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REGIO, CHŌRA, REGION

Regio

Thirty years ago, with regard to the definition of region, a core issue in geography, Claude Raffestin (1984, pp. 69-72) suggested that we ask ourselves, first of all, not what a region is, but where its name comes from, and, about this subject, quoted Benveniste's studies (1969, pp. 9-15) on the root of the Latin word *regio*. The question of the origin of terms, in my view, remains to this day pivotal with regard to regions, and indeed has to be enriched with the semantic history of other words, as I shall try to do here. But focusing for the moment on *regio*: its semantics is particularly eloquent in relation to a terminological choice made by Augustus, which can be considered a founding choice, also inasmuch as, if it is not original, anyhow it goes back two thousand years. The first Roman Emperor divided Italy into parts which he chose to call *regiones*. But why was Augustus the *auctor*, to express this in Pliny's terms (*N.H.* III, 46), of such a *discriptio*, i.e. division? And, most of all, what identity did the Emperor intend to confer on the resulting parts of Italy by calling them *regiones*?

To understand the reasons for the *discriptio*, it is enough to quote Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 370): «homogeneous space is in no way a smooth space; on the contrary, it is the form of striated space». Which, turning the terminology on its head, means that a space must be striated so that it becomes homogeneous, that is, it becomes the image of a central power in all parts of the land over which this power extends in the same form. In other words, it is by means of striations that a power turns an area of land into its own territory ⁽¹⁾.

The regional plan drawn up by Augustus, thus by a Roman power which has renewed itself as principate, consists essentially in the aim – I shall not here discuss to what extent successful or not ⁽²⁾ – of making the identity of the *terra Italia* uniform by striating it in a new form. That is to say, the *discriptio* into *regiones* is the projection of a homogeneous identity onto each of the resulting parts. This identity is built, first of all, by analogy and through difference. By analogy, to the extent that the division of Italy into *regiones* recalls, at least terminologically, the division of the city of Rome into *regiones*: this fits in particularly well with a cultural policy which wanted to make Italy seem as a greater Rome. Through difference, to the extent that the division of Italy into *regiones*, distinct from the division of the rest of the empire into *provinciae*, leads to recognize the former as a land that does enjoy the extension of citizenship and other privileges, which the provinces, instead, do not. But what is most important is that the significance of the division into *regiones*, in my view, concerns not

(1) Territory is here intended, following Farinelli (2009, p. 14), as «l'ambito individuato dall'esercizio della pratica del potere» («the area characterized by the exercise of the practice of power»). On this cf. also Raffestin (1980).

(2) On the «identità incompiuta» («unfinished identity») of Roman Italy, see Giardina (1997), and also Gabba (1998). For a different opinion on this subject, see Tibiletti (1978).

only their purpose or utility (3): *a priori*, in fact, I think that it concerns the very nature and identity of the different parts of Italy. Italy was the land of many peoples, thus of different lands because they were concretely marked by different historico-cultural paths, of which progressive Romanization had not removed the traces, and which Augustus himself, in his *discriptio*, took into account. It has been frequently pointed out, in fact, that the division of Italy into *regiones* was a shrewd partition, *qua* attentive to certain «lines of resistance» (Eco, 2000, pp. 50, 53), i.e. physical and/or cultural boundaries pre-existing on the Italic ground. But the fact remains that this *discriptio* projected onto different lands, *qua* marked by different historico-cultural paths, a common identity, that of *regiones*, i.e. of parts of one and the same whole.

And what identity is super-imposed by *regio*? The identity is clearly spatial, quantitative and enumerative, inasmuch as it derives from the tables (maps and lists) of the central power. It is enumerative and quantitative because it is probably based on written tables: the list of the *regiones*, which were identified first of all on the basis of a number, but also the lists of the towns and colonies which were part of each of the regions and which therefore established, at least in part, their size and boundaries (Nicolet, 1988, pp. 181-223). The archival enumeration as well as the identification of boundaries are the same principles that inform Pliny's description of Italy in terms of *regiones*. The description in question does not consist only of this, but it is peculiarly this, especially when contrasted with Strabo's description, which will be discussed below.

