

## **NEW PARADIGMS FOR GEOGRAPHY AT THE BEINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENIUM**

**Paul Claval**

*University of Paris-Sorbonne*

In order to meet the demands of the world in this beginning of the twenty-first century, geographers have to understand the dynamics which transform the face of the Earth, take into account the fragility of many ecosystems and measure how urgent are the decisions to be taken in order to reduce the global unbalances of our planet. The criticisms concerning Western modernity force them to choose approaches coherent with the new epistemological rules of both natural and social sciences.

These two imperatives – to create tools for understanding the forces which shape our world, to choose more rigorous approaches – are intertwined, but for the clarity of this presentation, we shall analyse them successively and show, in the conclusion, how each supports, calls for, and completes the other.

### **1.Changing landscapes and territorial organizations**

Modern geography was born at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It then developed more particularly its interest in a field which was becoming autonomous: human geography.

The pioneers of this discipline were sticking to the problems of their time. In the countries where they lived, Germany and France more specifically, but also in North-Western and Northern Europe and North America, they discovered a double reality: a countryside the landscapes of which resulted from a long history and kept the features they had gained at a time when European civilisation remained traditional; industrial areas, cities and some rural districts where the forces released by the steam machine and the industrial revolution were fully at work. Until mid twentieth century, geographers were mainly confronted with these two types of landscapes: those shaped by traditional societies and those which resulted from the use of concentrated forms of energy: coal, oil and electricity.

Since 1950, a new type of landscape appeared: the increasing easiness of transport explained that concentrated forms of energy became from now on available everywhere; the generalized use of car was conducive to a growing sprawl of urban settlements; aircraft and high speed trains shortened relations with faraway places; just in time communication between partners became possible whatever the distance between them. Information had no more to move up and down along a long hierarchy of relay stations which sorted out, compressed and sometimes rigged and controlled them.

Landscapes do not always reflect the real functioning of the groups who used and lived in them: to redraw plots of land is difficult and expansive; investments that are required for the development of agricultural and industrial activities or the building of new transport or housing facilities are so heavy that they cannot be modified in a short while.

Feelings of identity are tied to specific places: at a time when women and men experience increasing difficulties in knowing what they are, who they are and why they live here rather than there, the preservation of significant landscapes becomes a political issue.

Because present geographic distributions still reflect past situations, geographers have to understand how traditional groups, industrial societies and the globalized world of today functioned, or functions, and how landscapes reflected, or reflect, their diverse dynamics.

#### *Traditional societies and their landscapes*

Traditional societies were essentially rural: agriculture employed more than 80% of their population; towns and cities attracted only 5 or 10% of it – many craftsmen and service providers were living in the countryside.

Rural areas were made of a juxtaposition of communities; each ones tried to produce on its land all that was needed for its consumption, or to be sold in order to pay for that could not be cultivated locally. Peasant economies were largely based on familial or local self-consumption.

Energy was provided by the sun, either directly through photosynthesis or indirectly through atmospheric movements or running water. People knew already how to mobilize some forms of concentrated energy, that provided by horses or oxen, water falls or the wind, but the power produced in these ways was always low. Based on photosynthesis, agricultural production required the return of fertilizing elements. It relied on the association between culture and cattle- or sheep- raising, which provided manure. Agrarian systems (infield/outfield, openfields, *bocage*) combine in a stable way activities which were otherwise contradictory.

In the technical field, communication relied on word and gesture, which shaped vernacular cultures. These later travelled slowly along with the persons who mastered know how and knowledge and were able to teach them.

The quality and specificity of traditional rural areas came from the combination of their main features: generally self-sufficient local economies; agrarian systems which provided sustainable ecological solutions; slow communication, more particularly in the technical field, which explained the homogeneity of local landscapes.

Traditional rural areas were ruled by elites. They owed their power to the techniques of communication they mastered (the use of the written word), the administrative efficiency they induced, the military techniques they developed and the procedures of trade they elaborated. They were present in rural areas (landlords, feudal lords, lawyers), but they mainly lived in towns and cities. The agricultural surpluses produced by rural areas were so limited and transports so expansive that the size of urban centres was always small, some tens of thousands of people at best, except where fluvial or maritime shipping was available.

The limit range of agricultural products and that of the services provided by towns and cities explained the regularity of central place systems. Since cities provided hierarchic services, urban centres were also organized in a hierarchic way, but this fact was imperfectly translated into population figures because of the high cost of food transport.

