

North

Although the North is generally singular, and often in English associated with the definite article denoting its "established" status, the word is used to refer to several distinct realities and representations. It is at once a point and a direction, it is used for different spaces and territories, it is a scientific construction and a geographical fantasy. It is one of the cardinal points, but it is also a cultural construction: referring to different things depending on the society concerned. In Europe it relates to an imaginary world where cold and darkness combine to form an inhospitable environment, on the fringes of the «ecumene».

The North is a point, or rather two points, one astronomic, the other magnetic. For astronomy, the North is one end of the Earth's axis, the other being the South. Also known as the geographical poles, the North and South Poles are two points turning on an imaginary axis linking one to the other. From a magnetic point of view, the North is one of two points of intersection (the other being the South magnetic pole) between the terrestrial magnetic dipole and the earth's surface. But unlike the geographical poles, the magnetic poles are not fixed and are constantly shifting, although they remain in the high «latitudes». Because of its proximity with the geographical North Pole, the magnetic North pole was used for centuries to guide scientific travellers, those who used elaborate instruments to find their way rather than the simple orientation methods of sailors. From the invention of the magnetic compass to GPS, this is the North that has replaced the geographical (or astronomic) North as the main point of reference. In the different practices linked to orientation, the North is more a direction than a point to be reached or avoided. In this perspective, the distinction between the magnetic and geographical North is not very important. It is the direction indicated by the magnetic needle of the compass or by the Pole Star in the Northern Hemisphere sky. Because it corresponds to a point that is at once fixed – its localisation does not change with the seasons – and a point where all the astronomic lines enabling a scientific representation of the Earth converge, it acquired a particular status from Antiquity onwards. It is the ultimate directional reference, from which all the others can be deduced. There is an expression in French which is "losing the North", meaning that the person has lost all sense of direction and all references, or has in fact "lost his senses". The South could have the same role in the Southern Hemisphere, but it does not have the same reference status as the North. This is explained in particular by the fact that the three great civilisations (Greek, Arab and Chinese) that developed academic systems of representation of the world based on astronomic observations are all located in the Northern Hemisphere. And seen from the north side of the Equator, the «South» is a direction where space extends and spreads out, rather than a direction where space concentrates to become a point.

In addition to being a point and a direction, the North is also a space, or rather several spaces. There are local "norths" as perceived from where one's home is, and there is the Far North. Local norths are perceived as such relative to a given point in space. Typically, this will refer to the "northern" parts of a State – the North of England for instance. The phrase "Grand Nord" in French which has no real equivalent in English but means something like "the Far North", refers to a sort of absolute North that can be outlined objectively. In this perspective the French-Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin (1976) created a set of ten "polar values" (VAPO) to measure the nordicity or northness of different points situated north of the 50th parallel. Each VAPO has a 10-point scale, and the sum of the points derived from the 10 VAPO provides categories forming a nordicity index. Six "polar values" measure natural phenomena (duration of darkness, mean temperature etc) and the other four measure human occupation (economic activities, population, accessibility). The system puts emphasis on the relative nature of nordicity. The index can change in the course of time, and the outlines of the areas corresponding to the Near North, the Middle North, the Far North and the Extreme North do not follow the lines of latitude. It is possible to be in the Middle North at a latitude of 70°N, and in the Far North at a latitude of 65°N.

Whether relative or absolute, the North is never an indifferent space. It carries representations and values. In Europe these are often positive, sometimes condescending. The North is associated with hard-working, skilled, disciplined people, with friendly populations, and traditions of solidarity. There is less voluble good humour than that associated with the South of France, for instance, but a more supportive society. Life is hard in the North, which explains the endurance of the inhabitants. The Far North, for its part, is the "Extreme" North – extreme cold, extreme darkness, extreme precariousness of the living environment, extreme hardness of the population who live in conditions of extreme privation, but have extreme ingeniousness and strength of mind, who are extremely mobile in a way with which only the nomads of the Sahara can compare. This avalanche of extremes makes the Far North an ultimate challenge for adventure-seekers – the early explorations, or all manner of extreme sports today.

So is the North a territory? Local norths certainly are. In several European countries these areas have a clear identity component for their inhabitants. In France "le Nord" recalls the mines and factories, the local dialect, beer, and a socialist electorate, much as the

North of England also carries numerous comparable representations. The Far North, however, appears as an anti-territory, an open space, a desert that has been little or not at all appropriated. This representation serves the designs of exogenous powers. It has legitimised the taking-possession of spaces that were "discovered" by explorers from the 16th to the 20th century, and today it fuels all manner of "expeditions" for would-be heroes. Yet the Far North is also, and above all, a multitude of different territories for the peoples living there, and the all-embracing name tends to erase its diversity. All the native peoples in the polar region are today calling for recognition of their lands as territories with an identity and political status. The Inuit are the most advanced in this combat (in Greenland, The USA and Canada), and they are a reference for other peoples. The difficulty gaining recognition resides in the reluctance of their tutelary States, and also more fundamentally in the geographical fantasy of the Far North, which merges with the fixed point and the point of absolute reference for people in our hemisphere. Like the East, the North has a particular place in the geographical representations in the Western world. The Far North is assigned to immobility and extremes. It is not made up of ordinary living environments in the way other territories are, its inhabitants can only be heroes of day-to-day survival. While in the imagination of the Western world the East is foreign and exotic, the North is associated with the victory of Man over Nature, however hostile. Yet when the North is set against the South in the many expressions describing international relationships, the hostile dimension gives away to a notion of domination, and a binary view of the functioning of globalisation.

Bibliographie