

# DIMENSIONS OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPES — PERSPECTIVES OF NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

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This paper contributes to debates on the social construction of landscapes through adopting a new institutionalist approach. Landscape is analysed from a broadly constructivist perspective. Five dimensions of the social construction of landscape are presented: the analytical construction by scientists, the subjective construction, the material constitution, the collective constitution, and the construction through these constructs. Aspects of the ontologisation of landscapes and of landscapes as action arenas are discussed as important facets of the collective constitution of landscape. Thus, the conceptual relationship between constructivism and the theoretical approaches of new institutionalism is analysed by means of empirical findings drawn from a case study of landscape policy in the Spreewald in the German Land of Brandenburg. The logics of sectoral institutional systems are formative for a regional agency, but they are modified largely as a result of the existence of regional informal institutions such as spatial images, symbols, or traditions. These informal institutions have an important influence on the agency of stakeholders in action arenas such as biosphere reserves or tourism regions. The paper concludes by considering the consequences for further social science research on the social construction of landscapes.

## Introduction

Landscapes should not only be regarded as physical spaces, as natural scientists usually understand them. In social sciences they are more often understood as social constructions resulting from individual and societal processes. Recent work in human geography and sociology (Jones, 2006; Kaufmann, 2005; Kühne, 2008; Robertson and Richards, 2003) has widened the perspective of landscape research<sup>1</sup>: while the physical “reality” of landscapes remains an important point

of reference, human agency, symbolic representations, normative constructions of spatial images and — more generally — forms of cultural and social practice are acquiring greater importance.

The term “social construction of landscape” emphasises not only the relevance of subjective meanings and interpretations (Duncan, 1995), but also the often neglected influence of cultural and institutional factors for any area perceived and designated as a landscape. This paper aims to enrich ongoing

discussions about a constructivist approach to landscape research through drawing on insights from a political science perspective concerned with collective phenomena: the new institutionalism. There are, however, very few studies employing political science approaches in the field of the social construction of landscapes (Görg, 2007). In turn, the topic of “landscape” is often neglected in political science research, even when the focus is on environmental resources (Young, 2002) or local environmental commons (Ostrom, 1990).

This paper<sup>2</sup> contributes to debates on the social construction of landscapes through adopting a new institutionalist approach. To achieve this, the article opens with a discussion of how landscape is seen and analysed from a broadly constructivist perspective. Five dimensions of the social construction of landscape are presented. In the second part of the paper the conceptual relationship between constructivism and the theoretical approaches of new institutionalism are illuminated with reference to empirical findings drawn from a case study on landscape policy in the German Land of Brandenburg, with specific regional examples from the Spreewald landscape. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the study for further social science research on the social construction of landscapes.

### **The social construction of landscapes: a systematisation**

According to a positivist understanding, a landscape is a specific portion of the earth's surface. It is the material result of human–nature relationships in a given area, a concrete and objectively existing reality. From a positivist point-of-view, a landscape exists independently — separate from the researcher, research methods and from an appraisal of social institutions. The role of subjective forms of landscape perception is not considered, nor is the importance of

collective agency in the construction of a landscape.

However, in this paper landscapes are to be understood as social constructions (Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Winchester *et al.*, 2003): landscapes are perceived as spatial entities, constituted in social and cultural processes. They are more or less distinct spatial units, emerging from synthesizing processes such as ontologisations and reifications. The ontologisation of a landscape denotes that this specific portion of the earth's surface is unequivocally understood as a specific spatial entity, independent of single opinions of individual or collective actors. Its existence is not negotiable (Schlottmann, 2005). Reification entails the comprehension of a notion — e.g. “a landscape” — as a thing: understanding an abstraction as if it had a living existence (Werlen, 2000).

Through ontologisation and reification of landscapes the collective repression of their constructed character is accomplished. Socially negotiated and/or accepted criteria of homogeneity such as the “unity of land and people” (in German: “*Land und Leute*”), the “discrete and unique character” (in German: “*Eigenart*”) or, in the terminology of tourism marketing and contemporary regional governance, the “unique selling proposition” of a landscape play a fundamental role. To refer to a specific portion of the earth's surface as a “landscape” puts emphasis on this specific originality (Körner and Eisel, 2003), as well as on the regional interdependency between materiality and sociality (Swyngedouw, 1999). Moreover, the notion of “landscape” is an important linguistic symbol with utopian connotations.

