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Marianne Morange, Yann Calbérac, Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, Cécile Gintrac, Elizabeth Hessek Rose

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# New Babel:<sup>1</sup> The Third Coming of French Critical Geographies

translations of  
French Critical Geographies?

**Marianne Morange**

Inalco, département Afrique Océan Indien, CESSMA UMR 245 Université Paris Cité  
marianne.morange@inalco.fr

**Yann Calbérac**

Institut universitaire de France, Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, CRIMEL,  
Centre Marc-Bloch  
yann.calberac@univ-reims.fr

and

**The Recent Rise of Critical Geography in France:  
Critical Geography, Radical Geography, Spatial Justice, Social  
Geography, Action Research**

**Cécile Gintrac**

cecile.gintrac@gmail.com

introduction by

**Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch**

Université Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, Sciences Po Grenoble, Pacte, Grenoble, France  
Myriam.Houssay@normalesup.org

translation by  
**Elizabeth Rose Hessek**

Université de Montréal  
elizabeth.hessek@umontreal.ca

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## Introduction

*By Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch*

Have you, dear reader, ever read a French critical geographer? You have definitely read plenty of French critical theory, you know your Bourdieu, your Lefebvre, your Foucault, maybe even your Wittig. Was there a single contemporary French geographer among the critical luminaries whose works you read? Odds are not in our favor. This is not solely your fault and signals an interesting double disconnection. First, French (not Francophone) geography experienced a long disconnection from English-speaking geography, because for decades we wrote mostly in French, and were seldom translated. Second, French geography has long been disconnected from other French critical social sciences, so much so that even if the latter are aware of geography's existence as a discipline, they tend to quote David Harvey more than any geographer writing in French.

Nevertheless, French critical geography does exist and has recently written itself back into existence. The two papers, almost 10 years apart, translated here attest to this. Morange and Calbérac's 2012 piece in the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of *Carnets de géographes* (hereafter CDG), has, as presented in Elizabeth Rose Hessek's brilliant afterword, a specific context. Let me just add that CDG was founded by three doctoral students, Karine Ginisty, Amandine Spire and Jeanne Vivet, all of whom were supervised by Philippe Gervais-Lambony at Université Paris Nanterre, as an outlet for new (and critical) developments in French geography.

Morange and Calbérac introduced the first special issue devoted to contemporary French critical geographies. The special issue's contributions were aimed at other, sympathetic French geographers, and the introduction contextualizes these contributions historically and vis-à-vis other social sciences. This Franco-French inner dialogue explains some of the text's idiosyncrasies (e.g., the acritical use of "Anglo-Saxon" to denote

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<sup>1</sup> Since its inception, ACME has been a journal committed to linguistic plurality, publishing pieces in Spanish, French, Portuguese, and English. We have also sought to introduce work originally published in languages other than English to English-speaking geographers. To that end, ACME's translation committee, Team New Babel, has developed relationships with many non-Anglophone journals with the intent of translating some of their most widely read geographic scholarship into English. This translated article is a result of these partnerships and Team New Babel's initiative to highlight geographic works globally.

geographies in English and the positioning of authors in terms of a modernism/postmodernism debate).

The second text by Cécile Gintrac (another of Gervais-Lambony's students) appears in a special issue on "[r]ecent changes in geography in France" of the less critical *Histoire de la recherche contemporaine*, of which Gervais-Lambony and Desbois (also from Nanterre) were the guest editors. *Histoire de la recherche contemporaine* is a CNRS<sup>2</sup>-funded history of science (STEM, as well as the social sciences and humanities) journal. This special issue, aimed at Francophone scholars of other disciplines, comprises two other papers on French critical geographies, one on gender geographies by Claire Hancock (2020), the other on postcolonial geographies by Catherine Fournet-Guérin (2020). Both journals are part of a vibrant ecology of open access publishing, which the CNRS supports financially and logistically. Open access is indeed quasi mainstream in today's French social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Critical geographies have a location (Barnes and Sheppard 2019; Berg et al. 2022) that gives them a particular shape. The main specificities of French critical geographies are fourfold. The first specificity is the "primacy of fieldwork" (Morange and Calbérac 2012), which legitimizes scholarship far more solidly than theory does. In fact, this empiricism is characteristic of French geographies as a whole. The second specificity is that French critical geographies refer to a pluralistic, non-orthodox, constellation of theoretical and political positions, aptly described as a solid "distrust of overly globalizing theories" (Morange and Calbérac 2012): French geographers prefer ad hoc theoretical configurations. This theoretical eclecticism is associated with relatively few direct claims to currently well-known genealogies (Gintrac 2020). The third specificity is their strong internationalization (Gintrac 2020) due to many French critical geographers having done fieldwork in the Global South and having links to Anglo geographies. Reading English texts, allowing translations of existing or current work<sup>4</sup>, and publishing more often in English-speaking journals are all part of a definite trend that these geographers set. However, this internationalization tends to limit itself to an Anglo/Franco dialogue. The fourth specificity is that French critical geographies exhibit a rich reflexivity (see for instance Chossière et al. 2021), strong epistemological and/or pedagogical traits, and a fondness for methodological experimentations.

Current French critical geographies have also started institutional structuration. It is possible to identify certain centers: the Parisian peripheries of Nanterre and Université Paris-Est (UPE Créteil and Marne-la-Vallée), Bordeaux, Grenoble, and the ESO research team in several Western universities, such as Rennes, Caen, Nantes, etc. In these places, not all geographers focus on critical geographies, sometimes not even a majority does, but on the whole, they are a critical mass and have attained visibility. At a national level, the CNFG (Comité national français de géographie, or the French geographical association) has a feminist specialty group, founded in 2017 by Rachele Borghi and Émilie Viney. Since 2020 it also has a critical geography specialty group thanks to Sophie Blanchard, Muriel Froment Meurice, Mari Oiry Varacca, and Claire Hancock (all from UPE). However, violent battles are

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<sup>2</sup> French national center for scientific research.

