islamic-Oriental world” (Wirth 1980; Büttner and Scholz 1993). The ambiguity and change of regional terms, their vague and varying definition and geographical extension show that in fact no single, consistent conception of regions exists and that the conceptions vary in accordance with social contexts and issues. In contrast to (often strategically) communicated images, they rather constitute relatively recent, heterogeneous and disputed, continuously renegotiated constructs. Essentially, we are dealing with loosely-knit relational structures and multiple non-contiguous configurations that can only be described using open, temporary definitions and from different perspectives displaying manifold, overlapping and multiscale belonging.

Correspondingly, subsequent chapters will rarely place Oman and its people and society within the Arab world or wider MENA region (alone), but (also) in other smaller and larger regional contexts, such as the Gulf (e.g. Zorob, Dietl, Benz) and the Indian Ocean (Nicolini, Wippel, etc.) – in quite different extensions and understandings – or show the close “bilateral”, state and non-state links with Iran (Dietl), India (Pradhan), Zanzibar (Verne and Müller-Mahn) or the USA (Zorob).

## 2.4 “Spatial Turn”: Deconstructing Spatial Rigidities in Social and Cultural Studies

Methodological nationalism and regional metageographies often constitute implicit and hidden presuppositions of social research rather than explicitly declared and consciously applied perspectives. The inherent spatial dimension of social phenomena has long been ignored to an even greater degree. Instead there has been a relative preference for time, especially in the modern Western worldview, in accordance with contemporaneous ideas of progress, dynamics and development.

But since approximately the 1980s, a new interest in social space started to develop across the disciplines, mostly kicked off by early debates in human geography about the appropriateness of existing concepts of space, but also in sociology,

in particular based on Lefebvre’s (1974) seminal work on “the production of space”.<sup>4</sup> The expanding “spatial turn” was not only pushed by a general interest in the spatiality of human life, but also, and essentially, included new theoretical and conceptual approaches, mostly taking recourse to perspectives introduced by the larger “cultural turn” and social constructivism. This, however, is based on a wide range of disciplinary discourses and research backgrounds and represents diverging states of the art of meta-theoretical considerations. Some authors contribute action-oriented approaches, whereas other researchers advocate exclusive discourse-orientation. Many scholars plead for a microscopic approach, and especially flow-perspectives are *en vogue*. Still others, despite many controversies, recognize the complementarity of different approaches.

Yet, all of them contribute to overcoming the aforementioned methodologies and to breaking up static, closed and homogeneous images of territorial states and world regions. Finally, the spatial turn also drew interest in specific fields of history and political science, yet rarely in orthodox economics. In accordance with the multiple meanings of this turn, the following studies will all show an interest in the spatial qualities of social interaction and, more or less, apply specific space-centred concepts or interpret their results in the light of them.

## 2.5 Globalisation and the State: Concomitant Processes of Deterritorialisation and Reterritorialisation

Protagonists of globalisation theories often point to the fact that globalisation trends go hand in hand with the detachment of social agency from rigid territories (e.g. Bahrenberg and Kuhm 2000; Bahrenberg 2002; Werlen 2000, 2004). The territorial state is said to be increasingly losing its ability to regulate and control society vis-à-vis transnational and global actors. Globalisation is interpreted as a placeless, distanceless and borderless, territorially disembedded process. Fixed places and borders are accordingly replaced by global circulation, flows and geographical mobility and by transnational – quite often meaning “transstate” and “transterritorial” – interconnections and networks (e.g. Castells 1996). Consequently, Taylor (1994) asks whether, after having been “filled”, the container is not increasingly “leaking”. After the decline of its roles as an economic and a power container, it also seems to be losing its qualities as a social and cultural container with the globalisation of lifestyles, multiple citizenships and transnational flows of migrants.

Yet, many of the same authors who reflect about the “territorial trap” also warn against overgeneralising trends and effects. For them, the TNS continues to be

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<sup>4</sup>For the German debate, see contributions, e.g., by Werlen (2004), Hard (2003), Bahrenberg 2002 in geography and Löw (2001), Schroer (2006) in sociology. They also give historical overviews of debates on space in both disciplines (see also Miggelbrink 2002). For the more recent “spatial turn”, see Bachmann-Medick (2006: esp. 284 ff.).

powerful enough to shape social processes and to be an important framework for organising daily life (see, e.g., Paasi 2003; Agnew 2005; Schroer 2006; Taylor 1994, 1995). The realisation of the non-aprioristic character of container-like spaces does not contradict their empirically observable construction and attractiveness in daily practice. Contrary to the apologetic literature on its decline, the state still resists, proves to be highly efficient and seems to be still rather “filled” as a container.

