

## *1,001 Regional Nights*

I read a lot of Doctor Dolittle when I was young, but my favorite was *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*. It had a number of memorable episodes – the dog, Bob, testifying from the witness stand in a British courtroom; the Doctor “fighting” the bulls in Monteverde – but the one that spoke loudest to me was Blind Travel. This was a game the Doctor played whenever he wanted to go on a voyage but couldn’t make his mind up where to go. As he described it:

I would take the atlas and open it with my eyes shut. Next, I’d wave a pencil, still without looking, and stick it down on whatever page had fallen open. Then I’d open my eyes and look. It’s a very exciting game, is Blind Travel. Because you have to swear before you begin that you will go to the place the pencil touches, come what may. Shall we play?<sup>i</sup>

In *The Voyages* he plays with Tommy Stubbins: “When the book falls open,” he tells Stubbins, “wave the pencil around three times and jab it down. Ready? All right, shut your eyes.” Stubbins continues:

It was a tense and fearful moment – but very thrilling. We both had our eyes shut tight. I heard the atlas fall open with a bang. I wondered what page it was: England or Asia. If it should be the map of Asia, so much would depend on where that pencil would land. I waved three times in a circle. I began to lower my hand. The pencil point touched the page. “All right,” I called out, “it’s done.”

The atlas lay open at the *Chart of the South Atlantic Ocean*. The pencil point was resting on the center of Spider Monkey Island. It turned out that Spider Monkey Island was a

floating island, an island that moved around. It wasn't a place they could just go to. First it was a place they had to find.

### *Playing Regional Geography*

When I first began to think seriously about regional geography in the 1970s, Blind Travel came back to me. Its use of chance, its moving target, struck me as a lot more ... *scientific* ... than the regions geographers, myself included, were playing around with. These struck me as little more than lassos of prejudice tossed into space, mapped stereotypes, the most transparent social constructions. Giving away the game were the ever-shifting criteria, the economic system here, over there colonial history, sheer jingoism at home. There seemed to be no diversity so great that the geographer couldn't make out the latent unity; no unity within which the geographer couldn't find the lines of division. It occurred to me that an amusing way to teach regional geography would be to follow Dr. Dolittle's lead and take, say a ring of some kind, an embroidery hoop maybe, and with the eyes closed, toss it onto a map of the world. Wherever it landed on the map would be certain to exhibit all the characteristics of a geographical region. And in elucidating them – that is, in discovering, in making them out – the nature of regions as social constructions could be laid bare.

For example, I recently tossed a ring onto a world map and it landed, well, no surprise really, on water. After all the surface of the earth *is* over two-thirds water. More precisely the ring landed in the Indian Ocean, the north western Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea mostly, and on the littorals of adjacent East Africa, the Gulf States, and India. In regional geography texts these littorals would fall into three distinct regions, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia; but they actually constitute a single region of great anciency, tied together by winds, ocean currents, and trade. Five thousand years ago Egyptian sailors were negotiating the Bab el Mandeb into and through the Gulf of Aden to Punt, to Somalia, trading for ebony and myrrh.<sup>ii</sup> Within the next half century ships were carrying goods through the Arabian Sea between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, lots of goods (*tons* of barley, for example). Following the South Equatorial Current, Indonesians made it to Madagascar, and following the South West Monsoon Drift, Arabs made it to Zanzibar. These connections resulted in the languages Malagasy and Swahili. Greeks were crossing the Indian Ocean in the second or first century BCE. A couple of hundred years later Rome exploited the monsoon to develop an intensive trade with the southern Indian kingdoms of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas. Around 70 AD, the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* – that is, the northwest Indian Ocean – described these very routes along the Indian and African coasts.<sup>iii</sup> Though today the trade includes fewer spices, lots more oil, and Somali piracy, these relationships have never abated. This is a human region tied together by 5,000 years of mercantile history.

Okay, I tossed the ring again and, again, no surprise, it landed on water. More precisely it landed smack in the middle of the North Pacific, again not much of a surprise since the Pacific accounts for nearly half the surface of the world's ocean (the Pacific alone occupies more of the earth's surface than all the land taken together). Well, this is almost too easy. Bounded to the north by the North Pacific Current, to the east by the California Current, to the south by the North Equatorial Current, and to the west by the Kuroshio Current, this region's knit together by, or into, the North Pacific Gyre which may well be the world's largest single ecosystem. It plays an enormous role in carbon sequestration and is furthermore home to the various pieces of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an intense concentration of pelagic plastics, chemical sludge, and other human debris. Estimates of the Patch's size range from that of Texas to that of the whole U.S., or larger.<sup>iv</sup> For 250 years the Pacific Gyre carried the Manila galleons from Acapulco – stuffed with silver from Mexico and Bolivia – to Manila where spices, porcelain, ivory, lacquerware, silk, and other Chinese goods were loaded for the return to Acapulco (and so, on to Europe).<sup>v</sup> The Manila galleons were a major source of revenue for the Hapsburg Empire, for its influence on European history. I could go on. The North Pacific is an obvious region with unfathomable significance to world geography. Strangely enough it plays no such role in any regional geography text I know.

