# Preface

Like any living science, geography has changed considerably. Fortunate enough to be both a witness and to participate in these transformations, I have observed that it has not been a linear evolution but rather has advanced in stages. Certain people believe that the evolution was advanced by a succession of negations: it is easier for them to forget a moment rather than integrate its most reliable assets. Even if science is not shielded from trends, it progresses more by successive assimilations, by accretion, rather than by negative events and omissions that would only set it back; this is its strength over time and its sustainability, contrary to popular opinion.

**From nature to man**

A key moment was the period between the 1960s and 1970s, when geography, while evolving towards the social sciences, took on a more scientific aspect. This could seem like a paradox, but is not. For a long time, geography was dominated by the practice of natural sciences. It studied the Earth as a planet, primarily in its physical aspects, limiting itself to the Earth's epidermis, as said then, the ground over which humanity spread, its natural habitat, rather than humanity itself was the focus of attention. It was said to study "the relationships of man and of nature", which was partly true of previous eras.

Towards 1950, this was no longer even very accurate: geography was focused on nature, and even on a single aspect of nature, the landforms. It had learnt to be somewhat thorough, but without sufficient scientific grounds. The training of geographers remained literary, in the old tradition of tales of journeys and exploration. Its forays into human societies were characterized by this: even though it was interested in certain groups, it was especially interested in the "natives", the exotic peoples that were called "primitive" at the time. In this respect, contemporary geography in the media, as found in *Geo* or *National Geographic* has not

significantly changed: preferring the picturesque, it always favors "nature" and the latent curiosity towards the most marginal groups of humans in our globalized world.

In the mean time, nonetheless, physical geography had thankfully developed, and better concerned itself with the living aspects of nature, especially plants and soils, as well as with the atmospheric and oceanic circulations. It has needed to get closer to natural science and even physics specialists and their methods. It has discovered that by concerning itself with accidents it could integrate the notion of *risk*, which at the same time was to adopt the point of view of human societies. More thorough than human geography before the 1960s, physical geography has kept on its scientific course, all the while becoming more and more interested in human societies and integrating the environmental dimension precisely: it became an ecology.

Until the 1960s, approximately, human and regional geography was primarily descriptive and monographic. It could use numbers in abundance, but forgot to draw conclusions from these. When it tried to generalize, at best, it was by describing certain well-defined *ideal types*, based on appearances. The worst case scenario was that it would lose itself in dangerous political doctrines, which attempted to justify imperialist and aggressive attitudes. It was on the name of "nature" that it depended totally and to which it submitted all its ideas: the doctrines of vital space (*Lebensraum*), of natural borders (*Naturgrenze*), justifications for the colonization of "primitive" countries, the *Geopolitik* of the German generals as well as Pinochet, and "the land that does not lie", which embodied the "true" peasant values – Blut und Boden in German.

**Is there a new geography?**

The end of Nazism meant that these wanderings were more or less forgotten. New generations of geographers were looking for something else, and to better understand the world, its divisions and its potential. Several openings arose: the thoughts of cybernetics (N. Wiener and L. von Bertalanffy) and system theories resulting from "hard" science; the work of philosophers and sociologists or anthropologists, such as C. Levi-Strauss, the active discussions of Marxist hypotheses; the development of models and means of calculation by economists. The research environment had changed, while at the same time provoking a true variety of approaches and attitudes.

Then we began to discuss models and theory in human geography, particularly in urban studies. The trend has been more swift and more technical with English-speaking geographers: the publications of T. Hägerstrand, B. Berry and P. Haggett

have had an impact, as well as the theoretical ideas of G. Olsson, W. Bunge and P. Gould. The trend has been slower in France and in the more "literary" countries that have Latin origins, as well as in Russia where the "dominance of nature" has mobilized geographers, and where the social sciences were repressed. At least people could start thinking of systems, models, theories and practice at the same time. It seemed like a "new geography"; it was, at least, a real change.

The trend became more generalized, and inevitably there were contradictions. It had its own tangents, just like in economy, towards the dehumanization of human actions in favor of supposedly acting abstractions, of quasi-entelechies forgetting the real players of the geographic space. A "radical" geography appeared with the aim to make the dominated players and the oppressed minorities the center of the debate. This was renamed "social geography" in France, and it put forward a "spatialism" that was truly exaggerated or sometimes imaginary. The report that I wrote for the French government in 1982[1] acknowledged this evolution of the practice of geography towards a science of man and society, the broadening of its interests, the way it looked at and discussed things.

