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From Regional Geography to the Geography of Regionalization

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1.1. Introduction

In the 19th century, academic geography emerged in Europe, particularly in France. In the wake of the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache, French geographers paid attention to sub-state regional divisions, in a monographic approach. However, from the beginning of the 20th century and during the interwar period, some observed what was already called globalization. They proposed a regionalization of the world, based on the geographical distribution of power centers and the observation of exchanges. After the war and until the 1970s, the themes of the regionalization of the world and regional integration on a macroscale (the construction of large multi-state groups) reappeared in France in a scattered manner. With their expertise on the notion of region, geographers, using their tools, took possession of this theme again, based in part on more advanced work from other disciplines.

Regionalization of the World,

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1.2. 19th and 20th centuries: the hesitant paths of regionalization between intra-state regions and continents

1.2.1. *The legacy of the 18th century*

To regionalize is to divide the surface of the Earth in order to classify knowledge about the known space. With the improvement of cartography and statistics, in the 18th century, regional descriptions became more precise: based on the political-administrative divisions, in states with an administration that produced figures. Whether on a global or national scale, the starting point was a naturalistic or even deterministic division. The emphasis was on climates, mountains, rivers and seas. Some works were based on watersheds (Philippe Buache and then Maxime Auguste Denaix), on altitude and climate (Abbé Giraud-Soulavie) and on geological outcrops (Omalius d'Halloy at the beginning of the 19th century, who planned to produce a rational division of the globe based on geology) (Claval 1999). This division played a central role in the French-speaking geographical vision in the 19th century, in the context of the exploration of the interior of the continents, the improvement of cartographic coverage and the census of reliefs and landscapes.

1.2.2. *Vidal and the vidalians: lifestyles, cities and circulation*

At the end of the 19th century, regional geography was defined in France by Paul Vidal de la Blache, who was influenced by German authors. Carl Ritter formalized the idea of regional differentiation by dividing the world according to a hierarchical model: the world, the continents and the parts of continents (mainly based on the observation of relief and climate) themselves divided into smaller regions. He divided Europe into regions according to several criteria: topography, atmospheric and hydrological data, population distribution, location of resources and distribution of fauna and flora. For him, the regions owe their personality to the particular relations which are established between the human societies and nature; their boundaries do not have any relationship with the political network.

Vidal de la Blache in turn laid the foundations of a regional approach that used concepts such as the “physiognomy” of regions, “ways of life”, environments and landscapes, and that would mark the French school of geography until the 1940s. His region is a homogeneous whole defined by the singular interaction between a natural environment and the action of a social group. He later integrated other elements into his thinking: the role of cities (he already spoke of “nodal regions”), the exchange of goods and circulation in general. This prefigured the idea of

functional regions and led him to reduce the importance of the principle of homogeneity when defining regional boundaries.

Vidal de la Blache contributed to the necessity of a monographic approach, but at the same time, following in the footsteps of F. Ratzel in Germany, posed some important questions about the regional fact at all scales. Are the combinations described unique or recurrent? Can we identify major types of regions from the examples described? What relationships are established between the identified regions? What role does regional differentiation play in the construction of the state? Not all the promises of Vidal de la Blache's work were fulfilled. Often written by his students, the great regional theses of the interwar period have some weaknesses. They were oriented towards the agricultural world, neglecting urbanization and industrialization; they forgot the new countries and the developing world; they favored small- or medium-sized territories, whereas long-distance exchanges existed and were increasing; the French regional approach remained at the intrastate level (see Vidal de la Blache (1903)), in a context that was nonetheless marked by internationalization.

Continents, regions and divisions of world space at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: Universal Geographies

Universal geographies (*Géographies Universelles*) reflected the orientations of French regional geography at that time. The criteria for regionalization were never explicit, but they were obviously influenced by the continental divisions inherited from the tradition since at least the Renaissance and taken at face value (Grataloup 2009). The divisions could have also been influenced by editorial contingencies, such as the desire to publish volumes of equivalent size. Between the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, the most famous universal geographies were those of Conrad Malte-Brun (*Précis de géographie universelle*, then *Géographie universelle ancienne et moderne, mathématique, physique, statistique, politique et historique des cinq parties du monde*), Elisée Reclus (*Nouvelle géographie universelle : la terre des hommes*), Paul Vidal de la Blache and Lucien Gallois (*Géographie universelle*).

