

Steffen Wippel (2012), *Wirtschaft, Politik und Raum: Territoriale und regionale Prozesse in der westlichen Sahara*, 2 volumes, Berlin/Tübingen: Verlag Hans Schiler, ISBN 9783899303674, xiv + 1,438 pp.

Steffen Wippel's post-doctoral degree, "Territorialisierung und Regionalisierung im Nordwestlichen Afrika: Wirtschaft, Politik und Raum in den marokkanisch-mauretanischen Beziehungen" ("Territorialisation and Regionalisation in Northwest Africa: Economy, Politics and Space in Moroccan-Mauritanian Relations"), won one of the six doctoral prizes awarded by the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg in 2010 (Dies Academicus 2010). Published in two large volumes and consisting of 1,438 pages, the work's appearance and weight may be off-putting to the reader. Nevertheless, despite being difficult to read in a linear fashion, it is worth keeping within reach as a reference as it encompasses both colonial history and the key political and economic issues of the early twenty-first century. An economist by training and a specialist in interdisciplinary Modern Middle East Studies, the author employs a multidisciplinary approach to comment on the economic, social and political schools of research in Germany during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He justifies his chosen approach through his methods, sources and geographical areas of investigation, as well as through his role as a researcher at the Centre for the Modern Orient (ZMO) – where he has participated in research initiatives on translocality, intermediate spaces and regionalisation.

Besides an introduction that lays out the study's objectives, conceptualisation and proposed methodology, the work is comprised of three main components. The first of these deals with the conceptual approach to space – that is, social space and regionalisation or territorialisation – and the relationship between the two. The second part centres on the empirical aspect of the study, dealing mainly with the relations between Morocco and Mauritania. Beginning with a historical and cross-cutting tabulation of this space, this section introduces the actors of the colonial states before presenting current relationships and issues, both political and economic. The third and final part deals with the infrastructures that link places, interests and people, which were established and centralised from the 1960s onwards, thus re-activating (or not) the economic and symbolic significance of the former western trans-Saharan routes.

Wippel's focus is the Western Sahara space, and here he adopts a regional perspective that principally includes Morocco and Mauritania and their marginal areas, as well as those of the Sahel – an uncommon approach, in that works on this region usually specialise in one or another of the states involved. This space is selected for its symbolic significance, its representing a link

between the Arabo-Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa – hitherto under-appreciated in comparison to its more frequently studied East African counterpart, the Nile axis. The idea of Mauritania as a “bridge” between “white and black Africa”, and the “fraternal” relations of the people and governments of the two states are regularly evoked at bi-national meetings and by nomads and traders who make play with national borders. These are also arguments that have been used at times to support the hegemonic concept of Greater Morocco. Territorial claims by the two protagonists, which were an aspect of both continuing conflicts between the different colonial powers and still-unresolved border disputes, were transformed in the late 1990s into relations of cooperation – in particular in the economic sphere, with the aim of making these spatial factors mutually advantageous rather than blocking economic flow. Wippel argues that there has been a permanent reconfiguration and a new restructuring of this space lying between Morocco and to the north of Mali and the Senegal River. Called the “Sahelo-Maghrebian trans-Saharan space”, it extends its sphere of influence into the Mediterranean, Arab (by way of Western Sahara), and sub-Saharan worlds.

On the basis of the integration of the Morocco-Mauritania space (viewed from a historical perspective within that sub-regional space), the relationships between these two countries, and the interactions and cross-cutting ties at work there, this work aims to contribute to the growth of reflection on the construction of regional integration in Africa, including the emerging opportunities and challenges as well as the difficulties and contradictions. Indeed, relations between Morocco and Mauritania, which are often conflictual but may also be cooperative, play an important part both in the bilateral relationships the two countries maintain with their neighbours and within regional organisations such as the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), among others. This approach enables the author to conceptualise and analyse processes of regionalisation or territorialisation from a political and economic point of view, and to show that political and economic spaces do not always overlap, but may indeed be at odds with habitual cognitive representations and discourses concerning the space itself. He reviews the use of the concept of regionalisation or territorialisation in different disciplines, and of space in multiple social, geographic, philosophical, political and economic approaches. His own approach, which integrates a heavily documented historical perspective and a multitude of references, is rich in source materials. This enables the use of these concepts to be thoroughly explored, which opens up reflections on them that are perfectly illustrated in the geo-political and economic situation of the space in question. The documentation of the evolution of political and economic relations since the 1970s is particularly

detailed, highlighting the prevailing changes in geo-political balances of power in the region.

Although he defends his decision in the introduction, Wippel may be criticised for failing to deal with the issue of Western Sahara – a deep fissure in the process of regionalisation or territorialisation. Also, there is little consideration of the political and economic dynamics of actors on the fringes of inter-state relations, or of the various kinds of trafficking interests that can sometimes dictate the positions adopted on politico-economic issues. At times he appears to fall prey to excessive detail and to lead the reader into blind alleys. However, praise is due for his economist's account of this space's infra-structural history. He illustrates how the railways, electricity grids and telephone networks, and their evolution in the light of the changes in fortune and political will, re-activated and re-adapted trans-Saharan relationships for the present era. Here, he captures the essence of the process of regionalisation or territorialisation in this space – a space that, while continually adapting to globalisation, is still in search of itself.

- Laurence Marfaing