

## Introduction: The many frontiers of the Baltic

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1893, at the World Fair in Chicago, a young Wisconsin professor had his big moment in front of the prestigious American Historical Association: Frederick Jackson Turner presented his paper on “*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*” and introduced one of the most influential and enduring concepts in American historiography.<sup>1</sup>

For decades, approximately up to the 1960s, Turner's frontier paradigm shaped the way the United States perceived their own history, and it continues to evoke emotions up to the present day: Intrepid pioneers moving westwards, facing a hostile environment and braving the unknown. Striving to master the wilderness, the frontiersman has to realise that it is the wilderness that masters him: “It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. [...] In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish.”<sup>2</sup>

For Turner, the frontier is “is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization”.<sup>3</sup> In the wilderness, all those social distinctions which the European emigrants took with them lose their importance.<sup>4</sup> The frontier

---

1 Turner, Frederick Jackson (1996 [1893]): “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. - In: Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Dover Publications; pp. 1-38. Available online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/> [20-08-2008]. For an introduction to the extensive literature on frontier studies, see Faragher, John Mack (1998): “The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography. A Guide to Further Reading.” - In: John Mack Faragher (ed.): *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press.

2 Turner (see note 1); p. 4.

3 Turner (see note 1); pp. 3-4.

4 “The Western wilds, from the Alleghanies to the Pacific, constituted the richest free gift that was ever spread out before civilized man. To the peasant and artisan of the Old World, bound by the chains of social class, as old as custom

fosters self-reliance, egalitarianism, a love of freedom and a penchant for democracy – all the ideas and values that made America what it should be. The moribund urban centres of the East Coast depend on the Western wilderness to reinvigorate them with pioneer spirit. There, at the frontier, Turner believed to observe “the perennial rebirth of American life”.

To many modern scholars, Turner's tale of the frontier seems tainted by the bad aftertaste of an imperialistic era.<sup>5</sup> His concept is, indeed, heavily ethnocentric: The protagonists of the frontier epic are white, European settlers, and the Native Americans are little more than inventory, one among the various obstacles and hardships the pioneers have to face.<sup>6</sup> Critics have also objected to Turner's cynicism regarding the social problems of his time: Dumping urban proletarians in the wilderness, to teach them the proper American way, does not seem to be a convincing solution to modern observers.<sup>7</sup>

Turner's frontier thesis has received much criticism, and it has often been declared obsolete. Yet, equally often, it has been reinterpreted and inspired new research: “Turner has become a kind of vampire, killed on many a day with a stake through his Thesis, yet ever undead and stalking abroad.”<sup>8</sup>

Although it had been modelled on the American West<sup>9</sup>, Turner's concept of the frontier proved to be adaptive. Scholars have applied it to numerous other settings throughout the world and throughout the ages, ranging from

---

and as inevitable as fate, the West offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature, into the midst of resources that demanded manly exertion, and that gave in return the chance for indefinite ascent in the scale of social advance.” Turner, Frederick Jackson (1996 [1903]): “Contributions of the West to American Democracy”. - In: Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Dover Publications; p. 261.

5 Waechter, Matthias (1996): *Die Erfindung des amerikanischen Westens. Die Geschichte der Frontier-Debatte* (= Rombach Historiae 9). Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach; pp. 320-325.

6 Juricek, John T. (1966): “American Usage of the World 'Frontier' from Colonial Times to Frederick Jackson Turner”. - In: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 110; p. 25.

7 Waechter (see note 5); pp. 249-252.

8 Burns, Robert I. (1989): “The Significance of the Frontier in the Middle Ages”. - In: Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (eds.): *Medieval Frontier Societies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; p. 307.

9 Turner devoted particular attention to the forest wildernesses that the American settlers encountered during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The open prairies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century feature less prominently in his original concept of the American frontier. Cf. Waechter (see note 5); p. 199.

medieval Spain to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Siberia and to the “frontiers of space” in contemporary science fiction.<sup>10</sup> The “Baltic Frontier” is one among these many Turner-inspired approaches to comparable historical phenomena.

