Reading Claude Raffestin: pathways for a critical biography

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Abstract

This paper suggests fleshing out and making material the authorial voice, exploring pathways for writing a critical biography of Claude Raffestin, a Swiss geographer writing from the late Nineteen Seventies to the present day. In exploring his life and contribution as part of the wider Francophone tradition of social and political geography, it aims to engage further with the debate on the circulation of knowledge, and the alleged hegemony of the English language within geography. In doing this, I suggest that the term 'disciplinary Orientalism' might help to think through some of the contradictions in geography of both drawing heavily from foreign critical thinkers, often removed from the spaces and contexts of debate they are/were writing in, while simultaneously ignoring foreign geographical traditions and contributions. Building on Raffestin's work, and drawing from diverse sources including his writings, reviews of his work and new interview material, I explore how his geographies might make sense here and now, to the extent that here is inevitably an uncertain place, not only in where this paper is written and read, but also because reading always takes place in-between contexts. Through this example, this paper explores how scholars are embodied and located in

uncertain places, pointing to the multiple circulations and non-circulations of theory and praxis within geography.

Key words

Claude Raffestin, French geography, translation, circulation of knowledge, biography, political geography, historical geography.

"Here revealed is the dual importance of geography to biography and of the geography of biography in assessing the place of biography in geography" (Withers 2007 : 69)

Withers' tongue-twisting suggestion of thinking biography and geography in tandem marks a departure from former histories of ideas, an academic trend whose fashion has clearly waned in the past decades. Instead, this approach to the history of the discipline stresses "the importance of institutional histories and of biography and memory in explaining the modern development of the subject, its political and intellectual context, defining practices and changing cognitive content" (Johnston & Withers 2008 : 3). While many important geographers who played a key role in recent transformations of the discipline are still alive, but are not getting any younger, making the most of the potential oral archive seems also particularly useful. The rediscovery of the written past of geography and geographers directly connects to writing on the politics of archives. The apparently simple fact that few geography departments (or institutes, schools, faculties etc.) have kept records of what people have done and written within them in any systematic way needs further work. It is significant that the biographical approach no longer simply narrates tales of unproblematic linear progress in the subject's traditions (Johnston & Withers 2008) but instead offers complicated, situated and at times rather random accounts of people, artefacts and surviving documents, indicating a possible critical 'biographical turn' (Withers 2007). Biographical approaches to writing the history of the discipline have come and gone, as tensions between perpetuating grand disciplinary narratives of progress and contextually-nuanced, spatially and socially sensitive assessments have struggled for precedence. The method of focussing on one particular individual developed here is not to present another version of a thinly-disguised *Géographie*

des Grands Hommes, but rather to explore how knowing an author, and understanding the context this person was working in and was read in, helps to understand the resulting geography. The result of such an approach could be similar to Minca's written history of (Italian) cultural geography, narrated not as a fixed and structured presentation of facts, but instead as "a fluid and dis-articulated disciplinary scenario (…) tracing a series of (almost random) paths: paths marked by people, books, events and episodes" (Minca 2005 : 929). Such histories can only be a partial: always situated, always subjective, always open to (or hoping for?) alternatives. Critiquing such attempts for their subjectivity would be unfair[1] since these should be neither attempts to fix history, nor rewrite it. Instead, modest attempts to "disclose the memories held by former staff as a vital but untapped biographical record of departmental history" (Johnston & Withers 2008 : 5), together with an awareness of how "scientific knowledge in one guise or another has been differently made and differently received in different places" (Withers 2005 : 64) following paths and methods suggested by Livingstone (2005), helps us to understand how questions of what is held to be geography and social science is always situated, embodied, narrated and contested. This openness to the multiple spaces where scientific theories and texts are encountered and read, implies that this has an important bearing on how they are read. It also means that this directly has a bearing on how they are understood. Building on this, Keighren has developed, for instance, an exemplary historical review of the reception of one particular book, Ellen Semple's *Influences of Geographic Environment,* exploring the locational particularity in its reading and reviewing (Keighren 2006).

Why might these debates matter? This paper argues simply that it matters how and where we do things as geographers. It matters where ideas comes from, where people think about,

1 For example, critiques of the book *Key Thinkers on Space and Place (*Key Thinkers on Space and Place edited by P Hubbard, R Kitchin, G Valentine; Sage, London 2004) focussed on two areas : the selection of the authors included, and the virtues of adopting a biographical approach per se (Boyle 2005).

discuss and publish them. It matters where they are read, it matters how they are spread about, how they get picked up, and where they are ignored. All these matter because they change how we think of the world as a place in which and about which theory is made. As Keighren has written, "attending to the spaces in which texts are composed, printed, distributed, sold, read and reviewed, the geography of the book attempts to situate ideas, practices and practitioners within geographical context, and to understand how knowledge and ideas are made mobile and circulate between these spaces" (Keighren 2006 : 528). And because such making, writing and reading is always ultimately the doing of individuals, this paper takes an explicit biographical approach.

> "Our way of doing geography has been rather ahistoric… That is to say that we have a bit… we haven't situated things sufficiently, within a historical perspective, or perhaps we haven't done enough history. Or else geography hasn't listened" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*)[2].

In exploring the life and contribution of Claude Raffestin, who writes mostly in French and has been unevenly translated, I aim to get a little beyond what I suggest calling a form of disciplinary Orientalism that *Anglo*[3] geography seems to have got itself into. This curious affliction combines two converging trends: a fascination with past ('foreign') European thinkers working outside geography, such as sociologists, philosophers or political scientists who are enthusiastically embraced with scant reference to the context they are/were working in; coupled with a total ignorance or even disdain for the contributions of non-Anglo past and

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[2] All direct quotes of Raffestin in the text are from a taped and subsequently transcribed interview carried out in my office – next to his old one – in the Spring 2011. This was followed up by a subsequent discussion with Raffestin a couple of months later on the first version of this article. Many thanks to Marion Ernwein for doing the transcription with her usual speed and competence.

