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Guest Editorial: on the limits of dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone political geography

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The suggestion that there is an Anglo political geography versus a Francophone one is intellectually unsatisfactory and has been debated in various ways within the nascent debates within Anglophone journals about the need for openness to 'other' geographical knowledges (Garcia-Ramon 2003; Minca 2005; Samers 2005; Paasi 2005; Aalbers & Rossi 2006). Many scholars work as go-betweens, reading broadly and passing references both ways. Yet authors exploring the differences between both do tend to perpetuate the divide, with varying degrees of nuance, while providing substance for the portrait of the sub-discipline as an Anglo-American hegemonic project unaware of its internal cultural politics. This much is well known, and is recognised by geographers working in various languages and contexts (Minca 2000; Staszak 2001; Chivallon 2003; Besse 2004; Claval & Staszak 2004 ; Aalbers & Rossi 2006; Fall 2007; Sidaway 2008).

Even if we accept that there is no clear binary, and that there are multiple people reading beyond monolingual intellectual cultures, the different approaches to theory

within Anglo and Francophone geography continue, particularly in relation to so-called 'French Theory' (which can encompass figures as diverse as Lefebvre, Foucault, Derrida or Deleuze) and which, of course, like French kisses and French letters, is not called that in France. It has often been assumed that these different ways of using theory are shared by all (Hepple 2000). The Francophone world is often portrayed in Anglophone geographical reviews as internally coherent and elusively Other, and it continues to be relatively unknown in English-language journals and debates. Things have thankfully moved on since Hepple argued that "few Anglophone geographers read much French geography, or indeed (to our shame) any non-English language sources" (Hepple 2000 : 270). There is not simply an 'us' versus 'them' of uneven geographical knowledge production, since, as Paasi noted, such binary divisions hide contexts that are in themselves heterogeneous and modified by power geometries (Paasi 2005 : 770). Papers have been written about diverse traditions, national schools of geography and the effect of language on the circulation of knowledge. If the time has passed for self-flagellation, with Anglos feeling vaguely guilty for only reading English, and others feeling terribly left out and ignored or simply lonely, then what should we do now? Is this unevenness and hegemony of Anglophone geography quite so totalizing as some might believe? Should there really be a 'global geography', or a post-national geography or would this just be hegemony by another name?

Least some think that non-English speaking political geography is fixated with a vision of Anglo hegemony, intellectual life in the so-called periphery remains very pleasant for many. When we asked one of our colleagues what French geographers thought of Anglo debates, he simply answered: "*Ils s'en foutent!*". In other words, they

simply don't give a damn. It is still possible to have a good career in France without ever publishing in English, although this is perhaps less and less the case. Conditions and rules in Switzerland remain different again, and there is an increasing fascination for 'international' journals, even if these are no more than journals of local reputation published in English. Paasi observes that what passes as international science is often nothing more than national science from the 'core' of Anglo-American academies (Paasi 2005).

Yet, Anglo-American geography over the last few decades has been driven forward by so-called 'French Theory,' an intellectual fascination Cusset (2003) explains lucidly in his book of the same name. It is indeed ironic that the one place you won't find Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and others – all unavoidable in Anglo political geography since the 1990s – is Francophone political geography. The reasons for this peculiar state of affairs are complex and detailed elsewhere (Fall 2007). In a country with remaining strong hierarchies and where the weight of orthodoxy is institutionalised in subtle ways, we would nevertheless argue that Francophone political geography is slowly reinventing itself through simple generational renewal. In an effort to give this process a little nudge and to foster an international dialogue between multiple traditions of political geography, an international conference around the theme of (*L'espace politique: concepts et échelles / Space of politics: concepts and scales*) was held in Reims, France, on the 2-4th of April 2008 under the aegis of the International Geographical Union/Union Géographique Internationale (IGU), represented by Anton Gosar, the president of the political geography commission of the IGU, and the French political geography and geopolitics committee of the IGU, represented by its president Stéphane Rosière.

This event, one of several recent ones to directly bring together scholars from a wide range of backgrounds, brought together around one hundred people from a dozen different countries, mainly geographers, with a few political scientists. Participants were mostly from France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Switzerland, and Belgium with few participants from developing countries. An absent Algerian who was refused a visa illustrated further, despite his best efforts, how geography remains uneven in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Within France, *géographie politique* has been less developed than the *géopolitique* practised by Yves Lacoste (who did not attend the conference), whose work is averse to social theory and in fact much closer to mainstream international relations than to critical geography. French geopoliticians look down on political geographers and consider them irrelevant, far from the real matters of state.

