

INTRODUCTION

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Those who until now followed with attention Paul Claval's scientific itinerary during the many years in which it developed can, I think, discover in it two significant turns. Without simplifying the rich bibliography his course is studded with and imprisoning the development of his thought in the cells of schematisms, I think these turns are undeniable and meaningful.

The first turn occurred, according to my reading, when Claval celebrated, in a concise and dense essay, the geographical personality of Paul Vidal de la Blache, the founder of the French geographical school. He examined the work and thought of the great Master, concluding that his geography relied on an elementary sociology.

Those were the years during which Paul Claval seemed essentially sensitive to the development of the sociological thought, French and not. In this way and thanks to the meeting with overseas geographies, the Canadian one in particular, he concentrated totally on widening the scope of our doctrine and integrating into it the fruits and results of American and English geographies.

An unceasing effort of his aimed at going beyond Maurice Le Lannou's position, for whom the so-called "theoretical» geography was still to come. And through the construction of frameworks and classifications, and the search for laws, all the attention of the scholar was directed towards the liberation of geography from the narrow categories of exceptionalism and history, and also towards the bringing closer of our doctrine and the paradigms and approaches of the other human sciences.

His scientific position was certainly not totally dominated by the quantitativist innovation that swept along the various Racines with multivariate analysis, the various Baillys with psychologism and the various Raffestins with the so-called critical geography. And although he turned mainly to the scientific literature written in English, his strong European cultural preparation kept him away either from the simplifications of the "new geography" or the abstractness of those who thought that geography was the science of war and marshals.

The time besides was very uproarious and geographers were not the only ones to suffer from it. Since the ways of speaking about geography were also becoming outmoded because of the collapse of Berlin's wall, it was necessary to renovate them and launch, in the big variety of the "thousand flowers", narratives that didn't seem yet landed on new shores.

It was at this point – we were in 1996 – that I met Paul Claval who, together with George Prevelakis, has organized in Paris a great meeting labeled "On the traces of Jean Gottmann". After a first day dedicated to the commemoration of Gottmann's thought and his remarks on political geography, the meeting focused on a desperate and even ideological quest for a new iconography. This iconography should support the future of Europe, after the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the dissolution of the Balkan unity. The Conference, however, didn't discover it and just denounced this deficiency.

It was therefore in these years that Paul Claval "discovered" Jean Gottmann and came closer to what has to be called "cultural geography". This long digression on Paul Claval's itinerary does not come by chance in a meeting that focused on his cultural geography and rediscovered the weight and role of the regional geographical schools of our Country.

I am not stupidly claiming that I was ahead of the results of this Conference, even if, as a member of the Italian Geographical Society, I had tried - ten years ago - to investigate on what type of studies on regional geography were produced in Italy. (And the material that I collected is still waiting for a patient last-year undergraduate or graduated student to exploit it!). The summary I just presented of the development of Paul Claval's thought and his "landing" in cultural geography is useful to introduce the round table that I am chairing and to explain the meaning that I ascribe to this new label.

In an essay on urban geography that Paul Claval prepared for the special issue of the review *Ekistics* dedicated to the tenth anniversary of Jean Gottmann's death, he wrote:

The substitution of cultural approaches to morphological and functional ones was mainly achieved from the 70s. Some authors had however understood earlier the interest of combining these different perspectives: it explains the interest of Jean Gottmann's contributions to the study of modern big cities (Gottmann, 1966). He started from the skyscraper, a classical element of the morphology of great American metropolises, but he immediately went a step further than other urban theoreticians: the vertical circulation the skyscraper accelerated could be substituted to horizontal ones; thanks to it, switching from partner to partner became easier: the skyscraper contributed to the efficient functioning of the social and economic switchboards downtown areas are. At the same time the skyscraper fired the imagination by its boldness and its architectural quality: it thus gained a symbolic value; it reminded of the power of the company which built or operated it; it participated, thanks to its presence among buildings of the same type, in the symbolic affirmation of liberal economy and capitalism.

This long digression on Paul Claval's thought is not only for paying homage to a distinguished personality who honors with his presence this meeting dedicated to the cultural geography. It aims at focusing on the meaning that I attribute to the definition of cultural geography, so that the significance of the round table I am chairing becomes clear. It aims also at stressing the fact that I am convinced that political geography is always a cultural geography.

At the end of the long bend, which during the second part of the last century finally resulted in bringing closer geography and the other human and social sciences, the "landing" into cultural geography is, according to me, the verification of the specificity of our discipline and the specific requirements that distinguish it from other disciplines. In studying men and societies in relation with the inhabited and lived space, geography is responsible for not oversimplification. It has no right to renounce to the local and time specificity, which can only lead to a less unilateral knowledge of reality.

Claval, or Gottmann drive us necessarily beyond the exceptionalist position of Vidal de la Blache (and it is not by chance that the young quantitative geographer Jean-Paul Hubert upholds that Gottmann was unwittingly a structuralist), according to which the scientific nature of geography was necessarily different from the other human and social sciences.

If the subject of our study is the differentiation of the world surface, when searching for the diffuse reasons of this variety – i. e. what links between the different parts of the globe are responsible for it – we cannot lose sight of the wealth, variety and also historical specificity that are the object of our study. It is in this sense that there is not study of geography, especially human geography, that is not at the same time scientific and historical. So, it is in this sense that when speaking of cultural geography, it is necessary to specify that we don't speak of a specific branch of geography which would examine for instance religions or cultures, ways of life, customs and so on.

According to me, human geography has to be cultural. It has to take in consideration the convenience of using common rules for explaining the variety of the world and, at the same time, it must remain conscious of the specific characters and variety of the relations that men develop with other men, spaces and environments. They are always specific and unrepeatable.

After this proposition, made in order to precise the significance I give to the concept of cultural geography, let me spend a few words to extend these considerations to the round table I am chairing. Speaking of political geography as cultural geography is just acknowledging that, if all human geography is at the same time - in my opinion - a science and a history (since it shares with the first the quest for rules and with the second the taste for specificity), it is all the more valid for political geography.

Interested or not in the States, regions or relations between States (with a view over promoting a world government) political geography is a discipline in which the tendencies to change and the opposition to it intersect. This opposition to movement, that Gottmann attributed to iconography, (i. e. to the values, symbols, myths and rites that – present in the heart and mind of the people which share them – change the members of a community into the citizens of a State or any other political entity), is at the roots of the world variety and explains at the same time how much it is difficult to change or integrate it.

To imagine that it is possible to investigate in this direction using methods similar to those of other human and social sciences and ignoring the ways and processes through which this iconography developed and differentiated, is absurd. There is similarly no sense in speaking of States, territories, frontiers, capital cities and even resources, neglecting the totality of values, i. e. the world of ideals and feelings, shared by the people concerned.

All this explains why I invited around this table a few colleagues who had diverse experiences and knowledge, but are united by the shared consciousness of the thickness that attributes to the world of politics its belonging to the world of culture, before its belonging to the world of science.