<sup>3</sup> See the catalog of the OpenEdition portal, <https://www.openedition.org/catalogue-journals>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice's* systematic publication in both French and English.

still being fought with mainstream geography about the legitimacy of critical approaches, especially in terms of queer and gender geographies.

Beyond these battles, I identify four current challenges for French critical geographies. First, and due to the discipline's national history, critical quantitative geography is still too weak, although there have been encouraging signs recently (e.g. Ribardi re and Valette 2017; Cahu 2019; Migozzi 2019). Second, French geographies, including critical geographies, are still very white, even if issues of racial discrimination are currently addressed more straightforwardly (Dijkema 2021; Hancock 2021). Third, there is the strong and two-faced challenge of speaking back to theory by problematizing the French situation. What do we French geographers do with the French case and what does it contribute to international theoretical debates? Conversely, what do we international critical geographers do with the analyses that French critical geographers develop? Do we read them? Do we take them seriously? Or do we subsume them under the "normal" theory, which is far too often grounded in US-UK cases? Fourth, French critical geographies, as well as other French critical sciences, face the harsh, external challenge of the dismantling of the welfare state and of the public sector, with the latter including the dismantling of universities over the last 20-plus years (Le Goix et al. 2022). This fight requires a great deal of French critical geographers' energy and time, making them the target of violent attacks by an increasingly illiberal government (Bayart 2023). Nevertheless, after Reclus, after the intellectual and political intensity of the 1960s and 1970s, French critical geographies are still alive and kicking.

## French Critical Geographies?<sup>5</sup>

By Marianne Morange and Yann Calb rac

The urgency of engagement was replaced for us by the priority of discernment. This break with the Sartrean intellectual tradition illustrated in *Les Temps modernes* appeared at the time to be the most remarkable development of *Le D bat*. It was quickly understood that refusing to engage with political partisanship was simply the product of a desire for civic responsibility. In the country of the Enlightenment, the presence of intellectuals in public life is a tradition. There is no question of renouncing this tradition, but, on the contrary, restoring its radiance by finding its relevance.

Pierre Nora, "Vingt ans de d bat," *Le D bat*, 2000, page 9, <http://www.le-debat.gallimard.fr>

To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the scientific journal *Le D bat*, Pierre Nora used these words to speak to the editorial vision of its founders at the dawn of the 1980s. He recalls the founders' distrust of partisan affiliations and their attempt to forge a path for social science researchers to reconnect with a form of political action despite that era's discrediting of Marxist intellectual struggle. The contemporary surge of critical approaches in French geographic thought could be interrogated in light of this manifesto and its anti-partisan turn. Today's critical geographers are not coming from a clearly identified collective of scholars engaged in a radically transformative political project with historical significance, as were

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<sup>5</sup> Morange, Marianne, and Yann Calb rac. 2012. "G ographies critiques «   la fran aise » ?" *Carnets de g ographes* 4. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cdg/976>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cdg.976>.

many of their intellectual forebearers. Third-worldists like Jean Dresch (1979) or André Prenant took part in the battle against colonialism, often in tandem with the French Communist Party. Yves Lacoste and the *Hérodote* review of the 1970s (Lacoste 1976) were also engaged in the work of radical politics. Today's geography is critical, but not necessarily radical.

Contemporary critical geographies in France are characterized by a clear ideological pluralism and an abundance of methodological and theoretical approaches. Each is the product of various influences, including certain political legacies. They organize around thematic topics, cultural spheres, and subdisciplines without ever claiming the label of "critical." Whereas numerous geography journals exist for work produced in English, there is no specific publishing support for Francophone research. Thus, French critical geographies remain isolated from each other.

To address the current situation, this issue of *Carnets de géographes* proposes a space to decompartmentalize critical approaches in French geography. The objective is threefold: by bringing together historically siloed geographies, we aim to illustrate the contribution of geographers participating in the renaissance of critical French geographic thought; to determine the potential specificity of critical geographic thought "à la française"; and to develop an audience for French geography in a moment when the field appears to have lost its invested public.

We would like to open an experimental arena to allow geographers working and writing in the French language to share their observations on the role of critical approaches in advancing the fields of geography they are building. We only received submissions from researchers working in France; thus, this issue explores critical geographies "à la française" in the sense that they were developed in the context of French institutions and the French academy. Additionally, we apply a broad definition to the term "critical" by evoking "approaches developed to question classic analytical categories, articulated with a desire to influence political and social evolutions." This definition refuses to thematically restrict proposals and opens the conversation to every manner of "doing with," - but also, why not, "doing without" - critical approaches.

### ***Critical needs?***

French geography has constantly questioned its societal role and its relationship to politics (Calbérac and Delage 2010). It has never stopped engaging with the social world. In this issue, Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot highlight the influence of Renée Rochefort's work during the 1960s (Rochefort 1961) on the social geography that they practice today. However, in geography as in other social sciences, the pertinence of critical engagement was undercut by an imperative for "axiological neutrality" that developed at the same time as a pseudo-Weberian suspicion towards the scientific legitimacy of approaches labeled as non-neutral or based on value judgements.

"Axiological neutrality" in the service of accurately understanding observed phenomena is an approximate translation of the Weberian idea of *Wertfreiheit* (the moral imperative to withhold value judgements during scientific research) and contributes, according to Isabelle Kalinowski (2005) to an ideological misappropriation of Max Weber's philosophy. This semantic shift appeared in the 1960s and enabled detractors of Marxist

theory to politically reclaim the great intellectual figure of Max Weber. For his part, Weber did not oppose *Wertfreiheit* with political engagement. He opposed it with propaganda: the reinforcing of a dominant academic position and the agenda of authority to impose certain values by presenting them as neutral. Translating *Wertfreiheit* as “axiological neutrality” allowed the substitution of this subtle opposition with one that was more simplistic, pitting engagement and duty against political neutrality.