As for the spatial nature of *regiones*: one may speak of the space of the maps drawn on the tables of the central power; but this applies to all portions of the empire, not only to those of Italy. It is rather the semantics itself of *regio* which most eloquently speaks about spatiality. *Regio*, which belongs to the same family as *rex*, *regere*, *rectus*, and *regula*, is primarily a direction and a line, in particular a straight line, which becomes a boundary line – hence the meaning of *regio* as limit and frontier, and thus delimited portion, region. *Regio* speaks about a geometric spatiality of straight lines, about a drawing of boundaries not only on maps/tables, but first and foremost in the sky and on the earth. The meanings of *regio*, in fact, also lead us back to the lines drawn by the augurs, and thus to the sacredness of those rites of foundation which reflect heaven's order on earth (cf. Rykwert, 1976). Augustus was officially an augur, as can be read in the *Res gestae* (7, 3), and, moreover, the very name *Augustus* is linked to the root of *augur*. According to an established, though not unanimously shared, interpretative tradition, the root of *augur* and *Augustus* has also to be associated with *augere*, from which *auctor* and *auctoritas* (4). And with *auctoritas* one gets right to the heart of Augustus' principate (Mazzarino, 1973, chap. III). But even just considering the link between *regiones* and *augur*, the semantics of *regio* is thus able to speak about the figure of the *princeps*, exactly in line with the way in which Augustus portrayed himself in the context of his cultural policy, which was a conscious recovery, in a renewed form, of the striations of tradition. And by the striations of tradition here is meant the geometric spatiality of lines drawn on the ground, aimed, well beyond ritual purposes, at the rationalization and organization of the land itself. Because it is with straight and orthogonal – standardizing and modular – lines that the Romans striated the land they dominated, thus making it their own territory, that is, the area of the exercise of their power (see above), and, at the same time, the image of their identity. It is enough to mention the checkerboard plan of towns, centuriation,

(3) I shall not here discuss whether only statistical or also administrative. On this issue cf. Thomsen (1966), Polverini (1998), Laffi (2007, pp. 81-117).

(4) On the link between *augere* and *augur*, see Ernout-Meillet (1959, *s.v. augere*); Benveniste (1969, pp. 148-151). On the contrary, on the absence of such a link, see Semerano (1994, *s.v. augur* and *augustus*).

castra: all sides of the same identity, expressed spatially. In other words, the straight lines evoked by the semantics of *regio* reflect a Roman tradition rooted in, marked on the territory; or rather, they recall a tradition that was much older and also already Italic ⁽⁵⁾, but which, when elaborated by the Romans, in the context of their culture, acquired a particularly systematic character.

Regio, in short, is a part, as the result of a partitioning, of territory – thus a cultural «cutout» ⁽⁶⁾ – which by virtue of its very name reflects the striations of a *romanitas* which has renewed itself around the figure of the *princeps*. And perhaps also because of this, *regiones* is the name chosen for the portions of a land, Italy, in which «now» (at the time of Augustus and Tiberius) «all are Romans», as Strabo wrote (*Geogr.* V, 1, 10; cf. VI, 1, 2). More generally, *regio* is one of the words that best show how much the territorial nature of modern states has inherited from that of the Roman Empire. To the extent that the root **reg* associates *regio* with *regula*, the imposition of the *regula*-rule, i.e. of the ethical-political norm, appears to be a function of a spatial delimitation/division which bears the characteristics of straightness. In the link between *regio* and *regula* one can thus find the fundamental meanings which Carl Schmitt (1950, 1953) has attributed to *nomos*: a «*divisio primaeva*» of the land, between land appropriation and land utilization, revealing the spatial origin – spatial as marked on and rooted in the earth – of law.

Chōra

Both Pliny and Strabo are geographers of Augustan Italy, but each in a different way. Pliny, who writes in Latin after the death of Octavian, is for us the historical source for the division of Italy into *regiones*. Strabo, on the other hand, Greek in language and culture, is a contemporary of Augustus and is also pro-imperial, but makes no mention of the regional *discriptio* of the *princeps*. I shall not here discuss the reasons why he makes no mention of it. What seems to me more important is that Strabo, like also Pliny later, describes Italy in terms of its parts. However, Strabo describes the parts of Italy, as well as the rest of the inhabited earth, on the basis of his idea of *chōra*.