Consequently, landscapes should not be regarded as “given” spatial entities, but as the results of processes of social construction. We should, then, accept the “double hermeneutic”, or, to put it differently, the dialectical relationship between social scientific knowledge and human practices (Giddens, 1984).

Thus, a landscape can, at the same time, be an intellectual construct by scientists as well as a general social construct. Going further, Jacobs has brought to light a threefold ontology of landscape, differentiating between the inner, the physical, and the social reality of landscapes (Jacobs, 2004).

Drawing on theoretical insights provided by A. Giddens (1984), M. Jacobs (2006), B. Jessel (1998), and D. Lowenthal (1997), I propose an analytical systematisation of the complex process by which landscapes are socially constructed. In an attempt to minimise complexity, the social construction of landscapes is seen to be composed of the following dimensions:

1) the analytical construction by scientists,

2) the subjective construction,

3) the material constitution<sup>3</sup>,

4) the collective constitution, and

5) the construction by the constructs 1–4.

These processes are interdependent.

In the context of the *analytical construction by scientists*, the word “landscape” is a sort of analytical tool for special scientific approaches, e.g. for classical landscape geography with its synthesizing approach, for landscape ecology with its geographical classification of natural landscapes, or for the cultural landscape approach in heritage management with its research of material elements and structures of high cultural and historical value. Landscapes in these senses are unique and distinct spaces, identified on the basis of the professional interests of scientists. They are constructed intentionally with the help of the definition of scientific criteria of homogeneity. In addition to this, “landscape” has gained importance in recent years as a sort of basis for social scientist and/or interdisciplinary research. In the case of the above mentioned examples, the word “landscape” implies a multidimensional and holistic concept, unifying physical objects and mental representations at the interfaces

between nature and culture, between the material and the immaterial, or between the subjective and the objective (Jones, 1991). “Landscape” legitimises research approaches and programmes, conferences and scientific articles — like this one.

The *subjective construction of landscape* is the result of the landscape perception by individuals. The landscape view is the mental ability to understand a plurality of visually observable phenomena in a certain portion of the earth’s surface as a defined landscape or a landscape scenery. Landscape then, on this account, is “not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing” (Cosgrove, 1984, 13). This landscape view refers to a privileged vision of nature, the viewpoint of an “outsider” who enjoys the leisure requisite to aesthetic contemplation. Landscape as a way of seeing is first of all dependent on subjective prerequisites and individual feelings. At the same time, it is deeply influenced by cultural factors such as norms, values, ideologies, or attributions of meaning.

The *material constitution of landscapes* refers to natural structures as well as historical and actual land use structures. All the other dimensions of the construction of landscape refer to the materiality of physical objects in a spatial context. Landscape, in this sense, is a sort of product or by-product (Sieferle, 2003) of human agency, a unique result of the intended and unintended interaction of human beings with their physical surroundings. It is the physical, spatial, and objective (interim) result of complex socio-economic processes: the appropriation, the use, and transformation of anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic resources. The dimension of “materiality” is often neglected in social sciences, when it comes to research about the social construction of landscape.

In a sense, the *collective constitution of landscapes* dimension represents a superordinate concept for diverse perspectives. They

share the common ground that landscapes are entities constituted in social and cultural processes. On the one hand, interpreting a landscape as collectively constituted can imply an interpretation of a landscape resulting from long-term and emergent cultural processes. This focuses on the emergence of spatial representations, landscape images, or attributions of uniqueness to a specific portion of the earth's surface. Such a collectively constituted landscape can form the regional basis of individual and collective identities, of regional utopia (connected with the ideal conception of "good life"), of regional ideologies, or of the material and immaterial heritage of a bounded space.

