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Emphasizing the role of labelling in sciences. Some thoughts about the uses of “*géographie politique*”, “*géopolitique*”, “*géographie du pouvoir*”, etc., in French geography (20th Century)*

Olivier Orain**

Very often, referring to the history of a field of knowledge is a way to legitimate the balance of power of a current scene or to push forward a specific agenda. This is what historians of sciences call an operational use of the past. In stimulating writings, the sociologist and historian of science Christian Topalov suggests that this common attitude should be read as a version of what is more and more called “*présentisme*” by French historiography – a tendency to configure the past following patterns and objectives that are specific to the present time. Maybe getting rid of such an attitude is a pipe dream, knowing how strong and well established such a habit is. However, historians of sciences relentlessly try to develop an alternative way to write history, devoted to deciphering how people of the past constructed problems and patterns of their time. This is an essential tension in the practice of history, to borrow and slightly betray a Thomas Kuhn’s motto.

For a historian of human sciences, as I define myself, having a call to look at the history of political geography is very challenging and constructive. The primary and secondary literatures are absolutely filled with nods to and narratives about the past, as this one is complex and either glorious or dark. Pretending to offer a historically minded insight would request months, if not years, of labor. As this is a new research topic for me, started on for the sake of this 14U session, I had to find out a pinhead entrance into this huge subfield of knowledge that wouldn’t be too much of a pinhead, but useful for a debate and, in some ways, enlightening. I therefore set out to work on labels used in modern-founded – i.e. disciplinary – geography to embrace the political entry. Or, speaking more historically, the question I’d like to explore with you today would be: what did it mean to use the adjective or the noun “*politique*” to specify a type of inquiry in twentieth century French geography?

Of course, this is still a work in progress and fifteen minutes is a short time to say much. I eventually decided to give my speech in English, although my main focus is on French words, used by French geographers. I expect this to be peculiar sometimes, weird even, but we’ll try to get over said peculiarities.

First, I’d like to clarify the philosophical points of view which I draw on to work on words, scientific discourses, and especially, on labels. What I aim at here is justifying such an emphasis.

Then, I will sketch a global overview of French geography and “*politique*” – noun or adjective. If I have enough time, I’d like to focus on several milestones that show the great significance of labels in various moments of French geography. I will conclude with a well-established myth within the French field: the long-lasting marginality of political geographers.

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1) A nominalistic approach of scientific vocabulary

“Nominalistic” might not be such an ordinary word for this audience. Besides, its meaning hasn’t been very stable from medieval debates to contemporary philosophies of science and language. What I will state for the sake of this speech, and knowing the quirks of my English practice, is: words can’t give access to the substance of a thing, they’re a conventional way to refer to a single thing or to include a finite thing into a finite class of individuals. Moreover, an abstract word like a concept refers to single concrete things or to a single situation of communication, so its meaning can be deciphered only in this particular situation. I won’t develop those aspects now, but it’s related to more fashionable theories like constructivism or conventionalism.

A nominalistic approach of scientific vocabulary aims at studying words and concepts without imagining scientific concepts and labels always hold a stable meaning. Stability is an essential question that would deserve an enquiry. Meaning must be studied in many occurrences, without any *a priori* expectations. A nominalistic approach must also be intrinsically very skeptical about the idea of something substantial and deeply shared through a number of phrases – especially labels.

Maybe it’s time for me to be more specific about my use of the term of “label” It comes from the “labelling theory” developed by American sociologists of the 1960’s. It’s related to the allocation of an identity, primarily in the field of *deviance* studies. Interactionists like Howard Becker¹ consider individual identity as the result of a negotiation about a “label” between social actors, that could apply (or not) to a person. For numerous historians of sciences, studying the formulation, the promotion or the rejection of scientific labels, is of tremendous relevance.