Especially in political geography and IR theory, it is recognised that the TNS, despite all tendencies of dissolution, is still important for the national and international political system (cf. also Merle 1996; for the Arab world, Holm and Joenniemi 2001). As a cultural container, it still provides important bonds of identity. It is also difficult to observe a general retreat of the state from economic life. Economic geographers underline that enterprises are still embedded in and dependent on concrete social, cultural and institutional contexts, which are mostly defined on the TNS level (Bathelt and Glückler 2002; Glückler and Bathelt 2003; similarly Brenner 1999). Rules of origin that show national and regional territorial references are increasingly important for expanding trade and production chains. Other studies show that, even with their progressive opening, state borders still matter for trade and other flows (Helliwell 1998; Wolf 2000).

Between the reification of the TNS and territorially unbound globalisation, scholars with such critical stances (Agnew 1994; Delaney 2005; cf. also Paasi 2003; Brenner 1999; Miggelbrink 2002; from a historian’s perspective, Osterhammel 2001) emphasise the transformation of statehood and territoriality. Their dynamic character reveals that the ideal of the sovereign TNS has never been an exact description of reality, and historically several forms of statehood, territoriality and society coexisted. At the same time, the state is currently recreated beyond the traditional container. Instead of decline, authors often acknowledge an “evasion” to other forms of statehood, with synchronous working of inter- and transstateness (Taylor 1995). Thus, deterritorialisation goes hand in hand with reterritorialisation and the creation of new political spaces (Schroer 2006; Brenner 1999). With the redistribution of regulation, control and power on spatial levels other than the TNS, a complex, multiscale territorial system emerges (see also Paasi 2003; Merle 1996: 305 ff., Taylor 1994). At the same time, we need to consider the development and effects of discursive practices on state territorial sovereignty and linked strategies and rituals (Delaney 2005: 52 ff.).

In regard to globalisation trends, in the following, Abdelghani, for instance, will highlight the role of transnational companies and global consumption patterns in the intranational regionalisation of retail trade, whereas Brandenburg starts from the Westernization and privatisation of higher education to compare it in a regional Gulf perspective. Other authors come back to reterritorialisation processes on the supranational level (Zorob, Wippel), with Zorob in particular referring to the role of rules of origin. In contrast, Benz points to the specificities of a discontinuous state territory and mentions in fact shared, overlapping political and economic sovereignties. Valeri shows the redrawing of substate regions

as well as the territorialisation in a modern sense of the tribal leaders’ role when incorporated into the state apparatus. In fact, nobody negates the continuing, but changing role of the state.

## 2.6 The “New Regionalism Approach”: From Conventional Integration Steps to a Multiplicity of Forms and Actors

The process described above includes the construction of new regional economic blocs. In the political and economic realm, region-building for a long time has been understood as “regionalism”. This in particular refers to conscious and planned processes, initiated and politically controlled “from above”, which lead to the *de jure* institutionalisation of inter- and suprastate cooperation and integration of several territorial nation states into a new and larger container (Oman 1994; Pomfret 1997 and many others). Bi- and multilateral agreements create common contractual spaces that might be strengthened by further joint institutions and can become more formal organisations. Political theory focused on issues like security and the balance of national interests (Pollack 2001; Schulz et al. 2001). In contrast, conventional international economics analysed a series of consecutive, increasingly deeper integration steps (see also Zorob, in this volume) – in a finally “given” regional setting. Especially after the Second World War, the number of regional cooperation schemes grew considerably. The European integration project was not the only one. Many more emerged among developing countries, normally designed in accordance with the phased model. Yet, these endeavours have not been too successful, partly because of structural impediments in the global economy, but also because local political elites were not disposed to abandon, even partly, newly acquired sovereignty.