In his *Précis de géographie universel*, published between 1810 and 1829, Malte-Brun exposes an encyclopedic knowledge and his taste for a geography of discovery, a descriptive geography that does not propose any method of regionalization. He combines a continental division of the world with sub-continental regional divisions and a description of states and certain sub-state geographical entities (cantons, cities, provinces, etc.), without justifying his choices. In the *Nouvelle géographie universelle*, published in 1876 and 1894, Reclus does not

propose a regionalization method of the world either, even though he questions what we would today call discontinuities, for example, within the Eurasian group (Bruneau 2018). His divisions were made a priori and its volumes were distributed by continental masses. Europe and Asia each have four volumes, Africa has five and Oceania has one. In each volume, he describes nested geographical entities: pieces of continents, states, pieces of states, river basins, etc. For example, Russia is divided between a European volume and a volume devoted to “Russian Asia”, which surprises today’s reader. The Mediterranean disappears as a region, split between “Southern Europe”, “Northern Africa” and “Anterior Asia”. It is not surprising that Reclus began his description of the limits of Europe by referring to an antiquity that is more than 2000 years old: “From their first expeditions of war or trade, the inhabitants of the eastern shores of the Mediterranean had to learn to distinguish the three continents that meet there” (*Nouvelle géographie universelle*, Volume 1, *L’Europe méridionale*, p. 9, author’s translation). In the *Géographie universelle* by Vidal de la Blache and Gallois, the continental division of the world also prevails. The authors describe geographical entities of all sizes, according to a sequence whose meaning is not obvious. Olivier Orain recalls, for example, that the tome written by Raoul Blanchard on Western Asia “is divided into seven regional chapters, which draw an itinerary in the form of a spiral (Caucasia, separately; then Asia Minor, Armenia [in the broad sense], Iran, Arabia, Syria, and finally Mesopotamia)” (Orain 2000, author’s translation). Each chapter is divided into sub-regions. Frequently, these sub-regions are in turn subdivided, either thematically, regionally or in a hybrid manner. At the end of the 20th century, *Géographie universelle*, edited by Roger Brunet and Olivier Dollfus, paid more attention to globalization. But the distribution of volumes remains influenced by the classical continental division of the world.

1.3. 20th century: an early but timid emergence of the world

1.3.1. *The world as a chessboard*

Although French geographers were marked by the Vidalian tradition in the first half of the 20th century, some were already paying attention to the effects of the internationalization of exchanges regarding the organization of space. Even before World War II, they observed the improvement of means of communication and the extension of colonial empires. As Jean-Baptiste Arrault showed, they concluded that the world had already existed in the 19th century, that it was a scale of geography and an object whose regional organization had to be understood. Although this research remained secondary in the production of French geographers at that time, it gave rise to regular publications that were sometimes strikingly clear-sighted.

René Crozet, Albert Demangeon, André Siegfried and Maurice Zimmermann were interested in the opening of the great international canals (Panama and Suez). They wanted to show that it divided the world economy into new economic areas (Arrault 2007). The opening of the Suez strengthened the interaction between the center (industrialized Europe) and a vast periphery (the Orient, India and Australia). The canal was perceived as a European route (Vergez-Tricom 1920) and Panama as a route that reinforced what we would today call American regional integration (Zimmermann 1916). In an approach that could be described as geo-economic, Siegfried saw the “respective zones of Suez and Panama” as a competition between the main economic powers of the inter-war period (Japan and the United States), at the expense of Europe (Siegfried 1940).

Politically, the world was perceived as a chessboard: the emerging geopolitics now influenced geography. Outside of France, Mahan (1890), Ratzel (1903) and Mackinder (1904) questioned the factors of power: the balance of power was between land and sea powers. Mackinder (2004) proposed a formal regionalization of the world, which would become a milestone. Intended for policy makers, their work mixed scientific posture, ideological bias and political prescriptions. This is a thread that authors such as Haushofer (1931) and Schmitt (2003 [originally published in 1950]) then followed, with an even more ideological content. These approaches were denounced by French geographers who, in a form of critical geopolitics before its time, saw in German *Geopolitik* a propagandistic discourse at the antipodes of science (Demangeon 1932a; Ancel 1936a). As a counterpoint, they proposed their geopolitics of areas of influence. Thus, Vidal de la Blache described the clash of Russian and British imperialism in central Asia (Vidal de la Blache 1889) and Zimmermann the ambitions of Japan “in the East of Asia on a vast portion of the world chessboard” (Zimmermann 1908, author’s translation).

1.3.2. The inter-war period: decline of Europe, the European region, Triad

In *Le déclin de l’Europe*, Demangeon distinguishes what would later be called the Triad: “the division is between Europe, North America and the Japanese Archipelago [...] There are now several centers of high humanity instead of one. Since the great discoveries, the world had become Europeanized; under the influence of continents and peoples younger in progress, it tends to become regionalized” (Demangeon 1920a, author’s translation). Even before World War I, Vidal de la Blache described (in his *Principes de géographie humaine*) what we now call the world system, structured by these three poles and their exchanges.

