THE NATURAL GEOGRAPHICAL REGION

By A. STEVENS

UNIVERSITY, GLASGOW

THE most conspicuous geographical concept, the enunciation of which is associated with British geographical thought, is that connected with the phrase, 'natural geographical region'. In spite of much—rather sporadic—discussion, the concept remains obscure. Many who would like to employ the term are shy of it: they shorten it to 'natural region', and some limit the meaning of the epithet 'natural' to the physical, the inorganic; they distinguish the geographical region; they refer to economic, to 'human use' regions. All this hedging about terms is a sure indication of uncertainty of grasp as well as of diversity of view.

The term originally used by Herbertson was 'natural geographical region'. In most writing the middle word is dropped. Roxby says that a natural region is characterized by a particular set of physical conditions. But a uniform set of conditions is hard to find extended over a region of any considerable area. This is to be expected, of course: in a sufficiently small region one would find uniformity, or 'practical' uniformity, but in a large one it is necessary to search for unity within diversity. For large areas the 'dominant' physical condition becomes the criterion. Herbertson regarded climate as dominant in the characterization of his major natural regions of the globe, and this lapse in logic evoked serious criticism on the occasion on which he first propounded his views. The criticism was as immature as the thesis. No one, so far as we know, has entered on a systematic consideration of the geographical relevance of the various physical conditions, and an examination of this relevance would seem an essential preliminary to the establishment of dominance. Such occasional—and usually disingenuous—flirting with the question as occurs would indicate what is probably true, that any attempt in this direction is, in practice, hopeless.

The ultimate fallacy underlying this kind of thought or procedure is that it begins by assuming a duality, the physical and the non-physical, the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial. It brings geography to the stage reached by the Schoolmen when they disputed between form and matter, matter and spirit, and questioned the possibility of knowledge. We are not concerned about absolute knowledge or complete knowledge, but only about a particular kind of

knowledge and only about the attainable extent of that. We are concerned with physical and biological nature only in so far as it may be regarded as human environment and only with man in so far as he has demonstrable relationships with the environment.

Many will agree well enough with this last statement, but some of them, if not all, will insist that the method of geographical study is a synthesis or an integration.

Synthesis is not addition: it is a complex process for which there are no general rules. The chemist performs it successfully, but in special and individual cases. The mathematician is our best integrator. He may begin with a function of x and is as likely to end with a new branch of mathematics as with a reasonably simple new function of his variable. Neither of these magicians can operate with dissimilar things.

Something analogous to synthesis might be said to go on between man and his environment. If this analogy do not lead us astray once more, we might say that man is the synthetic influence. History is a spectator of the process, more or less blinding itself to everything but the time element. The geographer does not synthesize, because he cannot, but he also is a spectator of the process primarily interested in its development in space. Man must be looked at objectively by the geographer, and even his significant antics must be taken to be as natural as the physical environment. The natural geographical region is a result of what, for want of a better word, we may agree to call synthesis proceeding in Nature, under our eyes, but not by our voluntary action. There are two aspects of this synthetic product: the environmental aspect, essential to which is man himself, and the human aspect, which is much the same as to say the functional aspect, using the language of ecology.

The boundaries of the natural region (in our sense) are definite enough; which does not mean that they are necessarily simple or easy to trace. Where they are common to another natural region they are clearest. These boundaries indicate a state of equilibrium which may be stable but cannot be static. Change may occur in their position or in their condition. The most active normal change occurs when they are advancing unto unorganized country or relatively unorganized country. Such advances occur during colonization, even if that proceeds overseas. Their tendency is

* From the presidential address to Section E (Geography) of the British Association delivered in Dundee on September 1.

centrifugal, their actual development in space is limited by conditions. Organization by Rome was more or less regularly centrifugal, the advance of Germanism was eastwards. The boundaries of a natural region may be indifferent to natural (physical) boundaries. For an organism must have continuity in its medium, but continuity does not preclude variety. So the boundary of a natural region may cross a mountain range, partition a river valley, divide a coalfield; and it may be a better boundary for so doing. The time factor (*relative time*) is important here, for the question of stability, equilibrium, is a question of adjustment. It is no hardship to the economic structures concerned that France, Belgium, Holland and Germany share one coalfield. Their political frontiers antedate their industrial development. For the Romans the Rhine divided, for the Germans it unites, for the French it still separates. The flanks of a mountain range separate and are easily held; the passes connect.

