

## Evolution of Geographical Thinking and Disciplinary Trends in France

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### Component-I (B) - Description of Module

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## **Component II - e-Text**

### **Evolution of Geographical Thinking and Disciplinary Trends in France**

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#### **I. Introduction**

The modern geographical thought in France had been evolving since the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century in the background of prevalent diverse intellectual concepts proposed by some early and modern European scholars. This was the period when geography as a distinct subject and its disciplinary trends gradually advanced.

#### **A. Early Geographical Background**

Since the Greek-Roman period, determinism has been important concept defining man and environment relationship on the Earth which continued till the second world war. According to this concept, development of people's social-economic, cultural features largely depends upon natural conditions. Majority of early scholars like Aristotle, Strabo and Hippocrates were determinists. For Example, Aristotle explained the difference between European and Asian in terms of climatic causes.

In medieval time, France scholar Montesquieu viewed that people in a warm climate are timorous, weak in body, indolent and passive. Geographical determinism continued to dominate even in writing of the Arab geographers viz., Al- Masudi, and Ibn- Khaldun.

In the early modern period, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) supported determinism and clarified the difference between regional communities of people in reference to geographical conditions in their habitats. For instance, he highlighted that people in hot regions are timid and lazy.

German scholars like Ritter (1779-1859) adopted the anthropocentric approach and introduced geographical determinism. Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) also propagated new determinism giving more importance to man than other organisms but environment determinism continued to be a dominant force in a man-environment relationship hence shaping people's mode of life in different regions. However, His second volume of 'Anthropogeographie' analyzed human socio-economic activities and culture in relation to the physical environment which later immensely influenced French geographers like Vidal de la Blache.

Besides the concept of determinism, the later half of the nineteenth century and early decades of twentieth-century show prevailing scientific concepts like deductive approach, Darwin's theory of evolution, Newtonian cause and effect relationships, which influenced many contemporary geographers in France.

In this background, Geographers like Vidal de la Blache, L. Gallois, Jean Brunhes, Albert Demangeon, Emmanuel De Martonne, Raoul Blanchard, Andre Siegfried, Andre Cholley and Maximilien Sorrel laid down the foundation of the modern school in France (French School of Geographical Thought) and established geography as a separate discipline in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. French School made Geography as a subject integrating humanities and natural science. This subject becomes more applied and scientific because of some of the following French scholars.

## **II. French Geographers and their Significant Contributions**

### **A. Phillippe Buache (1700-1773)**

He was the first French scholar who led the movement for the evolution of *Reine Geography* (Pure Geography). According to him, Geography can only be studied through natural regions demarcated on the Earth surface. He opined that a river basin was the best suited natural regions for geographical study. For example, spatial analysis of geographical data (socio-economic and cultural features and activities) must be done along with natural region not administrative units. His proposition motivated French office of statistics to propose a plan for the division of the national territory into natural regions. The effort created interest amongst geographers to study regional divisions in France but later his efforts were opposed by Omalius d' Halloy in 1833 who prepared a geological map of France indicating a functional relationship between landforms and soils and the underlying rocks across the natural region (River basin).

### **B. Jacques Elisee Reclus (1830-1905)**

He was a renowned French geographer, prolific writer, and anarchist. Over a period of nearly 20 years (between 1875 and 1904), he was involved in writing world Regional Geography' (popularly known as *Nouvelle Geographic Universelle*) and 'Physical Geography' (*La Terre*).

*Nouvelle Geographic Universelle* dealt with a description of geographic features like rivers and mountains in various countries across the continents and their impacts. This compilation was profusely illustrated with maps, plans, and designs.

### **C. Frederic Le Play (1806 -1882)**

He was a renowned sociologist. In the light of geographical determinism as a concept, he studied social structures and social orders of European societies under different physical conditions. While discussing habitat- society relationship, he pointed out that each distinct habitat had developed a unique social order and structures. He further explains that environment, occupation, social types (European societies) had to be studied in association with one another, hence evolved a formula termed Place, work, Folk (or Habitat, economy, and society).

