## Book Review

**Béatrice von Hirschhausen**. **2023.** ***Les Provinces du temps. Frontières fantômes et expériences de l'histoire.*** Paris: CNRS Editions. 397 pp., ISBN 9782271145369, € 26.00

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Şişeşti and Mâtnicu Mare are two Romanian villages, located about 150 kilometers apart, with similar populations in terms of size, typical occupation, and ethnic composition. Yet in 2011, fewer than 5% of households in one village had access to running water, compared to nearly 80% in the other. These two cases exemplify stark regional disparities in public utility provision – especially running water – between Romania's southeastern (Oltenia, Muntenia, and Moldavia) and northwestern (Transylvania and Banat) regions. To explain this seemingly anecdotal contrast, Béatrice von Hirschhausen constructs, in *Les Provinces du temps*, a sophisticated and well-grounded theoretical framework. Her analysis, based on extensive fieldwork, is enriched by concepts and insights from a wide range of secondary sources. Through the notion of geonarrative (*géorécit*), the book offers an innovative heuristic application of the "phantom border" concept, linking the positivist approach of structural analysis with the constructivist perspective on geographical representations.

The two villages – one in Oltenia, the other in the Banat – are separated not only by the Carpathians, but also by the historical border of the former Habsburg Empire. Though long defunct, this imperial frontier still shapes daily life, even in something as mundane as access to running water. One might ask: What connection could there possibly be between a modern amenity such as a faucet and the rule of Maria Theresa or Franz Joseph, over two centuries ago? Drawing on – and significantly advancing – the concept of the phantom border, now gaining traction in the humanities and social sciences, Hirschhausen demonstrates how the institutions built (or neglected) by former empires in the nineteenth century had a lasting effect on local practices and perceptions. These legacies persist with remarkable consistency within the contours of former imperial frontiers, influencing areas as varied as domestic comfort, voting behavior, and agricultural collectivization and decollectivization. To support her thesis, Hirschhausen applies her model first to Romania – her central case – and then extends her analysis to Germany, Poland, and other Central and East European regions marked by similar phantom borders.

As the author demonstrates, regional disparities in the distribution of piped water systems cannot be explained primarily by uneven state investment in local

infrastructure in recent decades – though such investments have indeed favored towns over villages. Nor do these disparities necessarily reflect differences in residents' material well-being, despite persistent regional stereotypes. Instead, the research highlights the cumulative effect of private household efforts to install water systems. This finding shifts the analysis toward a cultural factor – a certain "mentality" – embedded in specific geographical areas and sustained over time.

The book's approach is, in some respects, analogous to Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), where the author maps regional variations in economic development and institutional performance, correlating them with levels of "civicness" and associative engagement – traits rooted in divergent social and institutional histories dating to the Middle Ages. Yet, as Hirschhausen notes, Putnam's thesis has been criticized for offering a "scientific rationalization of common prejudices" (98), thereby perpetuating a refined form of cultural essentialism.

*Les Provinces du temps* could, to some extent, invite similar critique – for lending scientific legitimacy to regional stereotypes or essentializing cultural traits. Fully aware of this epistemological risk, Hirschhausen rigorously tests her argument using two approaches: a structuralist-comparative perspective and a constructivist-discursive one. These approaches were addressed in the early 2000s by Holm Sundhaussen and Maria Todorova in the journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. Hirschhausen persuasively argues for identifying structural causes behind regional disparities, pointing to statistical patterns in the development of aspects such as water access or voting behavior. At the same time, she also applies Todorova's constructivist lens, focusing on how political and social differences – within Romania and elsewhere – are shaped in relation to a hegemonic Western European model of modernity.

Ultimately, the book achieves a compelling synthesis of two seemingly opposing methodological approaches. It provides a nuanced understanding of the political and institutional foundations of regional discourses, while also illustrating the creative, structuring power of geonarratives in shaping lived experience.

Hirschhausen conducts ethnographic research in four Romanian villages on either side of the phantom border between the Banat and Oltenia, aiming to document how people articulate representations and translate them into regionally rooted practices. Through testimonies and observations in these "rival" villages, she identifies in both cases a shared *regime of historicity* (in François Hartog's sense), centered on *rattrapage* – a recovery of lost modernity, be that linked to the socialist era or an earlier past. Both regions suffered severe socioeconomic upheaval in the 1990s as a result of rapid deindustrialization: coal mines and major factories scaled back production, and many workers turned to subsistence farming. A large share of the rural labor force migrated westward in search of better livelihoods.

Despite these parallel trajectories, villagers on either side of the phantom border define "normality" – which structures their daily lives and notions of well-being – in

distinct ways. In Constantin Daicoviciu (Banat), modernization is seen as a "geographical destiny", an expected path of progress. In Șișești (Oltenia), by contrast, it is viewed more as an imported novelty – something borrowed rather than innate. In the Banat, villagers often claim that "the Banat is the front" (*Banatul e fruntea*), asserting greater "civilization" and projecting an image of prosperity. The race for modernization continually raises the bar as to what is considered "normal" locally. Meanwhile, in Șișești, well water is proclaimed to be "better, healthier, more natural" than piped water, and the phrase "this is rural life" is often used to explain the lack of amenities. Yet both villages are modernizing, albeit at different speeds and with differing priorities. These changes are shaped by social comparisons – be that with neighbors returning from the West or with nearby, seemingly more developed regions.

As Hirschhausen argues, the geonarratives shared by villagers in the Banat and Oltenia are more than mere clichés, passively reproduced by the population. They encapsulate a condensed set of lived experiences, anchored in geographical space, shaped by evolving social relations, local norms, and expectations of the future. These narratives are deeply internalized and form part of the habitus of these communities. Drawing on testimonies and vernacular practices, Hirschhausen reconstructs the "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" (Reinhart Koselleck) defining village life. These geonarratives are dynamic, always in flux, and shaped by ongoing tension with competing narrative elements.

Despite the depth and rigor of Hirschhausen's argument, a discerning reader might wish for further exploration of certain issues – such as the long-term political and institutional roots of geographical disparities in access to domestic water systems. Similarly, in her analysis of voting patterns for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), which has disproportionate levels of support in eastern Germany, the book overlooks the distinct politics of history and memory in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, particularly from the 1970s onward. Notably, the different approaches to assuming responsibility for the Holocaust and other crimes of National Socialism – whereby the GDR leadership largely shifted blame onto West Germany – are not fully addressed (see, for example, Jutta Scherrer's works).

That being said, a valuable book does not necessarily answer every question – even if that were possible – but equips readers with a robust framework for raising their own questions and exploring new lines of inquiry. *Les Provinces du temps* stands out for the breadth of its scope, the sophistication of its theoretical framework, and the rigor of its methodology. It makes an original and compelling contribution, carefully developed around the concept of geonarrative, offering a rich, interdisciplinary foundation for comparative and multiscalar regional analysis.