Associations between the Turner thesis and the history of Eastern Europe have a certain tradition. Scholars have likened the medieval eastwards expansion of German settlers to the westwards movement of American pioneers. Traces of the Turnerian frontier thesis have appeared in research on the medieval Baltic since the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> In 1980, Eric Christiansen used the term “Baltic Frontier” in the title of his influential study on the Crusades in North-Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> During the following decades, the catchphrase “Baltic Frontier” has gained general acceptance within scholarly discourse as a term that encompasses the large variety of transformation processes which shaped the Baltic Sea Region during the Middle Ages. Alan V. Murray’s volume entitled *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500* (2001) demonstrated the versatility of Baltic frontier studies<sup>13</sup>, and ongoing research and forthcoming publications<sup>14</sup> prove that the frontier thesis continues to influence medievalists working on the Baltic region.<sup>15</sup>

---

10 For an overview on comparative frontier studies and their various regional applications, see the online bibliography compiled by Richard W. Slatta at <http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/comparebib.htm> [21-01-2009]. Cf. also Burns (see note 8); pp. 311-315.

11 For an early contribution, see Winter, William J. (1973): “The Baltic as a common frontier of Eastern and Western Europe in the Middle Ages”. – In: *Lituanus. Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 19.

12 Christiansen, Eric (1980): *The Northern Crusades: The Baltic and the Catholic Frontier, 1100-1525*. London: Macmillan.

13 Murray, Alan V. (ed.) (2001): *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

14 Murray, Alan V. (ed.) (2009): *Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier*. Aldershot: Ashgate [forthcoming]; Jensen, Carsten Selch et al. (eds.) (2009): *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier. The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia (Early Thirteenth Century)*. Aldershot: Ashgate [forthcoming].

15 The application of Turnerian frontier methodology on Europe in general, and the Baltic case in particular, has also drawn intensive criticism. Fernand Braudel, for example, has stated explicitly that “[t]here is no possibility of confusing the *Ostsiedlung*, the famous 'Germanic colonization' of eastern lands, and the saga of the American frontier, despite the efforts of comparative history”. Braudel, Fernand (1992): *Civilization and capitalism, 15th-18th Century. Volume I. The Structures of Everyday Life. The Limits of the Possible*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 100. See also the critical remarks on “false comparisons with America” by Urban, William L. (1998): “Victims of the Baltic Crusades”. – In:

The symposium at the European University Institute intended to revisit the idea of a “Baltic Frontier”, examining it from a broader perspective. As my co-organiser has stressed<sup>16</sup>, analytical tools and scholarly paradigms like the Turnerian frontier are the result of a scholarly discourse, embedded in the political and social interpretations of the participating researchers. As such, it seems advisable to question and re-evaluate the underlying assumptions upon which the academic tradition of Comparative Frontier Studies is based. The interdisciplinary character of the symposium stressed the necessity of such a critical stance towards frontier studies, while at the same time providing an inspiring forum for a re-examination of the frontier paradigm.

To this day, the usage of the term has been restricted almost exclusively to medievalists. And academic specialisations tend, as we all know, to impede a *longue durée* approach. Is the Frontier concept no longer applicable to the Baltic after the upheavals of the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Or have scholars with a background in other disciplines simply ignored the term, since they felt it belonged to the medievalists' toolkit?

Hardly anybody would, admittedly, argue that the North-Eastern Europe has experienced a fully fledged Turnerian frontier situation after 1500. The open spaces that had characterised the medieval Baltic had disappeared and there was no more room left for pioneers, explorers, merchant adventurers and the like. Loose, ambiguous and dynamic frontiers condensed into linear, clearly defined borders of statehood and administrative institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Since the 1960s, however, comparative frontier studies have developed beyond Turner's naïve tale of bold pioneers. Scholars have addressed the methodic weaknesses that were inherent to early frontier research, tried to dissociate the term from the imperialist implications of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet managed to retain the intriguing aspects of Turner's approach. Most importantly, they stressed the importance of the indigenous inhabitants in a frontier setting – an aspect almost completely ignored by Turner. Comparative research has pointed out that asymmetrical interethnic

---

*Journal of Baltic Studies* 29.

16 See p. xx.

17 Cf. the typology of borders in Tuchtenhagen, Ralph (2004): “Border – Aspects of a Notion in the Humanities”. - In: Karsten Brüggemann (ed.): *Narva und die Ostseeregion. Beiträge der II. Internationalen Konferenz über die politischen und kulturellen Beziehungen zwischen Russland und der Ostseeregion (Narva, 1.-3. Mai 2003)* (= *Studia humaniora et paedagogica collegii Narovensis* 1). Narva: Tartu Ülikooli Narva Kolledž; pp. 257-259.