[3] I use this slightly slang term on purpose: this name is used in spoken French when referring to "*Les Anglos*", i.e. those called at times Anglo-American, British-American individuals working within English-language or even, most shockingly, 'International' geography (Fall 2006). An alternative term could be '*Anglophonie*' as used by Brunet to describe this space of debate (Brunet 2003 : 15), mirroring the more accepted term '*Francophonie*', a linguistic but also specifically political space that extends beyond France. The colonial past of this latter term, however, makes me wary of this suggestion.

present geographers. My aim here is not to engage specifically with how this disciplinary Orientalism works, such as by analysing how English-language publications construct other geographies and other disciplines. This would be fascinating, but is outside the scope of this paper. Minca draws attention to this issue of cultural politics: drawing particular attention to the fact that among all the `foreign' (read: non-Anglophone) people listed in the book *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* there is only one geographer (Torsten Hägerstrand), whereas all the others (mostly French thinkers) come from other disciplines (Minca 2005). Words of caution are needed here. This is not a new attempt to bound or police the discipline, since the creativity of geography is largely ensured precisely in its embracing of ideas from outside its traditional stronghold; nor is it a suggestion that geographers intrinsically have more to offer than, say, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, or Giorgio Agamben, to name some recent imports. After all, geographers can be terribly dull regardless of the language they are writing in. Instead, I hope that by engaging with debates occurring elsewhere, geographers can gain further insights into what it might mean to do geography. This choice of biographical approach should therefore explore what "present and future purposes [are] being served by remembrance and the differences and contradictions that constitute a life" (Withers 2007 : 68). It is uniquely tragic if geography, arguably the most worldly of disciplines (Bonnet 2003), gets rooted in a narrow definition of localism.

But how can this worldly potential be realised? Perhaps, paradoxically, by starting at the opposite end of the spectrum: not looking at the world, but at the body, or the individual person, as the original site of encounter with theory. This is part of the wider feminist project of getting beyond the stifling mind/body dualism (Longhurst 1997), something that writing only a disembodied history of ideas perpetuates. Recent scholarship has suggested that the body of the researcher can and should be a tool of the interface between theory and research, an instrument for directly tackling the challenges of doing more worldly research (Tolia-Kelly

2010). The formulation, dissemination and analyses that lead to the production of knowledge in practice should allow geographers to begin to talk from an "embodied place, rather than a place on high" (Tolia-Kelly 2010 : 363). These personal spaces of knowledge production, beyond national and academic divides, specifically include mediating between different scholarly traditions (Rossi 2008), and different languages. But bodies are weak, linguistic skills are lacking, and connections are sometimes hard to make. But more importantly, individual people also live somewhere, work somewhere, read somewhere, write somewhere, and travel around multiple places to do what they do elsewhere, as academic careers are increasingly built around and through professional mobility, although this was not the case for whole generations of geographers. But how can an individual be an interface? How can theory and research really be embodied, and further how can this embodiment help explain the circulation – and non-circulation – of knowledge? In this paper, I play with different levels of engagement with the work of Claude Raffestin, alternating a biographical overview with a more intimate approach related to my own engagement with him and his work. This posture explains the methodological choices of this paper that combines interview material, my own reading of his papers and books, with commentaries on and reviews of his work done by others. I aim to make explicit my own positionality, not because this is in any way unique – nor particularly interesting – but because it seems indispensable to get beyond the disembodied biographies of Great Men written from Nowhere. It is in this that I attempt a *critical* biography, aware of where it is coming from, following the cautious use of the term by Withers: "Whether the prominence of this theme in particular signals the emergence or even re-emergence of a critical 'biographical turn' in the history and philosophy of geography is hard to say – certainly, there has never not been such a theme – but its prevalence is noteworthy nonetheless. It is prompted in part by an enduring concern to mark the work of significant contributors to the enterprise that is and has been human geography, however and

wherever understood. Yet (…) individual achievements were often made in opposition to prevailing disciplinary trends" (Withers 2007 : 67). Because untangling the personal from the contextual is impossible, since both feed off each other in creative and contrasting ways, this paper merges a contextualist approach with a biographical one (Boyle 2005). This draws from the insight of feminist scholars in particular who have argued for combining contextual-biographic approaches with ordinary or so-called hidden approaches to history (Maddrell 2008).

Olivier Orain recently published a remarkable history of French geography (1910-1980), exploring how geographers wrestled with the question of realism (Orain 2009). This rewriting of his PhD thesis draws on Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions[4], using an archival and textual approach to discuss an impressive corpus of texts, writing "a history through texts [*par les texts*]" (Orain 2009 : 244). Explaining the intensely creative *Géopoint* meetings in the late 1970s that brought together a number of younger then-dissidents and innovators within Francophone geography, including Claude Raffestin, he states that "it is difficult to decrypt the complex articulation between the lectures and the forums when only considering the written archive, since a large part of the collective dynamics remains inaccessible *a posteriori*, unless we were to systematically mobilise interviews [*sauf à mobiliser systématiquement des témoignages*]" (Orain 2009 : 299), something that he does only occasionally, and never naming nor listing his interlocutors. The content of these suggested discussions, and in particular those obviously held with Raffestin (thanked in his Acknowledgements) is eluded, only mobilised as background material or, one assumes, to help him choose his corpus taken to be a coherent discursive formation[5] (Orain 2009 : 317). Notwithstanding this

[4] A similar theoretical framework is used by Ron Johnston (Johnston 2004).

[5] Orain however quotes one interview of Raffestin published in *EspacesTemps* (1997). He also mentions that he is interested in future in developing a social history of geography based on interviews and archival research (Orain 2009 : 383), in line with what I am calling for here.

methodological choice, his book is filled with a number of *personnages* that bring the tale alive. He devotes one of his final chapters to two *nouveaux géographes* – Claude Raffestin and Franck Auriac – who both adopt a radical constructivist posture – despite neither of them calling it that (Orain 2009)[6], reflecting this key movement away from the prevalent realism of those he calls traditional geographers.

