

**AUSTRIA AND EUROPE: REFLECTIONS ON RELEVANT REGIONAL AND
SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES BY ELISABETH LICHTENBERGER**

Homage at the Occasion of her 90th Birthday

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Introduction

Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER has undoubtedly played a vital role in the shaping of research in both regional geography and social geography in Austria. But, her approach and outcomes of her research have also had considerable impact in the other German-speaking countries and even outside the macro-region of Central Europe. It is therefore interesting to reflect on her outstanding research and publications in an attempt to position her approach in regional and social geography within a wider frame of reference. She is someone with a strong sense of international community of geographers



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and nations, seeking a framework of ideas and concepts within which her approach can be elucidated in a wider comparative context. It is obvious that considering approaches and interpretative frameworks in regional-geographic and social-geographic research one has also to reflect on the intertwined nature of regional geography and systematic (or topical) geography.

Referring to the important study by Hans BOBEK (1957) already Richard HARTSHORNE argued that “we remember that every truly geographic study involves the use of both the topical and the regional approaches” (1959, p. 122). This reference is important. On the one hand, it indicates the nature of a modern geographic approach, which Hans BOBEK and his “assistant of superior qualifications” (thus Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER, see BOBEK, 1983, p. 176) developed in Vienna [Wien] since the 1950s. On the other hand, it informs us about the balanced and relevant character of the regional-geographic approach, which has further been developed by Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER in her regional geographies of Austria and Europe (LICHTENBERGER 2000, 2005), which are considered in this short contribution. It can be argued that BOBEK (1957) inspired HARTSHORNE to consider so-called “element-complexes” as “more closely integrated elements” of heterogeneous natural and societal phenomena in configurations of regions and localities (1959, p. 122). Yet, HARTSHORNE was also warning that “we are forced to deal with the greater uncertainty of generalisations concerning man and society” (1959, p. 125). Seemingly, due to his strong emphasis given to the concern with “areal differentiation”, HARTSHORNE did not recognise the key importance of stages of historical development, which was central in the regional and social-geographic approach developed by BOBEK and further elaborated by LICHTENBERGER.

The reflections on the regional and social geographies of Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER are organised in this short paper in three parts. The next section is considering the approach applied in “Austria, Society and Regions” published in 2000 (491 pages). The third section is reflecting on her “Europa. Geographie, Geschichte, Wirtschaft, Politik” published in 2005 (360 pages). The last section gives major conclusions.

Regional and social geography of Austria

Considering the regional monograph on Austria, the diversity and volume of publications of Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER make seemingly generalisation of her approach hazardous. However, there is a remarkable consistency in her preferred approaches and practice and understandable progressions over decades of her scholarly activity. Her systematically-oriented investigations of urbanisation processes, regional economic changes, political geography, urban policy-making and planning, to historical and archival studies in geographic terms resulted in her long-term building of indispensable complex bases of spatially specified data and materials on Austria. There are at least six foci of her systematic (topical) research interests, which she has appeared to utilise in her writing of regional and social geography of Austria and which effectively elucidate the current character of regional geography of the country.

First, there is the consideration of urbanisation and the role of cities and their centrifugal and centripetal impacts on the regional organisation and development in Austria.

Second, there is great sensitivity to history, with reference to the approach developed with Hans BOBEK.

Third, there is her discernible interest in an evolutionary institutional and economic development of the country. This interest of LICHTENBERGER stretches further than usual investigations of changing regional and urban planning. Seemingly, in a MYRDALIAN tradition of institutional investigations of regional development (MYRDAL 1957) she has stressed the importance of the Austrian

political landscape and the redistributive role of the Austrian welfare state as well as associated value orientations of urban and rural population segments.

Fourth, one can discern her long-term research interest in the dominant role and development of the capital city of Vienna. Her research has clearly indicated that the city development has largely been sustained during a few last decades by the increasing importance of the so-called transactional activities of the quaternary sector (see also GOTTMANN 1970; DOSTÁL 2008).

Fifth, it must be underlined that, obviously, writing regional geography, she has also considered Austrian natural resources and environment, energy and water power. But again, she has approached these topics of nature and environment in terms of their relationships with a changing agrarian society and leisure society. Also these topics indicate a clear social geography-based character of her regional geographic approach.

Finally, LICHTENBERGER has also considered in the last two chapters of her monograph certain and uncertain futures and some aspects of the changing geopolitical position of Austria in Europe. Elaborating on the legacy of a divided Central Europe, she has mainly focused on current and future conditions of planned networks of motorways and railways (and urbanisation trends) and the documented significant extension of the Austrian labour market to the East and North of Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Referring to the conception of possible future developments she has pointed out to the formation of a second major European zone of urbanisation and international infrastructure in Central Europe, which would be stretching from Copenhagen [København] towards Berlin, Prague [Praha], Vienna and Budapest and further to the countries of the Balkans (see DOSTÁL & HAMPL 1992, pp. 193–194).

