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## Vidal de la Blache, P.

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### Glossary

**Genre de vie (Way of Living)** The concept of *genre de vie* (way of living), as used by Vidal de la Blache, includes all activities, practices, and techniques that characterize the adaptation of a human group to the *milieu*, that is, to the natural surroundings found where the group has settled. By way of the *genre de vie*, the *milieu* acquires a specifically human dimension which, according to Vidal de la Blache, the *paysage* (landscape) will never fail to reveal.

**Geographic Personality** For Vidal de la Blache, geographic personality, a fundamental concept in the *Tableau de la Géographie de la France* (portrait of French geography) (1903), refers to the ingenuity shown by each human group – and, more specifically, each people or nation – in taking full advantage of the resources drawn from the *milieu* in which it lives.

### Vidal de la Blache, Pual (1845–1918)

Paul Vidal de la Blache was the leading figure of the French school of geography that exerted worldwide influence until World War II (Figure 1). Along with Friedrich Ratzel in Germany, William Morris Davis in the United States and Halford Mackinder in Great Britain, he was a key architect of geography's rise at the beginning of the twentieth century to the rank of a highly regarded discipline, not only in academic circles but also in everyday social life.

Although Vidal de la Blache was long celebrated for his exceptional contribution to the advancement of geography, his legacy was the target of widespread criticism from the 1960s onward as new notions of the discipline emerged and the 'old masters' came under heavy fire. Little by little, however, criticism gave way to a rather widespread indifference to the lifework of Paul Vidal de la Blache. Indeed, nowadays very few people read his key works *Tableau de la géographie de la France* (portrait of French geography) (1903) or his *Principes de géographie humaine* (principles of human geography) (1922). Hence, in order to describe the thought of Paul Vidal de la Blache, it usually seems sufficient to repeat the few ideas that are summarized and repeated practically by rote in geography textbooks. Nevertheless, despite this relative neglect, Vidal de la Blache's work is currently the focus of solidly documented and more

balanced studies that shed new light upon his contribution to the rise of geography at the turn of the twentieth century.

Paul Vidal de la Blache was born on 22 January 1845 in Pézenas, a small town in Languedoc, a French Mediterranean region close to Spain. Sent to Paris at the age of 13 to complete his high school studies, he was then admitted to the *École Normale Supérieure* (national teacher training college) where he studied arts and history. He specialized in ancient Greek history at Athens's *École française*, which directly led to his obtaining a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1872. In spite of his training in history, he then turned to geography, accepting a position at the *Université de Nancy* that very same year.

Vidal's conversion to geography was tied in with France's recent defeat at the hands of Germany. This defeat, which many – including Vidal de la Blache – interpreted as a sign of France's moral and intellectual decline, culminated in the Treaty of Frankfurt (1871) that saw the winner amputate all of the Alsace region and part of Lorraine from the rest of France. According to the general consensus, French patriotism needed to be regenerated in order for the nation to get back on its feet.



Figure 1 Vidal de la Blache.

As such, the teaching of French geography appeared to be essential as a means of strengthening people's attachment to their national territory. But in order for this to materialize, French geography as a discipline would have to live up to the hopes placed on it. Whereas Germany, through Humboldt, Ritter, and others, had raised geography to the rank of a science, France had fallen seriously behind in this and other scientific fields, a cause of general consternation and dismay. Vidal hence insisted that France should participate actively in the building of a new geography. Thus, Vidal de la Blache, who was appointed Chair of Geography at the *Université de Nancy* in 1872, had the opportunity to take a direct part in the strongly desired renewal of France.

Vidal de la Blache's first works were greatly influenced by Germany's Carl Ritter. Like Ritter, he saw geography at this point in his career as the study of regions whose goal was to discover how each region is marked by the specific contribution it has made to the advancement of humanity. Again, like Ritter, Vidal adhered to the idea that each human society has its own way of transforming nature in order to produce whatever is useful to it, never excluding a capacity for improvement that could lead any given society toward a higher level of civilization. In this context, therefore, the art of geography consists of understanding regional dynamics, which, in part, involves understanding how each region deals with the resources at its disposal. How are they extracted? What products are derived from them? How are they used? How are they traded? On the other hand, geography should also study how each region has improved, and also could improve upon, the ways natural resources are developed. In this sense, it also becomes incumbent upon geography to explain how these regional differences – and the inter-regional relations resulting from them – condition the distribution and migration of human beings across the surface of the Earth.