In order to explore this key moment further, I suggest fleshing out and making material the authorial voice, exploring pathways for writing a critical biography of Claude Raffestin. I engage with his project ongoing since the end of the 1970s of formulating a more worldly critical geography, unashamedly ambitious in formulating a geographical toolbox for the discipline. This builds on the idea that Raffestin had become a sort of 'lost' geographer for a variety of academic, personal and structural reasons (Fall 2007), more likely to be quoted in Italy, Spain or South America than within the wider Francophone – or indeed, Anglophone – world. Through this example, this paper explores how scholars are embodied and located in uncertain places, pointing to the multiple circulations and non-circulations of theory and praxis within geography. I explore how this might make sense here and now, to the extent that here is inevitably an uncertain place, not only in where this paper is written and read, but also because in our globalised world we can only assume that we are always already in-between contexts. This builds upon earlier papers (Fall 2005; Fall 2007) that explored the spaces of knowledge production of Francophone geography, contesting the existence of a strict divide between Anglophone and Francophone political geographies. In the later paper, I focussed on Raffestin, and contrasted his work to that of Yves Lacoste and John Allen. I sought to explain not only how different critical political geographies emerge in mutual ignorance, but also how the particular structure of the French academy, a system within which innovation for

6 This is a pragmatic position within his historiographic approach : « opposer réalisme et constructivisme est finalement une commodité davantage qu'une opposition *en dernière instance* : cela permet de nommer et de confronter. L'important est dans les significations, bien plus que dans les désignations » (Orain 2009 : 318).

innovation's sake is scorned upon and pointed out as something uniquely Anglo and therefore intrinsically suspect (Cusset, 2003: 230) served to produce a particular space of debate around critical political geographies. I suggested that the French geographical context was different from the more decentralized structures prevalent in other Francophone contexts such as Switzerland or Quebec. Although the influence of this inward-looking French context within which – as Christine Chivallon put it to me in a conversation – "il faut montrer patte blanche"[7] is undoubtedly substantial, there is a danger of idealizing and reifying these differences, and in particular of idealizing Switzerland as an innovative or freethinking periphery (see Claval 1998: 439). It might simply be that the French geographers I have spoken to about such issues who suggested such a thing were just been terribly polite when visiting what might be to them a sort of extended part of *La Province*, the French term for anywhere beyond Paris! More crucially, may simply be a way of maintaining this space as uniquely 'Other', thus paradoxically regrounding its irrelevance…

Spaces of knowledge, spaces for debate

It is well known that there has been an extensive debate about such spaces of knowledge production within geography in the past decade. Commentaries have come from many directions, perpetuating or questioning the existence of one or many divides, questioning and/or reframing the discipline as an Anglo-American hegemonic project unaware of its internal cultural politics (Minca 2000; Staszak 2001; Bonnet 2003; Chivallon 2003; Besse 2004; Claval & Staszak 2004; Kitchin 2005; Paasi 2005; Simonsen 2005; Aalbers & Rossi 2006; Fall 2007 & 2009; Dupont 2007; Sidaway 2008; Whitehand 2005; Hancock 2010). This has been vigorously debated, through introspective comments about the *Angloness* of the authors that are read, and through calls for openness to other geographical forms of

[7] This is a lovely idiomatic expression that implies belonging is secured by not sticking out too much, and by conforming to accepted norms.

knowledge, working against the covert "construction and naturalization of geographical knowledge as Anglo-American and European knowledge" (Bonnett 2003 : 59). The Other geographies, the alternatives to the hegemony have been defined and located in a variety of ways, as postcolonial, subaltern, foreign-language, non-European, non-English-language geographies and so on (Garcia-Ramon 2003; Minca 2005; Belina 2005; Samers 2005; Paasi 2005; Aalbers & Rossi 2006; Dell'Agnese 2008; Tolia-Kelly 2010). Disturbingly, despite such critiques, "the net result is a kind of pious Eurocentrism in which much is written in theory concerning the necessity to appreciate difference, but this is too rarely articulated in practice" (Bonnet 2003 : 60), requiring a militant anti-parochialism connected to a refusal of ethnocentrism (Bonnet 2003).

Knowledge is made as it circulates: it is never made completely in one place and then consumed elsewhere. As texts and ideas circulate, they are modified, a point made most eloquently by Said (1991) and amply debated since then. As Agnew has written, "even in the face of hegemonic trends, not least that of the worldwide diffusion of scientific knowledge, where still matters but with respect to how ideas are understood (how texts are read) more than in terms of where new knowledge is initially produced" (Agnew 2007 : 145). This is not just because local norms or translation into a different language lead to different readings but also because the "writings and reputations of eminent scientific practitioners have often been mobilized as resources in ideological conflicts of various kinds" (Livingstone 2003 : 27 in Agnew 2007 : 145). But what about ideas that travel poorly? Or ideas and texts that don't circulate? Or that are read by those in contexts that have little background knowledge of the debates they were grounded in? One fertile path that I alluded to earlier requires us to examine "not the passive 'consumption' of geographical ideas, but rather their interpretive making and remaking in different social and intellectual spaces" (Withers 2007 : 69). This has been developed most eloquently by Livingstone (2005), tracing what has been called "the

tortured trajectory of geography" (Mizuoka et al. in Withers 2007 : 73), open to the institutional sites of its making and reception, but also to the fundamental importance of the spaces where reading literally takes place, as new knowledge is produced quite literally through encounters with texts (Livingstone 2005).

