Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery

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It has been more than two years since that momentous day on which the British electorate narrowly decided to extract itself from (political) Europe, by happenstance coinciding with the long-planned symposium on which the papers that form the basis of this volume’s contributions were presented. Naturally, the discussions of historic and current affairs blended into each other and provided ample room for reflection on the relevance of the concepts at the core of this volume for the present.

Ever since, the prospects of the UK crashing out of the European Union by default have increased on a daily basis. Whether one regrets or greets that prospect at this point in time depends on one’s political convictions, obviously, and this is not the place to offer a political value judgement. ‘Europe and its offshore islands’, as the late Ralf Dahrendorf, the former director of the London School of Economics (LSE) and only person who ever was a member of both the German and British parliaments, used to describe this asymmetrical relationship, have long been likely to come to a different arrangement, if few had foreseen the dramatic, and some would say tragic, way in which the process would play out. In Sir Ralf’s modern version of Vincenzo Gioberti’s characterization of England as the ‘Sicily of Europe’ (1851), as referenced by Axel Körner in the introduction to this volume, the UK is pointedly assigned to the periphery of the continent, and its relationship to Europe described as one of subordination. As the old pun about fog over the English Channel (‘Continent cut off’) suggests, the relationship naturally looks more complex from a British perspective, with several historical (Commonwealth),
cultural (‘Anglosphere’) and economic (‘global economy’) layers overlapping with geographical, or geography-defying, ones.

When I use this example from current affairs, without the benefit of hindsight that usually distinguishes a historian’s work from political commentary, it is to show that on the traditional British collective ‘mental map’, the English Channel seems to lie between the US and the British Isles, whereas the ocean separates the UK from Europe. Mental maps like this, or ‘collective mentalities’, as Joris van Eijnatten calls them in his contribution to this volume, provide a particularly interesting way to analyse hierarchical and asymmetrical relationships, and they are of course not one-dimensional but multi-layered entities. The illustration chosen for the cover of this volume is thus no coincidence. Unfamiliar representations like inverted charts of the world can be unsettling, and have been used, more often than not with political intentions, to challenge established hierarchies (e.g. between the developed and the developing world; see the controversies about the Peters projection and its variants versus the traditional Mercator projection since the 1970s).

The contributions to this volume are examples of attempts at re-mapping spatial hierarchies from a scholarly perspective, and explore the value of moving beyond the traditional historical model of ‘centres’ and ‘periphery’, as introduced by Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s and 1980s. Using examples of historical mechanisms of cultural and intellectual exchange from both European and global contexts and from different historical periods, they argue for a reconceptualization of the multi-layered relationships between global, regional and sub-regional (political) entities. When questioning existing hierarchies and focusing in particular on perspectives from the allegedly ‘lesser’ states and cultures, they do so without claiming to fully rewrite European and global history from the perspectives of the peripheries (which would be a desirable undertaking), but in the hope and expectation of providing a historical corrective that rebalances common and frequently unquestioned perceptions.

Note

1. In his opening address to the 1992 convention of the German Historians’ Association (Deutscher Historikertag) in Hannover, for example.