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HOW MUCH GEOGRAPHY IS THERE IN HISTORY? NORMAN DAVIES AND THE SPATIAL DIMENSION OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This article examines the works of Norman Davies through the lens of geohistory, drawing on the traditions of Paul Vidal de la Blache and Fernand Braudel. Davies situates historical events within their geographical contexts – spatial, environmental, and place-based – highlighting the dynamic interplay between place and human agency. He incorporates concepts such as *milieu* and *longue durée*, while simultaneously emphasizing narrative plurality and historical contingency, thus presenting history as a kaleidoscope of intersecting scales and processes. Cities, regions, and landscapes are treated as active participants in historical development rather than as passive backdrops. Davies's work demonstrates how mobility, trade, and cultural exchange shape both local and global histories, while geography structures opportunities as well as constraints. Ultimately, his approach bridges analytical and narrative methodologies, showing that space functions simultaneously as a framework for action and as a tool of historical interpretation. This perspective underscores the continuing relevance of spatial thinking for understanding past, present, and future historical processes.

Keywords

human geography • space • geohistory • geohistoriography

Introduction

The relationship between geography and history has for centuries been an area of intensive reflection and interdisciplinary debate (Clarke, 2000). Even in the earliest traditions of describing the past – from Herodotus and Thucydides to medieval chronicles – one can discern the conviction that history unfolds

in particular places (Marozzi, 2008; Lilley, 2014). Space, at various scales (regional and local), becomes the stage upon which processes and events take place. Geography provides tools for analysing this stage: it enables the study of the form and structure of the environment (landscape), the distribution of settlements, communication routes, natural resources, and modes of production (Hartshorne,

1958). History, in turn, captures the course of events over time, tracing change, processes, and the rhythms of civilisational development. Yet these two orders – time and space – have never been entirely autonomous. As Immanuel Kant observed, they constitute forms of a *priori* knowledge: distinct in structure, yet inseparable in scholarly practice (Kant, 1781/1998).

Kant's conception of time and space as categories that order experience had profound consequences for later debates on historical and geographical methodology. Tatham (1951), in his study of the Königsberg philosopher, argued that history without geography becomes "inexact" when it lacks reference to place. Space confers social and political dimensions upon events. Events reflect the properties of place, while places acquire new meanings through events (Tatham, 1951). This reciprocal definition of space and time proved crucial to the development of historical geography and geohistoriography (Mayhew & Withers, 2020).

Classical historical geography focused on reconstructing past settlement patterns, transport routes, boundaries, and land use (Sauer, 1941; Szady, 2013). It was closely linked to regional geography and its ambition to describe the landscape as a whole at a given moment in time (Claval, 1998). Vidal de la Blache, however, argued for a shift away from static or purely statistical description, such as that characteristic of commercial geography. Instead, he emphasised the dynamic nature of the relationship between humans and their environment. His concept of *milieu*, understood as a living system of interactions rather than a simple sum of natural and anthropogenic elements, opened a new way of thinking about space as an active factor in historical processes (Vidal de la Blache, 1922).

The ideas of Paul Vidal de la Blache and Fernand Braudel provide a theoretical foundation for research situated at the intersection of history and geography. They also offer a productive analytical framework for interpreting historical narratives. In particular, they help to reveal how historians such as Davies employ geographical categories –

especially space and environment – in their accounts of historical processes. This perspective makes it possible to examine how authors construct the *milieu* of their narratives, and to what extent their visions of the past are rooted in specific landscapes, regions, or urban forms. Reflection on geohistory in this sense thus offers a point of departure for further inquiry into the ways geography shapes historical interpretation and narrative meaning.

***Milieu, longue durée* – a field for Geohistory**

An important stimulus for integrated thinking about geography and history emerged from classical regional and human geography, whose recognised founder is P. Vidal de la Blache (Claval, 2007). His work, developed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, provided one of the intellectual foundations later drawn upon by the Annales school and by various approaches to geohistory. Central to his thought was the concept of *milieu* – the environment understood as an interactive field of human and natural agency – which he formulated in opposition to the prevailing geographical determinism of his time (Claval, 1988).