For Herbertson with his analogies, man represented the nerves of a natural region. Not so: man is the living principle. The nature of that principle is not the subject we are called to study. The nervous system, if we must have analogy, is the means of communication in the widest sense; and the analogy is unduly narrow, for means of communication have nutrient as well as co-ordinating functions. In this place, it is true, we are less concerned with the former, for the purpose is to define the natural geographical region.

The unity of the natural geographical region is achieved, maintained and developed by organization, by cohesion, and this cohesion is attained and extended by intercourse, at first within and later beyond the region, provided the organic development is an indigenous growth. Since the fourteenth century the means of communication of the type associated with Western Europe has been undergoing continuous but uneven development. This development was stimulated by overseas discovery, but its progress gained speed of a new order in the nineteenth century with the concurrent development of railways and large-scale manufacture, and the acceleration has progressively increased until our day. In consequence the range and intensity of organizing ability and power have increased. The most satisfactory natural regions to contemplate, and to appreciate from geographical writing, had been fully organized and had their identity recognized before the modern era began. One has but to think of the French *pays*, and the deterioration of the work of such a master as Vidal de la Blache beyond the Paris Basin. No doubt the conservatism of the French countryside and the degree to which it was able for so long to preserve its archaic cohesions has made it a specially

favourable field for regional studies. But traces of such a division of the country are not wanting in Scotland. Even in the Midland Valley names like Menteith and Lennox have not completely lost regional content, while names of regional significance are common enough north of the Highland Line. Elsewhere, access to extraneous sources of necessities and the means of establishing wider loyalties have obliterated local character and submerged local unity. What are the *pays* of the Rhone Valley? The speed of modern change has confused a great deal of thought.

There are minimum and maximum sizes for natural regions. The minimum is determined by the least extensive area, in extent and variety of natural endowment, capable of being organized and maintained, by its resources—physical, biological and human—for cohesion, sustenance and defence. The maximum is determined by the efficiency and range of means of communication. Both maximum and minimum vary in time.

Two types of organization must be distinguished and we shall call them conscious and self-conscious respectively. The former is primitive and appears less artificial. The latter is very modern. It is a development made possible by progress in general, especially in the knowledge of the possibilities of 'planning', and of the 'management' of environmental conditions; and in the development of means of communication in particular. The objective view of man excludes the possibility of regarding his actions as artificial. Some of them we may think ephemeral or capricious, but they have their source in the nature of man.

Natural regions must change in extent and otherwise with time, but the changes need not be continuous. At times of specially rapid change in human life the natural division into regions may almost suffer a revolution. But a true revolution, a sudden and catastrophic change, has occurred only in extra-European countries. In North America there must have been natural regions—or, if it is preferable, an analogue of a system of *pays*—of Indian times. The traces of these have been swept away, except what may be gleaned from such knowledge of tribal distribution as has persisted. We must distinguish natural regions of continuous and of discontinuous development.

Difference in scale would appear to be due to difference in topographic fragmentation—before due consideration has been given to the matter, so long as we consider the physical more fundamental and permanent. But it is neither. What is fundamental is relativity to man. Space, height, slope, areas at the time unproductive, all these represent difficulties in the problem of instituting and operating means of transport. At the present moment all of them within terrestrial limits have

their price in time, labour, ingenuity and risk. If the price is commercially—and even strategically—still too high, the practical possibilities are still of commercial magnitude. It is only a hundred years since the scale of land transport began to approach that of water transport. Crossing the Alps by forces of great military significance was almost as great a marvel in the days of Napoleon as in those of Hannibal. It was less perilous than the invasion of Muscovy. What strength in men and material could be launched across these obstacles of space and altitude to-day? What 'fifth column' of 1940 can be certainly held at bay by the most powerful or secluded or distant people?

