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“Can these words, commonly applied to the Anglo-Saxon social sciences, fit the French?” Circulation, translation and reception of radical geography in the French academic context

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For the observer of French geography, the identification of its ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ currents immediately poses a basic problem: can these words, commonly applied to the Anglo-Saxon social sciences, fit the French? (Lévy 1985, p. 9)

More than thirty years after Jacques Lévy asked it, his question remains germane. How possible is it to transfer words from one intellectual and linguistic context to another? Further, can concepts and rules brought from one context organize and structure an intellectual community in a different one? Central to my chapter is the question: is it possible to take *radical geography* that is deeply linked to the intellectual and political context of the United States of the 1960s and 1970s and translate it both linguistically and conceptually so it has meaning for contemporary geographers in France? Despite attempts during the 1970s to politicize French geography, it remains deeply indebted to the Vidalian intellectual legacy (Buttimer 1971). It is true that Yves Lacoste promoted a Marxist approach to geography in *Hérodote*, the journal he founded in 1976. But Lévy argued that there was a significant difference between the Marxism of Anglophone radical geography and the Marxism of Lacoste’s *géopolitique*. *Lacoste’s* was always deeply committed to international political action rather than the construction of theory as such (Lévy 1984). That said, since the 1990s with the globalization of the academy, contemporary French geography has become more connected than ever with Anglophone geography. So, are there now signs of an emerging Anglophone-inflected community of French radical geographers?

Certainly, there seem to have been changes recently. For example, sessions on critical and radical geography are now held during the *Festival International de Géographie*, a forum to connect academics to the outside public. Critical and radical geography are also now taught to students within the university. In 2015, candidates who sat for the *agrégation de géographie* were asked about the links between geography, geographers and power.¹

This visibility of radical geography is the result of a process that started three decades ago. During the 1980s, the very popular handbook, *Les Concepts de la Géographie Humaine*, provided a comprehensive review of radical geography (De Koninck 1984). In 2003, Jean-Bernard Racine dedicated an essay to radical geography in the dictionary edited by Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault (Racine 2003). Radical geography was thus admitted to mainstream French geography. It produced two kinds of issues: first, its reception in France; and second, the specific form it took, which became *géographie (critique et) radicale*.² My chapter examines how, why and when Anglophone radical geography crossed the Atlantic; and how these epistemological, theoretical, critical and methodological proposals were then received in France and assimilated within its geographical tradition.

¹ *Agrégation* is a high-level competitive exam to recruit teachers to secondary schools, but it is also to distinguish academics who work in a university. *Agrégation* symbolises the French conservative and elite academic system.

² *Géographie radicale* is the French geographical designation of *radical geography*. It suggests that French geographers perceive radical geography as originating from the US, and it also connotes the form taken by radical geography.

In this short chapter I make use of two main sources of information. The first are various databases used to document academic activities, such as *Calenda*³ (a calendar for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences that has promoted academic events for more than 15 years). I also use three bibliographical databases to track references and citations to radical geography, or to its main authors: *Persée*,⁴ *OpenEdition Journals*,⁵ and *Cairn*.⁶ The second source are various theoretical and programmatic papers, journals and books recently published in France (translated from the English or written by French academics) that are concerned with radical geography. The close reading I give them enables me to analyse their circulation and reception, allowing the documentation of French radical geography in-the-making.⁷

The first part of the chapter is about the increasing impact of radical geography in France, providing an explanation of the growing interest in radical and critical thought within French social science, especially Geography. The second part focuses on the links between geography and Marxism in the French academic context. The final section discusses the specificities of the *géographie critique et radicale "à la française"* (Morange and Calbérac 2012). I suggest that approach takes a hybrid form, combining a strong French tradition of an emphasis on social and political issues, and an Anglophone emphasis on critical and radical research.

1. The contemporary emergence of radical geography in France

According to Cécile Gintrac, the height of radical geography in France was around 2010 to 2012 (Gintrac 2017). During these three years, radical geography gained its greatest prominence and its broadest audience. In documenting this period, I focus on: editorial activities (1.1); academic events (1.2); and the geographical sites of radical geography along with their main actors (1.3).