If one consults dictionaries, in particular Latin-Greek lexicons and vice versa, the ancient Greek word corresponding to *regio* is *chōra*. Cassius Dio (55, 8, 7), for instance, calls the *regiones* of Rome *chōria* (diminutive in form, not in content, of *chōra/os*). Thus, does a description in terms of *regiones* coincide with a description in terms of *chōra*? No, it does not. There are similarities between the two kinds of description, especially in the identification of the parts of Italy, but also fundamental differences. Starting from the etymology, that of *chōra* is very uncertain: it seems to be linked to the ideas of part and separation (cf. Chantraine, 1984, *s.v.*; Semerano, 1994, *s.v.*), but not to a geometric spatiality of straight lines. Among other things, the root of *chōra* cannot be associated with the root **reg*, i.e. that of *regio*, the latter being linked to other Greek terms, such as the verb *oregō*. As for the textual occurrences of the word in the books on Italy (V and VI) of Strabo's *Geography*: sometimes the Greek author actually uses the term *chōra* to define each of the parts (Tyrrhenia, Campania, etc.) into which he has divided Italy in order to describe it; however, he uses the term *chōra* to define also

(5) Rykwert (1976); Farinelli (2003, pp. 150 ff.). On the ancient town in Italy, see Susini (1978); on centuriation, see Gabba (1994, pp. 177-196).

(6) The Italian word translated here as «cutout» is the noun *ritaglio*. Interweaving, in my interpretation of the nature of region, a geographical perspective with a semiotic one (see below), I mean by «cutout» (*ritaglio*) a portion cut out, implying, *a priori*, the division/partition and organization of a continuum (of sense), this partition being regarded as a cultural cutting (carving) out.

smaller lands (the *chōra* of a single city) as well as larger lands (for instance, the entire portion of Italy which the Apennines cut lengthwise). Pliny, for his part, in his description of Italy uses the word *regio* always (except in three cases) with reference to the Augustan partitions. But, clearly, the Latin author gives the term more general meanings, disjoined from the specific character of the imperial politics on the Italic territory, when he uses it in the description of other lands. It is not, therefore, on this basis that one can understand the difference between the two descriptions of Italy considered here. Rather, the difference is to be found in the definition of *chōra* that Strabo offers in the first of his seventeen books of *Geography*, and which is applicable to any *chōra* described by him:

the *chōra* of our actions is the land (*gē*) and sea we dwell in. The *chōra* is small when the actions are small, great when the actions are great; and the greatest is the totality of this *chōra*, what we properly call *oikoumenē* (the inhabited earth). So, *oikoumenē* would be the *chōra* of the greatest actions. (*Geogr.* I, 1, 16, my translation)

I chose not to translate the word *chōra*, as it has a complex variety of meanings, including that of region, which defies any simplification in translation (cf. Derrida, 1993). But anyhow Strabo's text does provide a fundamental clue to the understanding of his idea of *chōra*: it is ground as basis for human actions. And it is easy to understand what Strabo means by action, if one associates this notion with the idea of geography which emerges from the first book of his work. For Strabo geographical thought belongs to philosophy, and is addressed to the «man (*anēr*) of action» «who cares about the art of life and happiness» (*Geogr.* I, 1, 1 and 23). In linking the notions of practice and action to the goal of happiness, Strabo's geography also reveals its philosophical bases, in this case first of all Aristotelian. Aristotle's practical philosophy, both ethical and political, provides a precise definition of action: action is movement (*Eth. Eud.* 1220b). And movement is change: the latter is a principle of the Aristotelian physics and is also at the base of his practical science. The same practical science that informs Strabo's geography.

So Strabo's *chōra*, as ground of – basis for – human actions, is (an) inhabited land, inasmuch as it is travelled and modified by humans (Bonfiglioli, 2012a, pp. 104 ff.). This also means that *chōra* represents a precise idea of ethics as movement, process, and transformation. In my view, *it is in ethics, namely in the difference between the ethics of regula and that of action, that the main difference lies between regio and chōra*. On land-*chōra*, the *nomos* is not only that sedentary one, consisting of already-fixed delimitations, of a spatial order already achieved and which aspires to remain so for as long as possible, but is a *nomos* meant literally as a «*nomen actionis*» (Schmitt, 1953 and 1959), that is, as an act, a process of foundation or re-foundation of an order.