However, since the turn to the 1990s, in practical political endeavours as well as in interdisciplinary theoretical considerations, a “new regionalism” is emerging. On the one hand, the number of registered regional agreements, in particular on trade, grew again markedly. Also countries in the Middle East and Southern Asia, which for a long time had shown the most important reluctance to integrate, have negotiated a growing number of such arrangements. On the other hand, the “New Regionalism Approach” (NRA) that finally encompasses a multiplicity of perspectives and methods is eager to break up state-centred and Eurocentric approaches and points to new – or rather formerly ignored – characteristics of regionalisation. Authors who can be subsumed under this label (e.g., Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Bøås et al. 1999, 2005; Schulz et al. 2001; Lorenz and Mattheis, in this volume), in particular, turn to the diversity of forms “on the ground” and with that their spatial qualities. Forms and trajectories of regionalisation processes are more and more regarded as open, diverging and complex. Such newer approaches also highlight the overlapping of geographical spaces, institutions and tasks. They emphasise diverging levels of “regionness” and the smooth transition and complex interaction

between formalised territorialisations “from above” and emerging regionalisations “from below”. It is not the state alone that produces regionalisation, but rather, even if it remains a central actor, a large number of other state and non-state, national and transnational actors with differing motives, interests, strategies and powers intervene.

We can thereby observe an increasing differentiation of regional cooperation, for instance in the EU, based on a vanguard core group, a graded surrounding or some kind of “variable geometry” of integration (Wessels 1994; Deubner 2003). In addition, “open regionalism” following the Asian-Pacific pattern aims at parallel, common vertical integration into the world economy. Horizontally, it allows for multidirectional orientations including simultaneous membership in and geographical overlapping of regional agreements (Leong 2000; Soesastro 1998, etc.). The multitude of interwoven, complementary as well as competing bi- and multilateral treaties concluded in recent years contributes to the emergence of regional networks of agreements, despite all problems such a “spaghetti-bowl regionalism” (Bhagwati and Panagariya 1999) brings with it.

Thus, economic and political cooperation agreements often form more or less coherent regions. New geographical spaces emerge, which transgress conventionally regarded continents and world regions. On the one hand, this is based on “interregional” accords, particularly across vast oceans, and bilateral agreements in particular sometimes cover great distances. On the other hand, it comprises interstices that hitherto have been regarded as empty spaces and natural barriers to relations and contacts, rather than as zones of exchange and transit. Such “transregional” areas – compared with the standard subdivision of the world – develop in particular in interjacent, literally “medi-terranean” spaces along sea coasts or across maritime basins, dispersed archipelagos or great deserts (Attinà 1996; cf. also Veltz 1997: 268, Lewis and Wigen 1997: 199). Simultaneously, formal cooperation not only develops among territorial nation states, but also between substate regions to form transnational “region states” (Ohmae 1993), “growth triangles” (Tang and Thant 1998) and “development corridors” (Söderbaum and Taylor 2007).<sup>5</sup> Altogether, differentiated, open and micro-regionalisms make it increasingly difficult to determine the definite limits of the influence of regional institutions and entail blurred and “fuzzy” boundaries of spaces of cooperation (for the EU, Christiansen et al. 2000; Melakopides 2000).

Finally, in the context of growing globalisation and medialisation, institutionalised regionalism increasingly needs explanation and legitimisation for the broader public. Strategic debates about integration policies and about regional and cultural belonging fix such regions in people’s minds. Long-term regional orientations can contribute considerably to the emergence of common regional identities. Arguments often refer to relations (and myths) of the past, which are revived and at the same time developed further and formalized.

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<sup>5</sup>For the different levels of cooperation, see also the trilogy on macro-, meso- and micro-regionalism by Gamble and Payne (1996), Hook and Kearns (1999), Breslin and Hook (2002).

In this volume, Lorenz and Mattheis engage in depth with concepts such as the NRA and interregionalism. Empirical studies consider Oman’s simultaneous economic agreements, either based on the conventional step-wise, European integration model or on the shallow type of open regionalism. Whereas Zorob focuses especially on variable geometries and emerging incompatibilities of multidirectional integration, Wippel, who also refers to the NRA, mainly reflects on the interweaving of formal, material and symbolic dimensions of economic regionalisation. Finally, Benz concentrates on a specific case of mostly informal micro-regionalism. Moreover, many contributions relate to physical features, such as oceans (e.g. Nicolini, Wippel), maritime straits (Dietl, Benz) or deserts (Chatty), that constitute conduits and areas of intense social and economic interaction.