For Vidal de la Blache, the environment was neither a passive backdrop for events nor merely a "frame" for social life; rather, it functioned as an active co-creator of historical processes. This marked a departure from viewing geography as a static inventory of environmental elements, shifting instead toward an understanding of it as a sphere of dynamic interactions. Humans, rooted in specific places, act in response to the challenges and opportunities offered by their environment, while at the same time transforming it according to their needs. The process is reciprocal: the environment shapes culture, economy, and social organisation, while these, in turn, modify space.

Within this framework, Vidal de la Blache formulated the concept of possibilism, one of the key notions of classical human geography. Possibilism holds that the environment

offers possibilities (*possibilités*), but that culture, technology, and social structures determine which of these possibilities are realised (Vidal de la Blache, 1922). No space, therefore, absolutely determines the development of a community. Different societies may pursue divergent paths within the same environment. From a geohistorical perspective, this implies that the environment constitutes both a structure of constraints and a field of choice. The history of a region thus emerges as the cumulative outcome of decisions and adaptations made within those constraints (Clout, 2003).

Another essential component of Vidal's legacy was his conception of the region as the basic unit of geographical analysis. For him, the region was not a purely administrative or arbitrary construct, but an area coherent in cultural, natural, and economic terms, possessing its own internal logic. The region is therefore both a geographical and a historical category – a site in which long-term processes of environmental and social transformation can be examined. This approach proved highly productive for analysing the persistence and transformation of regional structures in pre-industrial history. Vidal's concept of the region inspired subsequent generations of scholars, including the Annales school, which extended it to the study of large civilisational units, such as the Mediterranean in Braudel's work (Braudel, 1982).

Braudel, one of the leading figures of the Annales school, developed this integrated view of time and space in a particularly radical manner. In his seminal work *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), he proposed a three-layered model of history, in which each level corresponds to a different rhythm of change. The first is the *longue durée* – the slow transformations of geographical, climatic, and environmental structures that form the enduring framework of human life. The second is the medium term (*conjonctures*), encompassing social, economic, and cultural structures that evolve over decades or centuries. The third is the short term (*histoire événementielle*),

referring to political and military events that are often spectacular, yet ephemeral.

This model challenged the traditional dominance of event-centred history and introduced into historiography the notion of geohistory: history understood as a spatio-temporal structure (Braudel, 1982). From this perspective, regional geography is not merely a narrative backdrop, but a causal factor shaping the conditions and possibilities of social development (Casteigts, 2012). As Trevor-Roper (1972) observed, Braudel in *La Méditerranée* begins with space – understood as human geography – before turning to social structures and events. Space, for Braudel, is an active agent of history: mountains, plains, seas, coastlines, agricultural zones, and networks of roads and ports all possess their own rhythms and exert influence on historical processes. In this sense, the Braudelian stage of history is inseparable from a specific *milieu*, in which each element contributes to the unfolding of events.

According to Kinser (1981), two heuristics are central to Braudel's method. The first is "geographical synthesis", which involves recognising landscape typologies, analysing their relationship to settlement patterns, economic systems, and political organisation, and identifying recurring patterns shaped by natural configurations. The second concerns the exemplary analysis of flows – tracing phenomena such as trade routes, migrations, or the circulation of goods in their spatial dimension, thereby revealing networks of connections between centres and peripheries. As Swianiewicz (2014) observes, Braudel avoids speculative abstraction: his narrative is grounded in tangible, material elements of life that can be spatially located and compared. History, in this approach, becomes a spatially concrete narrative in which events acquire meaning only in relation to place. Space therefore structures both the formation of historical regularities and the emergence of deviations shaped by geographical configurations.

Contemporary approaches, including historical geography in its classical form (Pounds

1990) and geohistoriography (Baker, 2003; Heffernan & Morin, 2020), remain situated at the intersection of spatial and temporal reflection. Geohistoriography – a term that has gained prominence in recent decades – extends the classical tradition by emphasising the narrative and conceptual strategies through which spatial and temporal dimensions are combined in historical research (Kučera, 2008; Naylor, 2008; Moretti, 2005). Returning to questions concerning geographical frameworks such as landscape, environment, and space offers a fruitful way of organising historical narratives and imbuing them with a distinctive sensitivity, sometimes metaphorically described as the “eye of history” (Mayhew, 2010b; Della Dora, 2011; Matei-Chesnoiu, 2012).