Ecological problems existed, but most of them remained local: the accumulation of waste in the vicinity of inhabited places made them unsafe; drinking water was frequently polluted by animals and close cesspools.

*The industrial revolution and the landscapes it generated*

The industrial revolution was born from the use of concentrated forms of energy: that of water, thanks to the use of a new generation of hydraulic turbines, which could harness higher waterfalls on more important rivers; that of fire, transformed into mechanical energy through the injection of steam in a cylinder where it moved a piston; that of the internal explosion of a gas or of a spray of gasoline within a cylinder.

The industrial revolution was coeval with a revolution of land transport, thanks to the railways and later, the car, and maritime transport, thanks to the steamship. Electricity offered very early new means to communicate at a distance: through telegraph from the 1840s and telephone from the 1880s.

The direct impact of the industrial revolution was initially limited to the areas where the sources of concentrated power (waterfalls or coal basins) were located, and to the corridors along which coal was cheaply transported thanks to rivers, canals or good railways. Cities, some of them at least, enjoyed an early access to the new sources of energy.

The impact of industrial revolution was mostly indirect: the areas which did not offer sources of concentrated energies lost their craftsmen, ruined by the competition of modern factories; at the same time, their farmers could sell their production to more distant markets since railways cut down transport costs. Agricultural productions became more specialized in order to be more competitive: mixed farming was on the decline.

The improved easiness of the transports of goods and persons transformed urban networks: rural craftsmen and landless workers moved to the cities. Their size ceased to be limited by the high cost of food transport. A functional urban hierarchy was already present in traditional societies; it was now completed by a hierarchy of their population figures. This latter roughly reflected the former one, but resulted, in some areas, from the development of factories. The regularity of the urban network inherited from the traditional economic and social systems was disturbed by the multiplication of new mining towns in coal mining areas, where industrial agglomerations or conurbations soon appeared – i. e. new forms of settlement.

An important share of productive techniques ceased to fall within the realm of vernacular cultures; they were taken over by engineers or technicians, who became an important component of the new elites. In rural areas, farms remained the units where decisions were made, but they were influenced by an increasing number of innovations coming from elsewhere: more efficient ploughs, new crop rotations, the culture of fodder legumes, the use of chemical fertilizers, etc. School diffused everywhere the perspectives of modernity.

Even if the industrial revolution had universal effects, its consequences on landscapes were unequal: to areas completely changed by the new activities were juxtaposed regions where the only visible transformations were the growth of urban centres and a still limited modernization of farming.

The concentration of activities and populations in industrial and urban areas created numerous forms of pollution. People did not know how to limit the atmospheric pollution induced by domestic or industrial fire places – except through the use of anthracite. Waste water was collected by sewers, and discharged into rivers or spread over rural fields. Drinking water was provided by distribution networks fed by spring or groundwater. In this way, the water problem was solved through its exportation downstream or in rural areas. In so far as ecosystems were resilient enough, it was a good solution – but it was not always the case.

*The globalized world and its landscape expression*

From the 1920s in the U. S., after World War Two in Europe the impact of technical innovation was generalized thanks to oil and electric power: the use of concentrated forms of energy ceased to benefit only to limited areas. It concerned the totality of space. The tractor and the machines it drew deeply transformed rural areas. The rather rigid combination of cultivation and cattle- or sheep-raising of sustained agrarian systems ceased to be imperative thanks to chemical fertilizers. Mechanization required large fields, which was conducive to land consolidation in many countries. Most of the visible features of openfields or *bocages* disappeared. The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides increased the output of fields without any need for inserting them into sustained crop rotation systems.

The technical transformation of rural areas undermine traditional know how. In cities as well as rural areas, vernacular cultures do no more rely on the command of productive processes: they are now elaborated and mastered by scholars, engineers and technicians. Vernacular cultures are increasingly based on consumption and sociability.

The urbanization of population is still going on, but along new patterns. More rapid and comfortable transports favour suburban sprawl. Thanks to telephones, cellulars, internet and cars, dispersed populations enjoy types of consumption and forms of sociability which were in the past the privilege of cities. Rurbanization is growing in the rural areas where human density is high enough and the environment pleasant. It is all the more interesting since the growing motorization of urban populations is conducive to urban congestion in downtown areas. As a result new commercial or business centres develop in suburban urban areas. The services they offer are not exactly similar to those of the old commercial streets: in the new commercial mails, shops are operated or franchised by big firms. The same trademarks and products are offered all over the national territory – and beyond. Franchised shops play also an increasing role in the old downtown areas. As a result, commercial functions are increasingly trivialized and standardized everywhere.

