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# Geography after Babel – a view from the French province

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1 **Geography after Babel – a view from the French province**

2

# 1 Geography after Babel – a view from the French province

## 3 1. Does French geography matter?

4 For the past decade, an international debate has addressed the internal diversity of geography as a  
5 discipline, a diversity that is at the same time national, linguistic, and conceptual (for instance,  
6 see Gutierrez and Lopez-Nieva, 2001; Braun et al., 2003; Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Aalbers, 2004;  
7 Aalbers and Rossi, 2007; Fall and Rosière, 2008; Schuermans et al., 2010; Bajerski, 2011; Bański  
8 and Ferenc, forthcoming). While early on, the discussion questioned Anglo<sup>1</sup> geography’s  
9 international status, we agree with the call by Fall and Minca’s (2012) and others to reject simple  
10 binaries between Anglo geography and ‘other’ geographies from the rest of the world. In keeping  
11 with this, we locate this paper’s analysis *within* Francophone geography, not only to further  
12 highlight the diversity of ‘other geographies,’ but also to assess the geographies of power – both  
13 internal (e.g., institutional) and external (the existence of a subsystem) – to the so-called  
14 periphery (Rodriguez-Pose, 2006). In so doing, we follow Best’s (2009) suggestion to use a  
15 postcolonial perspective when analyzing geographies of knowledge production.

16 Indeed, there are several scientific spaces, with complex hierarchies and processes of (self-)  
17 exclusion, also within the peripheries. We argue that, during the last third of the twentieth  
18 century, Francophone human geography may well have constituted a provincial subsystem, that  
19 is, a relatively closed space within the discipline. Following Wismann (2012), we also point to  
20 some of the challenges and – crucially – advantages of practicing a multilingual geography and  
21 “thinking in-between languages.” We will address these questions as native French speakers and  
22 mid-career tenured geographers.

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<sup>1</sup> Following Fall and Minca (2012: 18), we choose to use this “rather informal term to mean Anglo-American, British-American or English-language geography.”

## 1 **2. A view from the province**

2 We suggest that the notion of provincialism can usefully describe and explain French  
3 geography's position within the discipline at the end of the twentieth century. Dictionary.com<sup>2</sup>  
4 defines provincialism as follows:

- 5 1. narrowness of mind, ignorance, or the like, considered as resulting from a lack of exposure to  
6 cultural or intellectual activity.
- 7 2. a trait, habit of thought, etc., characteristic of a provincial, a province, or the provinces.
- 8 3. a word, expression, or mode of pronunciation peculiar to a province.
- 9 4. devotion to one's own province before the nation as a whole.

10 These four definitions point to the subsystem's autonomy, its provincial way of functioning, its  
11 specific language, and its hierarchical relationships to the rest of the world. We will explore them  
12 in turn to assess the hypothetical provincial quality of Francophone geography.

13 Before we proceed, some important caveats: First, *provincialism* has pejorative undertones (see  
14 definition 1), which we regret, because Francophone geography can rightfully claim many  
15 objective achievements. We certainly do not wish to imply that Francophone geographers are  
16 country bumpkins; what we mean is that their intellectual horizons and careers tend to develop  
17 within linguistic boundaries, and that these have become provincial. Second, Francophone  
18 geography has always been historically diverse, and there has always been independent, free-  
19 spirited ('franc-tireurs') geographers who have transgressed disciplinary and linguistic  
20 boundaries, delivering substantial scientific inputs in the process. We are therefore analyzing a  
21 mainstream tendency here. Thirdly, specific subfields within the discipline (e.g., physical  
22 geography, GIS, and locational analysis) have taken advantage of their more standardized  
23 publishing norms to participate in international debates held in English. Our intervention here  
24 addresses the situation in human (social, political, cultural) geography. Last, and under  
25 significant pressure (e.g., neoliberal reforms, competition for tenured jobs, and rating

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<sup>2</sup> Provincialism. Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary – Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/provincialism> (accessed: November 11, 2012). We deliberately chose an online dictionary to underline the material difficulties of access to Anglo materials from outside the Anglo sphere.

