

RIVALRIES FOR POWER, REPRESENTATIONS AND FRONTIERS IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY OF THE FRENCH GEOPOLITICAL SCHOOL

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Abstract. *The study aims to provide a brief introduction to the theoretical and methodological aspects of the French School of Geopolitics, mainly represented by Yves Lacoste and his disciples, grouped especially around the Hérodote magazine. We will insist on some key concepts specific to French geopolitics: power rivalries, representations, territories, borders, which help us to understand the explanatory and analytical approaches of a discipline that has the ambition to provide an epistemologically pertinent comprehension on the main dynamics of the contemporary world.*

Keywords: *French geopolitics, representations, frontiers, rivalries, Hérodote magazine*

Introduction

In recent decades, geopolitics has experienced an extraordinary career, surmounting the undesirable memory of its beginnings, when its theoretical dimension, reflecting on relations between man and territory, was instrumentalized in order to offer a bail to various politico-military strategies. However, an epistemic ambiguity related to its principles, methods, aims and limits persists, reflecting its incapacity to structure a univocal perspective on a multidisciplinary approach situated between more fields of study, utilizing their resources but without identifying itself with any of them. The French school aims precisely to ground geopolitics based on a conceptual and methodological rigor, with a precise circumscription of the realm of reality that it has the legitimacy to observe, to analyse it and to issue pertinent explanations and sometimes even prospective strategies.

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*Developing the French School
within a Controversial Discipline*

Geopolitics emerged towards the end of 19th century and, during its first decades, it did not represent a neutral comprehension instrument, but rather an ideological initiative or multiple academic perspectives on conditionalities between humans and geography. In this latter case, it represented the product of development in geography disciplines, developed especially during colonialism, when contact with new populations and territories imposed a theoretical and methodological approach on physical and human geography. A secondary consequence of this development was the intensification of reflections on relations between political and military power on one hand, and territory on the other, particularly in the context of nation-states' formation and apparition of borders and of Europe, simultaneous with powerful states' global projection of power. Geography becomes an epistemic instrument of the political field, as it used to be from the very beginning a part of the military sciences utilized to gain correct knowledge on the territory in order to dominate it. Not accidentally, the founder of modern French geopolitical school, Yves Lacoste, named one of his books: *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre (Geography serves first to make war)*¹.

Geopolitics originated from the intersection of two major developments at the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century: the achievements of 'academic' geography on one hand, and the imperative needs of major powers to conceptualize political and military interests and strategies on the international scene, on the other. It did not appear as a new scientific discipline, but rather as an ideological instrument and theoretical support for politico-military projects of states, as well as justification of their decisions. Simultaneously, the formalization of its status, in the form of writings from theoreticians working for states, pursued identifying 'objective' deterministic models, in constant development, that would legitimize the existence and actions of states in specific territories. Hence, geopolitics received back then the shape of an apparent 'scientific' discipline, influenced by social positivism and Darwinism of the age, meant to serve new nationalist and imperial aspirations. It was perceived as an initiative presenting the elements through which political power could control space, utilize geographic elements in its own interests and identify means that justify domination.

From the very beginning, geopolitics was a discourse on power. Its first great theoreticians (Friedrich Ratzel, Johan Rudolf Kjellen, Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer) strived not only to discuss power, but to pinpoint the ways through which states can use it efficiently, at its full potential. All these theoretical models were understood not only as analyses of power and ways to exercise it in a territory, but as normative requirements as well, as projects of action meant to align decisional factors. Geopolitics became thus an ideological dimension, a doctrinaire and practical support as science in justifying political power's control and domination projects in territories².

¹ Lacoste Yves, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*, Paris: Maspero, 1976.

² Phillipe Moreau Defarges, *Introduction à la géopolitique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994, pp. 39-102.