The progress of telecommunications insures instant contact between faraway places. To convey messages, a double hierarchy of upward and downward urban centres – or telephone exchanges – was required. Today two (or three) levels are enough. The processes of filtering and control, which were frequent in many long distance relations in the past, have disappeared. Each place is by now in direct contact with the global level: it is *glocalized*.

The evolution of the systems of communication is parallel to that of rapid transport: there are by now only two levels of airports, those of small or middle-sized cities, and the big hubs which offer direct flights for other hubs all over the world.

Urban networks evolve in the same way. The forms of sociability present in small or middle-sized cities are increasingly similar. The only cities which differ from them are the big ones, which attract most financial activities and functions of direction, conception or research. They play often a significant political role: the *crisis of many small cities* is parallel to *metropolization*.

Because of mechanization, the age when people enter the labour market is higher, the age when they retired lower; the working week is shorter; people enjoy annual paid holidays. Leisure activities, sport and tourism play a growing role. Hence new forms of land use.

Be they industrial, commercial or for leisure activities, land uses are either planned by the enterprises or administrations which pilot the projects, or by the building firms which develop the new facilities. All rely on the same type of technical expertise. Plans are generally prepared faraway from the places where they will be carried out. Those who conceive them generally ignore local environments and traditions. No harmonization is insured between adjoining plots of land; the result is often a total visual anarchy.

Populations have often lost their local roots. People are very mobile and many have only a few contacts with the places they came from. The new forms of vernacular cultures do not insure a direct understanding of landscapes: it is the end of *lived memories*, as noted by Pierre Nora (1984). Their disappearance is conducive to a *crisis of local identities*. The criticism aimed at big narratives *questions national identities*. The problem of identities, which social sciences ignored for long, has become crucial.

#### *What lessons can we draw from this succession of geographies ?*

In order to fulfil their task, young geographers need particularly to understand the processes which are restructuring the globalized world of today and shaping their new landscapes. But an overview of the evolution we have just summarized is also useful for them, since a part of the realities we live in are inherited from the past.

1- The geographers of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century were in front of still largely traditional landscapes. The communities they formed appeared as small cells relatively closed to the external world. The solutions to most of the problems relative to these landscapes had to be sought for at local scale. Farmers had to deal with the soils and climate of the place where they lived. They had to find out crops adapted to these environments and satisfactorily meeting most of their needs. Local constraints had a huge influence on their decisions.

In a world where communication was difficult, solutions had been found out locally, or resulted from a slow process of diffusion, which imposed recipes invented elsewhere when they were better. The difficulty of innovation explained the uniformity of many landscapes and contributed to their harmony. The low mobility generated a feeling of being deeply rooted and nurtured strong local identities.

In their interpretations, the geographers of late nineteenth or early twentieth century did not insist much on the role of information. Many of the features of the traditional world, however, grew out of the difficulties of communication.

2- In order to understand the world born from the industrial revolution, it was necessary to rely on a plurality of scales. The share of farm production which was sold to distant places was growing: the specializations locally chosen depended at the same time on the aptitudes of the environment and on the demand of often distant consumers. Industrial activities mobilized sources of energy, raw materials, components provided by more or less distant mines or factories. They employed workers who lived close to their workshops, but had often migrated from distant places. Outlets were remote.

The nature of cultural problems changed also: vernacular cultures had lost the quasi-monopoly of productive know how they enjoyed in the traditional world. The conception of new items and that of the machines and procedures which insured their production was devised by engineers and technicians. Their marketing was the job of marketing men.

In rural areas and small towns, local identities were still alive, but national identities were by far more significant. As underscored by Benedict Anderson, they were imagined by the intellectual elites and taught in schools.

The geographers of mid-twentieth century were conscious of the dialectics of scales, which referred the explanation of apparently local features to distant causes. They paid an increasing attention to the mobility of persons and goods. They found out that communication had a strong incidence on spatial structures. They were getting more attentive to what happened on the national and international scenes. They cared more care about pollution problems, which were becoming increasingly regional ones.

3- For a geographer of the twenty-first century, it is no more possible to focus mainly on local scale realities. With “glocalization”, what happens here reflects attitudes, forces and processes which work elsewhere and, many times, at the Earth scale. Geographers have to invert the dialectics of scales they were traditionally practicing.