1 assessments), the French core of the Francophone subsystem is rapidly seeking to become more  
2 international, especially within younger generations; in this regard, our analysis is a diagnosis of  
3 the present situation as burdened by past inheritances.

### 4 5 **3. Mapping a provincial subsystem**

6 The Francophone province of geography can be described as a subsystem within international  
7 geography, because it has long been structured around a strong core, “peripheral” interfaces,  
8 “margins”, and “dependents.” The system’s core has a proud national history in geography: the  
9 Vidalian school was once dominant internationally, and French was one of the main languages  
10 used at international conferences - it has – rather quaintly – remained one of the two official  
11 languages of the International Geography Union. The national disciplinary debates around  
12 concepts and geography’s future has been lively and strong. This internal, deep-rooted strength  
13 might have been the main reason for both the existence and sustainability of a Francophone  
14 subsystem. It has also been sustained by steady relationships between its French core and its so-  
15 called perceived “margins,” some of which are innovative and open to the world (e.g., Quebec,  
16 Francophone Switzerland, and Belgium<sup>3</sup>) and act as interfaces, while others (e.g., North and  
17 West Africa) come across more as dominated peripheries, locked in a neocolonial, institutional,  
18 and financial, dependence. They have long been privileged sites for fieldwork for French  
19 geographers. Many North African and West African geographers still come to France for their  
20 PhD, and seek to publish in French journals. Research networks and collaborations between  
21 geographers in the former colonies and geographers in France have benefited both sides, because  
22 they have offered easy international exposure and international research partners – often  
23 prerequisites to obtain funding. They also provided French geography with a welcome exposure  
24 to the *other*, although from a secure power position.

25 This subsystem could be called provincial, because it was idiosyncratic as well as relatively  
26 closed and autonomous vis-à-vis so-called international geography; as a result, it lacked exposure  
27 to international debates (definitions 1, 2, and 4). This somewhat caricaturing statement points to

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<sup>3</sup> Because we situate our analysis in the French core, we will not address non-French Francophone geographies here, except to insist that their position between French-speaking, English-speaking, and German-speaking geographies has given them a remarkable vitality. They have often been agents of change for French geography (Claval, 1998).

1 the fact that French authors, located in the influential core, tended to debate only geographical  
2 concepts in French and to quote mostly references in French. The following reasons help explain  
3 this situation:

4 1) This set of theories and references was perceived as self-sustaining. The notion of  
5 *territoire*/territory, for instance, as theorized by Roger Brunet (1990), Joël Bonnemaïson (1981),  
6 Maryvonne Le Berre (1992), Bernard Debarbieux (2000), or Jacques Lévy (2000) is at the core of  
7 much geography work in French. It is very difficult to have an international discussion about a  
8 body of untranslated theory (Fall, 2007).

9 2) Outsiders' perspectives have often been considered irrelevant to local debates and have even  
10 been summarily dismissed. Ironically, this might be especially true of contributions that make use  
11 of "French theory" (Cusset, 2003; Varii Auctores, 2004), in a bizarre though ironic reversal of the  
12 disciplinary Orientalism pointed out by Fall (2012): Chivallon argues that 'it is scarcely possible  
13 to speak of 'postmodern geography' in France without suspicion of scientific heresy' (2003:  
14 406).

15 3) The Francophone subsystem has long remained fairly sustainable, dynamic, and open to new  
16 ideas, because innovative intellectual exchanges occurred through interdisciplinary collaborations  
17 with other Francophone researchers in other social sciences (e.g., sociologists and historians)  
18 rather than through international collaborations with non-French-speaking geographers.