It has to be emphasized that *chōra*, too, is certainly (a) striated land, where *regula* is indissociable from the territorial divisions which are at the base of the semantics of *regio*. But the ethical character of *chōra* speaks of striations which can be effaced or changed, or of which traces survive (the vestiges of ancient or defeated civilizations), as well as of movable boundaries. The regional dimension of the *chōra*, as can be read in the passage of Strabo quoted here, depends on human actions: the great actions of the Romans were able to extend their *chōra* to the entire inhabited earth (*oikoumenē*). Without forgetting that the *oikoumenē*, too, in its entirety, is nothing other than a part, thus a region, of the earth as a whole (*gē*: *Geogr.* I, 1, 15).

This ethical view of *chōra* derives from a long-standing Greek tradition regarding this concept, whose most eloquent expression is Plato's *Timaeus* (Bonfiglioli, 2012a, chap. IV and 2012b, pp. 5-13). In the cosmogenesis of the *Timaeus*, a primordial *chōra* was the matrix receiving all forms without

identifying itself with any of them, because characterized by incessant movement. So the historical *chōra*, inhabited by humans, already in Herodotus and up to Strabo, is the land where the signs of cultural identity can be effaced, for example, by natural causes, such as when a space is made smooth by floods – and smooth spaces are the domain of the nomad *nomos*, according to Deleuze. Or cultural striations can be re-written on the ground, in the same or in a new form, by human actions, that is, by historical causes. On *chōra*, land of changes, every territorialization recalls a deterritorialization and is already in itself a reterritorialization, in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, and also of Raffestin. The boundaries of *chōrai*, according to Strabo, are not movable only in a diachronic sense. They can also be movable from a synchronic point of view: the emblematic case in Italy is Ravenna. Strabo frequently dwells on this city in his description of northern Italy, contextualizing Ravenna in the landscape and economy of the Po plain. Yet, the fact that the city is inhabited by Umbrians leads Strabo, then, to include it within the boundaries of another part of Italy, the Umbrian *chōra*. This is a question of points of view, thus of variable cultural carving out.

Region

Between *regio* and *chōra*, between Pliny's and Strabo's description of Italy, I think that one can already see the whole destiny of region, as well as the importance of this notion right up to the present day. It is indeed the construction of the concept of region, of its very identity, which must be acknowledged as being the main legacy of the geography of Augustan Italy, since *regio* and *chōra* are but the two identity sides within which the nature of what we call region can be delineated and can reveal its topicality.

On the one hand, there is *regio* as a portion which is a cultural «cutout» (see note 6) and the expression of a sedentary *nomos*. And linked to *regio*, in the signifiers and signifieds, there is the dialectics between regionalism and regionalization – concepts here understood according to Gambi's lesson (1977) –, a dialectics having the two senses of reciprocity: in fact, it does not consist only in a verification of how much certain local «lines of resistance», expressions of an experienced reality, influence the striations-partitions drawn by a central power, but also, vice versa, of how much influence these centralized partitions can exert on the becoming real of some local «lines of resistance». The first sense, that of a shrewd regionalization, *qua* attentive to regionalism, while remaining centralized striation aimed at the projection of homogeneity, distinguished, in many respects, the first division of Italy into regions, i.e. the Augustan one. This is confirmed by the fact that Pliny's parts-*regiones* of Italy often recall the parts-*chōrai* of Italy identified on a historical and ethnographic basis by Strabo (cf. Maddoli, 2011-2012). The reverse sense – the partitions of regionalization which locally become real lines of resistance – is the one on which geographers (Sestini, 1949; Gambi, 1963, 1998) have insisted most in interpreting the division of Italy into regions sanctioned by the Republican Constitution, as a result of the work of the Constituent Assembly in 1946-1947. The regional partition of the territory of the Republic reproduces in large part a division into statistical *compartimenti*, going back to 1864, of the Kingdom of Italy (*Statistica...*, 1864, pp. V-VIII). This division, carried out for statistical purposes, according to the indications of its author, Pietro Maestri, bore the character of temporariness as well as of partiality of perspective. Yet, mostly as a result of being fixed and disseminated by the cartographic representations and geographical descriptions of school books, it had gradually become «tradition», and would be regarded as such by

the Constituents. Maestri's *compartimenti*, which in the statistical *Annuari* had acquired the name of regions already by 1913 (*Annuario...*, 1913, p. 11), had therefore become cartographic or written «lines of resistance», which would become real in the politico-administrative-territorial organization of the Republic (7). Gambi, in his writings quoted here, stressed the importance of rethinking and updating the regional division of the territory of Republican Italy, insofar as it still reflects a nineteenth-century partition carried out for statistical purposes. From a more general perspective (i.e., not only linked to the specific division of Italian territory), talking about the reconfiguration of a regional division and its adaptation to the evolutions of historical, socio-economic and cultural contexts, implies questioning what I have here defined as the spatial sedentariness of the boundaries of *regiones*.