The 1980s established the background trend, by spreading the precious methods of calculation and cartography made possible by personal computers, and then the Internet and the diffusion of methods and techniques of scientific analysis. They slowed down the protests: geography did not escape the so-called postmodernist attitudes, the relativist, and "constructivist" critics and many other "ists", which proves that it was in good health. Nonetheless, these were and remain watered down versions, somewhat behind the times, and rather vague: the learning of social sciences is still an unfinished task.

At least, the expression of geography as a social science has become even more accentuated. There has been a paradigm shift: we have gone from the "relation between man and nature" to the production and organization of the spaces of humanity. Progress is sensitive, however, even when geography deals with environmental questions, as it takes on more firmly and rigorously the comprehension of human processes and actions on land. It is regrettable that it is so little mentioned in contemporary debates on global ecology and global warming. Its sense of scale, what happens in the field, as well as climatic oscillations, would enable many geographers to make an impact in terms of measure and common sense: how the territories are managed is a good indicator of what needs to be done and how big the problem really is.

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1 BRUNET Roger, "Rapport sur la géographie française ", *L'Espace Géographique*, vol. 3, pp. 196-214, 1982.

## Towards a sustainable geography

For a long time, these trends did not really coincide with regional geography, which was what interested me. What appeared to me as key in our research as geographers was to understand the existence, creation, and evolution of different regions: why it is so here, and different over there? Why do these differences in landscapes, populations, activities, of development exist? Why were there even different names, and did they correspond to different content, under different appearances? What lies behind the countless facets of the world? Just as in painting, it was necessary to "give a shape to the shapeless", or better still to understand the different forms that the "face of the Earth" took on. Little by little I felt the need to look for the logic behind the organization and the differentiation of these spaces, and finally the *production* of these spaces.

Geographical spaces are the result of the work of human societies, in spaces that are already present, which have been transformed by previous societies. It is, therefore, necessary to know and understand the players and their thought process, the rules of production, and the organization of different territories; and the networks that link them together. The forms that we study all have a social logic, that go together with inherited forms, which are, in part, of natural origin. This is true on all levels: the world as a whole, the continents, the big regions, the countries and their districts.

The various aspects of the work presented in this book were constructed over a long period of time, with publications dating from 1952 to the present date. The environment has been modified by the transition to mass teaching, the revolution of communication and information, the reconfiguration of the world and of its centers, and the rise of new fears. The intellectual environment has also changed, going from empirical to Marxist debates, followed by quantitative and structuralist movements, and then deconstructive-constructive and postmodern, and a few neo-religions of market, profit, geopolitics and ecologism. These shifts and breaks affect everyone. However, a general idea remains, or maybe, just a way of seeing things.

My work aims to build a reasoned and rational geography, keen to understand the logic behind the production of geographic spaces in all their aspects, the rules of their organization, and all the diversity of their forms. It has shared common ground with the geography of English-speaking countries, but is different in its cultural background and its expression. Among others, and in its own way, it has sought to be worthwhile in the field of social sciences and maybe also useful in the management and development of territories. Therefore, contributing to establish the basis of a *sustainable geography*:

A sustainable geography is a geography that I can support, maintain, and justify, because of its place among the other sciences and by its scientific practice. It is a geography that, in its processes, can realistically survive the changes of the world and the places within it, all the while constantly incorporating new assets. A geography that does not idealize nature as eternal and invariable data, and even less so in its "pre-industrial" situation, as was stated in the conclusion of the summit of the UN in Copenhagen (December 2009), but which takes into account the ability that humanity has to adapt and evolve to a nature that is changing and different depending on the regions, nowhere or ever "ideal". A geography that has a solid theory based on verifiable facts. A geography that is capable of adapting to the new tools of knowledge and research, as well as world changes and the representations of the world, while keeping a necessary distance from the object. A geography that is fundamentally critical and that is never satisfied with the state of science or of the world.

This book is an illustration as well as an explanation of the process that aims to achieve sustainable geography. It brings together old texts (either refashioned or summarized) which have been published in a variety of journals and books, as well as new unpublished texts. The first part is about the fundamentals of the theory behind the production of geographic spaces. The others deal with certain aspects that have particularly interested me: the ruptures and discontinuities in space; the analysis of structures and spatial dynamics; the scales of this analysis; the uses and content of geography.

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