

Bringing the provinces into focus: subnational spaces in the recent historiography of Russia.

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Bringing the Provinces into Focus: Subnational Spaces in the Recent Historiography of Russia

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Bringing the Provinces into Focus Subnational Spaces in the Recent Historiography of Russia

Susan Smith-Peter (bio)

The picture on the next page is clearly that of a provincial city, but what is it that tells us so? Is it the skyline, or lack thereof? The two-story architecture, which yet so evidently proclaims itself as part of the historical core? Or is it the traffic and pedestrians? We may know that it is provincial but not be able to say quite how we know. This essay seeks to bring such provincial scenes into focus.

Many scholars are going beyond the city limits of Moscow and St. Petersburg to study what was happening there, based on a growing realization that a focus on the two capitals can mean that the rest of the country appears as a blurry afterthought. It is important to have the big picture, yet ironically that is often missing in works on the provinces. The view can be even smaller from the provinces than from the capitals because the latter are part of a preexisting national narrative, while the former often are not. This can lead to a sort of myopia, as scholars sometimes look only at their own province or region, ignoring theory, other provinces, and other disciplines. Synthesis is thus the most important task in this field, and this essay is designed to represent a step in that direction.

In the pages below I use three terms to address subnational spaces: regions, which encompass larger areas linked together not only by economic, social, and cultural networks but also by representations; provinces, which are defined as a middle-level space delimited by the state; and the local, which is a smaller unit that can range from a village or city up to a province. The term “region” tends to be applied to the peripheries, such as the Russian North or Siberia, while the “provinces” usually refer to European Russia. Terms used in Russian range from the older local lore (*kraevedenie*), which explores all aspects of the province, to the newer regional studies (*regionovedenie*), which seems to be local lore with a smattering of geographical theory. New departments in universities are being established in Russia under the name *regionovedenie* or regional studies [End Page 835] (*regionalistika*).¹ Other terms, such as local history (*lokal'naiia istoriia*) have also been proposed.² This new subfield has stimulated works on the topic without

always leading to clarity concerning the subject of study.



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Vladimir, Russia, 2009 Photograph by Susan Smith-Peter

Regional analysis has earlier been put forth as an important alternative to a proliferation of histories of ethnic groups, but one scholar has rejected it entirely, arguing that its promise does not live up to its actual results, which are hampered by a lack of theory and a tendency to reify the region.³ Yet there is, in fact, a useful body of theory on regions that can mitigate these effects. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the power of “di-vision” exercised by the monarch or state in creating regions includes within it the power of vision, and that the debates over the definition of a region are a way for the government and groups within society to put forth their differing visions of regions, which serve to legitimate or subvert existing regional borders and units.⁴ For Bourdieu, the region, like the nation, **[End Page 836]** is part of a network of meanings linked to power and symbolic representation in which the word makes the world. John Agnew, while not denying the importance of discourse in creating regions, argues that social, political, and economic networks play a role in their creation as well.⁵ Such networks might be interpreted as another way to make regions into naturalized, even reified, units, but this can be avoided by paying attention to the specific

ways in which regional symbols, knowledge, and identities are generated through subnational institutions and by recognizing that the definition of any region is dynamic and changing.⁶ In general, those interested in the region should be aware of human geography's long engagement with the term; as John Fraser...

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