I could throw the ring again ... and again ... and probably never – okay, *very* rarely – land on one of the regions that show up in geography textbooks. A high school geography text I co-authored back in 1976, *World Geography Today*,<sup>vi</sup> didn't claim to take a regional approach, but of course the book was broken into characteristic regional units: Western Europe; Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; Middle East and North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; The Orient; The Pacific World; Latin America; and the United States and Canada. A few years later, in 1989, James Fisher published the third edition of his college-level *Geography and Development: A World Regional Approach*.<sup>vii</sup> These are his regions: Anglo-America; Western Europe; Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; Japan and Australia/New Zealand; Latin America; Africa South of the Sahara; The Middle East and North Africa; and Monsoon Asia. With respect to our simple-minded division, Fisher has moved Japan out of The Orient into ... *the Pacific*? And called the rest of Asia that's not part of the Soviet Union ... *Monsoon Asia*? Here's a far more up-to-date version, Sallie Marston et al.'s, 2011 *World Regions in Global Context: People, Places, and Environments, Fourth Edition*.<sup>viii</sup> Here are its regions: Europe; The Russian Federation, Central Asia, and the Transcaucasus; Middle East and North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; The United States and Canada; Latin America; East Asia; South Asia; Southeast Asia; and Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific. Marston has put Japan back in Asia which she's divided into three parts, and sort of reunited Europe, except for what's become Russia-along-with-the-rest-of-its-former-parts, i.e., what my-co-authors and Fisher called ... the Soviet Union.

I could drag us through a lot more of these. Les Rowntree et al.'s 2012 *Diversity Amid Globalization: World Regions, Environment, Development, Fifth Edition* adds The Caribbean region; relabels the Middle East as Southwest Asia; and divides the rest of Asia up into four, Central, East, South, and Southeast; but otherwise hews to form;<sup>ix</sup> de Blij and Muller's 2010 *Geography: Realms, Regions and Concepts, Fourteenth Edition* adds Middle America, has only three Asias, and separates The Austral Realm from The Pacific Realm but otherwise sounds like our 1976 regionalization<sup>x</sup> ... but there's no point to this. They're all more or less the same: continents basically, or half-continents. Europe is split west/east. Africa is divided north/south. So is North America, everything from the Río Grande south being either attached to South America, which is then called Latin America; or else pulled out into a separate Middle America. Asia has long been divided into a Near, Middle, and Far East with India ... down south somewhere. The margins – Siberia, Japan, the Caribbean, Australia, other islands – they get tacked on to the nearest continent (Japan onto East Asia, the Caribbean Islands onto North America) or they get amalgamated into bizarre combinations (Japan with Australia/New Zealand).

And so what? The world has to be divided up somehow, especially if we're going to teach it. There's just too much of it to take whole. It's too big. So it has to be cracked into bite-sized pieces and ... who has a problem with that? Problems arise, though, when geographers try to ... *justify* their pieces, to claim that their regions have some integrity, that they exist in the world independent of the geographer's pedagogic needs. Well, of course they *do*, for geographers are less scientists here than ... servants of the status quo. As such the regions into which they've divided the world are servants of a *world view*, the contented world view of, especially in the cases I've pointed to, university professors of the United States and England. This is to say, it's the world view of a dominated fraction of the dominant classes. It's a bourgeois world view. Which is to say these are bourgeois regions, regions that support, that embody the values of the bourgeoisie. To do this they have to be naturalized, and indeed it's in the naturalization of these regions that the ideological work is accomplished. Mostly this is done by forgoing history.<sup>xi</sup>

Thus in Fisher's treatment of "Western Europe: Landscapes of Development" you'd never know how much the 16th and 17th century transformation – that is, the *creation* – of modern Spain was due to the silver that flowed from Bolivia and México thanks to the wholesale slaughter and enslavement of the native inhabitants; silver that fueled the Manila galleons; silver that flowed from Spain throughout Europe; silver that laid the foundations for the earliest murmurings of the industrial revolution. Later, speaking of México, Fisher says, "It has benefited throughout its history from some of the richest mineral deposits on earth – first in the colonial period with silver and now in the twentieth century with petroleum,"<sup>xii</sup> though exactly how *México* benefitted from its silver he fails to explain. Where history cannot be evaded, certainly the consequences can be. The history of European colonization is hard to avoid in discussions of India and Sub-Saharan Africa, where colonization is treated as a "factor," but that it was simultaneously

a “factor” in Europe’s history passes without so much as an allusion. That is, the regions are treated as isolates: they develop or fail to develop pretty much on their own, and largely due to “factors,” and this lays the groundwork for the astonishment with which globalization will be greeted.