### **D. Vidal De La Blache (1845-1918)**

Blache is regarded as the father of human Geography and propounder of possibilism. In 1872, he was appointed as professor at Nancy University later he became a university professor in 1898. His areas of interest were human and regional geography. His 'Regional Geography of the World' (Geographie Universelle), 'Geography of France' (Tableau de la Geographie de la France) and 'Geography of Eastern France' (France De la Est) are noteworthy. His geographical approach was field studies in France, through which he developed a concept of '*pays*'. '*Pays*' means regional units in rural France which are having unique agricultural patterns due to its specific soil and water supply, economic specialty and people's demand at surrounding cities. As per Blache, instead of reducing uniqueness (agricultural difference) of Pays (region), the trade in France accentuated its agriculture distinctively. Each '*pays*' had unique settlement pattern (compact or scattered settlement). The uniqueness of pays maintained over generations with specific interaction between the man-environment relationship. Besides, he published a number of research papers on different regions in the annual journal popularly named Annales de Geographie. His most impressive work was 'Principles of Human Geography' which was published by De Martonne in 1923 after the death of Blache. This book emphasizes on the concept of territorial unity (which means factors operating on the Earth surface are intricately interlinked), understanding the power of environment, its different forms and differences and examining environment's opportunities (possibilities) for a human being to develop cultural landscape. Vidal strongly criticized environmental determinism and proposed possibilism as an alternative concept. Ironically German geographer Ratzel's second volume of 'Anthropogeographie' has profound impacts on Vidal's writing on the concept of possibilism. A possibilism is an approach to the study of man and environment relationship. As per possibilism, nature offers opportunities for

developing the cultural landscape within the certain limits. How man adjusts and adapts with environment defend distinctive modes of life(Genre de vie). According to Vidal, there is no reasoning to draw boundaries between natural and cultural phenomena. As they are so closely interlinked, hence united and inseparable. Blache was so influential personality, after the first world war, the majority of geography departments in French universities were headed by either Blache or his disciples. In the late part of his life, Vidal came to a conclusion that industrial development was cause for vanishing the best things in French life.

#### **E. L. Gallois (1857-1941)**

After Blache, L. Gallois became a professor at Sorbonne University. He assisted Blache in publishing Annales de Geographie. In 1890, Gallois published a research journal 'Les Geographers alle Mands de la Renaissance'. During first World war (1914-18), he wrote geographical studies of various regions namely North-east France, Saar region, Middle Egypt and Suez regions.

#### **F. Emmanuel de Martonne**

Emmanuel de Martonne (1873 - 1955) was a prominent geographer, a disciple of Blache and founder of general physical geography (specially Geomorphology). He was appointed at Rennes university between 1899-1905 and at Lyon University between 1905-1909. Later, after the departure of Blache, he was honored with the chair of Geography in Faculty of Letters in Paris. His aim was to lay the foundation for a general physical geography by merging previously distinct disciplines (cartography, morphology, climatology, botany, and zoology). He also developed an interest in the regional geography of Carpathians and Central Europe and prepared a volume-IV of Geographie Universelle on this region. His contribution to geomorphological analysis and naturalistic explanations were of great importance for geographers in France and across the world.

### **III. Disciplinary Trends (Branches)**

Above stated geographers, various developed various thoughts and set up new disciplinary trends (different branches) in geography like Regional Geography, Human Geography, Colonial Geography, Political Geography and much more. An account of those disciplinary trends (branches) and major contributing geographers are as follows:

#### **A. Regional Geography**

Regional geography was the most important branch of geography in France. Vidal de la Blache initiated regional studies through the development of a concept called 'pays' (small rural region). He opposed the concept of Reine Geography and river basin as a region. Man-environment relationship shaped small region (pays) making it unique for geographical studies. Other geographers like L. Gallois and E. De Martonne also contributed to regional geography. In addition, the trends of geological and historical studies led the growth of a concept of regional synthesis. Later this concept was accepted as an approach to do a geographical analysis of a region. During this period, the regional studies were so popular that numerous books were written and published. For example, Vidal De la Blache's 'Table De La Geographie' and la France' (1903), Demangeon's 'Picardie' (1905), E. De Martonne's 'Les Alps' (1926) and 'An Essay on Middle Europe' (1930-1931), R. Blanchard's 'French Alps were noted books which contained description of geographical features like landforms, climate, vegetation, settlement and other social-cultural structures and distinctiveness of each region and its unique man-environment relationship.