relations and supporting stereotypes are a crucial, indeed a defining element of a frontier situation.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, scholars have expanded one of the most innovative aspects of Turner's thinking: He imagined the American frontier as a periphery that is actively influencing and shaping the entire society – imbuing the urban centres of the East coast with proper liberal American spirit. The patriotic undertones might be irritating, but the basic model has its unquestionable merits: For Turner, a periphery is not subordinate to the centres in every respect. It is not exclusively socially receptive, but is fully capable of developing its own ethics, its own cultural traits that retroactively influence the social centres. Turnerian frontier studies thus form a necessary corrective to the rather one-sided, strictly hierarchical centre-periphery interaction of a Wallersteinian pattern.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, frontier studies have departed from the primarily socio-economic approach that Turner once employed. The US census that inspired his essay defined the frontier through demographic statistics: “In the census reports it [the frontier] is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more [white settlers] to the square mile.”<sup>20</sup> But the linguistic turn has left its imprint on comparative frontier studies as well, and recent research has focused on the “myth of the frontier” rather than on quantifiable socio-political and economic criteria.<sup>21</sup> A frontier situation could not come into existence without the literature, the art, the public discourse

---

18 Thompson, Leonard and Lamar, Howard (1981): “Comparative Frontier History”. – In: Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson (eds.): *The Frontier in History. North America and Southern Africa Compared*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press; pp. 4-8; Miller, David Harry and Savage, William W., Jr. (1977): “Ethnic Stereotypes and the Frontier: A Comparative Study of Roman and American Experience”. – In: David Harry Miller and Jerome O. Steffen (eds.): *The Frontier. Comparative Studies*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Waechter (see note 5); pp. 334-335, 340-347. Cf. also the concept of a “Frontier ethnics” proposed by Smith, Anthony D. (1986): *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell; pp. 84-85.

19 Cf. Chappell, David A. (1993): “Ethnogenesis and Frontiers”. – In: *Journal of World History* 4; p. 271.

20 Turner (see note 1); p. 3.

21 Abulafia, David and Berend, Nora (eds.) (2002): *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate; pp. xiv. Cf. also Stoeltje, Beverly J. (1987): “Making the Frontier Myth: Folklore Process in a Modern Nation”. – In: *Western Folklore* 46. For a recent attempt at a mathematical theory of the frontier, see Turchin, Peter (2003): *Historical Dynamics. Why States Rise and Fall*. Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press; pp. 50-77.

and the scholarly debates that create, expound and reconstruct it. More than a century after Turner, it seems that there is little “Reality of the Frontier” beyond the “Narrative of the Frontier”.

The Baltic area certainly has not witnessed a purely Turnerian pioneer situation during the last five hundred years. There simply were no more untamed wildernesses and open spaces to explore and settle. But if one bears the three mentioned trends in contemporary frontier research in mind – the importance of asymmetrical ethnic encounters, the focus on periphery as an autonomous agent, and the stress on frontier myths and narratives – it seems that comparative frontier studies provide a useful inspiration for Baltic Studies nonetheless – even for the centuries after 1500:

1. The Baltic encounters between self-styled “Western” Europeans and putatively “Eastern” Russians have been, throughout the ages, marred by stereotypes of barbarism and otherness. Russia has frequently been perceived as a dangerous, Asian antithesis to European civilisation, and the anti-Russian sentiments during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Livonian wars, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russophobia and the 2007 riots in Estonia have shown some remarkable similarities.<sup>22</sup> Assigning cultural and moral inferiority to the Russians (and to a lesser degree to the Poles), ethnic interactions in the Baltic have, on numerous occasions throughout history, displayed the characteristic asymmetry of a frontier encounter.
2. In his famous monograph on “The Making of Europe”, Robert Bartlett has shown how the medieval Baltic can be interpreted as a Turnerian periphery that retroactively influences the cultural centres.<sup>23</sup> Ideals of knighthood and chivalry were shaped on the fringes of the Christian world – Outremer, Spain, the Baltic – and later spread to European centres like France, Italy and Germany. The economic transformations associated with the Hansa can equally be regarded as an innovation originating in the periphery. But culturally active peripheries can arguably be found in the Baltic also at later stages. Enlightenment thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century tended to perceive Russia's Baltic provinces as a testbed for their ideals. If peasant emancipation, enlightened education and liberal values

---

22 See the analysis of the condescending, disrespectful and hostile attitude towards the Russian minority in present-day Estonia in Imbi Sooman's contribution, in particular p. xx.