19 This subsystem was sustained by internal legitimation processes and institutional specificities  
20 (including shortcomings), achieved through local (provincial) journals, conferences, and  
21 institutions, in which a specific system of French-centered norms was enforced:

22 1) Peer-reviewed disciplinary journals such as *L'Espace géographique* (considered the flagship  
23 of French geography, founded in 1972 by Roger Brunet), the *Annales de géographie* (founded in  
24 1891 by Paul Vidal de La Blache), and many other regional or thematic journals publish articles  
25 overwhelmingly written in French, written mainly by French authors. Indeed, as Bajerski (2011:  
26 308) has shown, in French journals 82% of authors and 67% of references are French. Most  
27 reviewers are also French. Conversely, gaining access to the main international journals is  
28 extremely difficult and limited: for instance, CNRS, which is fairly resourceful and which funds

1 many university research teams, does not provide access to journals such as *Antipode*, and only  
2 JSTOR access to *Area* with a six-year delay.

3 2) As far as geography is concerned, institutions of learning (universities), research (CNRS), and  
4 evaluation (CNU, Comité national de la Recherche scientifique), tended to function in French,  
5 with French norms and mostly French colleagues, with a few exceptions in the form of  
6 colleagues based in Francophone institutions, to provide an international hue.

7 3) Research subjects – for instance, PhD subjects – deal mostly with the French-speaking  
8 universe: 32% of all the PhDs submitted in France between 1990 and 1994 dealt with France and  
9 44% with former French colonies (Knafou, 1997).

10 4) There was a general lack of international mobility, due to financial constraints and the lack of  
11 supporting structures. For instance, sabbaticals are very few – 15 to 20 per year only offered by  
12 the main source, the CNRS between 2000 and 2008 for 1100 to 1300 possible candidates - and  
13 difficult to obtain – having had a sabbatical in the previous 10 years acts as a disqualifier for a  
14 sabbatical from the CNU, the second main provider nationally<sup>4</sup>. Also, all university lecturers  
15 must teach 192 hours per year (that is, 8-10 courses); this comparatively heavy teaching load is  
16 made heavier by the lack of teaching assistants to help mark exams, together with a shortage of  
17 support staff, which leaves many routine administrative tasks to faculty.

18 5) Building a successful academic career in France requires a French-centered publishing and  
19 networking strategy.

20 Mastering this French-centered, provincial subsystem was a prerequisite to become an academic  
21 geographer in France. On top of all this, knowing, using, and publishing within the Anglo  
22 theoretical framework - a huge investment in own money and time - has long been perceived as  
23 very tough and probably not worth the effort.

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<sup>4</sup> Source: *Bilan de la mandature 2000-2004 de la section 39* ([http://slr39.free.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=35](http://slr39.free.fr/article.php3?id_article=35), accessed February 6, 2013); *Rapports de conjuncture de la section 39* (2003: [http://slr39.free.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=21](http://slr39.free.fr/article.php3?id_article=21); 2010: [http://www.cnrs.fr/comitenational/doc/rapport/2010/Rappeconj\\_2010\\_interactif.pdf](http://www.cnrs.fr/comitenational/doc/rapport/2010/Rappeconj_2010_interactif.pdf)); participant observation of one of the authors for the 39th section of the Comité national 2004-2008 and the CNU since 2012.