1.1 A thriving publishing market

According to Matthieu Giroud in his preface to the French translation of David Harvey's *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (Harvey 2012a), and Serge Weber (Weber 2012) who interviewed the pool of translators who worked on that book, contemporary interest in radical geography in France is because of the recent availability of French translations of Anglophone writings by radical geographers.

Radical geography was known in France long before 2010. Paul Claval (1977) wrote about it in the 1970s, and De Koninck (1984) and Racine (2003) provided reviews in respectively a handbook and a dictionary. However, the authors of the latter two publications, did not live and teach in France, but in respectively Canada and Switzerland. Even though they spoke and taught in French, their intellectual communities were Anglophone. They recognised the lack of interest in radical geography in France and tried to fill that gap using their own familiarity with the English-language literature.

³ <http://www.calenda.org>

⁴ <http://www.persee.fr>

⁵ journals.openedition.org

⁶ <http://www.cairn.info>

⁷ This chapter deals with only the French context, and it is written from France. Hence, bibliographical materials used are mostly in French. The chapter also aims to decolonialize the dominant Anglophone geography by scrutinizing what occurs on its Gallic margins.

There was further interest following the publication of Jean-François Staszak's (2001) edited collection, *Géographies Anglo-Saxonnes*. While French academics are most used to publishing handbooks that offer a comprehensive view of a field, Staszak preferred the unusual format of a reader to introduce a French audience to the diversity and complexity of contemporary Anglophone geography. The book consisted of an introduction, several translated founding texts, and a set of individual chapters each about a major field in Anglophone geography. Topics included feminism, postcolonialism, and of course radical geography. Béatrice Collignon's introduction explained the historical and ideological backgrounds of radical geography, and there were three newly translated papers: Harvey's (1992), Merrifield's (1995), and Peet's (1997). The book played a crucial role in allowing a French audience to read some Anglophone major texts that previously were not easily accessible, as well as introducing brand new perspectives such as postmodernity,⁸ and critical and radical geography.

Things accelerated after 2007 thanks to the fact that David Harvey's papers and books were now normally translated into French. Indeed, Harvey dominated French discussions of radical geography, becoming effectively its sole representative. His papers were translated in journals such as the Marxist *Actuel Marx* (Harvey 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), and in compendiums. His *Géographie et Capital: Vers un Matérialisme Historico-Géographique* (Harvey 2014c) was specially designed for French readers⁹: it is a collection of papers selected and organized to illustrate Harvey's spatial and historical materialism.

Harvey's books are also regularly translated: *The New Imperialism* (Harvey 2010), *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (Harvey 2012a), *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (Harvey 2012b), *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Harvey 2014a) and *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Harvey 2015). As the increasing pace of translation suggests, Harvey has become a major author in France. His primacy occludes other radical geographers and the specifics of their radical approaches, however. Further, the timings of the translations are often linked to events and processes in France. For example, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* was translated only when it was clear that gentrification was occurring in Paris, and associated with a debate around the right to the city (Clerval 2008). Or again, the non-translation into French of *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Harvey 2008) was a result of disinterest by French geographers in the cultural turn (Claval and Staszak 2008). Other of his books, especially from the 1980s and 1990s, have also not been translated. Nonetheless, Harvey has become *the* author to read. His books are regularly reviewed (for instance Clerval 2012) and he is interviewed (Mangeot et al. 2012). Ironically, David Harvey is now better known than when in 1995 he was awarded in France, in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, the IGU Vautrin-Lud Prize, the Nobel prize for geography.

1.2 A radical calendar

Alongside these publications, various academic events have been organised in French universities to promote radical approaches. Some have an epistemological purpose, to clarify historical, ideological and theoretical backgrounds. That was the goal of the first issue of the 2012 volume of the journal, *Les Carnets de Géographes* (Morange and Calbérac 2012). It was the first collective reflexion in French geography aimed at clarifying a radical approach "à la française." On the one hand, it elucidated the meaning of critical and radical approaches

⁸ Thanks to that book and its authors, postmodernity became an issue that was debated in French geography from the beginning of the 2000s (Collignon and Staszak 2004).