The 'natural geographical region' is an active organism. The size of a region growing freely is determined by the range of the means of cohesion. At a given time that range depends on the state of technical development of the community occupying the region in relation to the problems presented by the nature of the medium. If technical development is relatively stagnant, but territorial development is undisturbed, the 'organism' will expand up to boundaries which for topographic reasons, but also, it may be, on account of mere distance, are insuperable at the time. The state of equilibrium so reached in empty, barren or distant areas will be fluctuating. Improvement in the means of communication will produce an expansion of the organism, provided it is free to expand. In a 'new' country like the United States, that is, where the history of development is discontinuous, to the expansion of regional units are set the very wide limits compatible with modern means of communication.

Efficiency of communication may become uneven. Long-distance communication and bulk movement of commodities have undergone hypertrophy, while the more intimate contacts which produce 'neighbourliness' are weak. Very large areas may be fed, policed and defended. National organization is in a stable condition. In such conditions natural regions of the order of *pays* are never likely to develop, or, at least, to have more than a very ephemeral existence, until population densities are very different from their present condition. If regional unities of the nature of *pays* develop they will be on a vaster scale.

Some, at least, of the commonly recognized regional divisions of both Russia and the United States are represented, mistakenly, of course, as regions of monoculture with a characteristic crop produced under suitable climatic conditions. In fact, the corn belt is as much a region of mixed farming as the dairying belt and there is a great deal of pasture, largely unimproved, in both. The pressure of population on the land is low, and the region-community organism is far from the condition to which the ecologists apply the term

'climax association'. A state of equilibrium has not been attained. Two propositions follow from these considerations: the relation between the community is so loose that its activities do not fully reflect the conditions of the environment; the more intimate and less organizable contacts within the community are so indefinite that what we may call regional consciousness is rudimentary.

At the same time, what we have referred to as self-consciousness is of an advanced type. The 'human use' region, as usually distinguished, is an area of undeveloped economy. The natural geographical region emerges from chaos only when it has evolved to the stage at which it can be clearly recognizable as a synthetic whole with what the French would call 'personality'. When this stage of climax association has been attained, we are able to assess the relative significance of environmental (physical and other) factors; for this cannot be done satisfactorily except by using the nature and activity of the community as an index in the same way as the natural vegetation of a region has been employed as a climatic index. The climax condition, when it has been attained, is not necessarily permanent. It may change with greater or less rapidity in time, and the obvious reasons for change are human progress, chiefly technological, or the reverse, and exhaustion of resources, notably mineral resources, absolutely or due to alteration of values.

In the more westerly parts of Europe the centrifugal processes were propagated from a number of centres during the course of development to present conditions. Through a great deal of it something like climax conditions were reached before the railway era, and to these conditions belong the French *pays* and the German *Gau*. Such entities occur east of the Rhine only within the sub-Hercynian belt of dense population, and not throughout the belt. In the extreme west they expanded territorially up to natural limits which, being narrow, kept them small. Had these close natural limits been wider the *pays* would have been limited by the advancing peripheries of other organisms, and conflicts would arise which would be stilled only by coalescence into larger organizations by one of the methods known to history. Indeed the *pays* as we know it is no doubt a product of coalescence: as the smallest organism of the type, available for study, it may, merely for convenience, be regarded as indicating the practicable minimum. In areas more remote from the influences active in western Europe, and to the east in particular, slower progress in indigenous technology, greater obstacles to cultural importation, and correspondingly less rapid growth in population, absolutely and in relation to the extent of available territory, deferred to a comparatively

recent date the attainment of the climax condition. The broader fragmentation of the country was a concomitant, but not at all necessarily the dominant determinant of the territorially larger organism.