#### 4. The issue of language: Mourning translation, and beyond

Last, the Francophone subsystem is also structured by language, and by a single but international language at that<sup>5</sup>, which corresponds to definition 3 of *provincial*. The question of language in geography is a fascinating and expanding research field. Certainly, being able to write in English – and to pay for editing/proofreading – is the first obstacle to overcome when one wants to enter international debates and has little to do with scientific relevance (Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Aalbers, 2004). The main journals’ persisting Anglo bias has been well documented (see Gutierrez and Lopez-Nieva, 2001; Vaiou, 2003; Bański and Ferenc, forthcoming). However, in our view, this is just one part of the problem. Crucial disciplinary keywords can have very different meanings in various languages, which leads to very different ways of thinking. To name just one example, Anglo geographical debates often rely on the dialectic between space and place. Because of different conceptualizations of place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*), this dialectic is meaningless in French. *Lieu* is not a “humanized space” nor a “[setting] in which social relations and identity are constituted” (Johnston, 2000: 582sq). In Francophone geography and particularly in the widely used *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l’espace des sociétés*, *lieu* is mainly a kind of space within which distance is considered irrelevant. Unlike with Anglo conceptualizations, the question of a sense of place, or the opposition between place and space to analyze the relationships between local specificities and general processes, are not central to the debate. By contrast, the *Dictionnaire* doesn’t oppose *lieu* to space but to *aire* (area), a kind of space in which distance is considered relevant (Lévy and Lussault, 2003). *Territoires* are understood as an example of an areal space with topographical metrics, as opposed to *réseaux* (networks), which have topological metrics; metrics being a way of measuring distance within a space. Hence, Francophone geographical thought is not structured by the place/space dialectic, but by a trialectical relationship between *lieu*, *réseau*, and *territoire*. As a result, translating geographical texts is anything but straightforward. Translating a concept can lead to the loss some of the original connotations and relational meanings (Olwig, 2002). A fundamental keyword such as *space* or *place* is necessarily a node of intertextuality: it refers to other texts, other images, and

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<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting here to draw a comparison with Russian or Arab geographies, which are also elaborated in an international language.

1 other meanings that cannot circulate simultaneously through translation. As a result, we must  
2 mourn for the loss of translation as equivalence (Ricœur, 2004).

3 Furthermore, is it at all useful – as opposed to ethically justified and desirable – to seek to  
4 overcome these linguistic and national boundaries within geography? Surely, social scientists –  
5 and especially geographers – cannot be bound to a single way of seeing the world: remaining  
6 provincial, limited in outlook, and unsophisticated is a failure in the ethics of science. But are  
7 these (perhaps too) foreign ideas useful to understanding one’s research object? Also, to what  
8 extent is it a scientific problem to have never read any geography literature in Arabic, Russian,  
9 Brazilian, or Chinese? Beyond Anglo geography’s hegemony and the theoretical gatekeeping in  
10 Anglo journals, as well as the strategies people might implement to circumvent them, why should  
11 anyone be compelled to use foreign ideas to make their point? Imported theories do not  
12 inherently deserve more respect than locally rooted ones. As geographers, we know that scale  
13 matters. Applying this idea to the geography of knowledge production would mean that what is  
14 scientifically relevant at a global or international level might not be relevant at a local level, and  
15 vice versa. While such a distinction deserves careful consideration, it also holds risks: first, we  
16 risk legitimating the exclusion of subaltern discourses; second, we may overlook the ethical,  
17 scientific, and political question of who decides what is relevant, useful, and operable and what is  
18 not. This debate comes up against the distinction between the ethics of accessibility and the  
19 pragmatics of science. We care, but does it matter?

20 We believe it does, if we consider translation an opportunity for increased reflexivity (Bruns &  
21 Zichner 2009; Crane et al. 2009). Certainly, moving and thinking between languages, probing  
22 their points of friction as well as “les champs de force que les langues créent entre elles, avec des  
23 problèmes qui naissent de leurs différences et parfois de leurs convergences – apparentes ou  
24 réelles, et c’est tout le problème” (Wismann, 2012: 13) might lead to new ways of  
25 conceptualizing and articulating concepts. Even better if this happens between more than two  
26 languages, in order to go beyond the English/non-English binary, also linguistically. As Wismann  
27 (2012: 102) notes, the “Babel effect” might have been the most productive moment in human  
28 history. New ways of thinking can indeed be *found* in translation, as long as translation is

1 understood and practiced as a process that is never-ending, dialogical, and fraught with heuristic  
2 tensions.

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## 5 **References**

6 In line with our own hypothesis, we propose an experimental bibliography, centered around the  
7 main references in French, and including contributions by 'other' geographers (i.e. based in non-  
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