⁹ Its title, given by the editors, sounds so French!

(Gintrac 2012) including the specific practices of radical academics in the US (Vergnaud 2012). On the other hand, the journal grappled with how to perform radical approaches within a French context. Meanwhile, a workshop, “*Épistémologie des Savoirs Géographiques*,”¹⁰ was organized on May 24th, 2012 in Lyon by Cécile Gintrac and Martine Drozd.¹¹ It pointed to the two different roots of radicality within French geography: the legacy of Elisée Reclus from the end of the 19th century; and American radical geography from the 1960s and 1970s.

Two major symposia have also punctuated the French critical and radical debate. The first organized in March 2008 at Nanterre University was dedicated to spatial justice¹² – “*Justice et Injustice Spatiale*” – a field opened by radical geography during the 1970s that paid tribute to Henri Lefebvre’s legacy at the University in which he taught (Lefebvre 1968). This event gave an opportunity to evaluate Lefebvre’s influence on both the social sciences (Revol 2012) and radical geography (Brennetot 2011). That symposia led to a special issue of *Annales de Géographie* (Gervais-Lambony and Dufaux 2009), and an edited book (Bret *et al.* 2010). Moreover, a journal dedicated to spatial justice – *JS/SJ*¹³ – was founded following the symposium. This stimulated great interest in radical geography, opening the way for numerous translations. The second symposia – “*Espace et Rapports Sociaux de Domination: Chantiers de Recherche*” – was on September 2012¹⁴ in Marne-la-Vallée University. It can be considered the birth place of French radical geography. It was designed as a dialogue between prestigious US radical geographers (such as Neil Smith, Don Mitchell, Pierpaolo Mudu and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro) and young Francophone researchers who presented their Marxist-inspired geographical work. Its proceedings are now an indispensable reference (Clerval *et al.* 2015).

1.3 Mapping, embodying and historicizing French radical geography

Mapping these events and locating the main actors demonstrates that French radical geography has its own geography. Key have been the universities of Nanterre and Marne-la-Vallée. Both are in Paris’s suburbs. Nanterre was created at the beginning of the 1960s in the West of Paris, famously known as the starting point of the May 1968 crisis. Marne-la-Vallée was inaugurated in the 1990s in an Eastern suburb of Paris. Academics in both universities (geographers and, more broadly, social scientists) work on common political and social issues. There is also an important geography outside the university. For example, there are the sites of the publishing houses eager to promote Marxists theories such as *Les Prairies Ordinaires*, and Harvey’s first French publisher. Its founder, Nicolas Vieillescazes (an English-to-French translator), played a crucial role in introducing Harvey to Francophone academics.

Within this wider French geography, specific actors promoted radical approaches. On the one hand, there were Marxists primarily interested in theory. While they praised Harvey, it was because he was a Marxist theorist not because he was a geographer.¹⁵ On the other hand, there

¹⁰ <https://calenda.org/208599>

¹¹ Cécile Gintrac both witnessed the rise of radical geography (Gintrac 2015a), and was a participant (Gintrac and Giroud 2014). Martine Drozd is a critical and radical geographer (Drozd, Gintrac, and Mekdjian 2012). She is especially a critic of the neo-liberal city.