In the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the success of this strategic misappropriation, signaled by the rise of the liberal ideological order (Cusset 2006), nearly resulted in the scientific and institutional disqualification of the socially engaged researcher and the discrediting of critical thought in the social sciences. Certainly, critical thought never fully disappeared. The professional success of Pierre Bourdieu and the popularity of the School of Critical Sociology at EHESS (a prestigious French postgraduate school for social science) during this period attest to its survival. Nevertheless, critical approaches were relegated to academic niches, no longer dominating academic spaces as they had in the previous decades.

Our challenge is to rediscover, resuscitate, but also rebuild critical thought around new theoretical frameworks in a reconfigured and often more distant relationship to political engagement. “New critical thoughts,” as baptised by Razmig Keucheyan (2010), must rise to this challenge. The vitality, one could even say the trendiness, that surrounds these new thoughts stems from a desire to break from the digression of the 1980s and 1990s as well as an aspiration to disrupt the call to axiological neutrality that characterised that period. Their success would therefore be linked to a breaking point in this moment of ideological and institutional crisis.

This crisis also sometimes reflects a need for resistance against recent transformations in the French university. Pressured to become (finally) “useful” by political actors won over by the neoliberal turn in the Lisbon Strategy<sup>6</sup>, the university finds itself called upon to redefine its social function while developing budgetary autonomy using an entrepreneurial framework. Universities are expected to offer professional training, evaluate “competencies,” and produce applied research. They must submit to the atrophied timelines of calls for projects and exist in service of large private or public enterprises. Critical thought finds itself marginalized in this environment (when it is not immediately considered suspicious for ideological reasons), and foundational research is condemned to the sidelines, whether in the humanities and social sciences or in the so-called “hard” sciences. In this context, *Carnets de géographes* seemed to be an appropriate venue for this issue. As a scientific journal launched in the early 2000s to explicitly oppose neoliberal reforms in the French academy, *Carnets de géographes* provides a space for innovative research in geography and is open to all critical approaches. It publishes texts that are unflinchingly politically engaged, something that is rare in the realm of French academic publishing.

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<sup>6</sup> The Lisbon Strategy was a 10-year development plan adopted by the European Union in 2000. Its primary objective was to prepare European countries for the transition to a knowledge-based economy in the wake of globalisation.

### *Three critical paths*

Since the middle of the 1990s, critical thinking in geography, as in several other disciplines, has resurfaced in various forms. One example is work on the relationship between ethics and geography anchored in a vigorous tradition of research in social geography carried out by the ESO laboratory and other independent scholars (see Morelle and Ripoll 2009 or Collignon 2010). Some very recent initiatives also evoke this critical turn, including the creation of the online journal *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice* which interrogates the relationship between space and justice; the work of Arnaud Brennetot on the ways that geography mobilizes the notion of justice (Brennetot 2009, 2011); and the organization of the conference “Space and Social Relations of Domination: Research Projects” held in September 2012 at the Université de Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée.

The result is an impressive diversity of perspectives and of ways of applying critical thought. Likewise, the contributions that we received stem from a range of different fields of geography and broach wide-ranging themes including gentrification, urban services, urban renewal and the creative class, large-scale regional and port development, land speculation and real estate trends linked to the tourism industry, literacy, mobility, and epistemology. The contributions consider sites located in the Global North (Brussels, Montréal, Paris), as well as the Global South (Tangier, cities of the Persian Gulf, Mali, Cape Town, Maputo, India, Mexico, and Brazil). Nevertheless, we can distinguish three types of approaches:

#### *1) The theoretical approach: critical thought as a framework for understanding the world*

Four texts use or propose a critical theoretical framework or model to penetrate a spatial phenomenon. Sabine Planel offers a very creative theoretical approach to the notion of “just space,” which she applies to the case study of the port of Tangier Med. Her approach combines elements of Foucauldian critique of power with notions of geography of scales developed by English-language scholars. Anne Clerval and Mathieu Van Criekingen explain, in the form of a scientific dialogue, how they mobilize the idea of gentrification – originally forged in the UK and honed in Anglophone contexts – in their respective work in Paris, Montréal, and Brussels. Frédéric Barbe proposes a “critical geography applied to culture” to denounce “the strength of the ‘transcolonial’ system that led to the demise of an educational utopia after independence” in Mali as well as “obstacles to the creation of a coherent national literacy program.” He outlines ideas for “public programming that is more mindful of managing the territory and society by promoting universal access to reading and writing.” Roman Stadnicki and Manuel Benchetrit present a photo journal of the daily lives of ordinary residents in cities across the Persian Gulf. These images add nuance to the catastrophist reading of these places presented by the radical English-language anthropology of Mike Davis and Daniel Monk which, according to the authors, is abusively generalist and out of touch. While they argue for “going beyond critique,” their proximity to their field of study, their concern for the complexities of socio-spatial dynamics, and their awareness of the tension between specific observations and scientific generalizations brings them into the realm of new critical social thought.

#### *2) The epistemological approach: critical thought as an object of research*

Two authors take up English-language radical geography as a subject of inquiry. Cécile Gintrac questions the relationship between critical and radical thought through a comparison



of France and the United States. Camille Vergnaud sketches the contours of “the figure of the professor-researcher-activist” and analyzes its embodiments in the American context. She describes three incarnations: the creation of an “academivism” space at the University of Syracuse which made GIS technology available to community members; the empowerment of communities by “facilitator-researchers;” and Don Mitchell’s “radical geography of the library” which offered a more classic academic support to militant groups to help them refine their arguments and adapt their actions. Moreover, Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot propose a manifesto “for a social action geography” that goes beyond the simple goal of unveiling knowledge to drive geographic research towards taking action. To do this, they mobilize their respective field experience in real estate speculation brought on by the tourism industry in a Mexican city and in population displacement caused by urban renewal in Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai.