Although Vidal de la Blache would never break with this Ritterian heritage throughout his career, he would nonetheless gradually develop his own geographical doctrine in which the concepts of *milieu* (natural surroundings), *genre de vie* (way of living), and *paysage* (landscape) would eventually serve as complements to his notion of the region. As such, Vidalian geography became a method for studying how each human group, through its activities, practices, and techniques, adapts to its *milieu*, that is, the natural surroundings as they exist in the region where the group has settled. This adaptation constitutes a *genre de vie* (way of living) which, in return, leaves its mark upon the group's *milieu*. Hence, by way of the *genre de vie*, the *milieu* acquires a specifically human dimension which, according to Vidal, the *paysage* never fails to reveal.

Another abiding feature of Vidalian geography lies in its naturalism. Although he came from a Catholic family,

Vidal de la Blache was an agnostic who saw the human being purely as a component of nature. He also recognized that every human group, regardless of the level of civilization it has reached, can never completely escape the restrictions imposed by its *milieu*, that is, the natural surroundings upon which it depends. However, once this principle had been established, it was still necessary to describe and measure how these restrictions were imposed as a function of time and place. Suddenly, Vidal was faced with two fundamental problems. On the one hand, he felt that it was important to discover which natural elements influence ways of living and landscapes most directly. Concerning this point, Vidalian geography evolved as well. In his earliest works, Vidal gave most weight to climatic conditions, after which he emphasized geological formations, and lastly he considered mainly biological factors, thus drawing his school of thought closer to the form of ecology that was gaining strength at that time.

On the other hand, a more philosophical question was raised as regards the position and role of the human being within nature. In this respect, Vidal de la Blache distanced himself from Ritter by objecting to the latter's teleologism. Whereas the German geographer interpreted human enterprise as the playing out of a divine plan in which, by following the path of progress, the human being becomes the Earth's true conscience, Vidal saw human endeavor as the expression of a simple dialectic of dependence and freedom based on technical skills and abilities. Vidal argued that although human beings are permanently dependent upon nature, we are by no means condemned to be purely a production of the conditions of the *milieu* (natural surroundings) within which we evolve. One of the fundamental human characteristics, according to Vidal, is, in fact, the capacity to improve how we produce and distribute useful things. Thus, by increasing technical abilities, human beings would gradually break free from the restrictions imposed by our natural surroundings. With greater technical skills, humans would be able to take better advantage of natural conditions that previously had to be endured. Thus, by gradually attaining technical prowess, we human beings would construct our own freedom, which does not, however, release us from the natural order, but rather offers us the possibility of becoming active agents of the general causality that energizes nature as a whole (from whence the term 'possibilism' that is often used to characterize Vidalian geography). This said, the aforementioned possibility is by no means the goal of human history. Vidal certainly did not downplay the benefits of human freedom acquired through technical skills; in fact he wanted these benefits to spread as extensively as possible. Nevertheless, according to Vidal, the progress of civilization cannot result from the premeditations of some sort of providence; it will simply be accessible to

human beings as we improve how we organize our societies, produce goods, and trade them. From this perspective, humans are nothing other than what we make of ourselves, such that freedom, according to Vidal, is only a contingency, that is, a reality that may or may not materialize, and, depending on the rate of technological development, may either grow, stagnate, or decline.

For Vidal de la Blache, the acquisition of technical skills, the primary factor of freedom, would not be possible without human ingenuity. Moreover, he contended that this acquisition also stems from human will which, in his view, would have little impact if it were not projected by political authorities. This explains why, from his first writings onward, Vidal, following the example of Germany's Friedrich Ratzel, paid such great attention to the State. According to Vidal, the State is not a purely arbitrary product but rather a full-fledged geographical entity. He believed that this form of political organization would result from the desire of a people making up a nation to control the territory that it is actually developing. For Vidal de la Blache, state territory is made up of regions that, over the centuries, have established powerful trade relations such that all those living therein have a feeling of belonging to a larger whole: the nation. This is why, in his view, nationalism is not to be condemned in itself, so long as it truly serves to help a people – and through that people all of humanity – progress. But this nationalism, Vidal repeated, needed to draw upon its grassroots, that is, regional dynamism. He also remained forever attentive to factors of regional modernization that in his opinion stem from the spread of large-scale industry, the development of transportation modes and networks, the intensification of trade and exports, the influence of cities, and the strengthening of regional institutions. Moreover, Vidal felt, nationalism must not be harmful to other peoples since all human societies, in all ages, have benefited from the contacts and exchanges that have brought them closer together. This is the main reason why he recognized the legitimacy of international cooperation and colonialism, which, in his view, made it possible to transfer the means of progressing more rapidly to less-technically advanced population groups.