The Pacific became a region of the world for geographers who were interested in the intensification of relations between its shores, the rise in power of the United States and Japanese migratory pressure (Arrault 2007). For Zimmermann (1897, 1899), the Pacific was the space where we had to gain a foothold if we hoped to count in international competition; the “Pacific question” was linked to the increase in links between its shores. In his course at the Collège de France, Brunhes was interested in the Pacific, which he saw as a space as such. Finally, Demangeon (1920b) spoke of the advent of the Pacific, which “tends to become a great economic unit”.

French geographers became aware of the need for Europe to unite in order to resist this new global competition. A European regional problem was born. Demangeon (1913) said that Western Europe was a “commercial city” in the face of America. So, the union of Europe was envisaged in academic debates. With an impressive foresight, Demangeon (1929) believed that the European idea offered a perspective for dealing with the economic crisis by specializing “in quality production” and developing international agreements through industrial cartels. Like Jacques Ancel, he criticized the political fragmentation of Europe as a major cause of economic problems and promoted “regional agreements”. Echoing these works, Siegfried (1929) gave a history of European sentiment, which had grown stronger since the war. He also considered the possible rapprochement of European states “as a prospect of salvation for a group of powers that are experiencing decline” (Siegfried 1935). For all these geographers, although it was no longer the master, Europe was then represented as a region of the world; it was therefore necessary to think about it and organize it. In the eyes of Vidal de la Blache and Siegfried, it was a civilization that, before being a continent, shared values: humanism, individualism, invention and freedom of the mind. This revived the classical discussion on its geographical boundaries and inaugurated a vein that structured the debates of the 20th century on a cultural definition of the regions. Demangeon hesitated: he excluded Russia from the political point of view (with the Bolshevik regime being incompatible with democracy), but considered that its presence in Europe was necessary for the economic balance of the continent. For Ancel, on the other hand, the physical and human geography of Russia distanced it from Europe (Demangeon 1932b; Ancel 1936b; Arrault 2007).

1.3.3. After World War II: global regions at last?

After World War II, regional geography went beyond the first Vidalian tradition, i.e. the relations considered too simple between human groups and environments,

the rural tropism, and especially the monographic approach. From the 1960s onwards, regional monographs took a back seat. The notion of spatial organization became central; it encompassed what was happening within the region *and* the relations with other regions. Some geographers refer to this as the “system region” (Dumolard 1975). In the wake of Walter Christaller’s economic theories and the theoretical contributions of economists such as François Perroux, the region was considered less in its homogeneity and more through the idea of functional integration. Regionalization then consisted of observing the spatial limits of economic channels and identifying nodes (cities) that dominated surfaces. We find this idea in Juillard (1962). The young regional science seeks laws of geographic space and studies the forces that organize it according to repeating patterns (Isard 1975). To understand regions, it is necessary to analyze networks, economies of scale, inter-scale relationships, production relationships and center–periphery relationships. This is what Marxist-inspired radical geography does. Moreover, spatially sensitive economists, such as Lipietz (1977), push geographers to seek principles of spatial division of labor valid at the intra-national level, as well as the international level.

From the end of World War II to the 1980s, however, regional francophone geographies of the world remained scattered. They were the work of a few prominent authors who developed different approaches, without creating a school of thought, with the publication of numerous works or articles devoted to this or that country (geography of Japan, France, Brazil, etc.) or to this or that part of the world¹. Despite the path opened up by Fernand Braudel’s Mediterranean, reflection on regionalism and regional integration on a macroscale remained marginal in France, both among geographers (including Dollfus, who was nevertheless receptive to Braudel’s work) and historians. Braudel’s intuitions were instead extended by economists and sociologists (Wallerstein, Arrighi and Amin). According to Grataloup (2018), this discretion is understandable if we place it in the intellectual context of post-modernity, which was not very favorable to the historical study of large regional areas. Talking about the East, Chinese, African, Amerindian and Oceanian worlds was difficult in the face of the rise of postcolonial criticism, the deconstruction of western subjectivity and the representations associated with it. The global scale was taking over the macro-regional scale; with the rise of global history, little attention was paid to regional divisions.

1. Braudel’s “civilizational areas” are related to what may be called a multi-monographic approach, in which the deep invariants of a region prevail over its external interactions. The idea of civilizational area – reappropriated and reinterpreted – is found in Pierre Gourou’s work, who explores the Braudelian idea of the civilization of rice.