### 3) *The reflexive approach: critical thought as method*

Finally, three articles propose a reflexive analysis of the practices and knowledge of their authors. These three contributions seem to us to be particularly valuable from a disciplinary point of view because, as Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot emphasize, unlike other social sciences, geography often skimps on developing its explanations (sometimes for reasons linked to formatting and publishing constraints.) Karine Ginisty reflects on the difficulties she encountered while analyzing the spatial justice of drinking water access in Maputo. She speaks to the work of deconstructing and reconstructing the notion of spatial justice that her fieldwork required her to pursue. Thomas Radovcic explains how his understanding of injustices in Cape Town evolved by breaking free of a strictly socio-racial post-apartheid framework to mobilize English-language literature on neoliberalization and urban governance. Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir and Camille Schmoll bring us behind the scenes of their fieldwork in so-called “irregular” migrant camps in Malta. They dissect the “constant pendulum movement between the shortcuts of activism and the rigor of academic work, between sidestepping, decentering and refocusing, between games of distance and engagement, and processes of objectification and subjectification” that they consider urgent to clarify in order to maintain the tension between activist engagement and scientific neutrality.

### ***Critical convergences***

Beyond their diversity and their divergences, these critical geographies share three characteristics that are linked to certain disciplinary characteristics. First, they adopt a suspicious regard toward theoretical ambitions considered too global for the specificities of research sites. Secondly, they demonstrate a certain distance vis-à-vis political engagement. Finally, they attest to an ability to combine a modernist critical approach with certain contributions from post-modern theories. As a result, “French-style” critical geographies maintain an ambiguous relationship with English-language critical geographies.

### *Critical thought or critical theory?*

Scholars have already amply engaged in semantic and epistemological debates about the directions and practices of critical thought in human and social science. The journal *Tracés* consecrated a special issue to the subject in 2007 in which Arnaud Fossier and Anthony Manicki proposed a synthesis of the debate in their editorial. However, geography does not

appear in this special issue, which focuses instead on sociology, philosophy, history, and literary studies. Furthermore, two recent reference works that aim to signpost the field of critical thought – the “cartography” that Razmig Keucheyan (2010) provides as a navigational tool for this theoretical and ideological labyrinth and the more militant “at least partial snapshot of this constellation” offered by an eclectic collective of authors (Collectif 2011) – barely mention geography, despite the richness of the works’ thematic and disciplinary scopes. These texts reduce geography’s contributions to those of radical geography, specifically the work of David Harvey, the only geographer judged worthy of entering the pantheon of contemporary critical thought due to the reach of his theoretical system. Keucheyan also cites Henri Lefebvre in an incidental manner while reflecting on how his ideas about the right to the city and the production of space are remobilized by today’s theorists.

Thus, geography occupies a marginal place in the great movement to re-establish critical theory. This large absence reflects the obvious marginalization of the discipline within the social sciences. It bears mentioning that while David Harvey is undoubtedly the geographer that other social scientists cite most frequently, his audience is largely situated outside of geography. The barely audible characteristic of French critical geographies is also linked to the fact that they are theoretically disparate and emanate from scholars who do not benefit from a rooted academic genealogy. Many critical French geographers even stand defiant before the closed and coherent theoretical systems of their intellectual forebearers. Their geographies are largely freed from the ambitions of “historic Hegelian totalization” (Cusset and Keucheyan 2010) characterizing their Anglophone peers. From the point of view of French geographers distancing themselves from established theoretical systems, the type of theoretical contribution deemed necessary to enjoy the “critical” label remains unclear: Razmig Keucheyan, for example, speaks variously of critical “thoughts” and critical “theories,” but he favors coherent and closed theoretical architectures, the same ones prized in the English-speaking world.

The strength of the empiric tradition in French geography was not favorable to the elaboration of “critical theories.” It considered abstract concepts to be subordinate to field observations (Calbérac 2010; Volvey et al. 2012). Karine Ginisty’s article is emblematic of how critical geographers perceive the tension between fieldwork and theory: she exposes the difficulty of articulating what political and moral philosophy can bring to the analysis of justice within the social and political realities of Maputo, a city where the strength of social control wielded by the hegemonic political party in power hinders the emergence of political dissent and feelings of injustice. Revealing a similar tension between theory and fieldwork, Frédéric Barbe bases his “Inquiry into Malian Literacy” on a patient accumulation of historical, social, and political data that demonstrate the complexity of the processes used to determine literacy rates (unfair competition in publishing, difficulties in school attendance, and political debates about “national” languages, among others).

Three texts develop a more intimate relationship with theorization, though fieldwork retains primacy in their arguments. The first, coauthored by Anne Clerval and Mathieu Van Criekingen, admits to being intrigued by David Harvey’s attempt at theoretical totalization, but the authors explain that it was first and foremost the study of social transformation in Parisian neighborhoods that led to them identifying gentrification in these places. The second text, authored by Thomas Radovic in a direct and explicit dialogue with Anglophone literature, builds off encounters with Cape Town’s network of elites to interrogate the exercise

of power in a neoliberal context instead of seeing it through the lens of race relations. The third text, by Sabine Planel, is the most theoretical. It follows, in fact, the structure of the Anglophone canon: the first section is dedicated to the theoretical framework, followed by a case study. However, even Planel prudently concludes with a discussion of the usefulness of the empirically tested theoretical "hypothesis."