Norman Davies: A historian between spaces

Norman Davies is a compelling figure, both in terms of his biography and his distinctive vision of historical practice. Ivor Norman Richard Davies (born 8 June 1939 in Bolton, United Kingdom) is a British–Polish historian of international renown and the author of wide-ranging syntheses devoted to the history of Poland, Europe, and the world. He studied history at Oxford, Grenoble, and Perugia, and in 1973 defended his doctoral dissertation at the Jagiellonian University. A long-time professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London, he has maintained close ties with the Polish academic community, ties that have significantly influenced both his choice of research topics and his interpretative perspectives (Davies, 2022).

Davies’s works operate across multiple spatial scales – from the local and regional to the continental and global – yet they share a common feature: a strong geographical grounding of historical narrative. His sustained focus on regions and his ability to embed historical accounts within specific landscapes make his oeuvre particularly amenable to analysis from the perspective of geohistory and the concept

of *milieu*. Geohistory, understood here as the study of the inseparable interplay between long temporal spans and spatial structures, reveals how Davies employs material environmental features, as well as political and cultural geography, in the construction of universal historical narratives. The perspective of *milieu*, conceived as a dynamic relationship between humans and their surroundings, further illuminates the ways in which Davies interprets the mutual interaction of space and society within long-term historical processes.

The aim of this study is to identify the ways in which Davies combines the embedding of history in geographical realities with the attribution of a supra-local, universal dimension of interpretation. The selection of four key monographs – *God’s Playground: A History of Poland* (2005 [1981]), *Europe: A History* (1997), *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (2003), and *Beneath Another Sky* (2018) – allows for a comparative analysis of how geographical components are incorporated into historical narrative across different spatial scales: regional and continental, local and global.

In his first major monograph, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, Davies presents the history of Poland as a multilayered narrative situated at the intersection of civilizations and inscribed within a broad European and global context. In *Europe: A History*, he undertakes a synthetic account of the continent’s past, portraying it as a web of traditions, regions, and cultures whose interrelations have shaped historical trajectories. *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*, co-authored with Roger Moorhouse, is a study of Wrocław – a city with a turbulent history that serves as a symbolic micro-model of transformations in Central Europe as a whole. By contrast, *Beneath Another Sky* documents the author’s travels across continents, showing how global-scale processes intersect with local landscapes, the memory of places, and the everyday experiences of their inhabitants. This perspective highlights the specificity of Davies’s scholarly practice and prepares the ground for interpreting his work in relation

to the classics of geohistorical debate, such as Vidal de la Blache and Braudel – figures whom Davies himself identifies as exceptional in their ability to construct broad frameworks for narrating time and space (Davies, 1997: 2 and 955).

The article advances the argument that Davies consistently treats space not as a mere backdrop to events, but as an integral element shaping historical processes. Landscapes, networks of communication, political and cultural boundaries, the layout of towns and villages, and natural conditions all play a significant role in his interpretations. His narratives combine the embedding of events in geographical realities with a broad comparative spatial perspective. He frequently describes the geographical settings of the processes under discussion, traces rhythms of life in particular regions, and analyses the interconnections between local phenomena and processes of continental or global scope. As he himself notes, understanding the complex destinies of people, societies, and the lands they inhabit requires an ordered vocabulary and a well-organised geographical framework, since the proper interpretation of history depends on geographical awareness (Davies, 2022: 366).

Space, borders, and mobility: Geographical categories in Norman Davies's narrative

As Davies consistently emphasizes, history never unfolds in a vacuum but always within a specific landscape. Geographical diversity, especially natural diversity, is not merely the backdrop of events but also an interpretive category through which the course of history can be more fully understood. Natural spaces define both the opportunities available to communities and the constraints that shape their everyday existence.

In *Europe: A History*, Davies conceptualizes the continent in terms of five basic physiographic units, each carrying its own historical weight. A crucial insight for interpreting European history is that Europe is not

a homogeneous block but a mosaic of physical forms that influenced the destinies of peoples, societies, and later nations. Mountains offered protection, lowlands exposed societies to external influences, and seas facilitated exchange. This spatial ordering demonstrates that the fate of states and cultures depended to a large extent on the environments in which they were embedded. The Alps and the Pyrenees separated the south, the North European Plain served as a perpetual migration corridor, and insular Britain drew its strength from isolation and maritime access.

