

Chapter 2

Antecedents: French Geography in Brazil

Abstract This chapter focuses on French geography starting from its tendencies and approaches. It identifies the diffusion of its lines of research through the world and mainly in Brazil, which permits comparative analyses to be established and the identification of differences in the political and cultural contexts of France and Brazil, in the attempt to clarify some approaches regarded as ambiguous. French geography sought to create centers of formation and research, based on the work of a few geographers, the preferential option being Lablachean geography, and using its institutionalization to its own advantage. These centers, at the same time that they were able to create the image of the world in France and of France in the world, became bibliographical references with an enormous capacity for publication and cultural diffusion, often being concerned with explaining a world which was quickly being transformed.

Keywords Tendencies • Human geography • Geographical conception • Cultural diffusion

French geography has always demonstrated much vigor. However, its affirmation stems from the international recognition of the theses formulated by Vidal de La Blache (1845/1918). The most famous French geographer of all times was professor of the Normal Superior School of Paris from 1878 onwards. From this moment, he significantly increased the reach of his action when he occupied the chair of geography at the University of Sorbonne influencing a large number of disciples in France and overseas, especially in the United States of America. La Blache is considered the founder of the French school of geography. It is important to emphasize his main book, *Tableau de Géographie de la France*, which became compulsory reading among French intellectuals in his time. He was also responsible for founding the *Annales de Géographie* journal.

Historically, it can be said that French geography established itself with La Blache being widely applied during the colonial action exercised by France for many years. About this term, Manoel Correia de Andrade with a deep knowledge of French geography affirmed:

At the start of the twentieth century, France had the second largest empire on the surface of the Earth, which naturally required confusing colonial policies with the humanistic interests of taking civilization to uncultured people who were capable of being educated and absorbed by western civilization, rather than preaching a policy of extermination or conquering these so-called inferior people. (Andrade)¹

Tropical geography, subsequently developed by French geographers, partly replaced the country's action in that field of science, after the process of decolonialization. The dismantling of the colonial empire did not impede the presence of French geographers alongside the new states being formed in Africa, Asia, and Central America. The main proponent of Colonial geography was Pierre Gourou, of the College de France and the University of Brussels, author of the book *Les pays tropicaux* edited by the PUF in 1947. Another prominent name in Tropical geography is Guy Lasserre, who said the following in an interview given to the author in January 1993:

I am fundamentally a tropical geographer and I created the Center for Studies in Tropical geography (CEGET) in Bordeaux under the auspices of the CNRS.

It could be said that Third World geography is a mixture of colonial geography with tropical geography. However, in fact Third World geography ends up rejecting both colonial and tropical geography which was the cause of the main disagreements of that time and which led to the end of Ceget in Bordeaux. The concrete fact is that today's reality is a globalized world where the market dictates the rules. In this context, French geography adjusted itself to this new global configuration, radiating its influences, trying to adapt to this new reality. In turn, Brazilian geography became known almost eminently for following the French line.

Brazilian geography insists in its self-affirmation. In its attempts to build its own identity in this scientific field, Brazilian geography has faced various types of problems: the excessive number of professional training courses designed for teaching and technical qualifications, issues linked to the definition of the competencies of professors and technical staff, and the weakness of this training regarding the reduced number of professionals involved in the debate to define the paths for geographical science. The discussion about geography as a school discipline, scientific knowledge, and a set of technical-operational instruments has lasted some years. It is possible to list other questions linked to scientific production, dissemination, types of formulations, the role of geography as a science in the national context, corporative struggles in the effort to add value to this field of knowledge, etc.

The concrete fact is that in seeking to understand its origins, its paths or detours, Brazilian geography faced collisions connected to *scientific-cultural loans* or *cultural diffusion* that had been officially installed in the country from 1934 with the creation of the geography course at USP. The contribution of the schools was rarely discussed. It is known that Brazilian geography experienced other influences, such

¹Andrade (1982, p. 184).

as the American and German schools. Geographers of various nationalities and other researchers with work of a geographical nature chose Brazil as the subject of their questions, theoretical formulations, searches, and explanations. Today, the influence exercised by Spanish and Portuguese geographers is strong, a consequence of various partnerships and agreements established between Brazil and these two countries.

It has become common to assert that Brazilian geography is the fruit of French geography. However, the extent of those links is unclear, which is why this study verifies how these relationships were set up.

Brazilian geography should check the designs that defined themselves in the country, as to the centers that established greater or lesser contact with French geography. At the same time, it is necessary to identify the French geographers who choose Brazil as a field of work and research and use the information to verify the level at which these relationships were sustained.

In the recorded cases of Brazilians who were invited to France through technical cooperation programs to take up teaching or research posts, it is implicit that this relationship was not a situation where theoretical–methodological formulations were only transferred from French geography. On the contrary, if this fact is recorded with a certain frequency, it may reveal that Brazil has or would have the capacity to establish what might be called a Brazilian school of geography.