When it comes to explanations – to those “factors” – regional geographers prefer to lean on the environment rather than on history and so: “In order to understand better some of the problems and issues in China’s historical evolution” – dealt with in four paragraphs – “it is useful to examine the nature of environmental and ecological conditions in the source area from which Chinese civilization and culture grew.”<sup>xiii</sup> Yes, *loess* will establish the reasons for China’s historical evolution even though *loess* is also common “in parts of Anglo-America and Europe.” Elsewhere other factors provide the explanation: “The initially small population that developed the United States and Canada had the advantage of an immensely rich environment.”<sup>xiv</sup> Europe’s advantage, on the other hand, is its location at the center of the “Land Hemisphere” which gives its inhabitants “easy contact with almost the entire habitable world and its resources.”<sup>xv</sup> Culture exists and history does happen: there is no question in any this of an environmental determinism. But somehow pointing out environmental advantages and disadvantages simply seems to make ... *common sense*.

### *The Trouble with Regions*

The trouble with regions is that *common sense* is the *only* sense they make. Take Latin America. Usually taken to be everything south of the Río Grande, it’s supposed to be a significant improvement on simply splitting the Americas into North and South which, after all, are the merest physical divisions. It’s supposed, in the characterization of Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, to join together “the zones of Spanish colonization in South and North America,”<sup>xvi</sup> but even as it fails to do this, it does a lot of less convenient things. For one thing, Spain certainly didn’t colonize Brazil – that was the whole point of the Treaty of Tordesillas – and it didn’t colonize Surinam either. That was the British for a while, and then the Dutch for the next almost three-hundred years. Between Dutch-speaking Surinam and Portuguese-speaking Brazil lies French Guiana, never Spanish and currently French. On the other side of Surinam lies Guyana whose official language is English thanks to having been a British colony for a couple of hundred years. Culturally Guyana is a piece of the Anglophone Caribbean. So, okay, maybe not *Spanish* colonization, but then ... Latin?

No, hardly Latin either. On the one hand there’s nothing particularly “Latin” about either Surinam or Guyana – to say nothing of Antigua, Jamaica, Trinidad, Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, and the Virgin islands if the Caribbean is yoked in (not to get into Belize and the rest of the Caribbean coast) – while on the other hand cutting it off at the Río Grande leaves distinctly “Latin” Québec at sea in “Anglo”-America (and we won’t

get into the French colonization of the lower Mississippi Valley either) along with, well, along with the emphatically *Spanish*-dominated stretches of ... the U.S.

These are easy to overlook, but were we to follow Lewis and Wigen and describe Latin America as “the zones of Spanish colonization in South and North America,” we’d certainly have to include most of the western U.S. since it was Spanish, and then Mexican, for the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and first half of the nineteenth centuries. We’d have to add Florida too since in 1513 Ponce de León claimed it for the Spanish crown and in 1565 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine to make it the oldest continuously occupied “European-established” city in the U.S. But the claims for embracing the western U.S. in Latin America rest on far more than this history. Check out a U.S. Census Bureau map of the percentage of Hispanic or Latino population in U.S. counties. Southern California, the Central Valley, southern Arizona, most of New Mexico, west and south Texas, swaths of Washington and Oregon, Colorado, southern Florida, central North Carolina, the Washington-Boston corridor, and the Chicago area are all awash with Hispanics of which, altogether, there are just under 50 million in the U.S. Twenty-eight million of these are Mexican. Mexican food sales in the U.S. come to almost \$10 billion annually.<sup>xvii</sup> Miami has a Cuban-American plurality and is widely known as the “Capital of Latin America.” New York city has 800,000 Puerto Ricans, almost 600,000 Dominicans, and 300,000 Mexicans. With all the others, New York is a third Hispanic. In the history of salsa, New York is as important as Venezuela, Panama, and Puerto Rico. I could go on and on.

In their own regionalization of the world, Lewis and Wigen break the Americas up into a North America, an Ibero America, and an African America. This last sweeps up the Caribbean, the Caribbean coast from Belize south, and the Atlantic coast of South America down to Río. Doing this does excise the pesky English and Dutch settlements from Latin America, acknowledges the real differences between the slave coasts and the Indian interiors, but ... *African America*? Without the nearly 40 million African Americans in the U.S.? C’mon! This makes *no* sense at all.

The fact is, none of it does. If Latin America makes little sense thanks to its *exclusion* of the 50 million Latinos living in the U.S., their *inclusion* in Anglo-America makes even less sense. Changing the name from “Anglo-America” to “the United States and Canada” does get rid of the linguistic irony, but does nothing to ameliorate the problem of drawing a line through regions that are Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican-American, that is, through zones that are U.S., Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican exclusively in some narrow political sense. In most other senses – language, employment, foodways, music, ethnicity, et cetera et cetera – they’re indivisible. Puerto Ricans, in fact, are U.S. citizens!