The author formulates this idea in the following terms:

“[...] it is impossible to deny that Europe has been endowed with a formidable repertoire of physical features. Europe's landforms, climate, geology, and fauna have combined to produce a benign environment that is essential to an understanding of its development. Europe's landforms do not resemble those of any other continent or subcontinent. The depressions to north and south have been flooded by the ocean to form to parallel sea-chains which penetrate deep into the interior. In the north, the North Sea-Baltic sea lane stretches 1500 miles (2500 km) from the Atlantic to Russia. In the south, the Mediterranean-Black Sea system stretches over 2400 miles (4000 km) from Gibraltar to the Caucasus. Within these protected seas lie a vast complex of lesser gulfs and a huge spangle of islands. As a result, the ratio of shoreline to landmass is exceptionally high: at c. 37,000 km, or more than 23,000 miles, the European shoreline is almost exactly the length of the Equator. For early Man, this was perhaps the most important measure of accessibility” (Davies, 1997: 47-49).

The author's fascination with Polish history is, in many passages, a sustained reflection

on the influence of geography on the fate of the state and the nation. In reference to Poland, the author of *God's Playground* reminds readers that few people doubt geography's responsibility for the country's historical trajectory. Geography, however, did not signify threat alone but also potential. Citing geographers such as S. Pawłowski, E. Romer, and W. Nałkowski, Davies points to the natural latitudinal frame – stretching between the Baltic and the Carpathians – that shaped the history of these lands (Davies, 1997: 31).

Poland's history thus appears as the drama of an open space and unstable borders, in which every ebb and flow of political forces reshaped the state. The negative consequences of location, as well as its possibilities, revive the long-standing debate on Poland's geopolitical position. The legacy of Polish anthropogeography at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries strongly resonates in his descriptions of natural conditions, particularly since Davies does not shy away from metaphorical summaries. On this aspect he writes, for instance, in the following way:

"The resultant structure of Poland is one of an irregular grid, a lop-sided frame in which the dominant horizontal warp, is offset by the vertical weave of the rivers. In terms of human activity, it gave every facility for movement and transit, which was matched in early times by favourable opportunities for permanent settlement" (Davies, 2005: 33).

and

"Few people have doubted that Poland's geography is the villain of her history. Trapped in the middle of the North European Plain, with no natural frontier to parry the onslaughts of more powerful neighbours, Poland has been variously described as 'the disputed bridge', condemned forever to lie between the rival embraces of two

rapacious suitors; or, more cruelly, as 'the gap between two stools' " (Davies, 2005: 23).

and

"Unlike the English, who could always retreat behind the Channel and their Navy, unlike the Spaniards or Italians on their self-contained peninsulas. Unlike the Swiss amid their Alps or the Dutch behind their dykes, the Poles have had nowhere to hide. Their state has been exposed to every ebb and flow of political power in modern Europe, and the tides have left it alternately stranded and submerged" (Davies, 2005: 24).

The historian also emphasizes the geographical diversity of Polish lands, understood in the historical sense. Old Poland was a conglomerate of regions such as Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Mazovia, Silesia, Pomerania, and later also Volhynia, Podolia, and Ukraine, each possessing its own identity, derived either from the genesis of its territory or from political relations. Referring to the thought of P. Vidal de la Blache, Davies observes that human geography had from the outset stressed the geographical diversity of states, though it often employed this diversity as a tool for constructing national narratives. Such diversity enriched cultural life but at the same time hindered political consolidation. European regionalism has deep roots, and this was undoubtedly the case with old Poland, whose unity often proved weaker than the centrifugal tendencies of its numerous provinces (Davies, 2005: 26).

A vivid testimony to how strongly landscape shapes human experience can be found in the autobiographical thread of *Beneath Another Sky*. Recalling his childhood in northern England, Davies wrote:

"So if 'the Pike was the temple of the sunset, Winter Hill's scarp was the belvedere of the sunrise. One could sit

among the heather and tufted grass, listen to the skylarks and curlews, and watch the growing sunlight as it illuminated the ridges and valleys of England's Pennine backbone.

Such was the wonderland of my youth. There was no better place to orient oneself in time and space, and it was on our doorstep" (Davies, 2018: 11).