Giving a name to a scientific specialty can have a powerful impact. Whether this statement has a performative aim and is related to a new science that needs be sustained, or to a new domain, the autonomy of which one tries to develop within a scientific discipline, such an initiative always offers an interesting perspective for the history of sciences. When it succeeds, new concepts and knowledge grow from that new name, new scientific communities call themselves with it, institutions work on its continued sustainability and narratives construct its history. (Topalov, 2008)²

For example, Andrew Abbott³ and Christian Topalov⁴ showed, in different ways, how the label “Chicago School of Sociology” was made up during the 1950’s and early 1960’s by Chicagoan sociologists, providing them with an expected genealogy, founding fathers and

¹ For example in Howard Becker, *Outsiders*, New York: Free Press, 1963.

² « Donner un nom à une spécialité scientifique peut avoir de puissants effets. Que cet énoncé à visée performative concerne une science nouvelle qu’il s’agit de faire exister, ou un domaine que l’on souhaite autonomiser au sein d’une discipline constituée, une telle initiative est toujours un observatoire intéressant du point de vue de l’histoire des sciences. En cas de succès, se construisent autour du nouveau nom des concepts et des savoirs, des communautés savantes qui s’en réclament, des institutions qui en assurent la pérennité, des récits qui en retracent l’histoire. » Christian Topalov, 2008, “Sociologie d’un étiquetage scientifique : urban sociology”, *L’Année sociologique*, 1, 203-204.

³ Abbott, A., 1999, *Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Topalov, C., 2003, “Écrire l’histoire des sociologues de Chicago”, *Genèses*, n° 51, p. 147-159. Topalov, C., 2004, “Les usages stratégiques de l’histoire des disciplines. Le cas de l’‘école de Chicago’ en sociologie”, in J. Heilbron, R. Lenoir et G. Sapiro (eds), *Pour une histoire des sciences sociales. Hommage à Pierre Bourdieu*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, p. 127-157.

distinctive doctrine. In the history of French geography, Marie-Claire Robic⁵ showed how Paul Vidal de la Blache and his disciples constructed “human geography” as a trademark and a label, able to convey a strong identity for their group, who were called “French School of geography” from early on. This latter example brings us to another potential and competing label, “political geography”, and to a whole range of potential labels – the numerous ones that French allows to produce, with the same noun or adjective, “*politique*”.

2) A global overview about French geography and “*politique*”

“Political geography” is a very ancient expression in French geography. According to Claude Raffestin, it was already in use at the end of the eighteenth century. A social history of the uses of “*politique*” in what was called “geography” during the nineteenth century would be of particular interest. However, there wasn’t any kind of leadership or unified dominance amongst the so-called “geographers” until geography became an academic discipline. The institutionalization of geography only started during the last decade of the 19th century and the competition became rough between a few leaders who were trying to gain the upper hand on the new discipline.⁶ The end of the battle / story is well known: it saw the consecration of Paul Vidal de la Blache and his followers, who were from then on known as the “French School of geography”.

In an early programmatic article published in 1899, Vidal de la Blache seemed to make “*la géographie politique*” (political geography) the main label of the new science, which he shared with Friedrich Ratzel. But he later gave up this label for the term “human geography”, which was better adjusted to his views. Oddly, it’s very difficult to find any “political” meaning – in its contemporary acceptation – in this early piece of his programmatic work. Even the most common meaning of the term, “something that is related to the state’s action”, is inscrutable in this text.

Nevertheless, the adjective and the noun remained in the forthcoming production of the so-called “French School of geography”, if not as a label. Strangely, Camille Vallaux entitled a political treatise devoted to “political geography” (in a Ratzelian perspective) “*Social Geography*”, although the syntagma “political geography” is often used in the book. Incidentally, the most “political” essay of those early times was published by André Siegfried in 1911 – who wasn’t actually a geographer – and presented a “political picture”, a first attempt to show the persistence of political voting habits according to particular areas in France.

If labels including “political” are significantly few in the production of the 1920’s and 1930’s, French geographers didn’t show any contempt for such a topic: political perspectives do exist, if not expressed in explicit formulas or labels. Albert Demangeon, leader of the French

⁵ Marie-Claire Robic, “Avec ou sans épithète ? De quelques labellisations de la géographie et de leur sens”, (Con o sin adjetivos? Algunas clasificaciones de la geografía y su sentido), in Capron G., Icazuriaga Montes C., Levi S., Ribeira Carbó E., Thiébaud V. (ed.), *La geografía contemporánea y Elisée Reclus*, México : Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (Publicaciones de la Casa Chata), p. 69-91.