### *The place of the social transformation project*

As a social science, geography has (or is able to develop) theoretical tools that allow it to render spatial injustice and different forms of domination and exploitation linked to space and territory intelligible. Thus, in our call for submissions, we proposed that "theory" is considered critical when it meets two requirements: it must (as an ethical duty) mobilize these tools to create emancipatory work, and it must participate in the transformation of society. This double imperative moves us away from a Kantian approach that confines critique to "the evaluative examination of categories and forms of knowledge in order to determine the validity of their cognitive value" (Wacquant 2001). Using our proposed definition, critical thought necessarily blends the "descriptive" and the "normative" (Keucheyan 2010). It must situate itself within engagement, or at least within objectives seeking social transformation and political liberation. Critical thought in geography is thus much more than the simple act of using critical reason (in the Kantian sense) to subvert and emancipate the discipline from the authoritative norm, even if this dimension remains present.

However, the critical geographers represented in this volume are rather removed from the necessity of political engagement in the societies they study. Though some of them mention participating in activism during their research, they have neither developed their scientific process using this framework nor used it as their primary frame of reference. Incidentally, none of them belongs to militant academic or scientific collectives. Their engagement is indirect and punctual, often situated on the edges of academic practice. It is the result of a centrifugal movement that leads from the university towards the political world and social struggles - never in the opposite direction.

Three texts distinguish themselves by their desire to directly question the relationship between science and engagement. Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot dedicate their article to this question. They speak to "critical engagement" and reclaim a "social geography of action" that interrogates the "current limits of the diffusion of academic knowledge that forms the social sciences." Natalie Bernardie-Tahir and Camille Schmoll are more reserved as they explain how they had to confront and undertake the moral dilemma of needing "to do something," to "denounce... without losing sight of scientific exigencies" in the complex and tense situation they discovered. They discuss how they attempted to avoid "mixing roles" without ever truly succeeding in a completely satisfying manner. Camille Vergnaud practices a form of "ego-geography" (Levy 1995) which allows her to situate her work on critical Anglophone geographies in relation to her own doubts and personal difficulties regarding the place of engagement in an academic career.

We also see in these texts that engagement, whatever its degree or its nature, is seen primarily in relationship with fieldwork. For Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot, social engagement is the result of working with collectives defending the rights of people victimized by real estate speculation and urban renewal. Notably, evictees are more accessible and more likely to speak with university researchers than evictors, a fact that

immediately places researchers on the side of the oppressed group. Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir and Camille Schmoll underline the difficulty of finding themselves brutally confronted with the inhumanity of the living conditions of migrants in Malta. They suffered a “shock” due in part to their lack of political preparation, even though both researchers are experts in migration studies. It is fieldwork that leads to political engagement, not the inverse.

Finally, the ideological independence of these critical geographers is also apparent in their autonomy from French Marxist geography from the 1960s-70s – which they barely mention. The renewed interest in critical thought seems to owe more to the durability of the historically constructed figure of the independent and politically engaged intellectual (Ory and Sirinelli 1986). To employ the distinction made by Pierre Nora, this figure seeks a “discernment,” most often elaborated within a scientific collective (the laboratory or research network) or in a favorable scientific context, but does not seek “engagement” in a group of militant researchers working closely with activist networks on immediate political challenges.

### *Relationship to unveiling and post-modernity*

The geographers included in this volume manifest the same unveiling ambition that is core to modernist critical thought, whether one references the Frankfurt School’s project for critical thought that illuminates with an aim to change the social and political order (Wiggerhaus 1993) or the critical sociology of Bourdieu that opposes the “expert sense” with “common sense.” However, nearly all the authors are sensitive to certain aspects of post-modernity.

For example, Sabine Planel reveals the mechanisms of multi-scale domination by mobilizing both Lefebvrian theories regarding justice in the “production of space” and the fluid concept of power developed by Michel Foucault. Also situated at the intersection of critical modernist thought and post-modern thought, Frédéric Barbe proposes a manifesto to free literacy in Mali from “trans-colonial” forms of domination, which aligns with subaltern studies while simultaneously denouncing “the structural adjustment of literacy” (meaning its destruction through commodification) and advocating “the creation of more ‘just’ literacy activities” founded on a more equitable publishing industry and an overhaul of language policies. Anne Clerval and Mathieu Van Criekingen underline the importance of neo-Marxist readings of Neil Smith in their analysis of gentrification, but they also evoke the contributions of intersectionality in understanding this phenomenon. In some ways, Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot’s transition from a “sociology of unveiling” to an “action-based” sociology also integrates attention to subalternity by referencing, for example, “an experience of coproducing geographic knowledge about the types of autonomy developed by Indigenous social organizations in several regions of Mexico.”

Certain texts are more directly and explicitly sensitive to post-modernism’s contributions to questions about researchers’ positioning and subjectivity. These texts are more in line with the injunctions of the “sociology of critical thought” (Boltanski 1990) which warn against substituting the voices of critical scholars for the voices of exploited and victimized people. Thus, Camille Schmoll and Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir “give voice” to so-called irregular migrants in Malta to “demonstrate their capacity for resistance and empowerment by spotlighting the multiple forms of tactics and strategies, both individual and collective, put in place to improve their daily lives and, more broadly, give back their ability to be the narrators of their own stories.” Two other texts also insist on the dangers of

interpreting situations of dominance with an external, birds-eye view influenced solely by Marxist theories inspired by Anglophone radical geography (Roman Stadnicki) or by theories of justice produced by European and North American philosophers (Karine Ginisty). They both insist on the necessity for critical thought to develop in relation with the concrete social, political, and cultural situations that it encounters rather than as an offshoot of *a priori* and closed theoretical frameworks emanating from researchers occupying intellectual monopolies (Walzer 1990). This implies a decentering and a calling into question of dominant intellectual traditions which geography, considering its connection to fieldwork, is particularly capable of leading.

### ***Relationship to Anglophone Critical Geographies***

What distinguishes critical geographies “à la française” from critical and radical geographies developed in the English-speaking academy is the primacy of fieldwork, the distrust of overly globalizing theories, and a caution with regard to political engagement. These three elements are more distinctive than thematic choices and research subjects, which Francophone and Anglophone research often have in common (spatial justice, neoliberalization, migration control, segregation, mobility barriers, gender discrimination, etc.). This implies the French critical geographies have specific relationships to these critical geographies from elsewhere situated between curiosity, attraction, and (critical) distance.