In a short- and middle-term perspective all these ontologisations and reifications can serve as a basis for collective political action (Paasi, 1986). Thus, a landscape can be interpreted as a collective action arena or as a regional political space (Gailing and Kilper, 2009). A landscape as an action arena relies upon former collective constitution processes of that landscape. In such action arenas stakeholders managed to establish governance structures for the protection or the development of the landscape. During the past decades, a variety of action arenas, e.g. regional parks, large-scale reserves, regions of rural development, tourism regions as well as inter-municipal collaboration networks, have been constituted. Internally the establishment of a landscape as an action arena guarantees a sort of regional self-organisation and capacity to act. Externally, it renders the articulation of regional interests and marketing effects possible.

Making the social construction of landscapes a subject of research should not disguise the structural and/or institutional effects of the existence of landscapes, once they are established as ontologisations or as collective action arenas. Social constructions of landscapes act, in turn, as second natures, institutional spheres or symbolic environ-

ments and thus affect individual and social agency. It is important to consider the *construction by the above mentioned constructs 1–4* in this systematisation due to the fact that the social construction of landscape is a perpetual and ongoing process.

Amongst the numerous possibilities to analyse human-nature relationships by means of the social construction of landscapes, I will concentrate in this paper on a theoretical approach that focuses on collective and structural phenomena: the new institutionalism. Other aspects such as the subjective or material constitution of landscapes can only be considered as influencing factors.

### **The role of institutions in the collective constitution of landscapes — the example of the Spreewald in Brandenburg**

In the process of landscape change institutions play a decisive role as driving forces. Therefore, I will focus in this section on the often underestimated role institutions play in the process of the social construction of landscape.

According to institutional theory, human agency is influenced by a wide range of social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. Institutions are composed of cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning in social life (Scott, 2001). They are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North, 1990). This understanding of institutions differs from the everyday meaning of the term as well as from other scientific approaches which often confuse institutions and organisations (Breit and Troja, 2003).

Institutional research differentiates between formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions are sets of rules and regulations or administrative structures articulated