Political and ideological confiscation of geopolitical themes impacted negatively its image in post-war period. The term itself was avoided in academic discussions and theorizations, especially in the Anglo-Saxon space, its topics being transferred to other thriving disciplines such as international relations, security studies, political geography and so on. Even though the post-war context offered a ground for geopolitical analysis, taking into consideration the Cold War, the confrontation between democracy and communism, multiplication of states and conflicts for territory, ethnicity, religion, etc., the understanding of paradigms and generally analysis schools were associated with geopolitics as an ideological, historical or political frame. The situation was subsequently reverted, as geopolitics reappeared in France, the U.K. and the U.S. during 7th decade. The discipline's re-adoption was so enthusiastic that it came to be adopted in domains or processes that do not even indicate a special need for geopolitical analysis and comprehension. On another note, the increasing number of geopolitical schools – usually organized as communities structured around common methods, principles, but also around beliefs in what is considered to be the 'national' specificity of geopolitics, or around implicit ideological and strategic elements (for example, the 'Russian school' of geopolitics is considered to transmit an idealized nationalism) – has led to a relativization of perception on approaches and has raised difficulties in coherently establishing geopolitics' epistemic status.

The development of geopolitics in France was conditioned by the rationalist culture, specific to the French scientific and academic environment. This epistemological rigor has limited the development of idealistic and speculative geopolitical approaches, following the model of the German or Russian school, with emphasis being placed on a reflection on the conditions between geography and the human environment.

Even though historical memory retains it today rather for his libertarian thinking and anarchist ideas, Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) is considered one of the founding fathers of geopolitics, geo-history, and social geography. *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*³, translated into many languages at the time, brought him world celebrity, contributing to the development of a public interest for a discipline that until then was little known and agreed outside the specialized media. In his turn, *L'Homme et la Terre*⁴ is a frontier work, between human geography and history, proposing an original reading of the reciprocal conditions exerted, over the course of human history, between man and his geographic environment. The work has become a reference to the new French geopolitical thinking of the second half of the 20th century⁵, which constantly refers to the phrase that synthesizes its essence: 'La Géographie n'est autre chose l'Histoire dans l'Espace, de même que Histoire est la Géographie dans le Temps' ('Geography is nothing else but History in Space, as History is Geography in Time')⁶.

³ Élisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, Paris: Librairie Hachette, T. 1-19, 1876-1894.

⁴ Élisée Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, Paris: Librairie Universelle, T. 1-6, 1905-1908.

⁵ The *Hérodote* magazine has dedicated two special issues to Élisée Reclus: N° 22, 1981 (*Élisée Reclus, géographe libertaire*) and N° 117, 2005 (*Élisée Reclus*).

⁶ Élisée Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, epigraph.

The other founding father of the French school was Paul Vidal de Blache (1845-1918), a historian reprofiled in a geographer, as many of the future French apostles of geopolitics. Marked by Germany's military success against France in 1870, and its new expansionary ambitions based on a much-anticipated geographical culture at the level of politicians and the German scientific environment, Vidal de Blache tried, through his work chosen by its academic and scientific activity, to make geography a discipline not only scientific but above all, public, primarily by introducing it into school education, to form the new generations in the way of representing and knowing the world in the first place, France. After founding the *Annales de géographie* in 1891, he published two reference works, the *Atlas d'histoire et de géographie*⁷ and the *Tableau de la géographie de la France*⁸ – a wide fresco of the entire physical and human field of the French territories. Vidal's influence was enormous until after World War II, creating a true French geography school, with disciples who carried forward his vision and methodological analysis principles, especially the central focus on cartography, regional geography, interference between physical and human geography⁹. Even though Vidal and some of the French geographers supported the French Armed Forces Geographic Service and its projects to trace the new frontiers in Europe after the First World War, the French intellectual environment in the first decades of the 20th century was devoid of theoreticians putting geography at the service of political and military projects, such as those in the German School of Geopolitics. French geographers such as André Chéradame (1871-1948) and Jacques Ancel (1882-1943), oppose the themes of German geopolitics, criticizing their ideological dimension and epistemological fragility¹⁰. Attached by a scientific fidelity to the real, French geographers who analyse the relationships between physical space and human societies try to fit into the rigors of a scientific discipline without being confiscated by ideological or political imperatives. Indeed, in the first decades after the Second World War, geopolitics – both nominal and academic or scientific – is non-existent in France, being marked by the general atrocities brought by the excesses of its representatives in Nazi Germany.

Yves Lacoste (born 1929) was the one who, coming from the field of geography, in the traditional line of Vidal's school, reinvented geopolitics at the interface between geography and socio-human sciences, wanting to make it a specific instrument of analysis and understanding the power relations at the level of physical space, political, military, economic valorisation of geography and territory, that is, 'this is not a science, or a research on laws, but an ability to plan on terrestrial space and battles carried out here'¹¹. The development of a geopolitical reflection begins at Lacoste in the context of anticolonial movements – which he strongly supports as an intellectual and socialist militant, and the emergence of new Third World states.