Anglophone critical geographies are now well known in France. They have stimulated much curiosity since the 1990s and 2000s. They began circulating at the same time as texts by post-modern authors hailing from North American campuses (Cusset 2003). French geographers were particularly enthusiastic about Anglophone radical geographies, and some French geographers played a key role in spreading these theories. We can think of the formative work of B. Collignon (in Staszak 2001) or of the complete and partial translations of many of David Harvey’s works since 2008<sup>7</sup>, as well as his recent invitations to several institutes and universities. At the same time, French geographers maintain conflicting relationships with these geographies from abroad. In this issue, the positions on Anglophone critical geographies are quite varied:

- Three articles build their contribution largely on references to Anglophone geographies, either through their alignment with or break away from them. Anne Clerval and Mathieu Van Criekingen adhere to David Harvey and Neil Smith’s radical approach which they attempt to apply in their fieldwork. On the other hand, Roman Stadnicki and Manuel Benchetrit emphasize the limits of radical Anglophone geographies in their own fieldwork through a critique of Mike Davies and Daniel Monk’s work. Thomas Radovcic mobilizes Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore’s foundational article on “the urbanisation of neoliberalism” for his reading of injustice in Cape Town.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2008: *Géographie de la domination*, Paris, Les prairies ordinaires. In 2010 : *Géographie et capital. Vers un matérialisme historico-géographique*, Paris, Syllepse; *Le Nouvel impérialisme*, Paris, Les prairies ordinaires. In 2011 : *Le capitalisme contre le droit à la ville. Néolibéralisme, urbanisation, résistances*, Paris, Editions Amsterdam. In 2012 : *Paris, capitale de la modernité*, Paris, Les prairies ordinaires.

- Two articles take up Anglophone critical geographies in a more tangential manner, situating themselves as well-meaning and curious neighbors. Frédéric Barbe finds inspiration in New Literacy Studies, borrowing the term *littéracie* from Québécois. Nicolas Bautès and Clément Marie dit Chirot recognize that “social geography shares a certain number of theoretical elements with Anglo-Saxon critical geography, as well as references to Henri Lefebvre, Marxism, social classes, etc.,” but this geography is not central in their analysis. Sabine Planel uses Anglophone critical geographies to craft a novel theoretical hybridization between Foucauldian critical thought and geography of scales.
- Finally, two texts associate their interest in critical thought with an inspiration other than the Franco-English theoretical dialogue. These texts incorporate, most notably through their methodology, other disciplines entirely. Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir and Camille Schmoll integrate ethnomethodology and subaltern studies in their work. Karine Ginisty applies her familiarity with urban anthropology.

The degree of proximity to Anglophone critical geographies seems to result from a complex combination of the nature of fieldwork, the theoretical field, and the personal sensitivity of the researchers. Interest in the Anglophone approach appears sharper among urban geography specialists where these critical approaches are difficult to avoid whether one accepts them or not. When working in places less familiar to Anglophone geographers (Mali, Morocco, Mozambique), researchers seem less influenced by these approaches. Ultimately, critical geographies “à la française” demonstrate an especial interest in the community-based research, action research, and participatory action research experiments that Anglophone critical geographies propose (for example, the creation of the People’s Geography by Don Mitchell). These efforts to engage with civil society are not (yet?) required for academics working in France, but current trends point to this developing<sup>8</sup>.

For the moment, however, the convergences between critical geographies “à la française” and Anglophone critical geographies seem rare, in particular due to a strong institutional asymmetry. Anglophone critical geographies, though heterogenous (they are as able to embrace subaltern studies as they are post-cultural and postcolonial studies, for example), constitute a clearly identified nebula in the Anglophone world. They benefit from scientific journals, specific sessions at academic conferences (over 50 at the 2012 meeting of the Association of American Geographers), dedicated collections at major publishing houses (the University of California Press, for example), articles in encyclopedias, manuals (such as *Critical Human Geography*, edited by Mark Billinge, Derek Gregory, and Ron Martin and published by Palgrave MacMillan as early as 1984), and entirely separate classes in university curricula. The International Critical Geography Group – a recently created network in which Anglophones dominate numerically, linguistically, and in terms of theoretical production – has organized annual meetings since 1997. For their part, French critical geographies develop within research laboratories that do not claim to be critical, even when they are endowed with strong ties to critical thought (in social geography, geography of mobility,

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<sup>8</sup> French universities are beginning to encourage community engagement, but the focus is on students who sometimes receive academic credit for their community work. The Université Paris Diderot allows its students to receive credit for “citizen, volunteer, and/or laic engagement,” though the emphasis is on the charitable nature of the work over militant or political characteristics.

political geography, or environmental studies, for example). Certainly, social geography sometimes considers itself the equivalent in France of Anglophone critical approaches. However, the aforementioned absence of institutional structures explains (among other reasons) the lack of awareness of work carried out in France when compared to Anglophone approaches. For the moment, the lack of visibility of French critical geographies as a field does little to promote links beyond the thematic.

## The Recent Rise of Critical Geography in France: Critical Geography, Radical Geography, Spatial Justice, Social Geography, Action Research<sup>9</sup>

By Cécile Gintrac

Over the past decade, the term “critical geography” has made a place for itself within the field of geography in France. While, strictly speaking, no particular institution aligns itself with critical geography, more and more French geographers situate their work within this framework. For it is not the subject matter that makes geographic research critical, it is the methods used to accomplish the research. Critical geography centers an emancipatory vision set on transforming the society that it studies (De Koninck 2004; Gintrac 2012). One could define critical geography as, “the collection of approaches developed to question classic analytical categories used to understand the world, articulated with a desire to influence the political and social evolutions of the societies studied” (Calbérac and Morange 2012). The label “critical geography” is intended to be plural: it brings together fields as diverse as *géographie des minorités*, feminist geography, postcolonial approaches, radical Marxist geography, and anarchist geography. It represents “a broad coalition of politically progressive approaches to the study of geography” (Berg 2010, 617).