## **B. Human Geography**

Human geography refers to the study of man and environment interaction in specific places and across spatial areas. Vidal de la Blache was the founder of Human Geography who wrote a book entitled 'Principles of Human Geography'. Major contents of this book are as follows:

1. It illustrates the principle of terrestrial unity on the Earth. The principles of terrestrial unity mean the concept of the earth as a whole whose parts are well coordinated and organized where phenomena follow a sequence and general laws. In other words, all geographical factors are closely interlinked. Vidal's Human Geography also explains the concept of man-environment (milieu) relationship. There is no separation but unity between natural and cultural landscape. Therefore, man influences nature and vice versa.
2. This book describes the man as a geographical factor (active geographical agent). Man adapt and adjust the environment and transforms it. For instance, agriculture cannot be developed by nature. Man transforms the natural landscape and develops agricultural fields through various choices set by nature.
3. The human geography analyses the pattern of civilization circulations (means of transports) and cultural regions and cities.
4. This book also elaborates many and environment relationships in historical perspective.



Above-cited book was published in three volumes. The first volume deliberates on population distribution, density, and its migration. The second volume discusses the process of human civilization under certain environment and the third volume concentrates on transportation and communication.

After Blache, his disciples like Jean Bruhnes(1868-1930) and Demagaon (1872-1940) continued this tradition of the French School. Jean Bruhnes was a prominent human geographer who was mainly attentive at studies of shape and size of rural settlements and houses in France. His book entitled 'Geographie Humaine: Essai De Classification Positive' (Human Geography) published in 1910. The book contents are divided into three essential sections and some facts as follows:

1. 1<sup>st</sup> section covers 'unproductive occupation of soil', which refers to the spatial distribution of houses, types of houses, their differences, urban agglomeration, urban morphology, a vast network of roads and commutation covering vast geographical space. In other words, and can be used productively or unproductively.
2. 2<sup>nd</sup> section connected with the conquest of plants and animal world. In this section, he discussed how human being has cultivated some crops and domesticated some animals with special reference to pastoral nomadism and transhumance.
3. 3<sup>rd</sup> is the destructive economy, which means unsustainable exploitation of resources. Human being uses unsustainably soil (land and other resources), clearing forest, mining, which is often referred to robbery economy. Robbery economy may cause polluted environment, exhausted natural resources and economic poverty and its vicious circle.

Besides, in his Human Geography, Bruhnes discoursed some facts like spatial distribution of human races, social, political and historical facts. In his geographical studies, he emphasized on two principles.

1. Principles of Activities: As per this concept, physical and cultural phenomena are not static but dynamic lying in the state of perpetual change like the size of the sea, mountain and forest cover etc.
2. Principles of Interaction: This concept has been derived from Blache's 'Principle of Terrestrial Unity'. It means that all physical and social phenomena are closely interrelated and well-coordinated on the Earth Surface.

After Brunhes, Demagaon(1872-1940) sustained this tradition of writing on human geography. He got published Geography of Picardy in 1905. Later, in 1911, he became a professor at Sorbonne University. One of his interest was a study of rural settlement, its pattern, and factors affecting like mode and methods of cultivation in France. As per his concept, mode of agriculture determines shape, size, and pattern of rural settlement. After his death, in 1942, his book entitled 'Problems of Human Geography' was got published which highlights human group and society and its relationship with the environment and human beings as a modifying agent in the environment. Demagoan in his book named 'Problems of Human Geography' had mainly four themes (as contents) as follows:

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> theme is the study of natural regions and people's types of lifestyle. People in different regions have different lifestyles.
2. 2<sup>nd</sup> theme discusses types of techniques used for haunting gathering, agricultural and industrial activities across natural regions etc.
3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> theme focuses on distribution, density, types, and boundaries of settlements.

Besides, he authored many books British Island, Holland, and Belgium.