Landscape here is therefore not a mere backdrop, but rather a teacher and guide, opening horizons and shaping ways of perceiving the world. Regional education, whether it takes the form of a formal school system or of individual and familial interpretations, has a significant impact on understanding location as both an objective and a subjective category. For Davies, the model of space as composed of successive, ever-expanding circles of geographical awareness constitutes a universal framework for understanding the world and the relationship between human beings and their environment.

A similar role, at the regional scale, is played by Wrocław – the protagonist of *Microcosm*. The authors demonstrate how its history was determined by its position at the crossroads of routes and in the shadow of great powers. They begin with a statement that sets the course for the entire subsequent sequence of events inscribed in this place:

"The City was the offspring of the River and the Plain. It was conceived at a point where people moving up and down the River met others who were following trails across the Plain. [...] In fact, there are many circumstantial indications to suggest that the site was repeatedly, if not permanently, occupied from very remote times" (Davies & Moorhouse, 2003: 38).

The geographical form of Silesia rendered the city a place of encounters and coexistence of cultures, while at the same time an arena of political tensions and conflicts. The history of Wrocław is a story of successive

cultural layers superimposed upon one another, with its identity remaining that of a "borderland," if not always in the social sense, then certainly in the historical one.

Examples of references to environment and space reveal a recurring pattern: geography is not a passive backdrop but a constitutive element of the *longue durée*. It co-determines which regions become safe refuges and which turn into arenas of conflict; which states may benefit from isolation, and which must exist in the shadow of rivalry. Geography delineates frameworks and possibilities, yet it is human action that ultimately gives them form. Thus, in Davies's reflections, space is never absolute or static – it always remains relational. A place acquires significance only in relation to other places: through distance, proximity, intersections of routes, or borders. In his writings, geographical location therefore emerges as a category that is simultaneously physical, political, and symbolic. Davies concludes his discussion of Polish space in a metaphorical manner, comparing geography to a potter's wheel – a tool in the workshop. Human beings and clay, in turn, are likened to the creators of the emerging forms (Davies, 2005: 51). This imagery is strikingly close to Vidal's concept of *milieu*, which offers possibilities that humans exploit and transform.

In his works, Davies devotes considerable attention to the role of imagination, including spatial imagination, which provides a valuable perspective for interpreting the relativity of space and distance. Migrations, border crossings, and encounters with unfamiliar worlds often involve a confrontation between multiple imagined geographies. In one of the cases described in *Beneath Another Sky*, he recounts the experience of a newcomer from India, Iqbal Ahmed, for whom England appeared as an "incomprehensible world", radically different from the images he had formed through reading about Britain (Davies, 2018: 637). Location thus becomes not only a physical condition but also a mental category – a place situated within another person's imaginative map.

In this context, Davies's interpretation of borders acquires particular significance. He observes that in periods when land was abundant and political value resided primarily in people, there was little incentive to define a state's territory with precision (Davies, 2005: 30). Borders were fluid, and authority radiated outward from centres. Inhabitants of peripheral areas, he writes, were pulled first in one direction and then in another, like iron filings responding to shifting magnetic fields. Location therefore signified a state of tension and equilibrium rather than a rigid line on a map. Poland could function as a centre when it controlled routes linking the Baltic and the Black Sea, or as a periphery when torn apart by more powerful neighbours. Wrocław could exist as German Breslau, Habsburg Breslavia, or Polish Wrocław, with each identity redefining its position within the European system. At different historical moments, the city was regarded as the very centre of Central Europe. Yet this "centre" itself remained a fluid category. At times it was linked to Wrocław's position on the Oder along the route between the Baltic and the Danube; at other times it stemmed from its role as a frontier city where German, Czech, Polish, and Jewish influences converged. The very notion of a "centre" thus reveals itself not as a geographical fact but as a narrative construction shaped by competing perspectives and interests.

Ultimately, in Davies's work, geographical location is never a fixed point on a map but a dynamic historical category. Shifting balances of power, technologies, routes, and narratives mean that a marginal site in one century may become a strategic centre in another. One of the most intriguing illustrations of this relativity is the problem of "the centre of Europe". Davies repeatedly returns to this question and consistently undermines its apparent obviousness. He argues that virtually every European nation can locate on the map a place it regards as the continent's midpoint, and that each of these claims is as legitimate as the others. At times Vilnius or Suchowola are indicated; at others Vienna,

Warsaw, or Bila Tserkva. Everything depends on the chosen frame of reference.