Twenty years ago, the label was not truly present in French geographic literature, and dictionaries of geography still do not include “critical geography” as a stand-alone entry. In other contexts, notably in the Anglophone world, critical geography has a tangible presence (Gintrac 2015; Gintrac 2017). It is made material by the existence of groups that claim the label, such as the International Critical Geography Group which holds academic conferences approximately every three years (Gintrac 2017). It explicitly guides the orientation of some scientific journals like *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies/Revue électronique internationale de géographie critique*, *Geocritica* in Spain, and *Sub|urban (Zeitschrift für kritische Stadtforschung)*<sup>10</sup> in Germany (Gintrac 2014).

The goal of this article is to retrace the emergence of critical geography in France as well as its effects on the positioning of researchers. However, this emergence does not manifest as an epistemological rupture because, in reality, it remobilizes the heritage of French geography as much as it introduces new ways to do geographic research.

### *From the emergence of notions of radical geography and spatial justice...*

Starting in earnest in 2008, a series of translations of Anglophone critical and radical geographic texts explicitly established critical geography within the landscape of the French

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<sup>9</sup> Gintrac, Cécile. 2020. “Le foisonnement récent de la géographie critique en France”, *Histoire de la recherche contemporaine* IX (1). URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hrc/4122>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/hrc.4122>

<sup>10</sup> Journal of Critical Urban Research

academy. The independent publishing house Prairies Ordinaires began releasing several translations at this time, including *The Dubai Stadium of Capitalism* by Mike Davis in 2007 and *Geography of Domination* by David Harvey in 2008. Concurrently, the online journal *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice*, founded in 2009, launched a broad translation initiative which gave French speakers access to the work of Edward Soja, Susan Fainstein, and additional David Harvey, thus introducing France to new concepts.

At first, references to radical geography multiplied in geographic work even faster than critical approaches. Anne Clerval (2010) used Neil Smith's work to inspire her article about gentrification in Paris, published in the journal *Cybergeo*. In the December 2009 issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, geographers Gatién Elie and Allan Popelard retraced the journey of William Bunge, described as a "revolutionary geographer," to examine the geographic expeditions he led into Detroit's Black neighborhoods in the 1960s and 70s. We must also reference the pioneering role of the *Atlas des migrants en Europe : Géographie critique des politiques migratoires*<sup>11</sup>, released in 2009 and led by the MIGREUROPE network, a "European and African network of activists and researchers whose objective is to reveal and fight against the normalization of the confinement of non-citizens and the multiplication of camps, a tool central to externalizing migration control in the European Union" (MIGREUROPE 2018).

French research rapidly and intuitively joined this movement, notably through interrogating the implication of researchers in their work. In 2012, a special issue of the journal *Carnets de géographes* entitled "*Géographies critiques*" noted "the contemporary growth of critical approaches in French geography" (Calbérac and Morange). The conference "Space and social relations of domination: Areas of research," which took place at Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée in September 2012, was Neil Smith's final speaking event. Conference organizers Serge Weber and Anne Clerval noted that, "there is a desire, a visibility, and people are beginning to say that something is happening here, though that is not to say that absolutely nothing was happening before" (Clerval and Weber 2012).

### *...To the multiplication of "critical geographies"*

Since the first translations of David Harvey and the creation of *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice* in 2009, new generations of French researchers have not hesitated to employ critical geographic approaches to study what has proven to be an extremely wide variety of subjects. This article proposes a non-exhaustive panorama of these research topics.

Critical geography has found fertile ground in urban studies, which led to the publication of several works by non-academic publishers including *Paris sans le peuple* by Découverte (Clerval 2013), *Villes contestées: Pour une géographie critique de l'urbain* by Prairies Ordinaires (Gintrac and Giroud 2014), and *Pour une ville habitable: De l'espace-temps comme enjeu démocratique* (Luxembourg 2015).

*Géographie des minorités*, which was introduced in France largely following the publication of articles and works examining Anglophone geography (Staszak 2001; Hancock 2002), is part of the recent critical geography movement. Using this label, researchers

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<sup>11</sup> *Atlas of European migration: Critical geography of migration policies*



specializing in questions of gender (Chapuis 2016; Prieur 2015) and postcolonial studies (Choplin 2014) are able to claim intersectional approaches.

Driven by political ecology, physical geography has also recently considered the contribution of critical approaches. The seminar "Critical Environments" led by Reghezza Zitt and Émeline Comby for the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, spoke to this development. Critical physical geography aims to explicitly integrate physical geography and critical human geography into research and teaching practices (Dufour 2015).

Beyond theoretical references, critical geographers are developing seminars, research groups, and networks. Among them, the *Reseau des Géographes Libertaires*, "an international and transdisciplinary network that aims to bring together and connect all those interested in critical and/or radical geography, in the academic world and beyond" (RGL 2018), has been organizing annual seminars since 2015. Other regular events now exist such as the meetings of critical geopolitics, which provide a space to introduce theoretical currents dominant in the English-speaking world to French academics (Rosière 2017). These meetings, held in Grenoble since 2016, take an openly postcolonial perspective to geopolitics.

### ***A moment of experimentation: beyond the limits of the university***

Critical geography is above all an approach. It is about leaving behind the ideal of axiological neutrality defined by Max Weber. It is in this context that Marie Morelle and Fabrice Ripoll (2009) underline that "the belief in the possible absence of engagement seems broadly widespread, even dominant: there would be engaged researchers (activists) on the one hand and, on the other hand, neutral researchers (impartial)" (165).