¹² Call for papers: <http://calenda.org/192718>; program: <http://calenda.org/194494>

¹³ *Justice spatiale / Spatial justice* is a bilingual online journal: <https://www.jssj.org/>

¹⁴ Call for papers: <http://calenda.org/204854>; program: <http://calenda.org/209020>

¹⁵ This point of view is still quite uncommon in France insofar as the university is structured by disciplines (geography, sociology...) rather than by field studies (gender studies, Marxist studies...) (Monteil and Romerio 2017).

were geographers who were interested in Marxism because they wanted new approaches to the discipline. They were composed of the generation born during the 1960s (Jean-François Staszak, Béatrice Collignon, Philippe Gervais-Lambony or Frédéric Dufaux) who trained in foreign (especially Anglophone) universities; and the generation born at the end of the 1970s (Anne Clerval, Matthieu Giroud, Serge Weber Julien Rebotier) or at the beginning of the 1980s (Cécile Gintrac or Martine Drozd). This latter group were fluent in English, curious about the Anglo-American discipline, and conscious of the linguistic domination of Anglophone geography (Houssay-Holzschuch and Milhaud 2013).

Those academic events dedicated to radical geography and especially to its leaders during the 2000s and 2010s in France prompt us to focus on the potential links between French geography and Marxism.

2. A new space for Marxism in French geography

The various elements discussed in the first part of this chapter put the stress on two phenomena, deeply linked: first, the contemporary interest of French for English-language geography (including a radical one); and second, the growing interest by French geographers in Marxism, even though interest in Marxism has been declining within the human sciences since the end of the “Golden age” during the 1960s and 1970s.

2.1 Has French geography become radical?

More than a craze for radical approaches,¹⁶ the contemporary context reveals a keen interest for English-language geography that started during the 1990s and the 2000s. Geographers born during the 1960s and the 1970s, read English, and completed their education abroad, strongly urged French academics not to remain isolated in the periphery but instead to be at the centre. Translations – such as Staszak’s (2001) – empowered French geographers to participate in a worldwide debate. Meanwhile, because of the Internet, the English-language literature was increasingly opened to French readers. French libraries typically did not systematically collect foreign books and journals. Consequently, it was not until the 2000s that more and more French geographers were finally able to catch up with what had occurred in the English-language geography during the prior few decades. Both the radical geography of the 1960s and 1970s and the later critical and cultural geography of 1980s and 1990s thus arrived at the same time. That’s why this English-language geography is called *géographie critique et radicale*, paying no attention to the differences between the two approaches: *critique* because it is about undermining foundations, continually renewing the academic tradition; and *radical*, because of its connection to Marxism, which continues to assert both some intellectual foundation and a broad academic tradition.¹⁷ Consequently, radical geography appears diluted in its French language version.

French geography, therefore, has not massively adopted the radical turn. Because French geography has been defined by an empirical approach rather than by theory and political commitment, when radical geography has been adopted it prompted geographers to focus on substantive topics such as domination or inequality, rather than abstract conceptual innovation.

¹⁶ On the history of Marxism in French geography, see Pailhé 2003.

¹⁷ In French, *radical* designates the moderate left-wing of the political chessboard.

Paradoxically, the radicalness of radical geography has not been demonstrated by geographers, but by non-geographers. It is French Marxist sociologists, philosophers, and historians (especially those who first translated Harvey's texts in journals such as *Actuel Marx* or *Vacarme*, or in books published by Les Prairies ordinaire), who paid most attention to David Harvey as an exegete of Marx. Only then, after these translations, did those French Marxists invite geographers to consider and explore Harvey's thought, and more broadly, the project of radical geography (Harvey 2012a).¹⁸

2.2 A brand new Marxism?

The increased interest in *géographie radicale* reflects a larger shift that has occurred within French Marxism since the 1960s and 1970s. Then the dominant form of French Marxism was structuralism (Dosse 1991, 1992). After the fall of the USSR and the rise of neo-liberalism during the 1980 and 1990 (Cusset and Meyran 2016), French Marxism was reinvented. Whereas French Marxism of the 1960 and the 1970 was linked to the very powerful *Parti Communiste Français* and its structuralist interpretation, Marxists of the 1990s and the 2000s were eager to turn to original texts and interpretations. That partly explains why David Harvey became a major reference: his *Companion to Marx's Capital* (Harvey 2012b) echoes and replaces Althusser's *Lire "le Capital"* (Althusser, Balibar and Establet 1965).