In a world where information is easy to communicate and where mobility is great, it is no more necessary to live in a city in order to have access to the latest news, know new trends or buy the most recent products. As a result, the sociological urbanization of the world is progressing. The opposition between a capital city well ahead and more or less belated smaller centres, between cities which benefit from progress and rural areas where it comes much later, disappears. From rural zones to metropolises, people are connected to the same networks and swept along by the same fashions; they wish to consume the same things. Landscapes still vary according to densities, but the opposition between cities and the countryside is over.

At the end of the nineteenth century, most of the land was still used by agriculture or human settlements. By mid twentieth century, surfaces used by factories were already growing larger. With more intensive agricultural productions, cultivated areas now decrease in the industrial countries where demographic growth is slow. Streets, roads and motorways, factories, commercial centres, low density housing, leisure and tourism are spreading. The infrastructures, equipments and buildings required by many of these new

forms of land use are planned in the distant offices of public services or private enterprises with no care for their harmonious integration into landscapes.

At the end of the nineteenth century, geographers lived in a time when “man” was still conquering nature in order to meet his needs. Those of the twenty-first century are dealing with environments with too low resilience for supporting the massive gaseous and liquid effluents and the solid waste produced by urban and industrial areas. Global ecological equilibriums are threatened. Hence the necessity to control growth, limit the use of fossil energy and to better harness renewable ones.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, problems of identity were practically ignored in most States: the live memory and well preserved landscapes reminded everyone of the community he or she was a member of; school had taught him or her what was his (or her) nation – or was not, if he, or she, was a member of an irredentist minority which thrived for independence or dreamed to be incorporated into another State.

In the world of today, identities are unsure: the globalized place does not any more shape communities with a strong sense of what they are. National identities fueled the twentieth century World wars. As a result, they are often criticized and have lost a part of their appeal.

In order to understand today problems, the geographer has to analyze the forces operating in the contemporary world. Mobility is higher, as showed by the higher intensity of persons, goods and information flows; it shapes the new forms of culture. An essential part of planning decisions are made by public authorities or private firms which are not always conscious of the local consequences of their choices. In societies where people spend less time at work and enjoy more leisure, the analyst has to explore individual preferences for free time activities and the advertising which shapes them. Insofar as identity feelings which bounded groups together are in crisis, he has to look for the new ideologies and the new religious sects which offer new readings the world and meet with much success.

The geographers of the twentieth century insisted upon regional and national realities. Those of today stress at the same time the global level, which explains many spatial distributions, and micro-local realities, which reveals the diversity of human choices and behaviours.

In order to be a geographer of the twenty-first century, the dynamics which dominate the world have to be taken into account. Some of the orientations chosen by his predecessors are now obsolete: the exclusive attention given to productive processes, or the lack of interest in the role of information and culture, for instance.

## **2. New paradigms?**

In order to carry out efficiently his role, the geographer of the twenty-first century has equally to take into account the evolution of epistemological conceptions during the last century. There has been three successive conceptions of scientific – and geographic – research during this period.

### *The time of positive certitudes*

Modern geography was born at a time when physical, chemical and natural sciences were considered as models. Science relied on the gathering of positive facts through objective procedures.

In this context, social sciences had to overcome a specific difficulty: they had to eliminate both the subjectivity of the observer and that of the populations they studied. The scientist forgot his *ego* when conforming with the general rules of scientific methods. Nothing guaranteed, on the other side, the objectivity and the sincerity of the persons he met and analyzed. The solution was to ignore their views, their preferences, their dreams and to found the research on the visible and measurable results of their activity. The privilege given in this way to material facts explained the particular attention given to landscape.

As soon as the subjectivity of human interpretations had been eliminated, geographic facts became similar to others. The progress of knowledge resulted from their accumulation. The geographers of late nineteenth century and of the first decades of the twentieth did not reflect much on epistemological problems. They concentrated their efforts on the question of determinism. Were human choices dictated by the environment? Were they only influenced by them? Possibilism was in this way opposed to strict determinism: "Nature proposes, man chooses". Geographers debated about this problem for more than half a century. It was considered as a preliminary step, but the solution it received did not influence much the pursuit or research and the progress of knowledge.

#### *Paradigms and scientific revolutions*

After World War Two, geography went through a phase of doubt: it was mainly built on the analysis of rural areas and the ways of life which characterized them, at a time when industrialization and urbanization were progressing rapidly. Young scientists had no tools for deciphering the realities of the industrial world.

Spatial economics developed from the 1820s. Its progression was slow. Geographers ignored it until the interwar period. Capitalizing on his double training as a geographer and an economist, Walter Christaller analyzed then the location of service activities in terms of the range of goods and services, and proposed the central place theory. War slowed down the diffusion of his ideas. Geographers discovered them, and those of his predecessors, von Thünen in the agricultural field, Alfred Weber for industrial locations, at the beginning of the 1950s. They got in this way efficient tools for understanding a world when economic imperatives were dominant.