23 Bartlett, Robert (1993): *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

could overcome the backwardness of North-Eastern Europe, they could certainly prevail throughout the civilized world. Similarly, Soviet Estonia, as the Western periphery of the USSR, acted as an experimental ground for reforms and innovations and provided a progressive impetus on the entire Union.

3. “Myths of the Frontier”, eventually, have abounded in the Baltic throughout the ages. German settlers, Hansa traders and Teutonic Knights were, in a way, more active during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism than they had ever been before, providing an epic tale of German pioneering spirit – and provoking counter-myths among the Slavic nations on the Baltic Sea. When Alexander Nevsky met the German *Drang nach Osten* once more in Eisenstein's 1938 film, it proved the importance of such a mythology for both major totalitarian systems in the Baltic, Soviet Bolshevism and National Socialism – even though the Baltic lands no longer appear as a loose frontier, but as a contested borderland between expansionist powers.<sup>24</sup>

During recent years, the so called “spatial turn” in the humanities has been intensively debated – esteemed by many scholars as an important new paradigm that reintroduces space as a central criteria to scholarship, and scorned by others as a shallow hype that exists only because the academic community needs to come up with new “turns”, spatial, linguistic or otherwise, every now and then. Yet, at least in the Baltic case, it is intriguing to highlight the importance of spatial categories for cultural encounters. Nations and cultures have been labelled as “Northern” or “Eastern”, and in doing so they have been associated with a wide range of stereotypes. What are the cultural semantics of the compass rose in the Baltic area? Which implications did Northernness or Easternness have during different periods? And which place does the Baltic have in the the symbolic geography of Europe? At the heart of the continent, bridging East and West, or rather clinging to the West and turning its back on the East?

Bearing these implications of spatiality in mind, it seems tempting to revisit the “Baltic Frontier” of medieval Europe, and to follow its development through later periods up to the present. Was there something like an “enlightenment frontier”, a “Soviet frontier” or a “post-Soviet frontier”<sup>25</sup> in the region? And did the Baltic Sea itself display traits of a

---

24 Cf. Maureen Perrie's contribution, in particular p. xx.

25 An association employed, for example, in an economic context by Johansen,

maritime frontier<sup>26</sup> – as a last available option for enterprise, for pioneers to prove their value, after all land frontiers had consolidated into fixed borders?

S. D.

Is the frontier paradigm for me scientifically productive, clearly describing and in the same time not hiding relevant nuances? Would I want to use it for the newer Baltic history?

“Frontier” should indeed be seen as a discursive construction, in the sense that an area is a frontier, when it – by its inhabitants or its describers – is perceived as a such. But the paradigms of scholars on the meta-level, or at least on the comparative level, are also constructions, changing with their historical, political, social etc. interpretations, which – at the very end – are based upon their intentions.

As there cannot exist any meta-level in general, the frontier paradigm can only be “revisited” through an interdisciplinary dialogue, during which we can compare our different “frontier-paradigm-like” tools for describing the Baltic Sea Region, without really having to agree about the meaning of this “one frontier-paradigm”.

For such a dialogue you just need some basic agreement about what is important about “the Baltic”, which we apparently had, as the dialogue during our symposium was very inspiring.

In the following some reflections from my point of view:

Let’s try to apply the first of the three characteristic features of a frontier setting, as developed by comparative frontier studies, and raise the question whether the Baltic represents an “assymetric ethnic encounter”.

Neither in the 1860s, when the national cultures stirred against their local suppressors (the Estonians and Latvians against the Baltic Germans and the Lithuanians against the Poles) as well as against the political power from the outside (Russia), nor after 1918, when the own nationalities wanted to

---

Harley et al. (2000): “Nordic Investments in the Former Soviet Baltic Frontier: A Survey of Firms and Selected Case Studies”. - In: *Geografiska annaler* 82B.

26 Cf. Marta Grzechnik's contribution, in particular p. xx.



be free from all foreign influence, (even the old friends, the Swedes, had to learn Estonian to be able to support the new national University of Tartu, where Estonian from now on was the only teaching language), we can speak about “an” encounter, instead about “encounters”.

There were and are many border lines and frontier situations within the region, which – additionally – were subjected to change throughout history.

In the case of Finland, we can for example see an encounter of any type with Russia from 1809 on, which led to the independence of the republic in 1917, but Finland itself has remained a “frontier” for Sweden since its colonization in the 13<sup>th</sup> century until a short time ago, representing lower social class (immigrants since 1950) and “the East”. Hence it has played the Western as well as the Eastern role in two various frontier settings – or in the same... How broadly do we define the extent of a particular “frontier situation”?