## 2.7 The Daily “Making of Geography”: The Emergence of Spaces of Flows, Movement and Entanglement

Spatial contexts emerge in the course of human agency. Current interaction-oriented perspectives centre on space-creating relations, movements and flows. When people interact, connections between them are built up, which may result in temporary or lasting networks, which concentrate and intersect in specific hubs and nodes.<sup>6</sup> In these relations, people themselves move and exchange goods, information and ideas that often converge into bigger flows. These, in turn, can bring about spatially concentrated interlacement, which temporarily consolidates and stabilises. Especially under contemporary conditions, “‘flows’ have become the generic (and hegemonic) metaphor of globalisation” (Larner and Le Heron 2002: 755). Together with a shift of interest from politics to economics, research started to focus on the increased mobility of goods, labour and capital; studies of the circulation of images, signs and information followed.

For Castells (1996, 1998), new, expanding technologies of communication are fuelling a shift from hierarchies to networks as the main organising principle of society. The “space of flows” supersedes the “space of places” based on physical space and closed spatial entities. For the constitution of the emerging global “network” and “information society”, faster and faster circulating flows are of central importance. Local hubs that permit relations and exchange in these networks do not exist of themselves any more, but are determined in such a relational perspective by the processes in the networks. Subsequently, Appadurai (1996) in particular extended the debate to the cultural field, emphasizing several categories of flows undermining TNS-based institutions and creating new “media-”, “ideo-”, “ethno-”, “finance-” and “technoscapes”. The social sciences in general adopted the idea of flows as central characteristics of the contemporary global order.

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<sup>6</sup>For network-oriented approaches in the study of the Islamic world, see Loimeier and Reichmuth (1996), Harders (2000).

In parallel, an action-centred human geography asks how human activities and behaviour create and define spatial patterns. According to Werlen (2000, 2004), “everyday regionalisations” are related to diverse kinds of social “geography-making” (cf. also Weichhart 2000), by which people, through their daily actions, relate the world to themselves and shape it materially and symbolically. With a specific focus on African contexts, Ben Arrous (2009, developing his text from 1996) highlights the importance of a relational “geography from below”. He, too, refers to the spatial dimension of social dynamics and historical processes, which produce a multitude of varying and moving spatial arrangements, boundaries, hubs and networks.<sup>7</sup> Such subaltern spaces resist, contest and subvert the principle of territorial division, though not necessarily in binary opposition to territories, but rather in a dialectical, reciprocally constitutive relation.

As a result, authors like Werlen (2000, 2004; similarly Läßle 1991; Weichhart 2000; Jauhiainen 2004) distinguish several types of region-making. They acknowledge the structuring role of physical space as a substrate of social agency, as well as of politico-administrative territories as an outcome of norm-oriented agency. However, especially under late modern conditions of temporal and spatial “disanchoring” (*Entankerung*) of ways of life, two types of regionalisation are of special importance. Thus, “daily geographies of production and consumption” result from purpose-oriented, mainly economic agency and show the embeddedness of life in increasingly large and complex spatial contexts. In contrast, communication-oriented, primarily cultural agency leads to “informative-significative regionalisations” including the subjective, symbolic and emotional appropriation of space and its naturalisation and reification.

Networks and (spaces of) flows also constitute central fields of research in subsequent chapters, and many consider geographies from below and everyday regionalisations, based on material, social and emotional ties (e.g., Verne and Müller-Mahn, Beaudevin), including changing consumption geographies (Abdelghani).

## 2.8 From a Realist to a Critical Understanding of Making “Geopolitics”

With a widespread interest in spatial dimensions of human life, geopolitics – as an academic discipline and a field of political practice – also came back to the fore. In essence, geopolitics investigates connections between politics and space, in particular between state and territory (Mamadouh 1998; Helmig 2007; Agnew and Corbridge 1995). When it came up since the late nineteenth century, it essentially postulated the strategic political and economic importance of spatial contexts. International relations, expansion efforts and in general the mastering of space by territorial states have been a central focus. Biologism and natural determinism

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<sup>7</sup>For a region constantly moving and changing, see also Marfaing and Wippel (2004).

resulted in arguing in favour of a fateful space-oriented *realpolitik*. Geopolitical maps exposing spatial perils, potential alliances and partitions of the world between the great powers have been effective representations of this way of thinking.