⁷ Vidal De la Blache, *Atlas d'histoire et de géographie*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1894.

⁸ Vidal De la Blache, *Tableau de la géographie de la France*, Paris: Hachette, 1903.

⁹ André-Louis Sanguin, *Vidal de la Blache, un génie de la géographie*, Paris: Belin, 1993.

¹⁰ Jacques Ancel, *Géopolitique*, Paris: Delagrave, 1936.

¹¹ Yves Lacoste, *Questions de géopolitique*, Paris: LFG Poche, 1991, pp. 8-9.

The American bombardment survey on the Red River dikes in Vietnam in 1972, published in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* (Jun 8, 1972) and further developed in a larger study published in the first issue of *Hérodote* magazine¹², is seen by the Lacoste hagiography as the birth of the new French geopolitics, which puts all the resources of scientific geography at the service of understanding the territory as a stake and as a venue for power rivalries between different actors. The new vision is developed in the work that imposed it in the public space, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, faire la guerre*¹³, which did not delay provoking the aversion (still constant) of a part of the canonical geographers. The *Hérodote* magazine (originally with the subtitle *Stratégies, géographies, idéologies* and then *Revue de géographie et de géopolitique*), published in 1976, has remained the main vehicle for the dissemination of the principles of the new French school of geopolitics, contributing to the development of true patterns of epistemological and methodological analysis and geopolitical reflection¹⁴.

A growing circle of followers and disciples will form around Yves Lacoste and his journal, some remaining faithful to the master's theses, others (Michel Foucher, Michael Korrinman, François Thual) developing their own directions and private interpretations. But almost all contributed to the emergence of the *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*¹⁵, a mammoth work (over 1, 700 pages) coordinated by Yves Lacoste, a summation synthesizing the new models and methods of the French school of geopolitical analysis. In fact, over the decades, the editorial production (books, volumes, studies) of French specialists has become enormous, applying analytical principles to countless areas and themes, making geopolitics an explanatory approach with a huge public impact.

The legitimacy of geopolitics as a scientific and academic discipline was enhanced by the creation of the *Institut Français de Géopolitique* (French Institute of Geopolitics) at the University Paris 8 Saint-Denis. Founded in 1989 by Yves Lacoste, led by his most faithful disciple, Béatrice Giblin (between 2002-2009), and at present by Philippe Subra, the Institute has become the framework for the formation and specialization of new generations of geopoliticians, a medium of propagation, not only in France but internationally, of the epistemology and methodology of a geopolitical discipline seen as one of the most pertinent instruments of understanding contemporary realities.

Starting from the literature and the themes developed by its main representatives, our study aims only to briefly present some of the key concepts and principles of the French School of Geopolitics – they can serve as a useful propaedeutic to a more detailed approach of going through and understanding its immense production intellectually and scientifically, unfortunately, little known outside the francophone environment.

¹² Yves Lacoste, "Enquête sur le bombardement des digues du fleuve Rouge (Vietnam, été 1972)", *Hérodote: stratégies, géographies, idéologies*, No. 1, 1976, pp. 86-117.

¹³ Yves Lacoste, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*, Paris: Maspero, 1976.

¹⁴ <http://www.herodote.org/>.

¹⁵ Yves Lacoste (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Paris: Flammarion, 1993.

Rivalries for Power and Representations

The distinctive characteristics of the new French school are: its distance from ideological or political use of geopolitics, and the accent it puts on using geopolitics as analysis and comprehension method for territorial rivalries and conflicts. It is particularly concerned with methodological theorizations and their application in practical study cases. According to Alexandre Defay, three meanings of geopolitics can be distinguished: as representation (term specific to French School, will be analysed in this paper), as practice (effective application of geopolitical representations by different actors: states, communities, groups, parties and so on) and as analysis method of the two aspects mentioned earlier¹⁶.