This is why works on large regional groups remained rare among geographers. Claval (1968), however, is an exception. He took up the idea of international trade organized around three major poles. But his analysis of “large territorial groupings” was mainly economic and left aside the work of political scientists specializing in international relations who were working on theories of regional integration at the time (Haas in particular). We should also mention the geographers specializing in the Soviet Union, who necessarily took a macro-regional perspective given the size of the area they studied: a space of more than 22 million square kilometers, made up of 15 republics (George 1962; Blanc and Chambre 1971; Maurel 1982; Radvanyi 1982; Carrière 1984). They showed how planning allowed the establishment of social, economic and political links between these republics, which made the Soviet Union function as an integrated whole for several decades. However, the Soviet case remained ambiguous: should we consider that the USSR was a state, or a group of neighboring states engaged in regional integration?

1.3.4. *The 1980s: the world as a system*

Systemic approaches to the world revived francophone geography from the 1980s onwards. In his research on spatial justice, Reynaud (1981) was influenced by the work of Amin (1973) on dependence, and analyzed the center–periphery model at all scales. This led him to propose a regionalization of the world based on the relations between centers and peripheries, following the example of Immanuel Wallerstein who observed the dynamics of capitalism in the world system.

In his work on globalization, Dollfus (1984) further developed the idea of the “world system”. The world is no longer just a framework, it is a geographical object per se, a system of interlocking and connected socio-economic systems, a kind of large multipolarized region. In the 1990s, he even proposed a regionalization of the world, but emphasized other entities in this regionalization, such as cities and what he called the “global megalopolitan archipelago” (Dollfus 1994). In his work, he showed above all that a few major state powers and a few hundred global economic and financial groups dominated and organized the world system, with “driving spaces”, “polarized spaces” and “spaces in the process of destructuring”.

1.4. The turn of the 20th/21st century: relations between geographers and other disciplines are almost one way

Three changes mark the francophone regional geography at the turn of the two centuries.

1.4.1. Economics reformulates the regional equation

Geographers first take into account the rapid pace of globalization and the intensification of the technological content of production. These aspects become decisive in regional analysis, because the acceleration of the mobility revolution, particularly that of information, make physical criteria less relevant for dividing up regions. This leads them to increasingly take into account the work of economists on regional integration. Based on the theory of optimal currency zones (Robert Mundell) and the stages of economic regionalism (Bela Balassa), they broaden their work on regional integration by comparing intraregional dynamics with the growth of liberalized trade on a global scale. The pioneering analyses of the economists of the 1960s and 1970s on European integration are continued by a systematic reading of regional economic integration in the world based on three indicators:

– The convergence or divergence of national economies belonging to the same regional grouping: on this theme, economists propose analyses that geographers would not disavow (Hugon 2003; Deblock and Regnault 2006). With the new economic geography, they launch a challenge that stimulates the latter (Krugman 2000).

– The geography of flows, in order to see whether exchanges are increasingly, or less and less, intraregional (Chaponnière 2004).

– The nominal objectives of regional trade agreements, where a region is considered to be in the process of economic integration if its specific objectives are translated into reality (Baldwin 1997). By distinguishing between superficial regional integration (simple free trade objectives) and deep integration (regionalization of value chains and shared standard objectives), economists provide essential concepts useful for understanding regions.

1.4.2. Trendy regionalism and multidisciplinary necessity

The second change in the landscape comes from international law and political scientists who have been studying the trend, since the mid-1990s, for regional intergovernmental agreements, including Regional Trade Agreements (Dieter 2006; De Lombaerde et al. 2010), or post-Soviet agreements that aim to maintain Russia's area of influence over its peripheries by building new regional organizations (Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization). French-speaking geographers become accustomed to drawing on economic and political approaches, whether to understand regional integration or disintegration, or to compare the institutional regions drawn by the RTAs with the functional realities of the territories. This has led to a renewal of the

analysis of world regions (Mareš and Richard 2018) conducted by geographers, often in multidisciplinary teams (Gemdev 1994; Azuelos et al. 2004; Taillard 2004; Radvanyi and Laruelle 2016).

In this inevitable interdisciplinarity, the contribution of geographers is multiform. We can mention five fields.

They analyze functional territories and, in particular, the constitution of international networks whose cross-border actors are migrants or informal traders rather than the firms and states that dominate economic or political analyses. In this field, geographers mobilize the work of sociologists working on informal networks (Tarrus 2002), co-creating with them an approach to regionalization “from below” (Vignal 2020).