Remarkably, while shoving away these *kin*, Anglo-America embraces dozens and dozens of otherwise more or less sovereign peoples whose lifeways – language, employment, food, music, ethnicity and so on – are as far removed from those embraced

in the region with them as can be imagined. Here I'm referring to the several hundred ethno-linguistic groups we call, with great license, Native Americans or First Nations. You know, the Inuit, the Cree, the Dene, the various Athabaskans, the Sioux, the Iroquoian, the Cherokee, the Comanche, the Apache, the Navajo, the Native Hawaiians, and all the rest of the hundreds of different peoples who were living here before the Europeans and Africans got here, and are *still* living here, in fact, in increasingly large and vocal numbers. Here's a map from the U.S. Census Bureau showing their territorial situation in the conterminous U.S. as of ten years ago. The green are U.S. federal Indian lands; the other colors reflect state or tribal designations. As we zoom in you can see that in addition to the large areas reserved for the Navajo, the Ouray, the Sioux, the Blackfoot and a few others, there is a huge number of small, often tiny areas. California is thick with these, many of them, no matter how insignificant they may appear on the map, the sites of lucrative gambling casinos. Here's a map of Canadian First Nations. Notice that the north central portion of the map is empty. That's because this is Inuit territory, the largest nation in which, Nunavut, is an enormous piece of Canada.

If we zoom in a little we can instantly see that the Canadian-U.S. border paid zero attention to the location of the Indians living there. This is the Blackfeet Reservation in the U.S. But here's where the Blackfoot Confederacy lived and where the three Canadian First Nations of Blackfoot Indians are. In Canada they don't live *on* reservations but *as* nations, here, the Siksika Nation, the Piikani Nation, and the Kainai Nation, or as this last has called itself since 2006, The People's Republic of the Kainaiwa Nation. And, okay, these all fall squarely *within* what the regional geographers I've been referring to would call either the United States and Canada or Anglo-America; but this one, the Tohono O'odham Nation, flops, while speaking mainly O'odham, from *Anglo-America* into *Latin America*. The O'odham have had an interesting history. From the early eighteenth century through the present they've been occupied – as they put it on their own website<sup>xviii</sup> – by foreign governments, first that of Spain, then Mexico, and since the 1853 Gadsden Purchase, Mexico *and* the U.S., for the Gadsden Purchase pretty much split O'odham land in half. Since for years no one much cared about this border this didn't use to be a problem, but with the rise of U.S. hysteria about undocumented Mexican labor, life for the O'odham has become notably fragmented.

This splitting of the Tohono O'odham Nation; of the Blackfoot Confederacy; of the Latinos in the U.S. from those “South of the Border,” is one form of the violence regionalization indulges in, the form that *distinguishes* one region from another. Its opposite is the mindless *amalgamation*, the denial of difference, that binds regions together internally. Thus the five dozen or so indigenous peoples of Mexico – speaking as many languages, very often exclusively, Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec, Otomi, Totonac, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, and so on; and living more or less as they have since long, long before Cortés arrived – are all homogenized not merely into Mexicans, but into Latinos, Hispanics, which they are anything but. This leads to enormous surprise on the part of

U.S. employers when they discover the Mexicans they've just hired speak only the most rudimentary Spanish.

This problem of amalgamation can be found in every region, but perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in Europe which, as we meet here, is a boil with no fewer, and perhaps many more than ten dozen active separatist movements seeking greater autonomy, often self-determination. Powerful nations, the United Kingdom is a great example, are threatened with a loss of integrity. In the United Kingdom there are activist movements in Cornwall – with its terrorist Cornish National Liberation Army –, in England, in Gibraltar, in Guernsey, in the Isle of Man, in Jersey, in Mercia, in North Ireland, in Scotland – which will hold a referendum on secession in less than two years –, in Wales, in Wessex, even in Yorkshire. Some of these are merely silly, but some reflect deep dissatisfactions of very long standing. In Spain, to take another example, there are movements – often more than one – among the Basques, in Navarre, in Catalonia, in the Val d'Aran, in the Balearic Islands, in Valencia, in Aragon, in Galicia, in Andalusia, in Asturias, in Cantabria, in the Canary Islands, and in Castile and León. In Catalonia half the population is in favor of seceding from Spain, a country whose fiscal situation is sufficiently parlous that talk about Catalan independence effects global financial markets. The Basque movement has roiled Europe for years.

### *It's a Global History*

The relevant history here is not that given in Marston with its 1500 CE map of early modern Europe mosaicked out as a handful of integrated kingdoms around the microstates of the Holy Roman Empire, “legacies of the feudal hierarchies of the Middle Ages,” all of which, over the succeeding 500 years, will mature into today's nation states, well, except for the “Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans.” The map is silly. In its versions of England and France, for example, there is no demarcation of the Isle of Man, of Wales, of Cornwall, or of Brittany which, with Scotland and Ireland, these days comprise the Celtic League, a UNESCO member, an NGO that promotes self-determination for Celtic peoples, all of whom have active secessionist movements. These Celts are the remnants of peoples who in the second and first millennia BCE lived all over Europe, from the Atlantic and North Sea coasts nearly to the Black Sea. The relevant history would explain how this wide-spread population got crushed up against the very edge of the continent.