For French theoreticians, geopolitics involves the comprehension of interactions among actors in a territory, through analysis of 'historical, geographic, strategic, political, demographic, and economic factors associated to situations at states' internal and external levels'¹⁷. Hence, geopolitics endeavours an efficient analysis and comprehension of factors that impact power rivalries in a territory; it involves concentration on three major factors that intervene in a geopolitical situation: power, actors and space. According to Lacoste, 'In multiple cases that discuss geopolitics nowadays, it is actually about power rivalries on territories and people that live there (...) No matter the territorial size (global, continental, state, regional, local) and complexity of its geographical data, a geopolitical situation is defined, at a certain moment, through a historical evolution, large scale or small scale power rivalries and relations between forces situated in different parts of discussed territory'¹⁸. Similarly, for François Thual, the objective of any geopolitical approach is to 'identify actors, analyse their motivations, describe their intentions, localize emerging alliances or, on the contrary, envisioned alliances, and this at local, regional, continental or international level'¹⁹. For Thual, geopolitical analysis of a process or event (crises, conflicts, rivalries, diplomacy, etc.) involves clarification of essential interrogations: 'who wants what?', 'with whom?', 'how?', 'why?'. Practically, geopolitical analysis of a situation involves identifying actors, presenting their intentions, objectives, motivations (i.e. 'representations') in relation to the territory and strategies they utilize to achieve goals. The strategies could be diversified (political, cultural, military, economic); they represent the essence of processes and dynamics, the very object of geopolitics.

This holistic dimension of its applicability field implies an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand the entire set of factors impacting geopolitical processes and interactions: 'in order to initiate a theoretical operational procedure aiming to analyse this complexity, it is necessary to include multiple dimensions

¹⁶ Alexandre Defay, *La géopolitique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005, pp. 39-40.

¹⁷ Gyula Csurgai, "L'analyse géopolitique: une approche interdisciplinaire pour déchiffrer la complexité des relations internationales", *Revue Militaire Suisse*, No. 3, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁸ Yves Lacoste, "Préambule", in *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Paris: Flammarion, 1993, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ Thual François, *Méthodes de la géopolitique, apprendre à déchiffrer l'actualité*, Paris: Ellipses, 1996, p. 48.

connected through the factors of physical and human geography, history, demography, anthropology, sociology, strategy, ethnology and international law²⁰. This set of multiple, simultaneous and complementary approaches is not a result of the pre-programmed methodological plan, but determined by the analysed object and geopolitical principles: phenomena have generally multiple causes and, in order to efficiently and correctly understand them, the entire spectrum of causes must be considered and analysed according to epistemic criteria specific to each aspect. Since it aims to understand motivations and mechanisms behind the actions of structures operating in a territory, geopolitics must avoid any reductionist approach and any attempt to explain geopolitical dynamics as effect of a single cause: ‘thinking that any cause is integrally and exclusively related to identity, religion, economy, geography is a simplistic approach ... the causes are multiple, conjugated, interdependent and the role of geopolitics is to disengage causal lines’²¹.

A central concept of the French School is ‘representation’: for François Thual and Aymeric Chauprade, geopolitical science is a ‘science of representations’²². Yves Lacoste mentioned that ‘in order to understand a conflict or a geopolitical rivalry, it is not enough to mention and map its stakes, one must attempt, especially when the causes are complex, to understand motivations, ideas of main actors ... the role of ideas – even though false – is capital in geopolitics, since they are the ones explaining projects and, as material data, are determining the choice of strategies. We call these geopolitical ideas REPRESENTATIONS’²³.

Understood almost as a ‘psychoanalysis or archaeology of collective behaviours’²⁴, geopolitics is focused on application of the concept ‘representation’, understood as the totality of collective ideas and perceptions in politics, religion, identity matters, that influence intentions, actions, projects, strategies of social groups and represent the group’s particular vision on significances attached to a territory. Their representations are subjective forms of assessing (imaging, projecting) space and its roles for a community; they have a collective emotional value (ethnic, national, religious – generally related to an identity) or contain a set of values (strategic, economic). Understood as ‘mental maps’, these representations are equivalent to ‘an ideology whose ideas, values, faiths, myths and symbols serve as justification for a socio-political group to occupy a certain space’²⁵. Representations are not simple mental constructions of individuals or groups vis-à-vis the value of a territory, they serve as starting points for political projects, and subsequently actions and practices, including especially military ones.

Nevertheless, geopolitics is more than a ‘science of representations’, it is a realistic discipline, that takes into consideration the entire set of elements: actors’ ideological representations, the ways in which their decisions and actions are

²⁰ Gyula Csurgai, “L’analyse géopolitique”, p. 4.

²¹ Aymeric Chauprade, François Thual, *Dictionnaire de géopolitique*, Paris: Ellipses, 1999, p. 506.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 501.