Long before the railway era, France and Great Britain had achieved the more self-conscious organization of the nation-state by coalescences of various kinds. The process was less satisfactory in Spain. All three were able to relieve the unease to which increasing efficiency of means of communication made them liable by overseas adventure keeping step with that growing efficiency. The relief was illusory in the case of Spain. Germany had respite of a similar kind because she had her colonial area to the eastwards, and there she still has colonial spaciousness even within her present restricted bounds. In that direction also lie some of her deracinated offshoots, as others share the United States with ours and the French are to be found especially in Canada.

It is suggested that the European nation-state is a community occupying a natural geographical region as its immediate environment, because it is a natural growth limited by its geographical circumstances. Not only so, it is an organic phenomenon so characteristically European in its genesis, to be found nowhere else in a state of mature development; and therefore any European geography which failed to take account of it, indeed of which it was not the central object, ought to be unthinkable. The swing away towards the novelty of the physical region was a vain pursuit of novelty. If the real natural region for geographical study is as we have held, and if the nation-state-country organism of Europe is the achieved synthesis of European geography, then the region which is characterized by a set of physical attributes is, geographically, a misconception. For not only have many European States partitioned one of the main 'natural divisions' of the Continent among them by stable frontiers, but also it is unthinkable that any one community could develop that area as a whole and remain restricted to it. We refer to the North European Plain; but there have been attempts enough to unify the 'Mediterranean' region, and there is sufficient division now and throughout historic time both there and in the Alpine region, where physical conditions favour severance rather than unity, to justify the same statement with regard to them. Physical conditions are neither more permanent nor more fundamental in geography than human. If in themselves they change less quickly than the characters of the living partner in the symbiosis, their significance and value change rapidly, even suddenly, and sometimes disappear. We do not really believe in the permanence or significance we predicate. For we approve and wish to maintain

the further political subdivision which has taken place so recently in the North European Plain, we see reason in the demand for access to the sea or to a navigable river, but we boggle about allowing more than one nation access to a coalfield.

We see the countries of Europe as natural regions, natural because they exist as phenomena demanding study, demanding it with a special urgency in these days. Their territorial development seemed to have culminated before the War of 1914-18, and before the present unrest it underwent readjustment which seemed to offer some prospect of stability. We must look for objective explanations of failure. These States grew into contact with each other and organization permeated the whole of, or the more 'European' part of, the Continent. Not natural boundaries, but convergence of organisms set limits to expansion, especially for the later developed units, at a time when means of organization were developing rapidly. The proper scale of organization is no longer represented by the European nation-states but rather by the United States. Disturbance of equilibrium shows itself by unrest in the newer countries which have not been disciplined by long confinement within narrow bounds and had their views of hegemony chastened by such a loss of territory and influence as the French suffered in the complete rape of an earlier empire, the British in the loss of their earlier colonies in America and by the development of increasing independence in the Dominions. For the countries east of France the region of colonial expansion has been continuous with the homeland; the peoples of slower development whom they have replaced have been Europeans and have survived the disturbance of colonization. These countries do not appreciate the barbarity of applying in 1939 the moral principles applied by others in ruder times two centuries ago.

In Germany we can distinguish extensive areas over which the mean density of population is comparable to that of Great Britain. But to the east, especially, the Reich has extensive areas of relatively recent occupation which we have called its natural colonial region, that which it has in fact exploited, whether of choice or of historical necessity. There the mean density of population is scarce half as great. On the other hand, the former kingdom of Saxony has proved capable of maintaining a mean density twice that of Great Britain. The urgency of any problem of *Lebensraum* is fanciful. Straitness of living space is commonly relieved by more or less free movement of commodities from abroad, compensated by similarly free exportation. Voluntarily or involuntarily, Germany has to a large extent renounced this relief. The *malaise* seems by no means untreatable by other means.