Which is to say, if we really want to understand contemporary Europe, we have understand ancient Central Asia; for if it's the Goths who begin pushing the Celts west – in the case of England, specifically the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons – it's the Huns who pushed the Goths into Spain, the Franks into France (Attila reaches Orleans!), and the Vandals through Europe to Africa (from which they launch the concluding attack on Rome). In the fifth century the Huns get pushed west by the White Huns, a Mongolian people of the Altai, at the same time that Slavs begin moving south and west from the



Oder and the Don. They're followed by the Avars who push through to the Elbe. Then the Magyrs, the Khazars, the Turks until, from the south, the Moslems cut right across the Iberian Peninsula and over the Pyrenees to Tours. They're followed by the Cumans, the Kipchaks, and finally the Mongols of Genghis Khan who give the whole ever-westward moving mass one more gigantic shove.

The poor Celts, on the Atlantic and North Sea Coasts for three thousand years at that point, and with no place to go (except America), simply get squashed up against the ocean into less and less space. Behind them the Goths and Franks get slammed as far west as they can go. And so on, until you've got the sort of crazy quilt we know as nineteenth century Europe. The idea that these peoples were meaningfully annealed into our modern nation states is delusional. French was a minority language in France when World War I began.<sup>xix</sup> This wasn't because a uniform national language wasn't a desideratum of the French government, but because for the previous two thousand years Central Asia had erupted all over what today we choose to call Europe.

Oh, and all over other places too, like China.

Seeing Europe as land's end instead of at the center of the "Land Hemisphere," and across thousands of years instead of within living memory, shifts the focus from a region to a process. Seen as a process what we choose to call Europe remains very much in play, for Europe continues to be a site of invading populations, these days from India, Pakistan, the Anglophone Caribbean, Turkey, Greece, Algeria, and West Africa. One thing these new sources reflect is the changes in transport mode, from foot, horse, and wagon, to cars, buses, and planes. Differences in what many refer to as development *do* produce gradients, but here it's important to keep in mind that within the last hundred years the gradient ran *from* Europe to the rest of the world, *to* Argentina – where among the Spanish speakers plenty of folk speaking a Celtic tongue can be found – *to* Chile, *to* Brazil, *to* Venezuela, *to* the U.S., the U.S. peopled by Swedes, Norwegians, Irish, Scots, English, Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, oh, and Basques and Bretons!

Humans are such short-sighted creatures. If something's been so for a generation it's always been so, and the stories we're told as kids have *such* power. America – by which I mean the U.S. – has long told itself it's filled with these *Europeans* (the Africans, in this imagination of the country, never somehow *migrate* to it and the Mexicans are just ignored) and this story, celebrated every Thanksgiving – this *essential* image – is ultimately why the border between North and Latin America is drawn where it is. Americans are white, they speak English (sooner or later), and they're middle-class; Mexicans are brown, speak Spanish, and are poor. None of this is true, of course, and never has been, but it *is* mostly these racial, linguistic, and class biases that underwrite the literally unspeakable division of the Americas at the Río Grande. This is all dressed up in more speakable clothes – brown, for example, will be turned into "Indian heritage" (history as a kind of decoration) – but preserving the distinction, preserving the

“European” taint of the U.S., is one of the important things this regionalization does, one of the essential ideological tasks it performs.

As for the Europe those American forebears came from, well, prior to the Bolshevik revolution, probably even up to World War II, no one would have thought about Europe the way our regional geographies do. No one would have come up with regionalizations like *World Geography Today*'s Western Europe/Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, like *Geography and Development*'s Western Europe/Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, like Marston's Europe/The Russian Federation, Central Asia, and the Transcaucasus. Before the rise of Communism there was Europe ... and it included Russia, or at least so much of Russia as lay west of the Ural Mountains which was one of barriers supposed to separate Europe from Asia. Then World War II was fought, the Soviets moved as far west as *they* could, and we divided Germany into East and West and ran that division from the Arctic to the Adriatic and Black Seas. In *World Geography Today* we cut Czechoslovakia and Hungary from Western Europe, Hungary! whose king for centuries had been that Hapsburg who was *the* European hegemon of the sixteen century, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire *and* Spain, the Netherlands *and* Hungary. Budapest not in Europe? Prague not in Europe? Berlin ... *not* in Europe? With the end of the Cold War, with the reunification of pre-War Germany, the dividing line in Marston moves east to reincorporate the Baltic nations, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. But Russia – St. Petersburg! where Stravinsky grew up – that remains ... somewhere else, in another region. This is *all* nonsense, is, as I said in the beginning, lassos of prejudice tossed into space. I mean, splitting Europe west and east is three generations years old; it was motivated by nothing but politics; it's shifting as we meet here. Regions? Give me a break.

Fluxes, fluxes and flows better gets at this. Instead of thinking about Europe as a place, think about it as no more than a single frame in a movie, as a momentary crystallization out of the continuous flow of energy, of chemicals, and of life forms that *is* the planet earth and everything on it. It really is *all* flows, *all* transformations, *all* in motion and, from the very beginning, *global*, entirely global, that is: whole, one.