²³ Yves Lacoste, “Préambule”, p. 4.

²⁴ François Thual, Pascal Lorot, *La géopolitique*, Paris: Montchrestien, 2002, p. 47.

²⁵ Gyula Csurgai, “L’analyse géopolitique”, p. 4.

influenced by objective characteristics of physical geography (surface, position, climate, landforms, etc.) and human geography (demography, economy, sociology, politics, religion, culture and so on).

In order to be effective, any geopolitical approach must consider different levels of spatial analysis, according to scalar orders of magnitude; the diatopic method 'classifies, based on orders of magnitude, structures of all sizes – be they, for example, geological or religious – and represents these orders of magnitude (from local to global) as a series of superposed plans, each of them with a map indicating intersections with neighbouring plans, on the same scale'. By combining data on different plans of such a scheme, that some call 'diatopic' or 'multi-scale', analysis can be carried out at different levels in space. Such a reflection constitutes the most operative and strategic rationale related to territories, i.e. geographic reasoning in its most effective epistemic definition. Without such a rationale, it is merely impossible to thoroughly comprehend geopolitical problems, since the stake in power rivalry, at global, continental, national, regional or local level, is the territory'²⁶.

Geopolitical actors are defined mainly through their capacity or will to exert power: 'any constituted group endowed with capacity to exert power can be called an actor. Any geopolitical actor is susceptible to place its power in the service of geopolitical representations'²⁷. In a classical optics, the state is main geopolitical actor, since it is the structure mainly recognized as legitimate in exerting authority over a space, in building institutions and norms through which power is distributed and regulated. Similarly, according to Max Weber's classical formulation, the state has legal monopoly on the exertion of violence, instituting forms through which it is placed in service of the citizen and the state as such. In this context, one can distinguish between external and internal geopolitics.

The former refers to relations among states or actors that perform at international or transnational level (organizations, movements); this belongs to the field of classical geopolitics, subject also for International Relations. In geopolitics however, the accent is placed on effective ways to identify how states interact in precise situations, and not on formalization and model development, as in traditional political sciences. Geopolitics' role is to deconstruct intentions theoretically, and consequently the real actions and strategies of actors.

As for internal geopolitics, it takes into consideration power rivalries and force relations among actors at sub-state level (regions, provinces, towns and even districts); however, this does not imply that states or other trans- and supranational actors do not participate actively or even initiate dynamics at these levels. Especially in regions with multiple tribal, ethnic, religious communities, each attached to its own identity representations, internal geopolitics is a necessary and efficient tool, utilized in understanding interactions within states and identifying possible causes of conflict. An important role is played by sociology, the study of social groups based on different types of criteria (e.g. urban-rural, nomad-sedentary, professional appearance, communitarian state, ethnicity, sects, etc.).

²⁶ Yves Lacoste, "Préambule", pp. 31-32.

²⁷ Aymeric Chauprade, François Thual, *Dictionnaire de géopolitique*, p. 504.

Territories and Frontiers

Geopolitics operates with the essential concept of space/territory: 'Geopolitics analysis looks upon places, spaces. These spaces are inhabited, understood, claimed, and exploited by actors, since without them geopolitics has no meaning, because there would be no territorial dynamics, no power rivalry upon these territories without actors (...). These spaces, symbolically or effectively close to each other, become territories. There are legitimate territories, in the case that they are juridical recognized (state, region, municipality, supra-state territories like the EU), practical, exploited, claimed, represented spaces, etc. But space is not categorized only on this political approach: it is also marked by socio-cultural delimitations, linguistic, social, religious areas, that might sometimes interact with political spaces: disagreement between state spaces and other, for example linguistic or religious, spaces does not necessarily create tensions: tensions arise from the perception of a discrepancy and the idea of its illegitimacy. The space is also a collection of places, memorial places where some groups' or actors' history was constructed, and which become then a geopolitical value'²⁸.

