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# A classroom of our own: theorizing through teaching and learning at a French university

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**Abstract.** We work at rethinking our knowledge practices and at making geography and theory formation more just, and we tend to focus on research and not on teaching. Similarly, when investigating who is seen as producing legitimate theory and where, we rarely answer that students do. This contribution therefore offers a double-barreled argument: that we should also answer epistemological debates and better our practices by centering teaching in our scholarship for once and that we should consider the classroom a space for theory formation *by students*. This argument insists on the political and epistemological importance of problematizing the location of our teaching and bringing together the two traditions of feminist epistemologies and critical pedagogies.

## 1 Introduction

My (amazing) master’s students and I ran down the stairs of the Institut d’Urbanisme et de Géographie Alpine (IUGA) in Grenoble, poked our noses into faculty pigeonholes, rummaged through bike baskets, invaded faculty lounges, and startled colleagues taking a break in the yard: we were looking for clues and concepts. Tristan Dufourt and Alice Jeanne<sup>1</sup>, two other amazing students, had chosen to organize a scavenger’s hunt around the institute as the first part of the session they had to facilitate for my Worlding Epistemologies course. The session dealt with Black geographies, and we were discussing works by Hawthorne (2019) and Fleming (2017), as well as Niang and Soumahoro (2019). Tristan and Alice gave us a first set of envelopes, each of which contained a quote from one of the texts and defined a key concept. In the quote, one word or several words were underlined: they contained the clue to help us find the next concept. The “zone of non-being” was thus the unused concrete stairs, the “ship hold” was not the underground parking as we first thought but a bike basket, and “institutional racism” was hidden in the ceiling of the administrative building. After the hunt, we gathered in the classroom and discussed both the concepts and where we found them, in other terms, we practiced situated and embedded theory. Tristan and Alice

then announced that there was to be a last hunt, a collective one, without competition, as our Worlding Epistemologies class insisted on collaborative knowledge production. Armed with “seeds of knowledge” as our clue, we all ran to the IUGA self-managed garden, where we found sheets of paper attached on a long string. Texts, poems, and artwork from contemporary Black artists were printed on the sheets. A big bag of chocolate coins was attached at the end of the line. Both the snack and the session were a huge success. I asked Tristan and Alice about their pedagogical choices: they had smartly decided that a scavenger’s hunt would manifest spatially how Black geographies have been invisibilized but are structural in our everyday environment. Our reward, the chocolate coins, was explicitly chosen to point to the plantation economy, slavery, and capitalism. We, a class of white students and their white teacher, received the material reward and gorged on it – a comment on current privilege based on past and continuous exploitations and therefore on our responsibility to do our part of white-people work in order to “redistribute the burdens of redress and allow cultivating new possibilities to respond” (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2022).

I offer this story not only because I am in awe of the brilliance of my students (I am!), but also because when we work at rethinking our knowledge practices and at making geography and theory formation more just, we tend to focus on research and not on teaching. Similarly, when investigat-

<sup>1</sup>Named with their permission.

ing who is seen as producing legitimate theory and where, we rarely answer that students do. This contribution therefore offers a double-barreled argument: that we should also answer epistemological debates and better our practices by centering teaching in our scholarship for once and that we should consider the classroom a space for theory formation *by students*. This argument insists on the political and epistemological importance of problematizing the location of our teaching and bringing together the two traditions of feminist epistemologies and critical pedagogies.

The first part of my argument, centering teaching in our scholarship, means that we take “up north” the issue of Eurocentrism. This specific location, as feminist epistemologies have taught us, should be carefully and precisely unpacked, as *knowledge is situated*. This centering move is of course not against research per se, but it opposes the neoliberal university that takes research as the main metric for so-called excellence and climbing up rankings, for measuring our “productivity”, and for awarding promotions. A lot of recent higher-education reforms have prioritized research and treated teaching as punishment for faculty not publishing enough (see Le Goix et al., 2022, for the French case). The prioritizing of research by our institutions fosters individualism and competition among scholars. Time spent publishing – preferably in a journal with a high impact factor – is therefore understood by faculty as a better investment than teaching first years or pedagogical training.<sup>2</sup> In this context, teaching tends to appear as, at best, an afterthought for administrators and even as a “burden” for faculty (*la charge d’enseignement* is an often-used expression in French higher education) rather than as the core mission of universities that it is and should be. In short, among the new urgencies of geography in crisis times is “an emergency of teachers” (Morris and Stommel, 2018).

The second part of my argument, considering students to be legitimate theorists, brings us within the realm of critical pedagogies. These pedagogies, as theoretically informed practices or, better, praxes are *embedded* in specific classrooms (Giroux, 2011).