How to interpret this epistemological change? Edward Ullman played an essential role in the introduction of these new perspectives. For him, one of the two avenues opened at the end of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Ratzel and Vidal de la Blache had been neglected. As conceived by its founding fathers, human geography had two sides: (i) the study of man/milieu relationship ('vertical' relations, in a way); (ii) the analysis of 'circulation' (horizontal ones). This second side of the discipline was left practically fallow. The time comes at last to take systematically advantage of it, which was facilitated by the use of economic models. For Ullman, the new developments completed those of the first half of the twentieth century: the disciplinary field was just enlarged, as it had been expected from the beginning.



The interpretation proposed by the group of young scholars (William Garrison and Bryan J. L. Berry particularly) Edward Ullman inspired at the University of Washington in Seattle was different: for them, what was new was not the study of flows and traffic, but the quantitative methods they used in order to test the validity of economic models. There had been a break more than a widening.

During the seventeenth century, a deep change had occurred in physics: its Aristotelian version was supplanted by that developed by Galileo and illustrated by Newton: it was its first scientific revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the principles of Newtonian physics appeared unable to explain what was then discovered on the nature of light. Quantum physics replaced undulatory physics. Physical sciences had moved through a second scientific revolution.

Epistemologists studied the two major changes physics experienced in the last three centuries. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published by Thomas Kuhn in 1962, proposed a simple interpretation. At a given time and in order to take account of scientific observations left unexplained by the prevailing theory, a new scheme of interpretation, a new *paradigm*, is invented. It brings a *scientific revolution*. For a long time, scientists accumulate results coherent with the new paradigm. With time going, facts do appear, that it does not explain satisfactorily. A new crisis of knowledge, a new phase of doubt appears. Someone proposes a new paradigm. A new scientific revolution begins. History starts again.

Instead of being conceived in terms of a linear progression, the development of science is from now on presented as made of two types of periods: long phases of quiet progression, and in between, breakdowns, scientific revolutions.

Kuhn's interpretation was immediately applied to social sciences. The geographers who relied on economic models and used quantitative methods insisted on the radical originality of the approaches they developed. For them, New Geography resulted from a scientific revolution.

The success of the idea of a paradigm came largely from the hierarchy it instituted between scientists: on one side, there were the hard-working ones, who accumulated results, most of them trivial ones; on the other one, there were geniuses able to imagine new paradigms and giving in this way new impulses to research. The romanticism of this interpretation was much appealing.

Experience showed quickly that the idea of paradigm did not fit well social sciences. The new principle of interpretation, that of economic models and quantitative methods, did not supplant the former one (man/milieu relationships were still significant). It completed it by exploring an avenue opened long time ago, but neglected. The multiplication of scientific revolutions that people read in the development of geographic thought during the 1970s undermines the credibility of the notion: did phenomenological or humanistic approaches, radical orientations or time geography introduce total discontinuities in its evolution, followed by complete reconstructions? No. The ongoing transformations have to be interpreted in a different way.

#### *Western Civilization and science on trial*

The intellectual stage which appeared after the turmoil of the late 1960s differed from that of the previous periods. Doubt was cast on the intellectual, social and political

principles on which Western Civilization had been built. According to them, everything started from the autonomy of the individual, his aptitude to make rational choices, his freedom. On such a basis, the only legitimate political system was the national democratic State, born from a contract signed by autonomous citizens. Intellectual freedom favoured the progress of knowledge and the development of more efficient techniques. It conferred a superiority to the Western World and induced it to intervene in less advanced countries in order to let them know more efficient technologies and impose them some essential ethic and political rules. The Europeans and Americans had the feeling to hold a truth ignored by others. It justified their domination over less developed societies.

By 1960 decolonization was practically over. National State was subject to increased criticism because of the wars it was responsible for and the abuses of imperialism. The technical superiority began to disappear since many countries were by now able to produce what was initially developed by European, American or Japanese firms. Nothing could justify the overall condemnation of the values non-Western civilizations were based upon: most of them were respectable, and had to be respected.

The criticism of Western Civilization was born at the end of the nineteenth century from a questioning of the straight ethical rules it then propagated. It became harsher with the two World Wars. From 1917, it was supported by the Soviet propaganda. It found a deep echo among the colonized people and those who have just become independent. Heidegger, and in a different way, the Frankfurt school, gave it a philosophical dimension. It was strengthened by the critical French philosophy of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze.