The disciplinary Orientalism and the persisting limited willingness of geographers to engage with scholars outside their national or linguistic bounds raises questions. For what is tragic is "the seemingly insurmountable incapacity of a significant part of English-language geography not necessarily of transcending its boundaries but, at least, of fully recognising these boundaries" (Minca 2005 : 168), a forgetting that is part of a hegemonic disciplinary project. But it is certainly not an Anglo specialty. It was possible until very recently to have a successful career in France without reading or writing in languages other than French, as this was not valued particularly highly in a system where patronage implied developing long-standing ties to particular people and institutions. It arguably still is (Staszak 2010 *pers. comm.*), and not because French enjoys some sort of continued *lingua franca* status, because clearly it no longer does. That English is the *de facto* language of academic writing seems little questioned, even by the most enthusiastic Francophiles (Clout 2005). The critique that geographers do not read widely enough is potentially a bit spurious: it is not a uniquely Anglo pathology. It is also unrealistic – and somewhat self-serving – to suggest that everyone should read widely in other languages. Instead of making this a requirement for all, as suggested for example by Garcia-Ramon (2003), perhaps individuals who do read other languages have a responsibility for sharing the debates they encounter and concurrently – and most importantly – others have a responsibility for publishing and making such diverse voices available,

something voiced by a number of editors of geographical journals but difficult to put into practice[8].

This interest in spaces of knowledge production is not mirrored in all other linguistic and geographical traditions, and certainly not in Francophone geographies, perhaps suggesting that the hegemony and the ability to impose topics of debate is not quite as crushing as many suppose. The more interesting commentaries, many quoted above, have noted that there are not simple binaries of uneven geographical knowledge production, since it would in any case be hard to determine who is where in such divides anyway, particularly as many of the people writing around this topic are themselves between spaces and national traditions. The point of thinking through these divides is not to replace one reading of the divides with another: Aalbers and Rossi, for instance, argue somewhat confusingly that there is a uniquely European geography (Aalbers & Rossi 2006) distinct from what they call Anglo-American geography. Where this lies and what or who is part of it is not entirely clear in their proposal, although they identify a certain number of shared characteristics. Ironically, individuals calling for an end to Anglo-American hegemony are often "located in places which would not normally – on a global scale of power relations – be considered peripheral" (Best 2009 : 84). It seems at times as if there is a deeply-rooted difference between practices of wide engagement and reading, and the continued framing of the divides in everyday conversations and practices.

In any landscape of debates and individuals, some names stand out. Claude Raffestin is one of these key figures, yet remains uniquely positioned as an outsider in almost every space and debate he has been part of. When embarking on tracing some of these stories, I am mindful of Boyle's cautionary words: "are geographers equipped to write biographical analyses and do

[8] Thanks to Klaus Dodds, Stuart Elden and James Sidaway for various personal conversations on this point.

other disciplines not have better tools and a richer narrative repertoire to draw upon? Does geographers' status as novices of this kind of investigation open up fresh possibilities as to how biographies might be written?" (Boyle 2005 : 164). Hoping that readers will kindly focus on the suggestion within the second of these two sentences, let me begin…

"La géographie c'est un mode de pensée, un mode de fracturer le réel" [Geography is a way of thinking, a way of dividing reality]

Orain calls Raffestin a *doxeur*, a pun on the words doxa and boxeur, since this might indicate "a new *doxa* in terms of relation to reality while simultaneously reflecting the pugnaciousness of our author [*tout en donnant écho à la pugnacité des positions de notre auteur*]" (Orain 2009 : 342). He attributes his lack of impact on what he calls "the theoretical and scriptural personality of the author [*la personnalité théorique et scripturaire*][9]" (Orain 2009 : 342). That an author has a theoretical and written personality is assumed by Orain, as is the fact that this influences how he is read and understood. But I would like to take this further by recognising that this personality is also embodied within a real person[10], and that this is of course much more difficult to take into account when examining his *oeuvre*. Yet Raffestin is a good example to work this through, because his work is so lively: "in perpetual movement, feeding off multidisciplinary readings [*lectures multidisciplinaires*], it would be pointless to look for a closed and fixed system of thought [*système de pensée clos et figé*], that would have attained a given degree of formalisation at one given moment and that could be reified and reused to carry out a synchronic reading without regard for the routes taken by the author [*sans inhibitions à l'endroit de l'itinéraire de l'auteur*]" (Orain 2009 : 342).

[9] This turn of phrase is unusual in French, making the personalisation it implies all the more significant.

[10] A short video interview of Raffestin is here http://www.ville-ge.ch/culture/prixQuadriennaux/retro/2003.html, filmed in 2003 when he received the *Prix de la Ville de Genève.*

The basic outline of his life can be simply described, and his entire career was conducted in Geneva, notwithstanding a few short assignments elsewhere. Born in 1936, Claude Raffestin grew up in Paris before moving to Geneva where he finished school, earning his undergraduate degree and PhD (1968) from the University of Geneva, the latter written while teaching in a secondary school. The following year he was appointed to the faculty, becoming a full professor in the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences two years later, at the age of 33. He served on the board of the *Conseil National de la Recherche Scientifique*, a potentially strategic position in the country overseeing the attribution of research funding, and the first time a geographer served in this way. Involved in university politics, co-founder of the *Centre Universitaire d'Ecologie Humaine* (which he directed from 1986-1994), he served as vice-rector towards the end of his career. He was also a respected public figure in the city, in particular as a member of the *Commission d'urbanisme du Canton de Genève* from 1982 to 1994. He retired from the University of Geneva in 2000, but occasionally visits. He now lives between his flat in the Old Town of Geneva, and Turin, in Italy.