They measure the regionalization of flows: to do so, they use various indicators (trade, investment, migration and mobility, tourism, ship movements, etc.) to map flows and networks (Grasland and Didelon 2006; Zdanowska 2020) and measure spatial interactions.

They describe *concrete* territories, in particular because they are used to dealing with interactions between all scales. In doing so, they make a useful contribution to the paradigm that has become established in the spatial reading of the international economy, that of an archipelago economy (Veltz 1996). They give importance to the proximity of kilometers (Dollfus 1994) in the face of economists and political scientists who often tend to reduce the actors to planetary-scale strategists. The approach of geographers is not necessarily statocentric; their analyses are not built on national bricks alone. They remind us of the importance of the long term, which establishes tribal solidarities here or commercial solidarities there, and which organizes international urban networks that cross historical periods. They recall the particular reasons why a given regional territory does not really verify the general economic laws of regional integration, or follow the guidelines and perimeter of an intergovernmental treaty as we would expect, which leads them to question the links between regionalism and regional integration (Van Hamme 2014). They compare representations and discourses (Beauguitte et al. 2012) with the realities on the ground. They analyze the territorial consequences of regionalism: concrete effects of the European Union’s regional policy and cohesion policy (decrease or increase in territorial inequalities, realities of multi-level governance, etc.), the Infrastructure Integration Initiative of the South American region, corridors in ASEAN or in African regional organizations (Elissalde and Santamaria 2008; Baudelle and Jean 2009; Boulineau 2017; Santamaria 2017).

In particular, they analyze the functioning of borders, whose permeabilization is the basis of international regions. One of their contributions has been to show the change in the status of the *neighbor*: they used to be the hereditary rival for access to passageways and essential resources such as people, minerals, arable land or water. In the era of the knowledge economy, where the vast majority of resources are produced and no longer taken, the neighbor becomes the privileged partner for the co-production of resources and the cooperative expansion of market areas (Drevet 2008; Beckouche 2008; Beckouche et al. 2016). Their contribution is notable in the observation of border regions that become places of more or less in-depth cooperation, because regional integration consists precisely of reducing the barrier effects of political limits as much as possible. From this point of view, European cross-border and transnational cooperation is the focus of most research (Hamez 2001; Reitel and Wassenberg 2020), but French geographers are working on other parts of the world, notably Latin America (Medina 2009; Medina and Diallo 2020).

Finally, they take into account the environmental dimension of regionalization. Natural environments, which had somewhat disappeared from the geography of the *Trente Glorieuses*², made a strong comeback at the beginning of the 21st century. Through the notion of transnational public goods, environmental issues are even becoming essential objects of regional geography: common regional regulation against marine pollution, transboundary management of water resources and “hydrodiplomacy”, coordinated management of natural disasters and crises, coordination in the field of nuclear safety or energy transition. But it is essentially as a *result* of the powerful anthropic marking of territories that the environment is becoming an issue of regional geography, instead of the role of the territorial determinant that the founders of the regional division had once given to natural environments. This avoids the excessive naturalization of regional groupings that led to their a priori definition (on the critical approach to regional divisions, see Grataloup (2011), Capdepuy (2012) and Didelon Loiseau (2013)), and better illustrates the consensus that sees every region as a social construction.

1.4.3. Contributions and aporias of the civilizational paradigm

The third change has come from sociologists and political scientists working on the notions of “civilization” and culture. In particular, today’s regional geographers can hardly ignore the “cultural” paradigm propelled to the top of the agenda by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s. Despite the growing importance of the cultural theme in the contemporary regional equation, their joint work with anthropologists and sociologists, and their contribution to a better understanding of tribal realities

2. Thirty years following the end of World War II in France.

(Balanche 2012) in regions that westerners tended to analyze through their own cultural lenses too much, it is not clear that geographers have, on the whole, provided a consistently convincing response to the powerful reductionism of culture to religion, and of religion to simplism that has made Huntington's followers so successful. Critical studies of the civilizational division of the world by geographers remain rare (Didelon Loiseau and Richard 2020).

Three final points conclude this quick overview of the recent francophone regional geography. These works are, on the whole, not sufficiently known by other disciplines. Perhaps, the influence of monographic approaches is still too great. And, although most of these works use convergent approaches, it must be recognized that the methodological coordination of geographers is still perfectible if the rise in generality of the new regional geographies is to become readable by the other disciplines. Finally, there is still no consensus on the meaning of words, which makes comparisons difficult (Richard 2014; Mareš and Richard 2020). Nevertheless, the contribution of geographers is notable. This book, we hope, is a testament to that.

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