Because of David Harvey and others, reference to the spatial is now *de rigueur* (Soja 1989; Warf and Arias 2009). French geographers consequently began promoting critical and radical approaches. Forty years after it first appeared, French geographers have now assimilated radical geography. But what kind of radical geography is this French *géographie radicale*?

3. Radical geography "à la française"

To understand the French form of radical geography, we need to scrutinize prefaces, introductions to translations, proceedings of conference, book reviews, and programmatic manifestos. In them we find judgments made of Anglophone radical geography, as well as strategies for bringing that approach into the French geographical tradition.

3.1 Encountering Anglophone and Francophone geographies

Reflections about radical geography in France inevitably start with the history of French geography. The interest in social power, domination and inequalities began in French geography long before American radical geography existed. It started with Reclus at the end of the 19th century, then Renée Rochefort during the 1960s (Claval 1967), Lacoste during the 1970s (Hepple 2000), and finally the French school of social geography from the 1980s (Frémont *et al.* 1984; Di Méo and Buléon 2005). All these approaches made social and political issues central. This inventory of French geography both upsets the usual history that radical geography was born in North America during the 1960s, and acts as a prompt to discover more about a seemingly lost French intellectual tradition. While French geography may now appear to be in debt to Anglophone radical geography, in the past it exported its own radical approaches.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that radical geography was not the only new approach to enter French geography from Anglo-America. There were other critical

¹⁸ Only after the pioneer translation by Béatrice Collignon in Staszak 2001, did geographers for the first time consider seriously David Harvey's works.

approaches assimilated during the same period such as humanistic geography and the “cultural turn.” In this sense, radical geography was only one element in a broader *géographie critique et radicale* (Morange and Calbérac 2012) that reshaped French geography.

3.2 Fieldwork against theory?

The inclusion of radical geography within the general category of *géographie critique et radicale* circumvents a debate long bedeviling French geography that goes to the role of theory within the discipline. The reluctance to discuss theory in French geography goes back at least to Vidal de La Blache who promoted fieldwork as the main (the only?) method for geographers (Volvey, Calbérac, and Houssay-Holzschuch 2012). In their introduction to the proceedings of Marne-la-Vallée symposium, the editors focussed not on the novelty of radical geographical theory, but rather on how radical geography could usefully illuminate concrete studies of social inequality or domination *in combination with field work*.

Separating Marxist theory and its empirical study serves the purpose of blocking broad discussions of the legacy of Marxism. The place of Marxism in French social sciences (Barbe 2014), and geography in particular (Lévy 1985; Pailhé 2003), has always remained a sore spot. The move to justify the use of Marxism in geography as an empirical rather than a theoretical approach can therefore be seen as a strategy by French radical geographers to avoid contentious, fraught, even potentially embarrassing debate about Marxism. *Géographie critique et radicale*'s use is practical, to study concrete cases of social discrimination and domination.

3.3 How to be a critical and radical academic?

How to be a critical and radical academic is addressed by Camille Vergnaud (2012), Neil Smith (2015), Don Mitchell (2015), and Pierpaolo Mudu (2015). All these authors invited readers to break with the principle of academic neutrality, which is still axiological in French universities. French researchers should practice instead self-engagement, adopting ethical and reflexive approaches, and which is what they are increasingly doing. Reflexivity is more and more becoming a necessary procedure to validate methodological procedures (Calbérac and Volvey 2014).

More broadly, *géographies critiques et radicales* is a hybrid between French social geography and Anglophone critical and radical geographies. The importation of Anglophone radical geography has profoundly renewed the French geographical tradition. *Géographies critiques et radicales* is now one of the most exciting fields in the discipline, led by young and talented researchers. To answer Jacques Lévy's question: the words *critical* and *radical* perfectly fit the French context. In the *Commentary* he wrote to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary, Richard Peet said that the future of radical geography, “should not mainly consist in finding still more French authors to quote” (Peet 2000, 952–53). He is wrong. The vitality of *géographies critiques et radicales* shows that French authors are exactly those who should be quoted!

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