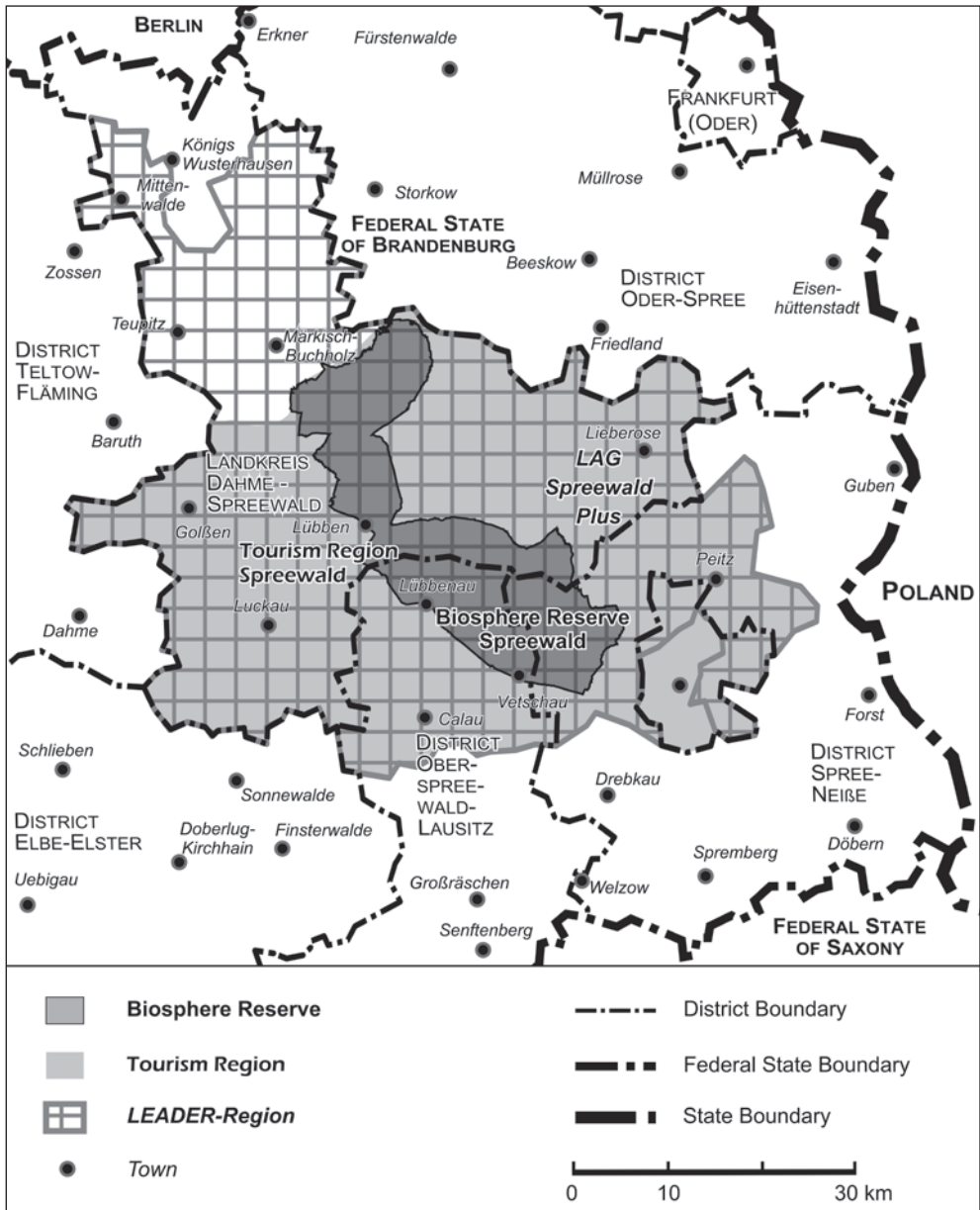


Fig. 1. Map of Spreewald in the Federal State of Brandenburg (Germany)

in constitutive documents (e.g. laws, statutes, or policy documents). It is one important asset of the so-called “new” institutionalism that institutionalist research focuses no longer only on these formal and codified institu-

tions, but puts more emphasis on the role of informal institutions. Informal institutions are traditions, customs, shared meanings about values, perspectives and worldviews about the nature of things, interrelated practices

and routines, shared beliefs or perceptions of Good and Bad (March and Olsen, 1995). These institutions are more fundamental than formal rules.

In contrast to the earlier approaches of institutionalist and structuralist research, the new institutionalism reflects the dialectic of structure and agency (Giddens, 1990): it is important to recognise that institutions do not simply provide orientation for actors; they are, in turn, themselves subject to (re-)shaping by actors (Scharpf, 1997). This is the case for formal regulative institutions that can be changed as a result of public governance, but also for informal institutions, which are often highly resilient. These cognitive or behavioural institutions often only alter in long-term processes of societal change, e.g. the change of ontologies or of symbolical representations (Berger and Luckmann, 1987). Enhancements of institutionalist theory such as the dialectic of structure and agency as well as the fundamental role of informal institutions make it easier to connect it with constructivist thinking.

What does all this mean for the collective constitution of landscapes? Formal institutions like laws or other regulative documents in nature protection, heritage management, tourism management, or regional planning play a decisive role in the field of landscape policies. Policies concerning landscapes are always controversial due to different conceptualizations of nature, culture and landscape, different institutional arrangements and governance structures, or sectoral policy goals. Taking into consideration that the behaviour of individual actors is never completely in accordance with the requirements of formal institutions, new institutionalists place special emphasis on informal institutions. Thus, it is the main hypothesis of the paper that informal institutions on the regional scale (e.g. landscape images, symbols, or toponyms) are the most important driving forces in the process of the social construction of landscapes,

especially in the relationships between the five dimensions mentioned above.

In the following, this theory-based approach to landscape will be discussed with reference to empirical findings drawn from a case study of regional landscape policy in Germany, the Spreewald.<sup>4</sup> The Spreewald is located in the southeast of the Land of Brandenburg in Eastern Germany. Although the German word "Wald" means "forest", only a third of its area has remained forested. Since 1990, the Spreewald has been protected as a UNESCO biosphere reserve due to its outstanding relevance as an inland delta of the river Spree. The high level of nature conservation is justified also with the presence of traditional systems of land-use in the context of an irrigation system which consists of 1300 km of small channels. At the same time, the Spreewald is not only a biosphere reserve, that is, an action arena of the institutional system of nature conservation, but a landscape, where institutional problems of interplay (Gailing and Röhring, 2008) between competing and overlapping action arenas of sectoral policies arise. The Spreewald is

- an important tourist destination with its own tourism association,
- a LEADER area with a collaborative organisation funded by the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union,
- an action arena for governmental measures in monument preservation, and
- a "cultural landscape", which is a designated action arena of regional planning according to the state development plan for Berlin and Brandenburg.