We are currently witnessing a proliferation of experiments that interrogate the position of the researcher and call into question the possibility of "objectivity." These experiments are often carried out on the fringes - both spatial and institutional - of universities, which researchers remark are increasingly restrictive. These experiments take place thanks to the creation of networks of action research, as in the case of the MIGREUROP network. Another example is the research and action platform *Genre et Ville* whose "work is nourished by critical geography, gender studies, urban anthropology, feminist arts, and politics" (Genre et Ville 2018).

Research with this approach takes the form of workshops at the intersection of art and scientific inquiry. In Gennevilliers, feminist geographers participated, at the request of the city government, in an "analysis of women's practices and ways of occupying public space" whose "global methodology is mixed methods nourished as much by the human sciences as by artistic practices to create participatory work" (Luxembourg 2017). In Grenoble, the workshop "*Cartographies Traverses*" was conceived as a tool for research-creation that brings creative visual and audio production together to understand the contemporary experience of migration. The workshop breaks away from concepts of lived geography and, more necessarily, the ideal of the external and *a priori* objective researcher (Mekdjian and Amilhat Szary 2015).

Finally, an essential area of experimentation concerns pedagogy, as evidenced by the special issue of the journal *Carnets de géographes* entitled, "For a collective reflection on the teaching of geography at the university," edited by Jean Gardin, Marie Morelle, and Fabrice

Ripoll. This issue demonstrated a desire to go beyond the walls of the academy. In Saint-Denis, for example, the Université Paris 8 and the Dionyversité, a grass-roots community university, established a joint study program in 2015-16. This program constitutes a pedagogical experiment "to open university courses to all instead of reserving the mobilization of knowledge produced at the university to paying students and academic circles. Thus, it imparts technical tools such as participatory cartography and the critical use of statistics to everyone to facilitate interventions in public debate" (Participant collective<sup>12</sup> of the social geography program in Saint-Denis 2017).

### *Genealogies of engagement and remobilization of French geographies*

It is important to note that experiments such as those mentioned above were not novel; rather, they revived certain approaches advanced in the 1970s and 80s. For one, they stimulated intense reappropriation of Henri Lefebvre's work (Martin 2016) which went far beyond the field of geography. The right to the city and the production of space have become unavoidable concepts for geographers over the past decade. Young geographers have also remobilized work from social geography. In a manual published by Masson in 1984, Armand Frémont, Robert Hérin, Jean Renard, and Jacques Chevalier cite Engels, interrogate social relations of production, and introduce the notion of domination. For them, "geography must be of its time and contribute to collective awareness and to solutions for social problems" (Frémont et al. 1984, 125). In 2006, following a conference to celebrate Masson's twentieth anniversary, Raymonde Séchet and Vincent Veschambre describe a social geography "concerned for its critical usefulness," "involved, or rather engaged, because social geographers cannot divest from their aspirations for a more just world, today and in the future, and therefore hold their gaze steady on inequalities, dominations, human dramas, and the ways they are lived" (14), even if this approach has always claimed a certain methodological objectivity.

Regarding engagement, geographers taking militant stances is not new. In the 1970s, researchers such as Manuel Castells took the side of urban struggles. It is also enough to reread the first issues of *Hérodote* or the work of Raymond Guglielmo to observe a radicalism that seems entirely contemporary:

The only possible attitude... consists of asking ourselves, before any other concern, how, as geographers, can we do the most possible damage to the domination of capitalism and state power over workers, in France or elsewhere, in order to help the advancement of working-class struggles that aim to undermine and eventually destroy this domination... To pose the problem in this way is to refuse to study these struggles as an expert, from the outside, in order to make them the subject of articles, of theses, or of seminars, which will certainly advance one's career, but not the struggle. On the contrary, it is to study them from the inside, by participating in them, when the people who lead these struggles support the study as a political necessity, when it contributes to their success, and on the condition that it is done in collaboration with them. (Guglielmo 1976, 73).

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<sup>12</sup> It is notable that authorship of this article was not reserved for the academics.

Taking this genealogy into account, it is appropriate to interrogate the conditions of what can be understood as a silencing of reflection on researchers' political engagement in France. Militant academic journals (such as *Hérodote* and *Espaces et Sociétés*, which Lefebvre participated in establishing) and journals that broke away from the conventional positioning of geography (*Espace-Temps*) blossomed at the end of the 1960s and the 1970s. The tension around positioning was itself a subject of debate among these journals. Despite this, in the 1980s many of the geographers who had participated in the movement to question a "scientific" geography aligned themselves with academic institutions. This period is undoubtedly what François Cusset described as the "long parenthesis of the 1980s" when explicit, even merged relations between the "rational state" and the scientific community formed.

### *Conditions of a renewal*

Two hypotheses can explain what appears to be a renewal of engaged forms of research undertaken since the mid-2000s. The emergence of a critical geography in France is first and foremost a response to a critical moment in which we are witnessing an accumulation of crises. Societies are waking up to the environmental emergency, the legitimization of minority claims for justice, and an exacerbated neoliberalism. In this respect, the 2008 crisis that resulted from the bursting of real estate bubbles largely proved the conclusions of researchers, notably David Harvey, who emphasized the link between the accumulation of capital and the production of urban space.

The second hypothesis stems from a geopolitics of globalized knowledge, where Anglophone references are sometimes qualified as hegemonic. The nascent field of German critical geography has observed this phenomenon: in one article, three geographers who identify with this approach consider that the "critical turn in German geography" was only possible through the internationalization of German geography (Belina et al. 2009, 47). According to them, references to radical theories were gradually accepted "not because they were *critical*, but because they were *international* and *recognized around the world*" (54).

Without an epistemological schism, critical geography has undeniably established itself in the field of French geography as a reclamation for engaged research. This movement occurred through the joint influence of remobilizing geographies of the 1970s and 1980s and a powerful internationalization of research. The move towards a critical geography serves to question the place of geographers in society and to explore new practices and places at the interface of activism and research.

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