## 2 Situated (in France): centering teaching in epistemological debates

I have explored elsewhere the situation of the French geographer as a researcher (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020; Houssay-Holzschuch and Milhaud, 2013), but as a teacher, the stakes are somewhat different. While the situation of French geographical research vis-à-vis global academia can be characterized as provincial, teaching has to deal with other characteristics of mainstream France: a tendency for self-satisfied fake universalism and self-centeredness. These are harsh words, but the national political context as well as actually

<sup>2</sup>Precarious faculty are in an incredibly difficult position here, caught between a rock and a hard place.

existing teaching practices give them some content. The national context, exacerbated under Emmanuel Macron’s increasingly illiberal government, is one of xenophobia and Islamophobia – see the very recent *Loi Immigration* while considering itself the epitome of democracy and culture. It is also one of self-styled universalism, the *patrie des droits de l’homme* (fatherland of Man’s rights) whose government insist on the use of “Man” instead of “human”, considering the masculine to be both neutral and universal (Bosvieux-Onyekwelu, 2020). France is indeed in dire need of being explicitly provincialized (Mbembe, 2010).

This national situation and unjustified Gallocentric exceptionalism are evidently diffracted to higher education – scientific socialization, theoretical references, funding priorities, and the choice of research sites as well as a relatively poor command of languages other than French are all too often reflected in teaching. A geography of erasures and ignorance in, say, undergraduate bibliographies would show that very few non-Francophone contemporary authors are taught and that the main concepts learned by students have been developed by the same Francophone tradition. While this is getting better, in part due to more translations from English, a very telling symptom of this isolation is that the French case is used as an all too frequent but *implicit* reference. For instance, when I picked up the Introduction to Human Geography first-year course in 2015, I realized that my predecessors had made it mostly about the geography of France, while never saying so or stating whether the French case was representative, exceptional, symptomatic, etc. of more global dynamics. A similar bias can be observed in many undergraduate books.

There are many theoretical, epistemological, and political consequences of this situation. The theoretical canon (authors, concepts, and theory-generating cases) is strictly delimited. Students are not taught to place the country where they learn within a more theoretical frame of reference, nor are they taught how their specific situation shapes what they learn in order to be able to leverage this case critically – as Hilbrandt and Ren (2022) did with the Swiss *Sonderfall* – or to work at decentering themselves to gain more perspectives (see below). Of course, such a monolingual, national, and exceptionalist view is to be found in many countries (Kinkaid and Fritzsche, 2022), as geography has long been used for nation building and nationalistic purposes. Teaching the heuristics of our respective national cases is therefore crucial.

Moreover, we have to work at explicitly bringing the world into the classroom to systematically reinscribe the world in our geographical discussions. In short, we have to *geographieren*, as the Ancient Greek name of our discipline suggests, i.e., write the world. Of course, as pedagogies are embedded, this needs to be done in sync with who our students really are and what they do in other classrooms. Several of my colleagues teach participatory action research: inscribing teaching and learning into local communities’ needs is there-

fore taken care of in other courses. My part of the job is to open up perspectives.

### 3 Embedded: students as theorists

Grenoble undergraduate geography students comprise many first-generation students, coming from either the rural Alps that surround the city or the city's working class, often of migrant descent, as well as EU students from the Erasmus exchange program and students coming from further away (mostly northern and western Africa as well as China). In other words, students themselves bring the world into our common classroom. The relative financial and administrative accessibility of French universities, with very low fees (under EUR 400 per year, including social security and health care) and a legal right of access for anyone who has completed secondary school (namely 80 % of an age cohort), makes our classrooms relatively open in terms of class. However, the current inflation, the consequences of the ongoing pandemic and of recent government measures, and students' structural social vulnerability have increased poverty and precariousness: in 2023, over a third of French students regularly skipped a meal due to poverty (<https://cop1.fr/ressources/>, last access: 16 December 2023). In racial terms, the majority of Grenoble geography students remain white (and are whiter at master's level).

Reinscribing the world in the classroom also means working against monolingual theorizing and thinking (a consequence of our situatedness), but, in the classroom, one has to deal with the deep insecurities many students feel about working in other languages, especially English. On average, a third of students in an undergraduate class feel that a text in English is inaccessible for them, and they are so discouraged by previous experiences that it is often difficult for them to even try. The drawbacks of Anglo-hegemony have been amply identified, and I do advocate for more multilingual social sciences. However, opening perspectives for my students also means helping them cross the bridge to reading international research published in English so as to have access to current debates and theories and to work from colleagues from China, Brazil, or South Africa. Teaching is always a labor of translation – couching ideas and knowledge in a language people can understand and building bridges (Hammond and Cook, 2023). In the classroom, I try to replace apprehension by playfulness, for instance by reading aloud poetry in German, a language often none of them understands. Heinrich Heine's *Die schlesischen Weber* helps us reframe not understanding as unproblematic, as the poem's rhythm and sounds convey the hammering of the loom and swish of the shuttle. I insist on not replacing one monolingualism (French) by another one (English), and we often end up speaking one language and inserting words in others. Not translating is therefore reframed as translation: concepts can be kept in their original language if they do not have an

equivalent elsewhere (Law and Mol, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Students contribute with the other languages they speak, enriching our conceptual vocabulary: we do theorize in tongues.