So the collective constitution of the Spreewald is highly influenced by formal sectoral institutions in the fields of nature conservation, tourism policy, policy for rural areas (as a part of agricultural policy), monument preservation and spatial planning. In the regional action arenas of the Spreewald sectoral policies are operative and interact with each



other. With the exception of tourism policy, the formal institutions for these action arenas are framed far away from the Spreewald, e.g. by UNESCO, the European Union, the federal state, or the state of Brandenburg. Important formal institutions with a high impact on regional policy in Spreewald are, for example,

- the Man-and-Biosphere-Programme of the UNESCO and federal laws on nature conservation (with relevance for the biosphere reserve), or
- the instruments of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union to encourage the economic, social and environmental development in the countryside with subsidies (with relevance for the LEADER area).

These formal institutions provide their own sectoral worldviews, fundamental values as well as modes of governance. Laws and regulations of nature conservation, for instance, focus on ecological structures and on landscape as a traditional aesthetic ideal influenced by landscape painting or romanticism. According to institutions of tourism management, landscapes are destinations and even virtual enterprises with a common image. Within the institutional framework of the policy for rural areas, landscapes are the basis for regional labelling activities, for agro-environmental measures, and for regional collaboration activities. Due to the fact that landscape is a complex common good, institutional regimes designed to regulate the development and use of landscape as a whole cannot exist.

The formal institutions of sectoral policies are formative for regional agency. But their sectoral logics of action are considerably modified on the regional scale mainly due to the existence of regional informal institutions. Informal institutions in the field of the constitution of landscapes are factors of regional identity. They contribute to the ontologisation or reification of landscapes and were devel-

oped in long-term historical processes by means of subjective and intersubjective interpretations, objectivations, and communicative memory (Assmann, 1992). Important examples of such informal institutions are:

- Toponyms: Geographical names like “Spreewald” are a common ground for regional activities in the field of landscape policy. Naming is significant in the emergence or institutionalization of a landscape (Paasi, 2008, 517).
- Landscape boundaries: Their communicative construction is often based upon the material dimensions of a landscape like ecological criteria — such as in the floodplain landscape of the Spreewald — or upon historical borders of ancient territories that are still relevant for local stakeholders. Their most prominent functions are the demarcation and distinction from other landscape regions as well as the construction of coherence within the landscape across the differences of sectoral institutional systems.
- Traditions: Nowadays in post-traditional societies, local traditions like customs, festivities, local food, myths and legends, traditional costumes and so on are often no longer a part of the people’s everyday life. However, as can be analysed in the Spreewald, they play a strategic and institutional role, for example, with regards to tourism: Sorbian<sup>5</sup> costumes, myths and festivities are a common point of reference for stakeholders of the LEADER area, the biosphere reserve, and the tourism association.
- Symbols and images: Symbols of the Spreewald like the haystack, the barge, the wooden house and the Spreewald gherkin are important for the spatial image of this landscape. The perseveration of these symbols in different kinds of media strengthens the ontological status of the Spreewald. Physical elements of the natural and cultural landscapes constitute

**Table 1. Examples of institutions relevant to the collective constitution of a landscape**

Formal institutions	Informal institutions
Laws and statutes (e.g. laws on nature conservation, monument preservation and spatial planning)	Toponyms (like “Spreewald”)
Regulatory and policy documents (e.g. on tourism development)	Landscape boundaries (for the distinction from other landscapes and the construction of coherence within a landscape)
Instruments of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union	Traditions (like customs, festivities, local food, myths and legends or traditional costumes)
International guidelines, statutes and conventions (like the UNESCO World Heritage Convention or the MAB-Programme)	Symbols with importance for the spatial image (like the haystack, the barge, the wooden house and the gherkin in the case of the Spreewald)

important points of reference for the spatial image of the landscape, even when they are (almost) no longer a part of the contemporary landscape. The resort to this “landscape of nostalgia” plays an important institutional role for the policy of all kinds of different stakeholders in Spreewald.