Raffestin clearly possesses a imposing personality, and creates an impact on those around him: a slightly austere public demeanour, coupled with a private sensitivity and intense loyalty. Capturing and expressing this is difficult. Mercedes Bresso, former President (2005-2010) of the Province of Piemonte and professor of Economics at the Polytechnic of Turin, one-time member of the European Parliament, and present wife of Claude Raffestin recently wrote a novel called '*Il profilo del Tartufo'* (Bresso 2009). This "geopolitical thriller", as it terms itself, mixes a somewhat unlikely search for a stolen mushroom and a murder in Hong Kong with musings about landscape, food and identity. *Vicecommissario* Sandra Lusso, in charge of the enquiry, is informally assisted by an intriguing Swiss professor of the history of landscape called Claude who seems to be spending some sort of sabbatical in Piemonte. This

charming, learned, kind and wise gentleman subtly seduces the Italian policewoman, and as he is passed a somewhat unlikely amount of confidential data, ends up helping to solve the enquiry. Knowing the author's connection to Claude Raffestin, I could not help reading this as a direct description, written by someone deeply fond of him. Notwithstanding all caution on my part to separate fact from fiction, I found this surprisingly touching. It almost seemed too intimate, too personal. This was a very different man from that I knew as a teacher, colleague and author[11].

"Le point de départ, c'est une insatisfaction" [The starting point is a dissatisfaction]

In the late 1970s, the setting up of the *Géopoint* meetings (starting in 1976 and still ongoing[12]) and the establishment of the *Groupe Dupont*[13] that published the *Brouillons Dupont*, a quasi-experimental text published on a shoestring, attempted to capture the vibrancy of debates within Francophone geography. These interesting times when "all those refusing the 'old' geography were amalgamated as *nouveaux géographes*[14], despite the increasingly important divergences appearing amongst them, and when new bridges were developing as fast as old alliances were unravelling" (Orain 2009 : 306). This time marked the real entry of Raffestin into debates within geography, one year before his appointment as full Professor. From the start, he took a stance against the existing mystifying geography [*géographie mystifiante*] (Raffestin 1976), providing a clearly formulated critique of existing canons, including Pierre Gourou, Beaujeau-Garnier, Paul Claval (Raffestin 1976[15]).

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[11] I took Claude Raffestin's class on *L'épistémologie de la géographie* as an undergraduate, a towering, authoritative presence in a small department.

[12] See http://www.groupe-dupont.org/geopoint.htm

[13] The name is a pun on *du Pont* d'Avignon, echoing the folksong.

[14] Writing in *Géopoint* in 1976, Raffestin refers explicitly to « une géographie nouvelle » (Raffestin 1976 : 84).

[15] He quotes a extraordinarily misogynistic extract of Paul Claval's book to put his finger on the role of ideology in language (Eléments de géographie économique, Paris 1976, p. 19). Claval describes the economic behaviour of housewives : «l'après-midi, elles lèchent vitrine avant de faire l'acquisition de robes, de blouses, ou de mille riens qui donnent leur charme

Beyond the biographical sketch, does it make sense to attempt to position someone so intensely in-between as Raffestin, other than saying that he is a geographer? His posture as an independent thinker requires casting aside the categories of political/social/critical/cultural geographer, largely irrelevant anyway beyond the *Anglo* context (Lussault 2003; Claval and Staszak 2004; Söderström & Philo 2004; Collignon 2004; Dupont 2004; Fall 2005 & 2006). He explicitly refuses to attach adjectives to geography, since "it is possible to argue today that this flowering of terms has created more confusion than order [*il est loisible de prétendre aujourd'hui que cette floraison a créé plus de confusion que d'ordre*]" (Racine & Raffestin 1983)[16]. He prefers instead to follow his own questions into particular fields and useful authors: "I rarely positioned myself within a context to which I wished to contribute, or pursued something that had already been done" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm*.). Raffestin has always been refreshingly unorthodox about borrowing from others, even at a time when this was unusual: framing geography clearly as a *science humaine*. Mentioning in any systematic way his key sources of inspiration is difficult. This is a wider problem for writing biographies, since "merely listing these influences trivializes the democratic notion that thinkers are produced largely by the political and intellectual context they inhabit, and the ongoing themes to which they contribute, rather than by their personal brilliance. Putting these two together, biography is not a `background briefing'. Biography has to be investigative, it has to be deeply appreciative, it has to contextualize the haphazard, and disturb the structured with the mistakes and accidents that really make things happen" (Peet 2005 : 165).

> "I am rarely orthodox, I am not a follower, I mean, you see, in the end why have I done things that weren't usually done in geography? You

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à l'existence » (In the afternoon, they go window-shopping before buying dresses, blouses or a thousand little trinkets that give meaning to their lives).

[16] This is not to say that Francophone geography isn't divided, rather that divisions such as the political left / right spectrum (often respectively associated with social / cultural geography) are more important. This issue of grouping has wider implications and ironically the key French Theory authors would not be bunched together nor called post-structuralist (Cusset 2003; Fall 2006, 2007), since labels and badges of belonging of this kind are largely absent.

> know as well as I do that provoked a great amount of criticism. Well it is because, in the end, I always thought about instruments as Foucault did. Books are boxes of tools (…). Some tools I am comfortable with, and I can use and remodel, and some are not (…). That is the source of my marked heterodoxy" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).

Orain (2009) has written that there are three distinct phases in Raffestin's work. The first consists of his early morpho-functional writing up until the early 1970s, and in particular his PhD thesis that he largely repudiated as being blind to power and ideology (Raffestin 1978 : 95). From that moment, Raffestin's geography was explicitly political: "it must also be said, and that is perhaps the most difficult to do, that any geographical attempt also contains a political project. Those who pretend not to do politics are only unconsciously perpetuating the balance of power of the context they are situated in [*celle de l'ordre dans lequel ils sont*]" (Raffestin 1976: 96). The second phase, of which the key contribution is *Pour une géographie du pouvoir* (1980), built on Michel Foucault's statement that space is fundamental to any form of communal life and any exercise of power. This book could be seen as a response to Michel Foucault's questions to geographers that were published in the journal *Hérodote* in 1976 (Crampton & Elden 2006; Fall 2005). Raffestin explained that this was written as "a reaction to that which I was dissatisfied with within the political geography of the time. And so I tried, if you want… it is an attempt not just to try to be different but rather to suggest something that seemed to me to offer a better explanation [*une réaction à ce qui ne me convenait pas dans la géographie politique de mon époque. Et, j'ai essayé alors, si vous voulez… c'est à la fois un essai et puis… non pas une volonté de me démarquer, mais mon problème était (…) d'apporter quelque chose qui me paraissait plus explicatif*]" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm*.). Amongst other ambitions, during this period he first sought to formalise his theory of territory and territoriality, building upon Michel Foucault's *La Volonté de Savoir* (Foucault 1976), a