The world is seamless, whole, integral ... one thing, but at the same time every part is in its own motion. Everything grows from, is rooted in, the local. Of course! *Where else?* But what else *is* the local but the intersection in the here and now of *global* processes, masses of air in motion, tectonic plates, the gradual migration of seed, the ceaseless conjugation of bacterial DNA, the ebb and flow of capital, the exchange of talk and songs? Because the local is everywhere, and is everywhere different, and because in the local every global process intersects with, chats with, meets up with every other, to think about the local is always to think about the global – and *vice versa* – because in the local *everything* touches, everything pushes, leans on, everything *tickles* everything else. The local is where the global hits the rubber. The local is the global at work.

I wrote these words thirty after I committed my youthful folly of *World Geography Today* – perhaps as a way of atoning for it – in a book called *Five Billion Years of Global Change*. I think I was moved to write it because I couldn't stand the din of the “Globalization is coming! Globalization is coming!” crowd, the nay-sayers anxious over the loss of individuality, particularity; over the ... erasure of *difference* (by which they meant *distinction*); terrified of being asked to confront, even to accept the Other; afraid, ultimately, of *losing* something, something, of course, that was never actually theirs to begin with. I mean, none of us actually “owns” even a tiny bit of the planet, let the law say what it may.

Accepting this is not necessarily easy. Accepting that the air I'm breathing was very recently in many of your bodies, that it's not just oxygen but a microbial mist rich with life forms far more ancient than any multicellular organism like humans, that while it may have some forms unique to this room, almost all move around the world in the ever-dynamic atmosphere, here today, there tomorrow, and someplace else the day after that. That's just the microbes in the air. But it's *all* in motion: the earth's churning interior, the great tectonic plates, the oceans in their thermohaline circulation, plant seeds, sea life, ants, roaches, birds in restless migration, wolves, humans, moving, carrying stuff, stuff caught in matted hair or secured by tumplines, loaded onto pack animals or stuffed into holds, trundled into train cars or piled up in containers on the decks of ships, carried by planes or ... the internet.

In the beginning most trade goods didn't move too far, stayed for a while inside a radius of say 60 or so miles.<sup>xx</sup> But the arsenic- and antimony-rich copper ores cast into a crown 5500 years ago at Nahal Mishmar had traveled 800 miles at least,<sup>xxi</sup> and as long as 5000 years ago they were using cloves in the Euphrates Valley, *cloves* now, from the Maluku in Indonesia, thousands of miles away.<sup>xxii</sup> The speed with which the radius of trade goods grew is an index of the rapidity with which the logic of trade evolved. By the time the Bronze Age opened – which it or its analogues did at different times in different places – there was Baltic amber all over the place, in Hungary and in the Balkans and Greece; there was Greek pottery in Italy, in Sardinia, and Spain; jade all over China; gold moving in Africa; turquoise from Santa Fe throughout Mesoamerica; parrots and macaws from tropical Mexico in Pueblo graves; salt everywhere ...

### *Regional Geography Is a Form of Defense*

The world's been globalized for five billion years. Long-distance human trade, that's *five thousand years old*. This is long enough, you'd think, for us to have gotten used to the fact that the globe's a single thing, unified by the dynamism of the very processes it's given rise to. Given this dynamism, all you can usefully do is tell stories about what's moved where and when, what happened, and what's happening now,

acknowledging, as you do, that the story's on-going, that it's not over, and that it never will be over.

Regionalization wants to stop this process, to flash freeze it and so not have to accept it, *any* of it. Regionalization wants to imagine that humans aren't intertwined with the rest of the planet's life forms, wants to believe that we're not all descended from Africans, wants to pretend that Europeans are something other than Asians, that Anglo-America isn't significantly Mexican. In its most exaggerated, absurd form, it wants to imagine that things – especially human things – are autochthonous to their contemporary location, that somehow they sprang up out of the ground as a beneficence of place, place which then becomes sacred, holy, defensible against the world. This is why regions have fences to define them, whether they take the form of the oceans separating East Asia from the United States and Canada; the deserts separating the Middle East and North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa; the mountains separating East and South Asia; the Cold War's Iron Curtain that used to separate Western Europe from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; the wall being built today along the Anglo- /Latin American border.

Walls, of course, can be scaled and oceans, deserts, and mountains crossed, and it's this that makes regional geography so vital. That some day there may be a continuous wall between Mexico and the U.S. hardly matters if all the new houses are being built by Mexicans and you can buy Corona Extra wherever you buy beer. The competition for jobs and markets, the threat of a growing Catholicism in an historically Protestant region, the creeping miscegenation promising to dilute the brown and white to a uniform tan, all these dull the edge of the ethnocentrism, of the chauvinism, of the jingoism necessary to project power, to maintain a robust military, to erect a wall. In this context regional geography plays a prophylactic role, inoculating students with a regional identity worth defending. Just as Scheherazade told 1,001 stories to quell the wrath of King Shahryar, so Western bourgeoisie spin tales of world regions in an effort to explain, to justify, to defend a world they believe is both theirs *and* under attack.