For Davies, the key to understanding the past of Europe and Poland lies not in closed borders but in dynamic mobility. The migrations of peoples, long-distance trade, labour movements, and forced resettlements are all processes that impart direction to history. In *God's Playground*, he notes how natural trade and communication routes structured human space:

"The Amber Road of ancient Times, and the medieval Prussian Road, both traversed Polish territory at this point, whilst countless hordes of barbarians, ancient and modern, have all poured through it on their way to fortune and infamy" (Davies, 2005: 33).

Central European space, rather than serving as a stable basis for statehood, often functioned as a corridor of movement. Poland, located at the intersection of latitudinal and longitudinal routes, was never an isolated island; it remained an open node through which waves of contact, invasion, and exchange flowed. In a broader perspective, the monograph *Europe* presents the continent as a structure of ceaseless communication. Davies emphasizes that Europe is not a closed system but part of the vast Eurasian landmass, within which flows between West and East, North and South have always been decisive. Distances in this context were measured less in absolute terms than in human experience. Roman roads, medieval trade routes, pilgrim paths, and later railways and air corridors formed dense networks that integrated the continent.

Europe thus appears not as a collection of sealed national compartments but as a network of interactions. Mobility was never confined to the exchange of material goods; it also involved the circulation of ideas. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment debates, and revolutionary movements are all situated by Davies within geographical channels of communication. Rivers, roads,

and migratory pathways functioned as effective carriers of ideas and knowledge.

In *Beneath Another Sky*, the author complements this broad historical perspective with personal reflection, presenting travel as lived experience. The traveller, confronted with unfamiliar spaces, is compelled to test and revise inherited assumptions. In this work, Davies writes (after M. Twain):

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness ... charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime” (Davies, 2018: 9).

and adds a further observation:

“Travel makes a wise man better and foolish man worse (Davies, 2018: 9)”

Mobility thus emerges not only as a geographical fact but also as an epistemological category: perception itself is shaped by movement and by shifts in perspective. In *Microcosm*, the authors provide a microhistorical illustration of such flows. The capital of Silesia was consistently a borderland and a transit city. Successive centuries brought waves of new settlers – Czechs, Germans, Jews, and Poles. Davies and Moorhouse emphasize that Wrocław never belonged exclusively to a single nation; its history is one of constant exchange and displacement. It stands as a symbolic city: at the very heart of Central Europe, permanence did not exist, and the enduring condition was change – demographic, cultural, and linguistic.

An important dimension of this history of flows is transport technology. Davies observes that the railway revolution of the nineteenth century transformed not only economies but also political geography: it shortened distances, tightened regional ties, and enabled the rapid movement of armies. The twentieth century intensified this dynamic still further, as aviation and air transport redefined spatial perception and

transformed former peripheries into nodes of global networks.

All these observations lead to a shared conclusion: historical spaces are not static maps of borders but dynamic networks of movement. It was through migrations, trade, pilgrimages, travel, and the circulation of ideas that new cultures and political orders emerged. Borders and states often proved to be temporary mechanisms for organising movement. Far more enduring were the routes and patterns of exchange that bound – and divided – people. Ultimately, regions became the most lasting elements of spatial structure, while geography itself provided a stabilising framework within which shifting social and political configurations unfolded.

Discussion. Norman Davies in relation to the tradition of *milieu* and *longue durée*

In recent decades, a clear revival of interest in space within historiography can be observed. The development of digital, postcolonial, and transnational studies has made space one of the key concepts in contemporary research on the past. Interactive maps, network models, mobility studies, and landscape analyses have not only enriched the historian’s toolkit but have also transformed the ways in which historical narratives are constructed and understood (Lee, 2018). Contemporary approaches – often referred to as geohistoriography – however, differ fundamentally from classical geohistory in the sense originally formulated by Braudel. As Mayhew (2010a) notes, in many cases space today functions primarily as a metaphor rather than as a material structure. Maps, network diagrams, or the notion of “connected history”, employed by authors such as Moretti (2005), Ethington (2007), or Subrahmanyam (2005), serve mainly as devices for organising narrative, functioning as rhetorical figures rather than as descriptions of actual material relations.