In her final outlook on Austria in Europe LICHTENBERGER underlined the geographically important facts that her country is relatively small and has only one real European metropolis: the capital city of Vienna.

This specific regional-geographic approach developed by Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER has been characterised by a balance between well-selected crucial societal topics, on the one hand, and the traditional interest in regions and regional differentiations of the country, on the other. The selection of the six key topics (or “element complexes”) has made the regional geography of Austria accessible also for interested readers outside the discipline of geography. It is also important to emphasise that the monograph is enriched by a big number of well-chosen photographs and maps, which effectively document the historical legacies and also current developments of regions, cities, towns and rural areas and their natural environment. These very rich illustrations have made the contents of her monograph accessible to readers from the general public.

Regional and social geography of Europe

Already the title of the monograph on Europe has made clear that Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER again has attempted to balance her regional-geographic approach with a number of well-selected social-geographic topics relating to history, economy and politics. There are again at least six foci of her systematic (topical) research interests, which she has utilised in the writing of her monograph on Europe and which clearly elucidate the current character of regional and social geographies of the continent.

First, there are the considerations of historical and cultural legacies of Europe. LICHTENBERGER has elaborated shortly on the basic conditions of natural environment and on the Greek and Roman heritage. Focusing on the exceptional historical trajectory of Christian Europe, she has proceeded from initial state formations to the experience of liberalism and industrialisation.

Second, there are the institutional concerns with comparative interests in the legacies of state-Socialist systems and post-Communist transformation and the nature of welfare states in the western part of the European Union (EU). It is clear that LICHTENBERGER has also utilised results of her long-term research interest in focused comparisons of institutional contexts of urban housing and labour market developments in the western market-based welfare states and the centrally administered state-Socialist systems (see LICHTENBERGER 1979, 1994). The most recent changes are discussed in terms of globalisation and migration, EU regional policies, and changing rural Europe, the agricultural sector and EU common agrarian policies.

Third, she has focused again on the evolution of European urbanisation patterns stressing the new centrality of European metropolises in relation to modifications and interweaving of historically established patterns and hierarchies of central places. Considering postmodern urban mega-structures she has focused on developments in Paris and Vienna, and on general trends in the set of European metropolises, which are specified: historical primacy of capital cities, urban planning reducing social inequalities, and strengthening positions of European metropolises in a globalised economic system.

Fourth, the topics of European economy and transportation are considered in terms of economic sectors development, but in particular focused on comparisons of economic tendencies in the EU and the USA. Here again, one can appreciate the political and economic system comparisons concerned with changing roles of markets associated with the paradigmatic shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism, which has resulted in a new cycle of policy-making in the EU. LICHTENBERGER has pointed out to impacts of neo-liberalism on the European urban system: increasing social disparities and segregation on housing markets, further marginalisation of some social groups and peripheral areas, and concentration of employment opportunities in bigger cities and limited or decreasing opportunities in rural areas. Considering the EU transportation network LICHTENBERGER has again underlined the future development of the urbanisation axis of Central Europe stretching from the North-West to the South-East of this macro-region.

Fifth, an important topic selected by LICHTENBERGER is also the development of a European leisure society. This theme is very well chosen. It constitutes an “element complex”, which elucidates close relationships between cities and towns as leisure centres, second homes regions, and tourism industries. She gives the reader short, but characteristic models of mass tourism oriented on the mountains or to the seas. In many EU countries mass tourism industry has significantly contributed to employment also in some peripheral regions.

Finally, the last chapter of the monograph asks the future-oriented question “quo vadis Europa?” This theme is certainly important. LICHTENBERGER has again applied her insights into institutional developments of the European integration. The 2005 monograph considers the 2004 enlargement of the EU incorporating ten new member countries. Accordingly, there are utilised many tables, which give useful and recent data on the enlarged EU of 25 members. LICHTENBERGER has considered the changed geopolitical constellation of Europe in view of both the deepening of the enlarged EU and the enlargement of the NATO. She has also underlined the importance of economic competition of the EU with the USA and the role of the EU as global player. However, she did not consider in explicit terms the existing multi-speed character of the European integration processes (see DOSTÁL 2010).

Also this monograph on Europe is enriched by an enormous number of carefully chosen photographs and maps, which document the historical legacies and also current developments of the EU countries and cities, towns and rural areas and their natural environment. Moreover, there are also included numerous schematic presentations of various key concepts and followed explanatory reasoning. Also these rich illustrations have made the contents of this monograph accessible to readers from the general public.

Conclusions

Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER has been a systematic promoter of theoretical approaches and interpretations. Yet, given her intellectual creativity and innovation she has also understood that her regional geographies must be controlled for their appropriateness in constellations of local, regional and national contexts. The regional and social-geographic contents of the two monographs also clearly show the importance of her research experience abroad, in particular in the geographic community in the USA. Her balanced approach combining regional geography and well-chosen social-geographic themes in the two monographs has obviously contributed to teaching and research in geography, but also to important education efforts of general readership.

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