The examples above are just a few of the many changing relationships within the Baltic, representing the dynamics...

Furthermore, “ethnic” is rather a myth for political conflicts that have been lasting for long and are part of what is called “collective memory” today. The aversion towards the Russian speaking population in Estonia and Latvia (incl. the rigid language policy or the attitude of the Estonian Government in the Bronze Soldier conflict) is for example a heritage from the Soviet time: the Russian-speaking population represents the earlier suppressors. In Lithuania there are no “ethnic” encounters for political reasons: it was not russified in the sixties and seventies, since there were no major industrialisation efforts. Inhabitants who desire to do so can become Lithuanian citizens.

Regarding, as another example, the Baltic Germans and their “ethnic encounters” with the Estonians and Latvians we must admit that Baltic German components were continuously absorbed by the local cultures, starting with the religious and continuing with socio-cultural as well as linguistic elements. Until the peasants were liberated, they had to adopt German culture and language to be able to raise their status, not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century they could do so and still remain “Estonian”. Encounters between Estonians / Latvians and Baltic Germans can hence be interpreted as assymetric often rather in a “social” than in an “ethnic” sense. From 1918 on, though, the Baltic Germans had to “practise the local culture”, they did not represent the upper class any more. So there had, admittedly, been one important aspect of ethnic suppression: the hindering of the development of the local language.

How about the Polish and the Lithuanians? Where are the border lines *in*

*their case?* Is Adam Mickiewicz a Polish or a Lithuanian author?

Also the notion of “ethnicities” must be regarded with some caution. In 1620, after the Livonian wars the Estonian population had decreased from 150-280 000 to 100 000 and 75% of the farms were deserted. The Swedes populated this area with settlers from various nations, Russians, Finns, but also Netherlanders and Scots, who on the countryside were “estonianized”. In 1700 the population had reached a number of 300 000 “Estonians”.<sup>27</sup>

Finland has, as mentioned above, sort of been the “Wild East” for Sweden since the 13<sup>th</sup> century but in fact the borders have run through the country, between the upper class Finnish-Swedes and the Finns, who inhabited various regions.

Also on the political level (if we let “ethnic” stand for a mixture of ethnicity and politics) we do not have any blocks in the Baltic Sea Region, neither in the states, where there always were and are various parties/earlier movements, nor over their borders. During the first independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, each republic was devoted to its own goals. Additionally there has in general been too much mingling with the neighbourhood, not only through Sweden's, Finland's and Germany's support of the new Baltic republics 1918-1939, but also during the Soviet period of their history.

New research with admission to archives, having been forbidden for fifty years, has shown how tangled the relationships were during this time on regional and European level. The Baltic did not form (as believed until now) a clearly westwards oriented political block with a “frontier situation towards the Soviet Union”. Instead, the power structures in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania made efforts of to cooperate westwards as well as eastwards, with Hitler as well as Stalin.<sup>28</sup> There has been much excitement and protests because of the dismantling of heroes and destroying of illusions, and the border lines in this discourse run through the scholarly, cultural and political communities.

Hence, the Baltic is not as homogeneous as the West was for the

---

27 Piirimäe, Helmut (1993): “The Use of the Estonian Language during the Swedish Rule”. - In: Aleksander Loit and Helmut Piirimäe (eds.): *Die schwedischen Ostseeprovinzen Estland und Livland im 16. - 18. Jahrhundert* (= *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 11). Stockholm: Centre for Baltic Studies; pp. 367-382.

28 Cf. Ilmjärv, Magnus (2004): *Silent Submission. Formation of Foreign Policy of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Period from mid-1920s to Annexation in 1940* (= *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis / Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 24). Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Americans. To make it look homogeneous today, to describe it as one “(political) culture” or one “ethnicity”, is hiding relevant nuances and not scholarly productive.

“The Baltic” is a construction that obscures more differences than it can show similarities. It was always used by the centres, not by the three states themselves.

If we instead let the Baltic itself represent “wild otherness” for “Western” Europe, the paradigm becomes revealing for specific discourses, reminding us for example of the fear of the new EU member states during the EU enlargement or also the fear the old members of the Nordic Council displayed towards the new one, Finland, in 1955.

The West is not homogeneous enough today in its attitudes, for justifying a common paradigm.

More exact methods would have to be applied.

Today’s efforts to stress a common “European cultural identity” (even meaning the old member states) is rather an act of region-building.