The perspectives until then chosen by the human sciences had to be modified according to the new critical themes. Many scientists thought that the societies they analyzed were balanced systems, the conflicts of which could be ignored. On the reverse, conflicting interests and struggles play a central role in the contemporary vision of social life.

Never is a scientist totally able to free himself from the ideas prevailing in the environments where he lives. Since he is incapable to be perfectly objective, the best is for him to make clear the position he holds.

At the time when positivism or neo-positivism was dominant, scientists thought it was possible to understand human decisions through their material outputs: in order to decipher a society, they did not consider that it was necessary to investigate the representations of its members. Such a position is by now impossible. Women and men dream, have an unconscious. They share their imagination with that of the groups in which they live. They are impressed by advertising and themes of propaganda. To ignore these dimensions of human behaviour has become impossible for social scientists.

In order to interpret the world and its evolution, social sciences relied on big narratives. Their logics was imperfect: a part of it relied on theories and empirical tests; another one, on narrative logics, i. e. on the chronological succession of elements in between which no logical ties really exist. Big narratives are so increasingly criticized.

Some of the criticism against Western thought and science concerned more directly geography: in *Surveiller et punir*, Michel Foucault (1976) analyzed the *Panopticon* of Jeremy Bentham and stressed the deep influence of the observer's look. It played a central role in the control of passions and deviant behaviours. The synoptic

vision offered by maps made easier the analysis of situations, the elaboration of strategies and the exercise of domination. Cartography and geography appeared in this way as useful tools for generals, conquerors, colonizers and more generally, governments...

Geographical description located on the same plane natural forces and human behaviour. In a way, it naturalized them. As a result, the fact that social realities are historically built was forgotten. Social inequalities gained in this way an evidence that nothing justified. When inserted into a harmonious landscape, they appeared as elements of a perfect and unchanging order. The geographic approach was often indifferent to the tensions and injustices that the landscape hid. It was often impaired by a conservative bias.

#### *The time of scientific turns*

From the beginning of the 1970s, the trajectory of geography – and other social sciences – reflects the criticisms we just mentioned. Social sciences do no more guarantee the access to an absolute scientific Truth. The results they get at are relative and provisory. The knowledge they offer is a critical one, since everyone is aware of the limits of its validity. A scholar could no more ignore the opinions, preferences and ideas of those he studies. His approach appears less radically different than in the past from that which produces commonsense knowledge: it relies only on a more systematically gathered information and a more critical interpretation.

In order to express the rise of these new epistemological concerns, people are speaking of the turn that each discipline has experienced: the linguistic turn of history at the end of the 1980s; the spatial turn of sociology at the same time; the cultural turn of geography at the end of the 1990s. The chosen word is important: *a turn is not a revolution: it does not entail a complete break with the past. It is a change of orientation: new objectives are taken into account, but it does not necessarily provokes a complete renunciation of the past.*

### **3. Geography after the cultural turn**

What means the cultural turn for geography ? It first involves an acceptance of the criticisms of both Western thought and social sciences. No, geography does not open a straight and wide avenue towards universal and eternal truths and laws. Yes, the discipline had in the past a conservative bias insofar as it naturalized social relations. Yes, it was a powerful tool in the hands of rulers, whether they were just and benevolent, or dictatorial and oppressive. It offered them precious data and presented them in a cartographic form which facilitated the elaboration of strategic decisions. Such relations between geography and power structures were sometimes dangerous. It is important to be aware of that fact.

Geographers do no more consider that Western values are better than others. There are, in this way, *post-modern*. They get conscious of both the weaknesses and strengths of Western thought and appreciate the many logics operating in the rest of the World. They no more focus only on the Western middle-aged male producer. They have an interest in the perspectives developed by women, the geography lived by children and the narrowing lived space of the elders. They try to understand the strategies of nomadic hunters or cattle-raisers, those of the quasi-autarchic small farmers in the traditional World, and those of the workers of modern urban and industrial areas.

This geography is *post-colonial* for two reasons: (i) it is aware of the biases displayed by the nineteenth or twentieth century geographic publications which were impervious to the specificities of non-Western cultures; (ii) it questions the forms of crossbreeding generated by imperialism, and the way it still weights on the way of thinking in former colonies; it stresses the consequences of a long tradition of domination on Western thought; it emphasizes the influence the cultures of dominated people exerts since a long time on a part of European and American elites – the influence of the Eastern arts, religions and philosophies being particularly strong.