Students' theorizing goes hand in hand with reinscribing the world in the geography classroom, as it allows them to assess the validity of their analysis and interpretations: are their conceptual claims valid beyond the case we are studying at the moment and therefore on their way to theory? One of the first years' favorite exercises, the "Triple Three", is designed to help them in this endeavor. Students spend a semester learning about the various processes that produce space during the course and track them on topographical maps of France during the practical component of the course (*travaux dirigés*).<sup>4</sup> For the Triple Three at the end of the semester, each student has to choose a place out of three possibilities: where they are, where they would like to be, or wherever they feel is home. They have to present it to the class for 3 min, using a map (Open Street Map, Google Maps/Google Earth, online repositories, or a print from the library can all be used), and find three relevant concepts. Over the years, we have collectively got to know and theorize with and from small villages in the Alps or Sardinia, Los Alamos or the Seychelles, and Algiers or Nevşehir and its troglodyte neighbor Derinkuyu in Cappadocia. A student even chose to travel in time and took us to the eighteenth-century Massif Central thanks to a historical map: he deliberately started from the concept of the landscape as a palimpsest and showed us the reconstituted "original text" of pre-modern patterns of settlement and production. Others had us simply travel to Mordor or inside a video game. All places were linked to students' family histories or dreams: they were intensely personal, even intimate. For each place, students theorized, that is, selected, relevant concepts going beyond the specificities of a place they knew and teased out for their audience what that place teaches us about geography in general, about cities, about landscape formation, etc. Sharing them brought distant places into people's personal realm: in 2021, a Chinese student spoke about his home town, Wuhan; the same year, a Ukrainian student took us through the streets of old Kyiv. Suddenly, Wuhan was not only the place from which Covid-19 came, but also the home of a classmate. And when Russia invaded Ukraine a couple of months later,

<sup>3</sup>These ideas are part of an ongoing discussion with Claire Placial (Université de Lorraine).

<sup>4</sup>Commenting on 1 : 50 000 and 1 : 25 000 topographical maps from the French National Institute of Geographic and Forest Information (IGN) is a classic exercise of French geography. It dates back to the Vidalians; is a staple of most geography curricula; and has been a key element of many competitive exams, including the CAPES and *agrégation* for future history and geography middle- and high-school teachers (Jaurand, 2003). The organization of the Grenoble curriculum requires that students learn this in the practical component of the course for the Introduction to Human Geography first-year course. I taught that course, as well as the practical component of the course, for several years (2014–2023).

students remembered they had found Kyiv so beautiful that many wished to go and visit. The Triple Three thus allows for critically important pedagogical, theoretical, and epistemological practices as first-year students practice theorizing – from the specific to the general – and juggle with concepts: they conceptualize from their own experience as well as experience theorizing, thereby gaining an understanding of how we know things, a.k.a. epistemology. Moreover, their experience of theory and epistemology is from the start critical; both intimidating notions are grounded in a specific and familiar place, in a moment in time, and in social relations shaped by the classroom.

#### 4 The long game

hooks (1994) has famously reminded us that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy”. Turning to teaching is definitely one of the possible “tactical shift[s] to play by a different standard or a different game”, suggested by Hilbrandt and Ren (2022), operationalizing our often-underused pedagogical freedom. “Staying under the radar” of institutions, who often do not care that much about students, allows us to co-construct with students the classroom as a space in which other ways of thinking and theorizing can find shelter. Not forgetting about teaching when we theorize and work towards more just geographies, even centering teaching for once, is important because, in the words of Gannon (2020), “[p]edagogy is political. Our pedagogy is a declaration of what we think matters”. My own journey as a French scholar of urban geography and post-apartheid South Africa has helped me to start uncovering my own positionality, unlearning and decentering my ways of doing geography to embrace other less Eurocentric and more critical theories and epistemologies. In a way, bringing them to my Grenoble classrooms is a homecoming and a prefigurative politics of the good university (Connell, 2019; Springer et al., 2016). “Teaching”, says Gannon (2020), “is a radical act of hope”, and our teaching practices “are radical, in that word’s literal sense: they are endeavours aimed at fundamental, root-level transformation. And they are acts of hope because they imagine that process of transformation as one in which a better future takes shape out of our students’ critical refusal to abide by the limitations of the present”. Let us then commit to teaching as a praxis in the here and now.

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