The current name for this attack is globalization. From the 1940s through the 1980s it was called communism but after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the threat of communism became less credible; and besides, as a threat, globalization has distinct advantages. For one thing, globalization comes from everywhere, which is precisely where the interests of the dominant fractions of Europe and Anglo-America have always lain. This means that dominant interests can take advantage of global opportunities at the same time that they rail against global opportunism. Globalization *is* an acknowledgement of the global wholeness of the planet but *within* a regional framework. For another thing, globalization is as much a promise as it is a challenge. That is, globalization can simultaneously code for capital market integration *and* Chinese manufacturing; for multinational corporations *and* international drug and weapons trade; for expanding sources of raw materials *and* environmental degradation.

Globalization lets the bourgeoisie have its regions and eat them too. Here: on Thanksgiving, Anglo-Americans celebrate regional foundation stories by eating Mexican vegetables off dishes made in China while watching football on South Korean TVs. Here a regional imaginary is layered over the fruits of a globalized economy. That is, even as the system benefits from the exploitation of international trade, the layering encourages the jingoist exploitation of the founding Thanksgiving myth in defense of local interests. Of course the strongest fences are built around the nations out of which the regions are composed. Thanksgiving myths, independence day celebrations, the veneration of veteran soldiers, the teaching of national histories, national currencies and stamps, all these participate in the construction of the national identities that in territorial terms comprise the geographers' regions. Anglo-America is the United States and Canada. Europe is the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and all the rest of them. East Asia is China, Japan, and the Koreas. South Asia is Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The national borders and the regional boundaries are reciprocally constructive.

But do they make *any* sense?

I've tossed the ring one last time and, surprisingly enough it's landed ... on land. In fact it's landed on an enormous mountain massif. Unsurprisingly, it's not one of our geographers' regions, but rather one that *World Geography Today* put in The Orient; that *Geography and Development* thought was in Monsoon Asia; that *World Regions in Global Context* and *Diversity Amid Globalization* locate in parts of three regions, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia; and that Lewis and Wigen describe as in parts of four, South, East, Southeast, and Central Asia (Lamaist Zone). This would certainly suggest that it's unlikely to constitute a region of its own, and indeed "its complex ethnic and linguistic mosaic has presented a bewildering puzzle for ethnographers and historians,"<sup>xxiii</sup> as well as would-be rulers. So it's a relief to find that at least one historian, Willem van Schendel, has given the huge massif a name, Zomia; and that at least one political scientist, James C. Scott, regards it as an exemplary *region*. And it turns out, these two are hardly alone.<sup>xxiv</sup> In fact an entire special issue of the *Journal of Global History* was turned over to discussions of Zomia.<sup>xxv</sup>

Having noted that "Scholarly work on the area has been as fragmented and isolated as the terrain itself," Scott goes on to make the case that Zomia, "qualifies as a region in the *strong* sense of the term." That is, Zomia "shares important cultural features that mark it off from adjacent areas," just like Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean basin did (which, incidentally, falls into two regions in *every* regional geography); although in contrast to Braudel's example, where the Mediterranean's water seemed to *bind* peoples across it, mountains, which is pretty much all Zomia consists of, has more often *divided* them.

What Scott claims unifies the region is ... *statelessness*, a statelessness that's resulted not merely from the region's relative inaccessibility, but from the fact that the hill populations "have actively resisted incorporation into the framework of the classical

state, the colonial state, and the independent nation-state.” Scott adds that it’s “a resistance with deep roots. In the precolonial period, the resistance can be seen in a *cultural* refusal of lowland patterns and in the flight of lowlanders seeking refuge in the hills.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Scott goes on to argue, “that much of the population in the hills has, for more than a millennium and a half, come there to evade the manifold afflictions of state-making projects in the valleys.”<sup>xxvii</sup> He goes on to make his case for the region for another 421 pages. I’ll take it as made.

Here then we have another ancient region that’s not only not in any regional geography, but flouts as well the reciprocal construction of nations and regions, flouts it ... *by definition of the region*. And this points up the most serious limitation of the geographers’ regions, their construction around nation-states. In the end, it turns out, they’re regions *only* of nation-states.

Well, I guess it makes them easy to draw.

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<sup>i</sup> Hugh Lofting, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Lippicott, Philadelphia, 1922), p. 115.

<sup>ii</sup> I know 5,000 years ago sounds like *way* back, but it’s actually only 3,000 BCE, which, okay, is back far enough. The classical description of this trade is due only to Pliny (1st century CE) but there’s archeological evidence for all of the parts, some of it, from Mesopotamia, documentary. Really it only sounds like a long time ago because we still can’t get used to the idea that these weren’t aliens or craggy-browed Neanderthals, but people “just like” you and me. Okay, their “consciousness” was undoubtedly different but

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... how different? For extensive bibliographic references on world systems trade at this time, see my *Five Billion Years of Global Trade* (Guilford, New York, 2004), the notes to pp. 196-200.

<sup>iii</sup> The author of the periplus is unknown. See Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text With Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989).