This shift from “space as structure” to “space as narrative” leads to a phenomenon

that may be described as geographical nominalism. It can be situated within the broader spatial turn in human sciences, which reconceptualised space as relational, processual, and continuously produced through social practices (Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2003). From this perspective, space is no longer understood as a passive container or a deterministic framework, but rather as a dynamic configuration of relations, power, and mobility that both enables and constrains human action. Davies's historical narratives resonate with this approach insofar as space in his work functions simultaneously as a material condition of historical processes and as a relational framework through which meaning, agency, and historical contingency are articulated.

Within this view, concepts such as "place", "network", or "region" become ordering categories – analytical tools that do not necessarily correspond to clearly bounded or stable entities. As Ockham (Boehner, 1990) and Hume (1978) remind us, neither time nor space exists as a thing in itself; rather, both are ways of organising experience. A nominalist approach thus cautions against identifying descriptive instruments with reality itself. When a historian maps migrations, for example, they do not simply reconstruct an objective reality but instead construct a narrative model that renders complex processes intelligible. This raises the recurring question of whether geography operates as a genuine causal factor or merely as a descriptive and interpretative device – a question that returns both in methodological debates and in analyses of the work of authors such as Davies.

The tradition of French geohistory, shaped by Vidal de la Blache and developed by Braudel, provides a crucial point of reference in this discussion. Vidal de la Blache introduced the notion of *milieu*, conceiving the environment as a dynamic relationship between nature and human activity, as well as the concept of the region as a coherent unit of analysis. Braudel, in turn, in his monumental *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, made geography

the foundation of the *longue durée* – the long-term structures that define the rhythm and direction of history. In his vision, space was not a passive backdrop but a causal force that constrained and shaped human action. Geography thus appears almost as a "collective character" in the historical drama: omnipresent, slow-moving, yet decisively influential in shaping the fate of societies.

Against this background, Davies emerges both as a continuator and as a critic of this tradition. His oeuvre – from *God's Playground* through *Europe* to *Microcosm* – is saturated with geographical references, but deployed in a manner distinct from Braudel's structural determinism. In *God's Playground*, one encounters passages that sound almost Braudelian, portraying Poland as "trapped" within the North European Plain and subjected to the pressures of powerful neighbours. Yet Davies repeatedly interrupts such narratives by emphasising that it is human agency, rather than the shape of the land, that ultimately drives historical change. Geography remains the stage, but the drama is enacted by actors endowed with will, ingenuity, and the capacity to choose.

Davies's writing is characterised by a highly vivid and metaphorical language. Borders appear as "scars on the body of Europe", Poland becomes a "tectonic plate" trembling under the clash of empires, and cities such as Wrocław function as "microcosms" – condensed spaces in which the history of entire regions is encapsulated. These metaphors are not merely stylistic devices; they perform an analytical function by allowing the past to be conceptualised as a field of constant tension and movement. In *Microcosm*, Wrocław appears as a place of repeatedly shifting political and cultural affiliations, illustrating the fluidity and mutability of identities. The city does not belong to a single, closed historical narrative; instead, it constitutes a point of intersection for multiple, overlapping histories – an approach that aligns closely with contemporary geohistoriographical thinking.

In this way, Davies both draws upon the tools of geohistory and subtly undermines

its foundational assumptions. Whereas Vidal de la Blache and Braudel sought coherent wholes – regions, structures, and rhythms of long duration – Davies constructs a kaleidoscopic narrative that resists reduction to a single explanatory model. He inherits from them the conviction that history cannot be separated from space, environment, and place, yet he rejects the ambition of comprehensive synthesis. Instead of stability, he foregrounds change; instead of unity, diversity; instead of enduring structures, narrative constructions.

Space in Davies's work thus plays a dual role. On the one hand, it functions as a unit of historical analysis – region, territory, or landscape. On the other, it serves as a point of departure for tracing multilayered, long-term cultural and political processes. Davies moves fluidly between microhistorical perspectives, which capture the texture of local experience, and macrohistorical panoramas, in which regions become components of broader civilisational formations. Contemporary geohistoriography, which treats space as a narrative category (Glennie & Thrift, 2009; Kearns, 2009), finds in his work a natural counterpart. Davies demonstrates that space can operate simultaneously as a material framework for action and as a rhetorical device that confers meaning upon historical narrative.