completely unusual reference for a geographer at the time. Raffestin's concept of territory also owed much to Henri Lefebvre's production of space, as he sought to spatialise his relational approach. This phase of his work drew heavily from semiotics, and from writers as diverse as Luis Prieto, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Umberto Eco. Edward Soja, David Harvey are also quoted in a number of papers, and he has remained faithful to Serge Moscovici and Alain Touraine. This list's eclecticism is unusual, as is Raffestin's refusal to limit himself to particular disciplines: he reads authors as individuals, taking each proposal seriously, and borrowing from each as needed with little regard for schools or labels. As mentioned earlier, this is perhaps not unique to him, but more simply is a Francophone way of engaging with authors as individuals.

> "For me a book is interesting when it manages to influence you over a long period. When it provides tools that you can reuse and adapt, rather like a screwdriver that you can file to use as required" (Raffestin, *pers.comm.*).

Raffestin's focus on territory as the site of all social and spatial relations, and territoriality as the result of these relations, has also drawn from the work of René Girard, in that territory acted as mediator in relations between people (Raffestin 1980 : 144). This theorising of territory and territoriality is certainly the body of work that Raffestin is best known for. But Orain identifies a third phase towards the end of the 1980s: "finally, almost imperceptibly, a 'third Raffestin' emerges in the 1980s (….) that expresses in a manifest way the adoption of a project on the phenomenology of the geographic called 'human ecology' [*qui exprime[nt] de façon manifeste l'adhésion à un projet de phénoménologie du géographique labellisée sous l'étiquette d'« écologie humaine »*]" (Orain 2009 : 343; see Gillet 2011 *current paper bundle*). The papers published during this third phase have been less read that others, appearing mostly in journals outside of geography and with no book to create a lasting

impression, other than his book in Italian on landscape (Raffestin 2005). From 1986, Raffestin no longer published in the major French journals nor served any longer on editorial boards as he had frequently done until then, preferring to publish in the *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*, in non-geographical journals, or following invitations.

"Faire quelque chose qui me satisfaisait davantage" [To do something more satisfying]

Raffestin's rejection of closed systems and his personal attachment to a *pensée en procès* in which a useable theoretical framework is attained through successive approximations (Raffestin 1980) does not always make reading him easy. Choosing which paper to consider his definite theory of territoriality, for instance, is impossible and/or unwise. His wider writings on the geographical intelligibility of reality are put forward more as proposals than polished theories. Orain notes for instance that "his production has the character of a slowly built up mosaic in which each text takes its place as a piece, both a device and a process. It is a device within which each piece of writing refers to other contemporary ones, edging them on and adding elements through partial repetitions that can be easily pieced together [*des redites partielles qui permettent un empiècement assez aisé*]"(Orain 2003 : 315). Yet Raffestin offers a more nuanced or more definite version, rejecting the nature of his own internal logic:

> "I am unable to repeat myself, I am even unable to use my own work (…). I cannot remember what I have done previously, I would have to look back to see what I could use to go forward. I am the anti-accumulator, if you want" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).
>
> "Angelo Turco always tells me: "when I see you tear up things you have done, you worry me"" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).

Later on in our discussion, we discussed the analytical work carried out recently by the CollecTer group. This was an unexpected and welcome initiative by young geographers, mostly graduate and undergraduate students, who wanted to engage with and disseminate Raffestin's work, since much of it is hard to find[17]. They suggested that Raffestin has focussed on less than a dozen key themes. He was pleasantly surprised by this, and intrigued to see that his own dispersion was not judged as harshly by others as he assumed – or as harshly as he judged it himself.

As I mentioned above, Raffestin's proposals rely on a wide diversity of sources way beyond the geographical *pré carré.* Orain notes the originality of this posture, particularly in the late 1970s: "in these times of rejection when quick feelings and snappy quips reigned supreme, it is rare to find new geographers [*nouveau géographes*] who set about rereading the classical corpus, in a manner that makes C. Raffestin appear a bit like the authority figure who grounds and justifies the collective mood [*qui fonde en raison et justifie l'humeur collective*]. Nevertheless, his posture is clearly at odds with the political declarations of Y. Lacoste or the condemnations for lack of scientific rigour that are so frequent in the writings of the period. The references he uses offer a clear added-value to the epistemological trinity of the time (G. Bachelard, L. Althusser et J. Piaget)" (Orain 2009 : 298). But Orain also notes realistically, and I shall return to this, that "the research carried out by C. Raffestin, because it sets out into fields little explored by geographers (semiological structuralism, neo-kantian philosophy, including in its analytical dimension, and so on), stokes many discussions within the *Géopoint* meetings, but does not bring about any lasting changes in written form [*elle a peu de prolongements intertextuels*]"(Orain 2009 : 299). His writings are "tight, short, grounded in a sort of dark elitism often considered to be 'philosophical' [*ramassés, concis, cultivant un*

[17] Thanks to the work of this CollecTer groupe, most of his work is now freely available on the Open Archive of the University of Geneva : http://www.unige.ch/ses/geo/recherche/groupes/CollecTer.html

certain élitisme ombrageux proche d'un art d'écrire en général taxé de « philosophique »]" (Orain 2009 : 298). This style of writing also makes the challenge of translation all the greater, since a bad translation risks making his ideas particularly incomprehensible. As many have noted, Raffestin's main publications have never been translated into English[18], a clear example of the parallel geographies mentioned by Minca (2003).