<sup>iv</sup> For a very readable treatment of the garbage in this part of the Pacific, see Donovan Hohn's *Moby-Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea ...* (Viking, New York, 2011).

<sup>v</sup> The locus classicus here in William Lyle Schurz's *The Manila Galleon* (Dutton, New York, 1939).

<sup>vi</sup> Saul Israel, Douglas Johnson, and Denis Wood, *World Geography Today* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1976). This is a high school-lower level college text. Though it doesn't say so, this was the fifth edition of the book, but the first I worked on. Johnson and I were hired to help bring the text back a little from the Cold War rhetoric that had been Israel's stock-in-trade. Johnson and I worked on the sixth, 1980 edition as well, before jumping ship. A new edition comes out every three or four years, most recently in 2008 (from what is now Holt McDougal).

<sup>vii</sup> James S. Fisher, ed., *Geography and Development: A World Regional Approach, Third Edition* (Merrill Publishing, Columbus, OH, 1989). This was an introductory college text. Doug Johnson worked on this one too.

<sup>viii</sup> Sallie Marston, Paul Knox, Diana Liverman, Vincent Del Casino, and Paul Robbins, *World Regions in Global Context: People, Places, and Environments, Fourth Edition* (Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River NJ, 2011). This is introductory college and university text by a bunch of well-respected American geographers.

<sup>ix</sup> Les Rowntree, Martin Lewis, Marie Price and William Wyckoff, *Diversity Amid Globalization: World Regions, Environment, Development, Fifth Edition* (Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 2012). This is another introductory college and university text from the same publisher as the Marston volume. It's claim is to really pay attention to globalization. We'll meet Martin Lewis again soon.

<sup>x</sup> H. J. de Blij and Peter Muller's *Geography: Realms, Regions and Concepts, Fourteenth Edition* (Wiley, Hoboken NJ, 2010) is the best-selling world regional geography text, and one of the oldest: it first hit the classroom in 1971. It might be called *Geography* but its cover only has the words REGIONS in huge letters superimposed over a photo.

<sup>xi</sup> In their *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997), Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen argue for precisely the opposite, that is, for using history to make sense of regions. Their regions are, however, pretty much everyone else's. See in particular their chapter, "World Regions: An Alternative Scheme." Lewis is one of the author's of Rowntree's *Diversity Amid Globalization*.

<sup>xii</sup> Fisher, op. cit., p. 408.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p. 594.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lewis and Wigen, p. 158.

<sup>xvii</sup> The food figures are from *Hispanic Food and Beverages in the U.S.: Market and Consumer Trends in Latino Cuisine, 4th Edition* (Packaged Facts, Rockville MD, 2010), summaries of which are available online at <http://www.packagedfacts.com/Hispanic-Food-Beverages-2565237/> (accessed 2 October 2012). But also see Gustavo Arellano's *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (Scribner, New York, 2012))

<sup>xviii</sup> [http://www.tonation-nsn.gov/history\\_culture.aspx](http://www.tonation-nsn.gov/history_culture.aspx) (accessed 6 October 2012)

<sup>xix</sup> See Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War* (Norton, New York, 2007), especially pp. 50-70, and the maps on p. 54 and pp. 58-59.

<sup>xx</sup> See Anthony Harding's discussion of trade in "Bronze Age Chiefdoms and the End of Stone Age Europe," in Göran Burenhult, ed., *The People of the Stone Age*, Harper, San Francisco. 1993, pp. 106-122.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ozment, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>xxii</sup> Joanna Hall Brierley, *Spices: The Story of Indonesia's Spice Trade*, Oxford, Oxford, 1994, p. 2. This is one of those "romance of ..." books but a neat enough little sketch (for more detail see, G. Buccellati and M. Kelley-Buccellati, "Terqa: The First Eight Seasons," *Annales Archéologiques Arabe-Syriennes*, 33, 1983, pp. 47-67). For the general context, see Robert M. Adams's well-known, "Anthropological Perspectives on Ancient Trade," *Current Anthropology* 15, 1974, pp. 239-258. Having observed how little we know (which is still the truth), he says, "On the basis of what is already known, however, there appears to be little doubt that long-distance trade was a formidable socioeconomic force. This was so in spite of its being confined largely to commodities of very high value in relation to weight and bulk because of high transport costs, and in spite of its directly involving only a small part of the population" (p. 247).

<sup>xxiii</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Some of these others include Jean Michaud, ed., *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples* (Curzon Press, Richmond [Surrey], 2000), where see especially the introduction by John McKinnon and Michaud, pp. 1-25; and Hjørleifur Jonsson, whose *Mien Relations: Mountain Peoples, Ethnography, and State Control* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2005) pays special attention to state relations.

<sup>xxv</sup> Edited by William G. Clarence-Smith and Jean Michaud, and called *Zomia and Beyond*, the issue ran articles by five scholars. One of them, by Sara Shneiderman, entitled, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some Scholarly and Political Considerations Across Time and Space," suggested an expanded region (*Journal of Global History* 5(2), 2010, pp. 289-312).

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.