### **C. Urban Geography**

A number of scholars were interested in the geographical study of town and cities in France. For example, Demagoan and Galloishad studied and written on Paris city. Besides, Levainville studied Rouen and Caen cities in France in 1923. Blanchard was also the professor of geography at Grenovle, who, in 1911, had written a book entitled 'Urban Geography of Greenville' in which he explained its situation, historical progress and current structural development. In 1922, he also wrote a research paper on the methodology of urban geography. He authored urban geography of cities like Lille, Nancy, Lyons, Marseilles, Nice Bordeaux. In addition, Jean Gottmann (1915-1994) was a French geographer who became famous for his influential study entitled Megalopolis: the Urbanized Seaboard of the United States. This is a regional geography presenting historical, physical, economic and political dimensions of cities in the USA. Later in 1962, he also published a study of metropolitans in European.

### **D. Political Geography**

Siegfried was the prominent professor of Political and Economic Geography who analyzed geographical factors playing role in electoral politics and in the formation of political parties



in France. His analysis was published in 'Political Geography of France' ('Tableau Politique De la France'), which laid the foundation of political geography in France. Besides, he penned ten books on England, USA Latin America, New Zealand. Suez Canal, Panama Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea. Another star political geographer was J. Ancel who wrote 'Political Geography of Europe' in three volumes. In addition, his books like 'Geopolitics' and 'Geography of Frontier' published in 1936 and 1938 respectively raised his reputation as a political geographer in his country.

### **E. Colonial Geography**

After the defeat of France with Germany in 1870, France began to compensate its territories by

colonizing countries in Africa and South- East Asia. Geographical knowledge of new countries was required for colonizing and sustain France rule on them. Thirst of knowledge led the beginning of Colonial Geography in France. First colonial geographer was M. Dubois whose authored articles, a study center for French colonies at Sorbonne University (at Paris) and French Geographical Society disseminated knowledge on colonies hence contributed to French colonial expansion between 1871-1881. Later by 1902 universities like Lyons, Paris, Bortex, Cans and Lille also started same kind centers for such study. Moreover, a known Colonial Geographer was Demogon who penned a book on Colonial Geography of British Empire ('L' Empire Britannique') published in 1923.

### **F. Physical Geography**

Emmanuel de Martonne was physical geographer who authored books like Physical Geography ('Traite de Geographie Physique') in 1909, Les Alps in 1926 and Physical Geography of France ('La Geographie Physique de la France'). Besides, Blanchard's Physical geography and Tricart's research papers on Geomorphology enriched the contents of physical geography in France.

In addition to above-stated branches of geography, the possibilism had emerged as a concept in France in contrary to determinism in Germany.

## **IV. Evolution of a New Concept: Possibilism**

Vidal de la Blache had proposed a concept of Possibilism and opposed environmental determinism geographical approach to study man and environment. As per possibilism,

nature offers numerous possibilities for human being within the set limits. It does not mean that human beings are free in taking all decisions but enjoy to make decisions on various possibilities in nature. According to Possibilism, each group of people living at a particular place has a distinctive way of life (*genres de vie*), which determines man and environment relationship. French historian Lucien Febvre elaborated the man and environment relationship and pointed out that there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities. Man is free to use or not use these possibilities for their better livelihood and life. On this concept, Blache and Febvre pointed out that nature are not mandatory but permissive. This idea gives the common emphasis on the thought and action of human beings and their ability to exert some independent control over their own destinies<sup>1</sup> therefore this idea also forms an important antecedent of humanistic geography<sup>1</sup>. In conclusion, Geographers in France brought about several new thoughts, approaches, trends in order to develop geography as a modern and scientific disciplinary, some are still relevant.

## **V. Current Trends**

Over the period of time Vidalienne tradition has faded away but regional studies continued to be a significant approach. Geography is moving from general to specific (scientific) trends using more quantitative techniques making it more applied. Most recent trends in French Geography show a geographical study of critical theories related to phenomenology<sup>2</sup> and hermeneutics<sup>3</sup> hence making this subject more relevant to current issues.

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<sup>1</sup>Cloke, P., Philo, C. & Sadler, D. (1991) *Approaching Human Geography*. London: Chapman.

<sup>2</sup>Phenomenology refers to philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation.



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