
ARTICLES

THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHY AND THE CHALLENGE OF STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

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I. INTRODUCTION

The experience of the IGU Commission on the History of Geographical Thought can be used as a starting point for discussing the challenge that strategic foresight is placing upon the history of geography. Several times, especially when its renewal was examined by the IGU, the Commission was asked to take a proactive view on the themes which were expected to be studied by the international community of geographers. This task was undertaken by the Commission through an examination of antecedent and pioneering ideas on current issues, such as processes of homogenization and fragmentation of the globe or the interplay of folk, scientific and professional geographical knowledges. However, especially in light of the issue of sustainable development, and of the contribution of geography to its advancement, the Commission realized that it could not just limit itself to a retrospective view upon contemporary statements.

This article aims at showing that the history of geography is not only a matter of retrospective examination, but it also concerns strategic foresight. The point of the article is also to show that such a prospective view is intimately tied to an approach which gives importance to the individual subject considered as potentially autonomous, creative and reflexive.

II. FORESIGHT AT THE HEART OF THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHY

Academic disciplines cannot be distinguished by clearcut boundaries which would separated three fields of inquiry: the past, the present and the future. Historical, social and planning sciences share many approaches and deal with these three fields. Consequently, geography, with evidently its own epistemological return upon its past, is not concerned by time constraints. It is largely accepted that geographical research may put emphasis on the past, and it is clear that the understanding of present-day phenomena is gaining strength from such an approach. However, the question is to know if geography should limit itself to a mere retrospective approach.

The dominant view tends to favor this option. It can be explained, at least partially, by the influence of the often-hegemonic positivistic discourse on geographic thought. According to positivism, there is a logical homology between explanation and prediction, because they both depend upon a universal law (Berdoulay V., 1988). Thus, the future would just be a predetermined extension of the present, however difficult an adequate foresight may be because of our very incomplete knowledge of laws. Clearly, in this view, knowing about the past is not an important issue for developing foresight, and there is as well no room for contingent, unpredictable events nor for the emergence of new phenomena.

However strong was the reliance of rational planning in the post second world war era on positivistic thought, there existed also a softer approach to foresight. The idea was to rely also on reflection and imagination as they can be fed by a close, detailed look at little visible innovations in the past (Berger G., 2007; Jouvenel B., 1964). Later, this attitude became more accepted because rational planning gave way to more collaborative approaches, whereby the autonomous and reflective part of the individual subject is gaining some recognition (Forester J., 1999; Berdoulay V. and Soubeyran O., 1993; Berdoulay V., 2003). This is particularly clear about the issue of sustainable development and its geographical underpinnings (Berdoulay V. and Soubeyran O., 2000).

III. FORESIGHT AND POSSIBILISM

The history of geography brings perspective on the issue of what are the possible futures. In many respects, the possibilist framework which had been initiated by Vidal de la Blache is still interesting and quite pertinent.

Possibilism considered that action should be grounded on an accurate and detailed knowledge of the latent possibilities in the *milieu*. Furthermore, any *milieu* is characterized by its complex, unstable and fragile nature, that is, by its non-determined, uncertain future. The geographer may thus work at identifying what are the possibilities which the population had selected in the past, and what are the still latent possibilities which one could tap for the future.

Generally speaking, most historical periods of great social and political instability are periods when foresight is most solicited from geography. A classical evidence of this is provided by the success of Hippocratic reasoning during the religious wars at the time of the European Renaissance (Robinson B., 1977; Glacken C., 1967).

As the theorizer of the possibilist approach in geography, Vidal de la Blache provided prospective thinking with a framework which was largely used by himself as well as by other scientists and by professional planners. Far from being a geographer who would have been nostalgic of a rural, traditional France, Vidal was clearly modern in his life and in his work (Berdoulay V., 2008). Deeply worried about the future of his country in the very uncertain context of the time, Vidal tried to identify in the *milieu* what were the *permanences*, the long lasting tendencies which help or constrain the becoming of the inhabitants. This approach helped Vidal in identifying where, and what, were the opportunities for eliciting innovative actions.

It is interesting to see how this possibilist framework was explicitly picked up by some of the founders of professional urban planning in France (Berdoulay V. and Soubeyran O., 2002). The issues they raised are still valid.

IV. NARRATIVE, IMAGINATION, IMAGE

Foresight is not symmetrical to a retrospective approach. Whereas the latter seeks for antecedent causes of present day phenomena, the former elicits actions in light of certain possibilities which are taken as open. Then, foresight consists in enunciating a possible narrative of places toward which our actions are orientated. This is why the individual subject is intimately associated to foresight and to the correlative construction of places (Berdoulay V., 2002).

In this effort whereby the subject tries to redefine his or her relationship to time and space, imagination plays an important role. It has to be creative, because what is possible is not – or should not necessarily be – what is probable. In this process, imagination draws a lot on the use, transformation, diffusion and production of images. All these processes contribute to iconographies of territories and landscapes, as it was termed and underlined by Jean Gottmann for explaining how a socio-political group takes conscience of itself and how it claims recognition from others (Gottmann J., 1952).

In sum, the role of the individual subject and his use of images and imagination are combined within a foresight-oriented narrative, which constructs the geography of the future.

V. MEMORY, LANDSCAPE, HERITAGE

The notions of memory, landscape and heritage make it easier to specify the contribution of the history of geography to the constitution of prospective thinking. Again, the perspective of the subject is fundamental, because he or she is involved in the process of self-construction through the consciously selective use of memory (Ricœur P., 2000). As this process depends upon the contexts and places where it occurs, memory and heritage should not be taken as fixed, static elements, contrarily to what is often done (Nora P., 1984-92).

A new combination of forms and meanings results in the «refoundation» of territories (Despin L., 2003; Ortega Cantero N., 2005). It results from the construction of a new narrative of spatial identity. The narrative of what the future could be thus draws heavily on what exists now. This is why the idea of landscape is important. As a palimpsest, it is a depository of ancient iconographies and it provides opportunities for reading differently what is at hand (Sauer C., 1963).

For political, ideological or commercial reasons, the identification and valorization of what is considered as heritage can be the object of a «narrative reduction» or of mere manipulation (Berdoulay V. and Paes M.T., 2008). One way of tackling this problem is epistemological. If it is clear that history as a science and history as memory are completely different, there is no reason for opposing the lived past to scientific truth. This is because places of memory (which will structure territories of foresight) do exist as far as they are experienced.

Far from a positivistic approach which would completely separate human subjectivity and scientific objectivity, the history of geography does not encourage to give a superior value to a reality which would be opposed to representations of it.

VI. CONCLUSION

The history of geography can bring much more to foresight than its retrospective tradition let it believe. Through the study of the experience of elaborating foresight, the history of geography shows how the individual subject proceeds.

Facing uncertainty, foresight implies a reflection on what is possible. The interplay of geography and planning around the possibilist approach is a good case in point.

Because of its narrative dimension, and through the notions of images, memory, landscape and heritage, the history of geography can be helpful for revisiting foresight as a fundamental human activity.

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