This was the first conference explicitly on 'political geography' held in France in recent years. That it was held in the Champagne district probably helped attendance, with the local beverage lending zest to the debates in the evening hours. Speakers were asked to provide overhead slides in whatever language they were not speaking in, to provide at least basic understanding for non-speakers. This worked surprisingly well, and certainly people made a huge effort, mobilising distant family members or willing colleagues to help with translation beforehand. People showed good will, made token attempts to speak English or French at the beginning or end of presentations, and participated in bilingual sessions. Papers were grouped thematically and displayed the huge variety of themes of contemporary political geography and geopolitics, critical and otherwise. The emergence of themes such as

globalization, ecology, gender, terrorism, did not eclipse older themes such as territory, sovereignty and power.

Yet despite many bilingual participants, many sessions and meal tables were largely monolingual. Language competency is an embodied capacity and people tend to gravitate to linguistic comfort zones despite nominal bilingualism. People and languages didn't mix as much as might have been hoped: the much-debated binary seemed more durable in practice than in pre-conference aspiration. An example of this was given by Virginie Mamadouh. While impressively multi-lingual, she explained at the beginning of her paper that while she had planned to speak in French on the debates around scale, she decided not to at the last minute since simply translating 'scale' to 'échelle' didn't conjure up and invoke the same meanings, geographical debates and implicit shared understanding. In other words, using English was a way of positioning herself within particular debates, ways of doing geography and of doing theory. To do so in French, she implied, would have made her paper incomprehensible.

Organizing a conference inevitably necessitates grouping papers thematically. It is a steep challenge for organisers to create sessions that cohere intellectually. But thematic grouping, even taken rather loosely, inevitably has the unwanted effect of promoting and fostering clumping. Differences in academic debates reflect real different agendas and ways of doing geography. Some themes simply aren't shared. The French government's streamlining of the state's administrative grid, and the creation of new "*communautés*" from the existing 36,000 communes was one particular preoccupation of French geographers that was simply too specific to be shared. Election analysis was another favourite of French geographers. On the other

hand, debates around Marxism, governmentality, and power were more clearly English language themes.

In a sense, we get the feeling that we have reached a clear turning point: if we are to bridge these divides that exist and are performed in subtle ways, then we have to invent new forms of encounter, workshops perhaps rather than *colloques*. Simply stacking papers together, one after the other, with time for questions is no longer enough. Creating networks, meeting new ideas and sustaining relationships between scholars do happen at international conferences, but real debates are a rarity. We have to invent new geographical spaces, dialogical spaces of encounter, based around intense interaction and time taken to gain common ground. Otherwise the 'Other' is simply seen as too different, too incomprehensible, or simply wrong. Flippant comments in corridors perpetuating the 'us' and 'them' and laughing at each other's foibles may well be the stuff of comedy down the ages but it is also faintly tragic among ostensibly worldly geographers.

One social evening from the conference testified to the power of cultivating international connections. In a tour of the underground cellars of the House of Pommeroy, the conference participants found themselves in the tunnels of an old Roman chalk pit staring at signs indicating *Zürich, Berlin, Rome, Londres, Marseille* and *Moscou*. It was dark and damp but all were in good spirits, surrounded as they were by thousands of bottles of Champagne. The subterranean scene called forth jokes about underground territories and rhizomatic networks but what was before everyone was a landscape of international understanding. French champagne became an international product line in the wake of the Napoleonic wars when savvy local area producers sent free cases of the wine to the British and Russian general

staff occupying France. They took their acquired taste home and so began a lucrative geographically denominated commodity brand. The Champagne cellars gained their place names each time a new market was conquered by the producer. The cellar had *Moscou* next to *Zürich*, and *Berne* close to *Kyoto*. Under a hill in the French countryside, a jumbled geography took form. Let us hope that emergent debates in international political geography can draw inspiration from these complex topologies, with self-consciously bilingual meetings, however conceived, as intellectual catalysts that reverberate in ways that are consequential though they may not always be visible.

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