While exploring the impact of such a diversity of authors on his work is beyond the scope of this paper, in our recent discussion we explored not who had influenced him, but rather who's way of thinking and working mirrored his own. While understandably cautious of comparing himself to others, Raffestin quickly mentioned Gunnar Olsson as well as William Bunge, a fiercely independent thinker who, "from his Quebec 'exile', continues to remain something of a geographical *persona non grata* today" (Merrifield 1995), excluded from the academic establishment for a combination of radical marxist views, and big personality[19]. I remember Raffestin mentioning Bunge to undergraduate classes, telling his intrigued audience how he abandoned academic geography to become a taxi driver in Toronto.

> "Bunge, who I met in Quebec, I remember, he was blocking the door to the office I was in, I barely knew him, and the chap is almost two meters high, more than 100kg, and so on. But he is a person who is very interesting in many ways. I also felt very close to Gunnar Olsson, and I also know him. So I mean, careful, I do not mean to say I had the same objects of study (…), I wasn't interested in the same things as Gunnar Olsson but (…) we had the same way of working regarding

[18] Pour une géographie du pouvoir has been translated into Italian (Per una geografia del potere. Milan: Unicopli, 1981), and into Portuguese (Por una geografia do poder. Rio de Janeiro: Atica, 1993), while only a short chapter of his book Géopolitique et histoire has been translated into English (by J. Lévy in 2001) (Dell'Agnese 2007). There are few papers in English, and one is so badly translated as to make it almost unusable (Ferguson & Raffestin 1986). Individual articles have also been translated into German, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish (Raffestin, *pers.comm*).

[19] Biographical information available on William Bunge, indicating some of this success and continuing mystery, available here on the blog of Zachary Forest Johnson : http://indiemaps.com/blog/2010/03/wild-bill-bunge/.

> how we engaged with a topic. We both tend to take the opposite position to what is offered, and to review what is available" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).

Other colleagues that remained firm friends and sources of inspiration were Franco Farinelli, Angelo Turco, and Gabriele Zanetto, all working in Italy, in other parallel geographies. Paul Claval was apparently important initially, but not for the past thirty years. But key sources of inspiration were also Friedrich Ratzel and Alexander von Humboldt, and Raffestin made sure, in his teaching, that all students were familiar with these key figures.

Mentioning that Raffestin did not have disciples should not give the impression that he was writing in a vacuum. In addition to authors who directed critiqued his work at the time (Fall 2005), a number of European authors have called for increased engagement with his work, including Angelo Turco, Giacomo Corna Pellegrini and Giuseppe Dematteis (Dell'Agnese 2008). Italian scholars such as Dell'Agnese (2008) and Minca (2005) have said the same, with Minca suggesting he should have been included in the *Key Thinkers in Space and Place* (Hubbard; Kitchin; Valentine 2004). This clear Italian connection is significant, for his contemporary audience in Italy has somehow replaced the one he did not have in France[20]. For there is a paradox in seeing Raffestin's name appear repeatedly in the *Géopoints* publications and within the *Brouillons Dupont* in the 1980s. These brought together many people who subsequently became lasting figures in France. Though present, he often comes across as an outsider, offering contributions at odds with others : "central and marginal, tutelary and solitary, C. Raffestin is able to generate the most densely argued and vivid comments and debates, yet his intertextual presence outside of the *Géopoint* meetings is paradoxically rare: his epistemologizing articles are rarely referred to in the contemporary

[20] One rather random point : it is also in Italy that I first heard references to 'Claude'. Before then, I was used to hearing everyone, including his close friends, refer to him as 'Raffestin'.

literature" (Orain 2009 : 298). That this moment of great openness and ferment, where he played a central role in debates, did not lead to his ideas and sources of inspiration being picked up is therefore all the more intriguing.

"C'est fatiguant de marcher sans atteindre effectivement ce qu'on voudrait" [It is tiring to walk without ever reaching the desired destination]

At the University of Geneva, several people did pick up various aspects of his writing, but they published in few internationally-read journals. More tragically, none engaged productively with his proposal or took his ideas any further. More surprisingly, his own sources of inspiration were not read independently by others. Was this is partly because he was writing and working in Switzerland, with diminished access to guarded circles of French geography[21]? Yet at the beginning of his career, he was certainly a key figure in debates.

> JF: Is the idea of being someone's student very French… from France?
>
> CR: It's very French, yes.
>
> JF: Do you think you managed to escape from that, by being here [in Switzerland]?
>
> CR: Oh well, I was nobody's student.
>
> JF: Oh no, that's clear! [CR laughs] Yes, yes, that's clear!
>
> CR: I was nobody's student and, I am going to say, nobody was my student, in the sense that it is used in France. I did not train disciples, and indeed I never tried to train disciples, students. I had students who were interested in what I was doing, or assistants [i.e. doctoral students

[21] This isn't entirely convincing when one considers the career of Antoine Bailly, from the same Geneva department, who was very close to many circles of power within French geography, and was widely read, despite – or perhaps because of – his very different theoretical scope.

> / teaching assistants] who did things that were of interest to them and who paradoxically, it's quite funny, some of them now lay claim to this lineage… in certain circumstances. (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*)

Raffestin has been frustrated by the critiques he has endured. Those who might have been expected to take his proposals seriously have seemed unnecessarily vicious at times, as if the effort needed to overturn the existing order of reigning *mandarins* and stale paradigms led everyone involved to unproductive pastures from the 1970s onwards. He is demanding of critique, and takes the exercise seriously, requiring someone to really work at a response:

> "I consider that people who work, the know the formula… that is Sartre's: "Write one hundred pages!". I am not going to contradict that. That's what I want to say. That's all" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).