The human and his territory become a binomial, they are in a dialectical relation, but each term must be approached in a comprehensive manner, taking into consideration its entire range of elements that determine interactions in effective situations. Territories could serve as spatial background for human interaction, but also as a stake: they have a property, value that determines disputes, provokes collective attachment among members of communities or groups. These are ready to carry out actions in order to keep or overtake the territories. The concept 'territory' has here a meaning broader than that of geographic area. In geopolitics, the territory is first and foremost the expression of subjective representations on physical space, valued and mentally reconstructed by individuals according to their own ideological identity, economic projections, and even military interests or personal ambitions. From an ontological perspective, territories are both physical, geographic, space as dimension of objective reality, and 'mental maps', geographies built in collective representations, ideal models of ideas that determine actions of individuals in an effective manner. The imaginary, as a dimension of subjectivity, interacts with physical reality and furthermore, it serves often as model, as source of inspiration for projects aiming to shape physical territories.

Therefore, as the territory becomes an object for multiple representations, belonging to more communities or states, it becomes a ground for rivalry, tension, conflict, etc. Geopolitics aims to clarify these rivalries for domination of territories that translate rivalries arising from collective representations of structures disputing the territories. The territory is valued, it has significance and provokes attachment. On this identity and institutional construction are state or similar collectivities based. Nationalism is the most classical form of collective representation related to a territory; according to theoreticians of nationalism, during the 19th century, any nation is defined as a community that has the same linguistic identity, a

²⁸ Frédéric Lassere, Emmanuel Gonon, *Manuel de géopolitique. Enjeux de pouvoir sur des territoires*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2008, pp. 17-18.

common history and is attached to own territory. Politics and international relations involve a reification and identity institutionalization between state and its territory: the state is defined not only through its human community and its institutional structures, but also as a legitimate territory confirmed by international treaties. Conflicts pursue almost always a spatial projection, a representation, and aim towards taking over and dominating territories, since they represent the physical support of power.

Frontiers separate not only physical territories of states; they are structures circumscribing a legitimate spatial projection of collective identities encompassed by the state. The problems related to frontiers and conflicts they generate were largely analysed by Michel Foucher. When presenting what he calls 'the invention of frontiers', Foucher considers this space organization manner as the product of a 'geo-ideological' project, originating from the French political tradition: 'from France spread the Jacobin idea according to which the frontiers of a state had to correspond to those of a nation, of a language and of a culture'²⁹. Hence, the frontier, in its modern connotation, is a product of European ideologies as the nation-state became important: the international political system was to become fractured in states, considered absolute references, while their frontiers were meant to define limits and spatially monetize particularities of each state. The frontier indicates and defends sovereignty of a state, but due to this limiting function, in terms of politics and geography, it is in the middle of geopolitical problems: 'A political frontier is both the external shell of a state and the contact line with neighbouring states. It is a limit with internal function and a limit with external function. Modern frontiers emerge with the founding of state institutions and their capacity to exert sovereignty upon a territory and upon populations in this territory. This shell is the limit of sovereignty exertion and its attributes (...) From a historical point of view, it is created by obligation coming from external powers or by opposition to neighbouring states'³⁰.

Geopolitics of frontiers is concerned with their morphogenesis and especially rivalries and conflicts that they generated or generate: 'Frontiers are elementary spatial structures, linear in shape, with function of geopolitical discontinuity, marking and providing orientation in three dimensions: real space, symbolic space and imaginary space. Discontinuity appears between sovereignties, histories, societies, economies, states and sometimes, not always, between languages and nations. Function of reality is the spatial limit of exerting a sovereignty in own manner: open line, half open or closed. The symbolic space suggests membership to a political community acting in its own territory; it has the characteristics of identity. Imaginary space connects with The Other, neighbour, friend or enemy, with own history and myths, be they constructive or destructive. The emigrant or refugee can "imagine" correctly if he crossed the "line". The frontier is not just a trivial functional limit, with juridical and fiscal role'³¹.

Nowadays frontiers from Europe are typically limits established by states through treaties or diplomatic agreements, often certifying separation between

²⁹ Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières. Un tour du monde géopolitique*, Paris: Fayard, 1991, p. 97.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

populations and states after conflicts. However, in the Middle East and Africa for example, configuration of an important part of the frontiers resulted from decisions made by external, colonial powers, and did not coincide always with territorial distribution of populations or their representations related to the idea of state. The concept of nation-state, as well as the modern frontier, institutionalized, were exported by major European powers and imposed to or assimilated by the new states that resulted from decolonization or disappearance of large, multinational empires.