⁶ Berdoulay, V., 1981, *La formation de l'école française de géographie (1870-1914)*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, C.T.H.S. ; reed. « CTHS Format » (paperback), 1995. Rhein, C., 1982, “La géographie, discipline scolaire et/ou science sociale ? 1860-1920”, *Revue française de sociologie*, XXIII, p. 223-251.

School of geography with Emmanuel de Martonne after Paul Vidal de la Blache's death, would provide an excellent case study (closet case?) on that matter, but I don't have time to develop.

During the 1930's, French geography was confronted to the rise of German *Geopolitik*. A few geographers wrote books or articles against the lack of *scientificity* they said was all too common in that production. They didn't aim at delegitimizing the intent of a political perspective in geography. Nevertheless, they contributed to the high level of stigmatization attached to the German label. The only attempt to *gallivize* it was made by Jacques Ancel, who was mostly an outsider in the (geographic?) academic field, though well received; his book *Géopolitique* (1936) is amazingly led by the aim at "clearing [the neologism] from the subterfuge of a false science". This is an example of the battles on words and labels and their potential performance of the day.

A brief chronology 1/2

- 1899, Paul Vidal de la Blache, "La Géographie politique, à propos des écrits de M. Frédéric Ratzel". *Annales de Géographie*, 7/32, 97-111.
- 1911, Camille Vallaux. *Géographie sociale. Le Sol et l'État*. Paris, Doin.
- 1913, André Siegfried, *Tableau politique de la France de l'Ouest sous la Troisième République*. Paris, A. Colin.
- 1920, Albert Demangeon, *Le Déclin de l'Europe*. Paris, Payot.
- 1932, A. Demangeon, "Géographie politique". *Annales de Géographie*, 41/229, 22-31.
- 1932, Yves-Marie Goblet, "Geopolitik et critique géographique", *Le Temps*, 14/07/1932
- 1934, Yves-Marie Goblet, *Le Crépuscule des traités*, Paris, Berger-Levrault.
- 1936, Jacques Ancel, *Géopolitique*, Paris, Delagrave.
- 1938, J. Ancel, *Géographie des frontières*, Paris, Gallimard.
- 1939, A. Demangeon, "Géographie politique, à propos de l'Allemagne", *Annales de Géographie*, 48/272, 113-119.
- 1949, Jean Gottmann, "Mer et terre. Esquisse de géographie politique", *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 4/1, 10-22.
- 1952, Jean Gottmann, *La Politique des Etats et leur géographie*, Paris, A. Colin.
- 1955, M.-E. Dumont, "Géographie politique et géopolitique", *L'information géographique*, 19/4, 151-159.
- 1955, Research meeting about German *Geopolitik* at the Sorbonne, getting together Jean Dresch (1905-1994) and Wolfgang Hartke (1908-1997).
- 1957, Laurent Champier, "Géographie politique et géographie religieuse" in: G. Chabot, R. Clozier et J. Beaujeu-Garnier (eds), *La Géographie française au milieu du XXe siècle*. Paris, Baillière, p. 149-158.

It's a common narrative to describe the decades after the World War Two as dominated by a taboo on "*géopolitique*" and "*géographie politique*". It's usually explained by a(n) alleged / preserved domination of Marxist geographers in France, notably Pierre George and Jean Dresch. A few right-wing narrators, like Paul Claval and André-Louis Seguin, have largely contributed to this authorized story. A few hints should incite us to re-evaluate and nuance such an interpretation. For example, Jean Dresch was involved in a 1955 debate about German geopolitics and a few articles were written by not much known authors, like Laurent Champier and Marc-Edouard (M.-E.) Dumont. The case of Jean Gottmann is, of course, very different. However, Gottmann named his main political book "*The Politics of States and Their Geography*", which is a very relevant formula for his aim.