Let’s now regard the second characteristic condition of frontier situations: Is the Baltic periphery an autonomous agent, influencing the cultural centre retroactively, in shaping the entire society?

We can hardly apply such a centre-periphery interaction model on the Baltic, meaning the three Baltic States. We do have a retroactivity (through bilateral interaction) but less and less. Centralisation and economic globalisation are processes with more influence. Neither today in the EU, nor during the Soviet Union (with the exception of the more Western outlook in the Baltic Soviet republics) nor in the first period of independence, not even during the Swedish “so democratic” empire you can talk about any retroactive influence of the Baltic states upon “its centres”.

The Baltic republics’ ongoing lobbying for an anti-Russian policy within the EU could be seen as an exception, but it is also influenced by Russia itself, and made possible only through the general anti-Russian tendencies in the EU.

Are there myths and narratives about “the Baltic”? Of course there are.

When the Swedes started travelling to Estonia, they wrote friendly idealising/colonising over the Estonians how “easy to satisfy and how diligent” these were, so to say a mixture of experience and construction.<sup>29</sup>

---

29 Wikberg, Sven (1930): *Estland. Intryck och studier*. Stockholm: Geber, p. 47.

Through re-established contacts the myths about the earlier “periphery” are being corrected (actually a sort of retroactive influence): through the movements of the West-East border there is a dynamic: myths arise and fall...

The “mysterious distant shore”, as my co-organiser has phrased it<sup>30</sup>, can still be found in most travellers' advertising, the strange “pagan inhabitants who turn out to be gentle and peaceful” could be a global psychological pattern for enjoying a new relationships, after having feared it.

The EU information in general tends to be rather schematic, concerning the new members: little information on the current situation, selling the old “genuine” cultural heritage.

But crossing the Eastern EU border, we construct enemies, so when the “frontier situation” is moving eastwards, the myths slowly develop to prejudices.

Regarding the “need of civilisation and conversion”, that the catholic missionaries assigned to Livonia in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century and which made the country remind them of India,<sup>31</sup> we could ask if such attitudes towards “the Baltic” are relevant today:

Critically seen, the EU indeed sees such a need also in the Baltic, but as the member states themselves have their representatives in Brussels and so influence the EU reform policy, Brussels can hardly be compared with a homogeneous group of missionaries, acting from the outside.

Maybe the awareness of a possible frontier setting could motivate an exchange of political reforms and increase mutual evaluation and respect. Although I am critical about Estonia in my impulse text to the conference “Transformation processes in the Baltic Sea Region...”, the second part of the title “...and the East European experience” is a reminder of the necessity of equality in the evaluation process.<sup>32</sup>

Continuing with the “acquir[ing of] a set of historical symbols”,<sup>33</sup> which is connected with the above mentioned issues, so are the EU but so are also the official structures in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania themselves, within their nation building. And they have used these symbols since 1918 against

---

30 See page xx.

31 See page xx.

32 Sooman, Imbi (2005): “Estland – ein 'neuer Mitgliedstaat...!'” - In: Imbi Sooman (ed.): *Transformation Processes in the Baltic Sea Region and the East European Experience. Report from the International Conference of Experts*. Vienna: Univ.; pp. 15-20.

33 See page xx.

Russia.

Also for describing the integration on the European level, you do not need the frontier paradigm, even if one could partly call it an influence of the periphery back on the centre of the EU, it's more an agreement about the common European sphere and the accepting of mutual local ones.

Let's end up with the factor of „discrediting the local elites“<sup>34</sup> – this issue does also not run between the blocks “West Europe” and “the Baltic”. If former Prime Minister Göran Persson (Swedish Socialists), for example, criticized the lack of taxes in Estonia, but present foreign minister Carl Bildt (Swedish Conservatives) doesn't, the borders run between political parties. The lack of NGOs or the bad prison conditions are, again, rather criticism on behalf of the Left.

To sum up: As political parties and NGOs on local, regional and European level represent various “West-East-constructions”, we can only define “the” relationship of West Europe to “the” Baltic Sea Region in a dynamic and tangled way.

Methods (rather than models) for describing the cultural and political encounters of the Baltic with its past and presence, with changing West-East borders, changing centres and peripheries as well as different and changing relationships between the various population groups could, among others, be discourse analysis, comparative methods of history and political science, sociology, economics and cultural studies.

Even proceeding along these lines of research, we would never receive answers for “the” whole region, which can be nothing but a construction. This, though, still means that there seems to be a need for this region.

I. S.

---

34 See page xx.