The *de facto* identities of states must be well understood in this context, what they are and values that define them and determine their action as geopolitical actors internationally. In this sense, the 'morphogenesis' of states studies state 'formation', the stages of a territory's formation in relation with political projects connected to it: 'The study of territory's formation for a country, for a nation, along with acquisitions and amputations, dilatation and losses, means recapitulating different political logics that competed for the formation of that space'³². Morphogenesis traces the modifications of states' territories in time, it is a 'territorial and spatial genetics' that allows the observer to understand the formation process of a state, its evolution, behaviour towards other states and reciprocally, other states' behaviour towards it. Morphogenesis clarifies the existence of geopolitical constant parameters, even in territories with expansionist tendencies, internal instability or a fragile state consistency, and facilitates comprehension of states' behaviour in precise situations, as actors of a geopolitical interaction. History is, in this context, an essential epistemic tool, because only an illustration in time of communities, states and their relations with the territory (own and others') allows perceiving how their representations and geopolitical actions were built. Geopolitical rivalries are often the result of long historical processes, related to formation of nations, collective identities, states, frontiers; in order to understand the tensions or conflicts in or between states, at a certain moment, one has to have an overview on their entire genesis process, their historicity. Geopolitics must include temporal coordinate along with spatiality: geopolitical dynamics are products of intersections between time and space.

Another important aspect of geopolitics is reached: that of state proliferation. Disappearance of colonial empires multiplied the number of states, but the multiplication process can continue from a historical perspective, as demonstrated by former Yugoslavia or, more recently, Sudan. The centrifugal tendency exists especially in multinational or multi-confessional states. This field of study is associated with minorities' geopolitics. Their status is essential in ensuring a state's internal stability; in many cases, crises and conflicts reside in the difficulty to reconcile the identities and interests of communitarian groups with official norms and national identity references imposed by the state. The problem of minorities resulted often from the process of establishing frontiers that fractured communities and placed them in different states. The configuration of minorities in space could be continuous, but separated by state frontiers, or they can be landlocked inside states.

³² Thual François, *Méthodes de la géopolitique*, p. 64.

Understanding rivalries and tensions in such states is the object of geopolitical study; even though geopolitics does not aim to (or should not) project perspectives, it could provide a useful image on the stability of such states and might estimate the chances for internal instability and ultimately the danger of fragmentation.

Conclusions

Originating in the tradition of the great French geographers (Recluse, Vidal) and historians who have been reflecting on the relationship between man and the geographical environment (Braudel), French geopolitics are characterized by an attempt to analyse and understand as precisely as possible the ways in which the various human communities and their institutional expressions represent their territories, are conditioned by them and relate to them, they maintain rivalries for their control. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical approaches, influenced by political science and based on different models of theoretical formalization, French geopolitics strongly relies on valorisation of geographic disciplines, in particular by focusing on cartography and through a close fidelity to the realities on the ground. Hence the imperative for researchers to start from a very good knowledge of the land, based on a personal proximity as direct as possible to it, carrying out research activities and a field survey methodology that are specific to social disciplines such as sociology or anthropology. Moreover, as geopolitics became a tool for analysing wider and more diverse realities at different levels of spatial analysis, it was forced to assimilate some of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological apparatus of other disciplines (history, political science and international relations, sociology, economics, demography, spatial planning, religious sciences, etc.).

Without interfering with the specific manner through which these sciences carry out their own epistemological productions and without replacing them, geopolitics nevertheless enters their realm of reality, trying to explain the dynamics and phenomena that fall into what is at the centre of a geopolitical reflection, that is, the phenomenology of relations between man and territory. The French School is opposed to attempts to (re) convert geopolitics into an instrument to justify frontier reconfiguration strategies, to model new collective identities, or to substantiate particular territorial policies developed by different actors, whether state-owned or not. It tries to remain circumscribed to its theoretical dimension, to become an epistemological tool for analysing, interpreting and explaining precise situations in order to make them as comprehensible as possible for the scientific community, for the general public and, if necessary, for factors of political or military decision-making.

In fact, what Yves Lacoste and other French geopolitics have tried, and to a great extent succeeded, has been to 'democratize' geopolitics, to remove it from the narrow register – and sometimes the partisan, the specialists and the strategists, and make it accessible to the city. This popularization is seen not only as a tool for disseminating knowledge and skills for reading and understanding the current world, but also as a way to optimize the ability of individuals and societies to become conscientious and effective actors within these dynamics, making more current than ever Francis Bacon's classic dictum, 'knowledge is power.'

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