This also means that the critical banter of academia, and the easy dismissals and vicious attacks, have wounded him profoundly, not out of vanity but out of frustration at the lack of any real engagement with his proposals:

> "One is allowed to offer a serious critique, but I mean, if at the same time as you strongly criticise something you also use certain things that were in it… that is dishonest, and I find that rather painful. That's unpleasant" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*)

Francophone geography is at times curiously immature as far as critique goes. As Franche has written: "for the past thirty years, geographers have indeed founded a variety of schools [*diverses chapelles*] that mutually ignore each other superbly: each of them has its own journal, and any suggestion of a controversy – itself very rare – is immediately branded as 'squaring up' [*règlement de compte*] – which it often is – before facing nothing but stony silence. It's hard to see how a discipline, whatever it may be, could progress in the absence of

any polemical debates, and we can understand better the current loss of influence of French geography: it will only make progress when authors are able to accept scientific controversies" (Franche 1995, no page number). Raffestin argues for what he calls a *critique identificatoire* that gets beyond tribalism. He noted, for instance, the impossibility for a student of – say – Paul Claval to criticize the work of another of his students. Allegiance to one *mandarin* protects all subsequent disciples from each other[22]. Critique is thus reduced to "doing a friend a favour, or destroying a potential or real enemy" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*). Being a free thinker in such a system is inevitably a risk, and fighting against an unconstructive climate is difficult. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to romanticise this position of the outsider, and present oneself as the only freethinker around: yet in this case it is useful to remember that Raffestin enjoyed from his early thirties the security of a full-time and well-paid permanent academic position.

Nevertheless, requiring of others one's own high standards of independence can have solitude as a consequence. It is certainly a tall order to expect of all, and particularly of graduate students, and is not a strategic attitude to adopt if one wishes to create a lasting school of thought. But this was apparently never Raffestin's intention, or certainly not after the beginning of the 1980s:

> "I never stopped people from doing what they wanted to do, I never imposed a research topic on a student, for an undergraduate or graduate thesis, a PhD thesis or something like that. They had to find by themselves what they wanted to do, and they we'd talk about it. That's why I never trained any disciples" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*)

[22] This is more a problem than might appear to an outsider : because PhD theses can only be supervised by someone with a *Habilitation à diriger les recherches*, like in Germany, there are in fact relatively few professors supervising a large number of doctoral students.

One person might have been, if not a disciple, then at least a successor. That this never happened is still an intensely painful memory for Raffestin. Jocelyne Hussy, his erstwhile student when he was still a high-school teacher, and his subsequent first doctoral student, never finished her PhD. She stepped back in order to allow her husband, Charles Hussy, to pursue his career in the same department. Her unfinished thesis was part-published in 2002 (Hussy 2002), as part of Raffestin's retirement *Festschrift.* Raffestin states that:

> "She is perhaps the only person I could call my student, not because of me, but because she followed me, that's all" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*)

If geographical ideas theories, and texts emerges within messy yet traceable networks of people and places, inevitably these mixtures of personality – or charisma – and context are intertwined in understanding the final impact of such ideas. Place, as Livingstone (2005) so clearly indicated, is an important factor in this. In this regard, if being in Switzerland had it drawbacks in terms of connections to centre of power, it also had the immense advantage not only of comfortable material conditions but also strategic distance, as the two quotes below illustrate:

> "The first *Géopoint* was held in Geneva, because the youngsters who were involved with it at the time, and who are the bosses today, couldn't do it in France. It was in 76. (…) They came to Geneva for that, because they couldn't do it in France. But it didn't stop them from subsequently doing to young people precisely what had been done to them at the time: turn them into slaves" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm*).
>
> JF: Did Switzerland, as a marginal space, or as a slightly different place, provide somewhere to get away from that?

> CR: Oh yes, undoubtedly. (…) I probably couldn't have done what I did in France. I would have been… I might have done it, but I would have been stopped by my bosses" (Raffestin 2010, *pers.comm.*).

Both these quote are equally interesting in how they reflect the entrenched nature of the system of patronage that Raffestin sought hard to escape from, all the while suffering from it. According to him, the radicals of the 1970s, on gaining power, could not but perpetuate the status quo, and rather than facilitate in turn the emergence of new ideas did their best to quash challenges to their positions. A depressing, if instructive, note to end this biographical sketch on.

Conclusions

Claude Raffestin was a key influence for me, the first critical geographer I read. I used his papers and books on territory and territoriality as an undergraduate making sense of war in Bosnia, and read him when drafting my thesis several years later while working in Geneva. Yet I did not work with him, nor ask him for advice about my project. In part this was through fear of his critique, that – departmental legend had it – could be vicious. But I understand now that it was also for a reason he himself would have had sympathy for: the fear of becoming someone's disciple, to owe everything to one person, and to be unable to distance yourself from them. This made me resist writing about him until I had left Switzerland. Yet his opinion would have mattered a great deal to me. When we spoke recently, he kindly asked me why I never came to see him at the time. Tears filled my eyes. I was baffled: I had certainly never expected to react in this way.

Yet if we take the proposal of writing critical biographies seriously, this irruption of the personal will always take place in one way or another. Claude Raffestin is an old man, and has been unwell. The interview I conducted with him was suffused with emotion, from both

sides, and for a variety of reasons I can only guess at. A few weeks ago, I explained to a class of undergraduate students that the white-haired man I was chatting to in front of the door was Claude Raffestin, and that I was sorry to start the class a few minutes late as a consequence. A hush descended, as though his physical existence was somehow impossible: in their minds he only existed in writing. Yet we cannot write a history of key thinkers as though their writing existed removed from the biographical, without working through the personal. Inevitably such tales can only be situated, and different people would choose to include and leave out different things. When embarking on tracing some of these stories, I was mindful of Boyle's cautionary words about other disciplines having better tools and a richer narrative repertoire to draw upon (Boyle 2005). I doubt geographers have any special insights into this, but I do hope that excavating and revisiting the biographies and life works geographers does help us to understand the richness of the geographical tradition, in all the places where it is practiced and lived.

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