His writing thus constitutes a bridge between geohistory and geohistoriography. It acknowledges the importance of spatial constraints while simultaneously transforming space into a narrative element subordinated to the logic of storytelling. For this reason, Davies's works can be read not only as reconstructions of the past, but also as reflections on the ways in which history itself is narrated and interpreted.

Ultimately, geography in Davies's approach is neither destiny, as in classical geohistory, nor mere metaphor, as in its most radical geohistoriographical variants. Rather, it appears as a dynamic *milieu* – a stage that shapes action while itself remaining subject to transformation and reinterpretation. People assign meaning to places, redraw borders, and build or dismantle states, but they

do so within spatial conditions that cannot be ignored. History thus unfolds as a drama in which time, space, and human agency are inseparably intertwined, and the past emerges as a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of events and experiences.

Conclusion

The analysis of Norman Davies's work, juxtaposed with the geo-historical tradition of Vidal de la Blache and Braudel, leads to the conclusion that history requires comprehensive, broad, and ambitious interpretative frameworks. Historical narratives should not remain confined to the level of events, but should seek deeper rhythms and underlying conditions, while simultaneously capturing the drama of human experience at local, regional, and global scales. Geography – understood both as physical space and as a cultural or narrative category – remains an indispensable element of such accounts. Landscapes, borders, trade routes, and regional diversity together form the frameworks within which historical processes unfold. Yet these frameworks do not exist independently of human agency, as space and memory intertwine within a dynamic system that requires continual reinterpretation.

Davies, like his great predecessors but in an even more pronounced manner, consistently emphasises that geography is not destiny. It does not determine history in an absolute sense, but instead opens a field of choices, shifts, and reinterpretations. Every landscape may be read in multiple ways, every border crossed, and every balance of power reshaped. In this respect, his narrative reconciles two dimensions: an awareness of the constraints imposed by spatial configurations and a belief in human creativity and agency. In doing so, Davies bridges geohistory – concerned with structures and long-term continuities – with geohistoriography, in which space functions as a rhetorical figure and a narrative device.

Geohistoriography, a concept that has gained prominence in recent decades, extends

this approach by emphasising narrative and conceptual strategies for linking temporal and spatial dimensions in historical research (Kučera, 2008; Naylor, 2008; Moretti, 2005). Its object is not merely the “geography of the past”, but rather the analysis of how geographical conceptual frameworks – landscape, environment, and space – organise historical narratives and how these frameworks are constructed in the research process.

Both traditional historical geography (cf. Pounds, 1990) and geohistoriography (cf. Baker, 2003; Heffernan & Morin, 2020) operate at the intersection of spatial and temporal reflection. They draw upon the tradition of the Annales School, in which Braudel gave new depth to the relationship between geography and history, as well as upon classical human geography largely shaped by Vidal de la Blache (Trevor-Roper, 1972). Their task is not only to reconstruct past landscapes or map settlement patterns, but above all to demonstrate how space structures historical processes and events, and how time, in turn, gives direction to spatial transformations (Swianiewicz, 2014).

These insights are particularly relevant in the contemporary world. We live in an era

in which space has once again become a field of political, cultural, economic, and ecological tensions. Borders once assumed to be fading have re-emerged as lines of conflict, while regional diversity is increasingly perceived not as a resource but as a threat. Migrations, mobility, and the flows of capital and ideas confer new meanings upon the categories of centre and periphery. In this context, narratives in the spirit of Davies – ambitious in scale yet attentive to detail, grounded in space yet aware of its narrative character – are especially needed.

History, as Davies understands it, neither ignores geography nor treats it uncritically. It becomes neither naively deterministic nor wholly constructivist, but rather a search for balance between description and interpretation, between awareness of constraints and confidence in human agency. The purpose of broad historical syntheses is not to provide definitive answers, but to open spaces for reflection, to confront diverse perspectives, and to reveal the complexity of the world. An awareness of the role of space – without absolutising it – can thus serve as a powerful tool for understanding the past, the present, and even possible futures.

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