And the internal questioning, that is, corrosion of the sedentary *nomos* of *regio* has to be identified, in my interpretation, with *chōra* and its ethical reasons. *Chōra* does not deny striation nor even *regula*, because it, too, is region, thus inevitably part, «cutout». But it is a portion – the result of a cutting (carving) out – which is characterized by a continuous internal dialogue with movement and relativization, that is, with the variability and re-negotiation or cancellation of its boundaries and pertinences.

More than once in the present paper, with regard to regional striations, I have spoken of «lines of resistance», quoting an expression of Eco linked to his analysis of the relationship between semiosis and ontology. In *Kant and the Platypus*, Eco (2000, pp. 12-15) calls Being that «Something» which «induces us to produce signs» and to which we refer using signs; and it is Being which imposes «lines of resistance» on our cutting (carving) out in the continuum of sense, that is, on our interpretations, even though such lines are «perhaps mobile, vagabond» (*ibidem*, p. 50). The ensemble of all interpretations is the encyclopedia, which remains «a regulative hypothesis», among other reasons because it is not only the ensemble of the already shared interpretations, but also of the possible resegmentations of the continuum, which over time will transform it (Eco, 1986, pp. 68 ff.). Every cultural cutting out, in order to be shared, must be codified. And every code is law, *regula*. Except that every cutting out, precisely because it is an interpretation, therefore, a relative point of view, is always already a re-cutting out, different from the previous one as well as from the following one. Which is the same as saying that every territorialization is always already re-territorialization. The code is *regula* which cannot escape constant comparison with the variability of the boundaries and pertinences of every single cutout.

Being, on the one hand, the variable connections of the encyclopedia inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, on the other, recall two fundamental poles – objectivism (8) and relativization – around which the geographical debate on the identity of region (on which cf. Vallega, 1982; Turco, 1984) continues to revolve. Similarly, between the systematizing *regula* of the code and the evolution of resegmentations, other fundamental geographical issues regarding region and regionalization echo. This is because, in my view, region, geographically meant, is the model of any other cultural «cutout». It is so to the extent that the cultural cutouts of the encyclopedia have shown themselves to be both *regiones* and *chōrai*, i.e. the two identity sides of region which emerged from the geography of Augustan Italy. Region is that cultural «cutout» which serves as a model for any other cultural «cutout» also to the extent that, or rather, first of all to the extent that, the language marked on the

(7) The outcomes and developments of this process remain at the center of the debate on Italian regions.

(8) I mean by objectivism a conception of region as a Dynamic Object, according to the meaning that Peirce attributed to the notion of Dynamic Object.

earth – that of delimitations and more generally of the signs deriving from the human practice of it – is the most archaic form of language, and already contains *in nuce* the theoretical models for understanding any subsequent linguistic mechanism, even the most abstract. Today, also in geography regional partitions are no longer based on lines concretely drawn on the ground, but rather on flows and practices. The pertinences of segmentations change: and this is exactly further confirmation of the fact that the ethics of *chōra* is an integral part of the identity of region to the same extent as the ethics of *regio*, the former being internal corrosion of the latter.

Region is both regio and chōra. That is to say that the identity of region is based on the internal dialectics between *regula*-codification and processuality. Only if interpreted as proposed here, region may reveal itself to be the model of any other cultural «cutout», and thus a notion destined to always remain topical, also beyond the (mobile) boundaries of geography.

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Abstract. REGIO, CHŌRA, REGION. – In this paper, I argue that the main legacy of the geography of Augustan Italy is the very construction of the concept of region. The nature of region which I delineate is based on the dialectics between the ethics of *regula*, proper to *regio*, and the ethics of action/movement/change, proper to *chōra*. *Regio* and *chōra* are the two identities of region emerging respectively from Pliny's and Strabo's description of Italy. I aim to explain why region, *qua* being, in my view, both *regio* and *chōra*, is the model of any other cultural «cutout» in the continuum of sense.

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