All the sectoral action arenas in Spreewald have one thing in common: the reference to the above mentioned informal institutions that are specific to this landscape. The influence of informal regional institutions tends to be stronger than the influence of formal central institutions. Regional stakeholders have established typical governance forms which are specific for the constitution of the Spreewald as a heterogeneous action arena, such as the strategic communication about historical or endangered landscape elements,

the creation of thematic locations, regional marketing, and the invention of regional traditions. Informal institutions are used by the different collective actors as a basis for their agency, irrespective of their formal affiliation to a formalised sectoral institutional system.

## Conclusions

The collective constitution of landscapes is a process enhanced by formal institutions rooted in sectoral institutional systems such as nature conservation, policy for rural areas or tourism policy. However, the high impact of sectoral institutional systems on the social construction of landscapes becomes less prominent in the particular action arenas on the landscape scale due to the existence of strong informal regional institutions — such as geographical names, traditions, symbols, or spatial images — and factors of



regional identity, respectively. These informal institutions serve as a sort of common ground for landscape policy at the level of regional action arenas. Nevertheless, informal institutions can, without doubt, be a potential ground for conflicts.

However, in some cases neither the formal nor the informal institutions of different sectoral institutional systems of landscape policy will be strong enough in comparison to powerful and effective sectoral institutions, such as regulations from the so-called first pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU, market forces in agriculture or transport, planning and building laws, or laws and provisions for energy supply. These institutions are strongly linked with the material constitution of landscape as a by-product. Spreewald is an example, where some action arenas overlap and many stakeholders are interested in the protection of the landscape; in other regions such as suburban landscapes or landscapes shaped by intensive agriculture this will not be the case. The power of informal institutions also depends on the existence of stakeholders in landscape policy. This aspect is worth to be examined in further case studies concerning different landscapes.

In the processes of the social construction of landscapes informal institutions can be considered as one important “bridging aspect” within the five dimensions of the systematisation of the social construction of landscape presented in the chapter “The social construction of landscapes: a systematisation”. In the first instance, informal institutions are assigned to the collective constitution of landscape. However, informal institutions like spatial images or constructions of landscape boundaries

- were often generated or influenced by the scientific construction of reality,
- depend upon objectivations of prior subjective feelings and perceptions,
- can only come to social reality on the ba-

sis of material aspects of the landscape, and

- are — once they are institutionalised — effective as a groundwork for further processes of the social construction of landscape.

This points to the general need for further research that should combine the dimensions of the social construction of landscape in the chapter “The social construction of landscapes: a systematisation” with the insights of new institutionalism. Within this article, I have in particular discussed aspects of the collective constitution of landscapes as action arenas on the basis of institutionalist positions, also reflecting the constitutive role of previous social constructs such as ontologisations or reifications of a landscape. Further research questions might include: What role does the analytical construction of scientists play in the ontologisation of a landscape? How can subjective forms of landscape perception be roots for institutional change and lead to new informal institutions? And: In which way have formal and informal institutions had an impact on the material constitution of landscapes?

It should be clear that in post-positivist landscape research there is a need for different comprehensive approaches from the field of social, cultural and political sciences such as that of new institutionalism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are analogies to discussions about the social construction of space (Lefebvre, 2000; Löw, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> This article is an outcome of the joint research network “KULAKon — Constitution of Cultural Landscapes” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2008 to 2011.

<sup>3</sup> I will use the term “constitution” instead of “construction” to deal with the physical substance of landscape as well as with the variety of collectively constituted results of processes of ontologisation or of collective agency. These fundamental aspects of materiality and of collective phenomena are often neglected in constructivist research.

<sup>4</sup> The methods of the case study were as follows: an analysis of text documents, guideline-based interviews with experts and participant observations.

<sup>5</sup> Sorbs are a Western Slavic people living in the South of Brandenburg and in the North of Saxony.