It should be noted that this view of the State played a key role in Vidal's 1917 analysis of eastern France. Here, Vidal in fact argued that the German occupation of Alsace and a part of Lorraine was illegitimate, since, on the one hand, the inhabitants of this region had long belonged to the French nation and, on the other, because German colonialism had not contributed to the progress of the region. More broadly, on a theoretical level, it should be recalled that Vidal actually saw political authority as the extension of human enterprise, especially in terms of what resulted from the projection of this authority for a region or a people as regards

organizational efficiency. This is why Vidal sometimes despaired of French politicians who, he contended, did not always understand that the mission of the State and of other political authorities – especially regional institutions – is fundamentally to promote technical and economic development.

Throughout his career, Vidal de la Blache accordingly built a geographical lifework that, while becoming more complex and balanced, never turned away from the inspiration originally drawn from German geography. Throughout the decades, his works and their influence attested to the fact that France would henceforth fully participate in the renewal of geographical science. As such, he won the confidence and esteem of the authorities and his peers. Thus, from his position at the *École Normale Supérieure*, where he was appointed as of 1877, and then at the Sorbonne, as of 1898, he gradually became an incontestable intellectual leader, training numerous disciples and creating institutions, such as the *Annales de géographie* (annals of geography) in 1892, that promoted the development of the discipline in France.

Although Vidal de la Blache had been able to acquire, in academic, research, and political circles, the reputation of being a leading proponent of the new French geography, it was only in 1903, with the publication of his *Tableau de la géographie de la France* (portrait of French geography) that he gained public fame. It is true that, up until that time, his subtle, erudite, and detailed work was able to meet the intellectual standards of scholars and satisfy the curious, but it had not yet seduced a more general public that was not necessarily interested in the discipline of geography for the storehouse of knowledge it harbored since what the public was seeking in geography was, above all, a compelling idea, the conviction that an essential truth was being expressed through the discipline itself. Another factor could have been that Vidal de la Blache's geography was too close to his German model which, in his eyes, embodied a certain scientific ideal. He was in fact reproached for this. Thus, while not sacrificing the scientific character of geography to the imperatives of patriotism, Vidal clearly managed to reform French geography, but he had not yet imbued this discipline with a full 'patriotic value'. This certainly stems, at least in part, from the themes addressed by Vidalian geography. During the first decades, Vidal in fact neglected France itself, concentrating especially on other parts of the world, the continents (in the first place Europe), and large countries such as China, India, and Russia. Was this not a mistake considering the patriotic mission assigned to geography at the time of his hiring at Nancy? Clearly his compatriots were longing for a geography worthy of its name, but was not a geography of France their top priority? In 1903, with the *Tableau*, the cycle was completed: Vidal had finally given France a geography, not only in order to position the country at

the cutting edge of science (of geographic science, in any case) but also so that France itself would be the subject of this geographic science, even its very best illustration. And in 1917, when he published *France de l'Est* (eastern France), just a few months before his death and while his country was facing Germany in a war that had cost him his own son, it became clear that geography was henceforth at the service of the French nation.

Reading the geography of Paul Vidal de la Blache a century after it was formulated, one cannot fail to be surprised by two astonishing paradoxes. The first stems from the fact that the much-discussed French school of geography that owes so much to Vidal de la Blache is not, in the final analysis, that different from other national schools of geography that were flourishing in Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and elsewhere at the time. Of course, French geography and the other national geographies each took on a specific coloring. Nevertheless, what we have here are variations on the same theme since, behind this mosaic looms a single fundamental question that at that point crystallized the entire challenge of building a scientific geography: how to view the relationship – both in terms of unity and diversity – that is established between human societies and the various regions around the globe? Although the national schools of geography easily reached a consensus when it came to establishing the unity of this relationship based on the principle of humankind's dependence on nature, it was difficult for them, in a context where numerous existing or emerging states were seeking to affirm their legitimacy (by way of economic competition, war, or otherwise) to get away from the idea that each people has, in this regard, its own spirit, or to borrow Vidal's term, a personality.

This is why the geographic science of the period with this issue at the heart of its concerns was so easily able to accommodate the diverse national schools which, by their very differences, corroborated the premise imposed by the circumstances that prevailed. Here we see the second paradox of Vidalian geography. Is it enough to argue, as Vidal did, that the State exists as a means of ensuring regional development, the affirmation of the national personality, and the progress of civilization? Is this not at the very least a naive approach that overlooks the complexity of human societies, the power issues that brew within them, and the divisions that cut across them? In addition, although Vidal de la Blache was sensitive to the intrinsically political dimension of human institutions, he managed to bypass any analysis of this element by making the people the ultimate, even the only, player on the political scene. Even as he broke down this scene into regional, state, colonial, or international components, his doctrine, carrying the stamp of naturalism and distrustful of the fledgling discipline of

sociology, in fact remained incapable of characterizing society otherwise than as a fascinating national whole.

**See also:** Francophone Geography; Landscape; Regional Geography I; Ritter, C.

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