Its exaggerations and misuse by totalitarian regimes had largely discredited geopolitics after World War II, even if geopolitical strategies still have been practiced, especially during the Cold War. Its public renaissance was related to new global complexities and challenges from the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system through the collapse of the Soviet empire to the events of 9/11. On the one hand, re-emerging “realist” geopolitics, starting from given spatial constellations to develop space-related strategies of domination, presence and access, still has considerable influence on political practice. In this “neo-classical” conception (for the classification of concepts, see Mamadouh 1998), the state is still mostly conceived as a single, coherent actor with a clear set of national interests. Huntington (1993) in particular refilled overcome Cold War dichotomies from such a realist tradition with new cultural categories. A more “subversive” geopolitics, developed in the French research context (especially by Lacoste 2000), insistently contested these traditional conceptions, but at the same time “engaged” in practical politics, too. Central for it are “geopolitical situations”, in which territorial claims, ideas and representations of diverse social groups engage in rivalry on different spatial scales and the role of media and public opinion in creating and developing them.

On the other hand, critical, purely academic approaches try to uncover essentialist spatial images and to deconstruct apparently given “spatial conditions” as socially constituted. Political geography turned again to geopolitical topics in the attempt to understand practical politics and international relations. Action-centred research analyses social and material conditions of political agency, emerging spatial power constellations and new territories, as well as forms of fragile statehood. In parallel, a post-structuralist “critical” approach regards geopolitics as a discursive practice that finally (re)produces the spatial order of international politics. It first of all endeavours to deconstruct powerful representations and imaginations of space in international relations, including constructions of the “other”, territorial ideologies and practices of naming and their instrumentalisation for political purposes. Yet, other authors (e.g., Agnew 1994; Agnew and Corbridge 1995) plead for considering entangling discursive and material practices simultaneously.

Yet, with a globalising economy, attempts at economic cooperation and competition in global and regional contexts started to replace interest in purely military and political geostrategies. Therefore, more recently, we can observe a shift to more “geoeconomic” considerations. They developed mainly as a realist perspective in the 1990s and denied the dwindling importance or irrelevance of the state vis-à-vis global business networks (Spanger 1998). With the decreasing importance of military power and territorial dominance, the logic of international conflicts and “vital interests” has been transposed to the field of trade policy (especially by Luttwak 1990). As political power is said to depend on economic strength, states have to compete for national revenues, welfare and employment. Whereas the US-induced debate focuses on economic conflict strategies and regulations as a zero-sum game among industrialised countries, French scholars consider a broader range of

economic actors and strategies again, which rather complement than supplement pure geopolitics (e.g. Lorot 1999). For them, countries outside the Western world, too, pursue international policies and offensive strategies to conquer markets and gain technological and economic supremacy. Simultaneously, the national territorial logic is seen as expanding to other scalar levels, in particular to the formation and institutionalisation of regional trade blocs.

In a broad understanding, many of the actors studied in the following undertake practical geopolitics, too. Yet, it is especially Dietl who deals with geopolitical matters in a more realist perspective, whereas others, more implicitly, investigate geoeconomic strategies (Zorob, Wippel).

## 2.9 The Rhetoric of “Transes”: Transstate, Transnational and Translocal Networks, Flows and Spaces

Economic activities in particular have been increasingly conceived as transgressing natural and territorial boundaries. Correspondingly, there is a call to study human beings and objects in their “transareal” activities, movements and relations, which create links between existing places and regions as well as new complex, sometimes consolidated, sometimes ephemeral spatial configurations that go beyond the borders of the TNS container (and well-established world regions, too). With this, a multiple rhetoric of “trans”-approaches arose, which mostly focus on processes “from below”.

Inconsistencies regularly exist between nationally or regionally institutionalised territories and spaces of interlacing and interweaving (e.g. Weichhart 2000: 551; Delaney 2005: 27 f., 63 ff; Ben Arrous 2009). This not only concerns relations and flows that have a formal character, but also informal movements, up to illegal practices, which are not controlled by state or regional authorities or which are even immediately directed against regulations from above. The focus of conceptual approaches dealing with these kinds of links is especially on the ambivalent meaning of borders between transgressed territories. On the one hand, they constitute barriers to trade and other movements and are often difficult to surmount and provide repeated sources of conflict. On the other hand, they are interfaces between different territories, tempting actors to overcome them, offer specific opportunities for social and economic interaction and signify geographical and social proximity (cf. also Meagher 1996; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996; Bantle and Egbert 1996).