### *Radical interpretations*

There are several ways to interpret these recent transformations. For some authors, geography, as a science of look, was an instrument of domination. It is thus important to deconstruct it.

Radical geographers dream of a discipline which would no more rely on sight and look, since they are potential tools of enslavement. For John Paul Jones III and Wolfgang Natter, regional description had to be prohibited, since it creates divisions which irretrievably distorts reality:

“Through the planning document that seals the geometric fate of space and the subjects within it, through the regional texts and images that make coherent the relationships between certain people and certain spaces, and through political discourse that normalizes space’s private and public demarcations, hegemony is complicitous in stabilizing constructions of both representations and social space” (Jones III and Natter, 1999, p. 244).

The geography proposed by these radicals shrinks away. It tries to be so critical that it does no more dare to practice directly fieldwork: it is focused on representations, explores discourses and images, but do no more deal with concrete realities. A sign of this evolution is provided by the many specialists of literature or fine arts who participate in new geographic publications.

The new intellectual masters who inspire this movement often come from developing countries and were influenced by the critical themes presented by Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault: it is the case of Homer Bhabha (1994) or Gayatri Spivak (1999), for instance.

### *From the eye of the geographer to the look of the others*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, geographers thought that a good observer was able to understand the choices of the populations he studied through the analysis of the landscapes they shaped. The teaching of geography relied on the training of the geographer’s sight.

The perspective prevailing today is different: landscapes reflect the way people perceive their environments and are shaped by the representations they have of them. The discipline is built on the study of the perspectives of the others. It is in this sense that the turn it undergoes is a *cultural* one: it leads geographers to focus on the *subjectivity* of individuals and groups. In order to understand the forms of spatial organization and the style of landscapes, it is necessary to know the *decision makers*, the place where they live,

their skills, the representations they have of the world, but also those they lend to their clients.

The way spatial organization is studied changes also. At the beginning of the twentieth century, regional geography divided the Earth surface according to criteria which were considered as objective. They could be accepted by everyone. Their knowledge made easier the functioning of public administration and the action of the State.

Today the aim is different: what is important is to understand how people confer a sense to the place where they live through the representations they have of it, the practices they develop and the plans they try to implement. Region is being displaced by territory.

Other questions are raised: do people feel happy, or more simply at ease, in the milieu where they evolve, when they have been designed by others? Insofar as *feasts* take place in ephemeral or fancy settings, insofar also as an inversion of social roles and statuses often happens during them, they appear more interesting for geographers than in the past: they testify about normally repressed desires and unsatisfied dreams. Tags and graffiti express the revolt of those who draw them.

Geographers develop their interest for the other worlds, the beyonds, men and women imagine, since they express their deep aspirations and often are, on the long term, translated into realities. Jean-François Staszak explores in this way the *Géographies de Gauguin* (2003): the book shows the impact on some artists of the criticisms concerning Western societies by the end of the nineteenth century. It analyzes the dreams which they fed. It was out of them that Gauguin drew his paintings of Tahiti, which have still so strong an appeal that they motivate the visit of many tourists. The book Augustin Berque just published on *Histoire de l'habitat idéal. De l'Orient à l'Occident* (2010) explains the contemporary taste for nature, and the suburbanization or rurbanization it favours, in terms of perception of nature and construction of the idea of a landscape.

Geographers move further and are fascinated by the other worlds which give a sense to the Cosmos, the Earth, the nature or social life and confer a normative dimension to human action (Claval, 2008).

#### *The cultural approach questions the division of geography into subdisciplines*

To say that geography is experiencing a cultural turn means that it *formulates in a different way the problems relative to environment, economy and social life*.

In order to rule a country, the totality, or the majority, of its population has to accept its political system as legitimate: power has to rely on shared religious and ideological beliefs, and reflects them.

On the market, food demand is not for proteins, carbohydrates or lipids, but for rice, wheat or cassava, beef, mutton or pork, wine, beer, cider or fizzy drinks. It is expressed through culturally built and defined categories. On the production side, the personnel of companies shares values, which explain a good part of its efficiency.

In the social field, to know the income of an individual is not enough to understand his place in his social group. Other factors play as significant a role. Where and by whom was he raised? Up to what level did he study? What degrees did he get? What is his job? Where does he live? How is he appreciated by his colleagues, his neighbours? It is also important to know about his spare time, the sports he practices, the

travels he makes, the shows he likes. Does he often move to the theatre, the movies? Does he prefer classical, pop or country music? Does he like flowers?