I will quickly finish the overview with the blossoming of political labels since the 1970's. Antimarxist narratives read that efflorescence as a by-product of Marxist decline. This is quite surprising, because Marxist thinkers (or close to Marxist theories) like Claude Raffestin and Yves Lacoste were very active in this development⁷. From a labelling perspective, each protagonist appears to be the custodian of their own idiosyncratic label, such as:

- “*géographie du pouvoir*” (Raffestin);
- “*géographie politique*” (A.-L. Sanguin, P. Claval);
- “*géopolitique*” (Yves Lacoste);
- “*géographie du politique*” (Jacques Lévy).

But some leaders also showed some reluctance to implement new subfield labels, as “geography” was the only legitimate label for them. It’s crystal clear in the case of Roger Brunet, and more ambiguous for Paul Claval and Jacques Lévy.

A brief chronology 2/2

1976, Launching of the Journal *Hérodote* (Yves Lacoste and al.)
 1976, Y. Lacoste, *La Géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*. Paris, Maspéro.
 1977, André-Louis Sanguin, *La Géographie politique*. Paris, PUF.
 1978, Paul Claval, *Espace et pouvoir*. Paris, PUF.
 1979, Claude Raffestin & Mercedes Bresso, *Travail, espace, pouvoir*. Lausanne, L'Âge d'homme.
 1980, Claude Raffestin, *Pour une géographie du pouvoir*. Paris, LITEC.
 1981, Roger Brunet, “Géographie du Goulag”. *L'Espace géographique*, 10/3, 215-232.
 1982 Foundation of the Institut international de Géopolitique and launching of the review *Géopolitique* by right-wing politician Marie-France Garaud.
 1982/1983 *Hérodote* is now subtitled “revue de géographie et de géopolitique”
 1984, Creation of the IGU section (soon to be named) “political geography”. Paul Claval (reluctantly) becomes chairman of the French delegation.
 1984, Jacques Lévy, “Espace et politique : une nouvelle chance”, *Espaces-Temps*, 26-28, p. 91-99.
 1989 Beginning of the institutionalization of a Geopolitics department at Paris 8 University (apart from the Geography department) – Institut français de géopolitique.
 1989, Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières*, Fayard.
 1990, special issue of the Journal *Espaces-Temps* “Pouvoir, l'esprit des lieux. Visiter l'espace du politique” (Power, The Spirit of places. Visiting the political space).
 1991, J. Lévy (ed), *Géographies du politique*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP.
 1995, C. Raffestin, D. Lopreno et Y. Pasteur, *Géopolitique et histoire*, Payot, Lausanne.
 1998 Launching of the Journal *Géoéconomie* (Pascal Lorot)
 2000 Creation of a Centre de Géostratégie at the École normale supérieure
 2005, Michel Bussi & Dominique Badariotti, *Pour une nouvelle géographie du politique. Territoire – démocratie – élections*. Paris, Economica-Anthropos.
 2006, Stéphane Rosière, *Le nettoyage ethnique. Terreur et peuplement*. Paris, Ellipses.
 2007, Launching of the online journal *L'espace du politique* (Stéphane Rosière)
 2010, S. Rosière, dir., *Dictionnaire de l'espace politique. Géographie politique et géopolitique*. Paris, Armand Colin.

⁷ An alternative explanation is provided by Marie-Claire Robic’s suggestion of a scientific revolution that would have occurred in France during the 1970's. See Marie-Claire Robic (ed). *Couvrir le Monde. Un grand XXe siècle de géographie française*. Paris, ADPF, 2006. I developed that hypothesis in my book *De Plain-pied dans le Monde. Écriture et réalisme dans la géographie française au XXe siècle*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.

How difficult it is to conclude such a fast overview. Drawing on this story of the production of politics-related labels in French modern geography, it's tempting to infer quick conclusions about the marginality of political geographers from the long-lasting marginality of the subfield. Nonetheless, prominent classical geographers weren't reluctant to address political issues, even if they didn't advertise it as such, for the sake of the discipline, as to them the only sustainable label was simply "geography" (or "human geography"). But in modern geography, after a revolution that paved the way to an era of pluralism, "*politique*" became a strategic means to attain leadership for the then activists and soon-to-be prominent leaders.