For such contacts and flows transcending territorial delimitations, Bach (2003, 2004) coined the term “transstate regionalism”. In particular he refers to Africa, where the phenomenon emerged in colonial times, when territorial borders multiplied. Today, reasons can be found in the financial, economic and political problems of concerned states that neglect their border areas and suffer from policies of economic adjustment or international sanctions. This also means that border areas are often socially and economically much closer linked to neighbouring countries than

to their own “mother states”. Some places and even whole countries developed into (trans)regional “hubs” in widely spanned trade and migration networks. Border-crossing relations become transstate activities in particular when they are able to penetrate entire territories as well as the institutions of affected states. Yet, states do not necessarily try to suppress such flows, which often exhibit a venting function. Even more, many state representatives may benefit from bribes or personally take part in these activities.

The concept of “transnationalisation”, too, contradicts the idea that transgression of borders constitutes a rather exceptional, one-time “container hopping”. It refers to social, cultural, economic and political structures and processes resulting from continued and repeated relations, interactions and practices of non-state actors across TNS borders. The term has become particularly prominent in migration sociology with reference to people, who not only emigrate – and perhaps remigrate – once between two states and societies, but in practice regularly move between, simultaneously reside in and continuously maintain ties with both of them (Pries 2002, 2004). These migrants are embedded in plurilocal cross-border networks; however, this approach does not ignore the enduring importance and influence of nation states. The term “transnational” also applies to non-governmental organisations, enterprises and financial capital, which have a consolidated presence in several countries. Even more, a transnational historiography claims a perspective that goes beyond national history rewritten onto legal or imagined territorial boundaries (Osterhammel 2001). It refers to groups, to their interconnections, networks and movements that transgress fixed national territories and continental regions as part of a world history that in particular includes the perspective from the “South”.

Finally, the concept of “translocality” essentially investigates concrete movements of people, goods and ideas across multiform – political and geographical, but also social and cultural – borders and great distances and the emergence of geographical, cultural and social “interspaces”, where new norms, identities and values are created (von Oppen 2004; Freitag and von Oppen 2010; Bromber, in this volume). It takes into consideration processes of the generation and institutionalisation of new spatial and socio-cultural structures that challenge established orders. The term “translocality” is preferred to the better-known “transnationalisation”, because it also encompasses movements and processes prior to and beyond the TNS that in the non-European world were first established in the course of the twentieth century. It also covers links for which a physical change of place is not necessary, but which rely on communicative and imagined connections and spaces. This specifically allows taking into consideration rarely regarded contacts between the regions of the “South” and the resulting constitution of and change in spaces of mobility beyond conventional regional categories. Corresponding empirical research was done at the *Zentrum Moderner Orient* in Berlin on (trans-)Saharan spaces (Marfaing and Wippel 2004) and the Indian Ocean worlds. Here, “seascapes” and “sandscapes” (Deutsch and Reinwald 2002; Reinwald 2004) have been perspectives that developed further from considerations of several “(land)scapes” by Appadurai (1996), who had originally introduced the notion of “translocal communities”.

As for networks and flows, most subsequent considerations also took an interest in the diverse kinds of “trans”-links and flows. First, Bromber presents practical research experiences with the translocality approach. Institutions such as clinics and shopping malls are described as having transnational or translocal character (Beaudevin, Abdelghani). Benz presents an illustrative case of transstate regionalism, whereas Chatty studies a transnational and translocal tribal community. In both cases, actors are not only disadvantaged by established territorial orders, but also profit from differentials across state borders. Verne and Müller-Mahn apply the translocality approach to their case study on the complex Oman-Zanzibar relationship. Transnational and translocal networks, flows and connections are also central to the geography of chronic diseases (Beaudevin) and to Indian migrant, merchant and businessmen communities in Oman (Pradhan). Mokhtar tries to link translocality and territory in the idea of “littoralisation”, the current seaward-oriented trend inside Oman, from a macroscopic perspective. Different forms and shapes of sea- and desertscapes have an important role in the chapters that follow (e.g. by Nicolini, Verne and Müller-Mahn, Chatty, Wippel); other authors clearly refer to perspective-related landscapes of a local community (Hoffman-Ruf) or of higher education in the Gulf area (Brandenburg).

