

Territory

A territory is a portion of terrestrial space envisaged in its relationships with the human groups that occupy it and manage it for the purpose of meeting their needs. This notion is, in geography, neither a synonym nor a substitute for the word space. While there is of course a notion of space in territory, it is not viewed as a neutral and isotropic backdrop. Numerous components (which can be environmental, social economic actors, institutional, etc.) impart specificity and identity to the «configuration» and the functioning of this ensemble. Understanding a territory involves evidencing «interactions» between the different components, rather than considering them as successive layers which, taken as a whole, might be called territory. Human settlement, the variety of projects and enterprises, and the variable ability to reach objectives will, on different scales, shape and develop a territory. The many interactions between different actors following up different or even conflicting strategies contribute to the process whereby territories are formed. For C. Raffestin (1986), these processes of territorial organisation should be analysed on two distinct levels, which nevertheless interact in their functioning: the level on which societies act on the material substrates of their existence, and the level on which systems of representations are formed. Since it is ideas that pilot human interventions on terrestrial space, the shaping of territory results from a "semiotisation" of a space, which is gradually "translated" and converted into a territory. Thus the territory is a conceptual edifice based on two complementary mainstays, often presented in geography as being antagonistic: the material and the ideational.

The notion of appropriation, contained in a number of definitions of territory, has links with the decisional and organisational spheres, and also with social «representations». H. Lefebvre (1974) considered appropriation to be the conversion of a natural space for the purpose of serving the needs and the potential of a group. This idea is often used in anthropology to characterise the actions of populations aiming to guarantee access, control and usage of the resources contained in a portion of space (Godelier, 1984). From this definition is derived a conception of territory that is akin to the result of a production process, which includes organisational strategies, and also strategies of exclusion and domination. Focusing on the appropriation of territory by social agents is intended to show the way in which relationships between societies are structured, and how the internal social interplay evidences relationships between individuals, thought to be reflected in the territory.

Territory as the scene of appropriation is a major theme in investigations on the intentionality of different agents. It is analysed as the projection "of a system of human intentions onto a portion of terrestrial space" (Raffestin, 1986), and as resulting from the way in which projected action, intentions and achievements are articulated. In the decisional sphere, agents are assumed to be able to voice their preferences and bring weight to bear on collective choices. This type of approach is nevertheless imprecise as to how to hierarchise and weight the roles of the different agents, protagonists and operators in the territorialisation process, and it is also ambiguous regarding the value systems used as references for these processes.

Territorialisation is also seen as involving a relationship between appropriation and identity. Each individual, within his or her life experience, entertains an intimate relationship with the «place» he or she lives in. These places are appropriated, and contribute to shaping individual or collective identity. Appropriation, and the development of "roots", have strong symbolic value. Emblematic elements strengthen the effects of appropriation, among which certain symbolic places (the French *haut-lieu*), or regional stereotypes (such as the production of bulls in the Camargue).

This approach does not set out to construct an objective meaning, but to produce an understanding on the basis of outside manifestations considered to reflect hidden intentionalities. The study of territory as an indicator of identity consists in uncovering the "project" enabling it to be ideated (see for instance A. Berque in 1982, who set out, why the «ecumene» is restricted in Japan). The behaviours of social agents can be read as messages which, if they are read correctly, can have something to say about their territoriality.

Territory can also be considered as a complex system. A territory belongs to a spatial system, within which it functions in a retroactive loop with the society that develops, manages and organises that territory, while at the same time the geographical space retroacts on the society. This notion of complexity enables the idea of appropriation, often called upon in territorialisation processes, to be put in perspective. On the one hand, research work has shown frequent disagreement between objectives and results, and, on the other, similar processes do not produce identical territorial configurations. This uncertainty as to the results of interactions between agents enables territory to be envisaged as a self-organising ensemble, where the logics of the different agents do not produce a spatial organisation that is the result of a synthesis of the choices of each.

Unlike the concept of the «region», and its use in French geographical terminology, that of territory is indifferent to scale. This imprecision could turn the word into a hold-all geographical term. On the basis of the consensus on the notion of a "conscious" space, or the awareness of a certain number of characteristics of a space, there can be as many sizes of territory as there are possibilities for a group to share a given relationship with place, i.e. the same territoriality. Territory "can be detected on different scales of geographical space" (Di Méo, 1998). A geography of territories requires the implementation of a level of analysis that is finer than that of the main themes of classic geography (city, region, rural area, city quarter, valley etc.) but also more blurred (territory), or even ubiquitous and ideational (A. Corbin's "territory of the void" the seaside in the history). The broadening and the popularisation of present usage of the word "territory" contribute to weakening the concept.

Bibliographie

Bibliographie :

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