In a way, natural environments only become dysfunctional when there are experts to reflect upon nature, analyze its dynamics, name and decipher its unbalances!

### **Conclusion**

1- In order to understand the twenty-first century realities, geographers have to explore the new dynamics of information, take into account both the global scale and the household one, be attentive to identities and their crises, and never forget environmental constraints.

2- In order to meet the new epistemological rules, scientists have to distrust big narratives. The eye is not only a tool of observation and analysis; it could be transformed into a mean of domination. Women and men do not act according to reality, but to the representations they have of it. Landscapes and spatial organization cannot always be explained through rational models. They are shaped by the looks of those who lived and model them. A particular attention has to be given to the weak and the oppressed, whose destitution has to be understood if people wish to remedy it.

3- New critical requirements have not, however, to hide the fact that the world is shaped by natural and social forces, even if reality is only known through human built categories. The cultural turn introduced new requirements, new approaches. It did not invalidate all those which were practiced until then : it has showed that their scope is not universal; they are only valid within certain limits.

In order to reduce street congestion in a city, for instance, the approach developed at the time of 'New Geography' is still valuable. The behaviour of urban populations are still shaped by the rules of an urbanized and industrialized society. People do not really enjoy the daily trips to work or shops. Their problem is to minimize this drawback. Cars and their drivers are just like atoms in a gas, and their reactions may be statistically predicted. It is from this idea that planners have to start when conceiving new streets or motorways and reorganizing traffic regulations.

Another example: an important share of the agricultural production of developing and emergent countries still comes from small farmers whose main target is to support their families on the long term. They grow food crops for their own consumption, and commercial ones to pay for what they are unable to produce locally. Their problem is not to maximize their income in the short run, but to take advantage of the local conditions of soil and climate in order to imagine efficient crop rotations for the present and avoid soil exhaustion for the future.

A part of the constraints small peasants communities had to deal with a century ago have disappeared: information is reaching the remote valleys of Himalaya or the depth of Amazonian forest. Peasants increasingly rely on small machinery to relieve them from a part of their physical efforts. They cultivate improved varieties, know the use of fertilizers. When comparing the context which prevailed in the traditional world and that of contemporary societies, the main difference results from the disappearance of some of the past constraints – those resulting from difficult transport and communication mainly. As a result, the range of choice open to farmers is wider. Natural constraints have not disappeared, however. Hence a situation where the sustained farming of the past has

disappeared – it is the negative aspect of the transformation – but the deep social injustice which often was inherent to it is also receding.

Today, geographers have to be more critical, more careful in the choice of the analytical tools they use, more sensitive to the mores, aspirations and dreams of the areas and populations they study. Regional realities do not play the same role than in the past, which involves a reflection on their present dynamics and a different mix of scales of analysis. It means that past results have to be put under perspective.

Geography is richer than in the past. It is closer to the other social sciences and the humanities. It is fully aware of environmental problems. Such are for me the main characteristics of the geography of the twenty first century.

## References

Ce texte reprend des idées que j'ai exposées dans des ouvrages récents :

Claval, P., 2003, *La Géographie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Claval, P., 2005, *La Géographie culturelle*, Paris, A. Colin, 2<sup>ème</sup> éd.

Claval, P., 2006, *Géographie régionale. De la région au territoire*, Paris, A. Colin.

Claval, P., 2007, *Epistémologie de la géographie*, Paris, A. Colin, 2<sup>ème</sup> éd.

Claval, P., 2008, *Religions et idéologies. Perspectives géographiques*, Paris, PUPS.

Claval, P., 2010a, *Les Espaces de la politique*, Paris, A. Colin.

Claval, P., 2010b, *Terra dos Homens. A geografia*, São Paulo, Contexto.

On consultera en outre :

Berque, A., 2010. *Histoire de l'habitat idéal. De l'Orient vers l'Occident*, Paris, le Félin.

Bhabha, H. K., 1994. *The Location of Culture*, Londres, Routledge.

Jones III, J. P., W. Natter, 1999. "Space 'and' representation", in : A. Buttner, S. D. Brunn, U. Wardenga (eds), *Text and Image. Social Construction of Regional Knowledge*, Leipzig, Institut für Länderkunde, p. 239-247.

Nora, Pierre, 1984. "Entre histoire et mémoire", in Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *La République*, Paris, Gallimard, p XXV-LII.

Spivak, G. C., 1999. *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason : Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press.

Staszak, J.-F., 2003. *Géographies de Gauguin*, Paris, Bréal.