## 2.10 Blurred Spatial Scales Between the Local and the Global

Social processes unfold on different spatial levels. Such a “geography of scale” ranges – below, beyond and across nation states – from the smallest micro-regional contexts through meso- and macro-regions to quasi- and trans-continental world regions (Swyngedouw 1997; Läßle 1991). Whereas action- and subject-oriented approaches, e.g. in social geography, often favour the former scales, the latter ones are more generally regarded by economic and political studies in regionalism. In general, “region” is understood as a spatial category that ranges between “the local” and “the global” with the TNS as a particular case.

Several authors point out that spatial scales are not fixed and aprioristic containers, either, that only frame and organise social entities, but that they, too, are historical social constructs of material and discursive origin, which challenge established metageographies (see also Brenner 1999; Sassen 2003; Löw 2001). Often, in a conscious “politics of scale”, certain spatial scales are created deliberately. Social conflicts contribute to the existence and the role of different spatial layers that in turn serve as important dimensions of regulation, control and power. At the same time, they run the risk of being mentally reified, including in the fields of research and politics, as the previous discussion of the TNS and world regions has already shown.

Different spatial scales are closely interlinked. Metaphors of “levels” of social life organized in an ascending spatial order don’t seem to work well today when we have to deal with phenomena like global cities, diasporic communities and transnational protest movements. Systemic approaches, for instance, focus on interactions

between social and spatial micro-, meso- and macro-structures (Ritter 1991 and his empirical study on Qatar 1985). There is a continuous rescaling of activities and organisational contexts; new scales are regularly created and others called into question – just as the state level is supplemented by sub- and supranational scales. Sometimes, in periods of exacerbated conflict and crisis, abrupt shifts of scales can occur. Even more, actions and their effects (or resulting flows and connections) regularly leap spatial scales and are rather difficult to be assigned to them without ambiguity (cf. also van Schendel 2005: 294, 296). In addition, perceptions and conceptions of space and space-related identities oscillate between scalar layers, depending on the contexts of action (Weichhart 1990: 75 ff.).

Continuous and accelerating rescaling results in an increasing “scale mismatch” between levels of action, organisation and appropriation. Instead of thinking in separated layers, we need to reconceive them as complementary and interpenetrating. Whereas, according to Sassen (2003), the concept of “globalisation” (Robertson 1995) still starts from a clear and hierarchical distinction of spatial scales and the jumping between them, she prefers the term “multiscalar globalisation” emphasising their interlocking and close interconnectedness. In consequence, scales often mix and boundaries between them increasingly blur.

Finally, several authors in this volume demonstrate the different scales on which social agency and regionalisation take place and which often blend and are difficult to differentiate, for instance, different geographical ranges of contacts of a local rural community (Hoffmann-Ruf) as well as the interference among local, regional and global cultures (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova), the narrower and wider (trans) local and (trans)national regional scales of “therapeutic journeys” (Beaudevin) and the global, regional and local geographical contexts of the Musandam Peninsula (Dietl, Benz).

## 2.11 A Complex Understanding of “Regionalisation”

In studying Oman’s diverse regionalisations, the present volume endeavours to go beyond the exclusive spatial categories of the territorial nation state and conventional world regions – without, conversely, ignoring them – and to develop a broader and more varied understanding of regional contexts. It thereby strives to show the multiple, often simultaneous, overlapping and perspective-related regional configurations and settings Oman, in the present and in the past, contributes to and is a part of. Thus, in the following, after exploring in more detail two of the aforementioned conceptual approaches – “new regionalism” and “translocality” – authors’ empirical studies will cover a great variety of regionalisation processes, from the historical regional connections of al-Hamra (in contemporary Oman’s al-Dakhiliya governorate) and the Sultanate’s exclave Musandam’s economic transnational links to the country’s re-emerging relations with the Indian Ocean area and economic bonds with the United States. Yet, the limits of linguistic expression, powerful established methodologies of research, especially the necessary reliance on existing

institutions, official documents and available data, and the continuing regulative, organisational and coercive power of the TNS make repeated reference to the territorial state as well as to the major world regions unavoidable – for instance, when exploring sub-, trans- and supra-“national” (or, actually, -territorial, -state) regional connections, flows and relations.

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