The strong presence of French geography in Brazil is considered by some theorists as one of the obstacles preventing this branch of science from having a different outcome in view of the fact that French geography is regarded as traditional in its general approach. However, it should be taken into account that over time French geography has been able to advance in developing new concepts and applications. Regardless of these advances, there are indications that in the Brazilian case there was the dominance of certain groups crystallized in France, so that some innovative geographical authors were belatedly acknowledged or remain in relative anonymity in the country. In contrast, there were cases that revealed a certain exclusivity or even control in certain branches of human geography, which ended up being interpreted as synonymous of the field. The presence of French geography in Brazil has not always followed a smooth course. There are records of cases of rifts, when certain sectors of the production and dissemination of Brazilian geography, broke with the French school searching for new reference points. The best known case is the IBGE, Brazilian geography's official body, which in the 1970s decided to be guided by theoretical geography, with a quantitative base, of Anglo-Saxon origin.

The effervescence of the 1980s suffered a certain breakdown in the transition to the new decade, with new facts that redrew the world and significantly altered its appearance, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dismantling of the USSR, the emergence of the post-communist bloc of countries, the intensification of nationalist struggles, and the configuration of new power blocs etc....

The study of French geography, its schools and trends, the dissemination of its research around the world and mainly in Brazil allows, especially, the establishment of comparative analyses. It allows an understanding of French and Brazilian

approaches to issues related to the urbanization process, metropolization, the formation of peripheries, social movements, citizenship, everyday life, the imaginary, representation, networks, flows, space, and territory etc. It also allows the exploration of the differences in the political and cultural contexts of France and Brazil in an attempt to clarify some approaches perceived as ambiguous. The bibliographical review and other ongoing research offer the opportunity of a partial perception of the state of the art in geography and especially French human geography. This opportunity has led to some questioning of French geography, with respect to its principles and essentials and its relations with Brazil.

The drafting of the text as a whole evokes a distinct picture from that lived by French geography in the previous century, when it would create theories and models which would be immediately incorporated and applied in countries which were under the rule of French hegemony. The contextual difference lies in observations and questions about the international scope of French geography in present times. The advent of the Internet with its online dissemination of information regarding the new rules imposed by science concerning the conception, the elaboration, and the publication of research outcomes in indexed, internationally recognized periodicals. These changes have shaken the international prestige of many national and even regional schools, demanding the incorporation of new procedures in line with those great centers recognized for spreading innovations. At the same time, the editorial market has to adjust to the requirements of this new period. Virtual bookstores encourage the divulgation and distribution of scientific production. It is in this context that the question is raised concerning whether French geography has been able to follow these changes and if it has maintained the same weight and strength as in previous periods. Geography and geographers who previously occupied a prominent position in those forms regarded as conventional are going through a period of "ostracism" when compared to the new professionals. By this we mean those who edit e-books, do teleconferences, have Internet profiles and circulate the results of their research rapidly. It is evident that geography is not as expressive as it once was. There are several prestigious geographers; however, this prestige does not appear to give prominence to geography, to place it to the fore. On the contrary, the geographers with more prestige are often confused with professionals from other areas of knowledge; thus, there is no resonance capable of giving value and prestige to geography. Of those professionals who are achieving a certain prestige, respectability, and renown, few are known in Brazil. One example is Marcel Roncayolo, the Director of Studies of the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences, who is the author of various books and articles in the area of urban geography and Urbanism that are widely disseminated in technical and scientific environments in France. Augustine Berque is also in this group, he is recognized for several works on Japan; he is also a Director of Studies of the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences. There are some others who could be mentioned, but certainly these two examples are sufficient to support our argument. It is worth emphasizing that these geographers almost all work in institutions with a multi-disciplinary approach.

Geography has achieved great prestige in the French academic and scientific environment and constitutes a major branch of its foreign policy. This prestige endures, it is unknown if this is founded on the quality of their current formulations or is the legacy of what their geography once represented. Based on this, a myth has been constructed around its quality, dynamism, and application.

In its history, French geography has had years of glory; it based itself on the work of a few geographers and for a while opted for Lablachean geography and through its institutionalization created centers for training and research. At the same time that these centers served to create the image of the World in France and the image of France in the World, they formed a bibliography with an enormous capacity for cultural dissemination and diffusion, which at times focused on explaining a world under transformation.

From descriptions of Colonial geography to the interpretation of France from its regions that became its biggest interpretation, French geography turned to new themes, although these were sometimes treated with old methodologies. Africa was one of the preferential spaces of French geography. Themes like the Third World, Underdevelopment, the Tropical World, and the *aménagement* of territory entered the scene, supporting some geographers and guaranteeing prestige and privileges to geographical science.

Reference

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Silva, J.B.d.

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