

Geography in the Colonial Context

Between European Science and Local Knowledge (19th-20th centuries)

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ABSTRACT

There are close and widely-noted links between colonial expansion and the development of the social sciences. Geography in particular appears as the science of European imperialism, with the creation of categories—“geography of exploration,” “colonial geography,” and “tropical geography”—which reflected a patriotic science, applied to colonized territories. Although this was made possible by the colonial context—maps are needed to conquer a territory, information is needed for the administration of populations—the development of geography reflects more complex realities. While the discipline gradually became institutionalized in metropolitan France, geographers in the field were in constant tension, with the colonial administration and its sometimes diverging interests on the one hand and with the sciences in metropolitan France on the other.



Map of the Tonkin Delta (sic), executed at the Dépôt de la guerre based on the work of officers from the expeditionary corps, 1885 (3rd edition) .

Beyond “Colonial Geography”

Geography plays a dominant role in the relations between knowledge and power, for it can appear as the science of imperialism *par excellence*. Along with Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, numerous researchers have claimed that “the history of geography and that of colonial empires are inextricably tangled.” The geography of exploration, which preceded colonial geography, is seen as an instrument of domination in the service of conquest. The act of naming a territory and putting it on a map signifies appropriating it.

Thus a distinction was made between “colonial sciences,” deemed to be an accessory of domination, and metropolitan sciences, which remained beyond any compromise with the colonial administration. In France, attempts to institutionalize geography gave rise to strong antagonism: supporters of an established discipline of colonial geography, such as Marcel Dubois, were opposed by geographers such as Paul Vidal de La Blache and Lucien Gallois, who defended a more academic geography. *The Annales de géographie*, founded in 1891, was the centre of the opposition until the break of 1894, which established the Vidalian paradigm.

The division between certain categories must nevertheless be nuanced—colonial geography versus Vidalian geography, field versus study. Florence Deprest has shown that the borders between the two are porous, by exploring the university careers of two specialists on Algeria, Augustin Bernard and Emile-Félix Gautier. The search for institutional legitimization led Bernard, who nevertheless was a former student of Dubois, to publish numerous articles in the *Annales de Géographie*. The political or academic positions held by geographers could thus orient their scientific production.

Networks of belonging formed among producers of knowledge, who found spaces within scholarly societies, university institutions, or scientific journals which welcomed their work. Thus the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Paris*, and its British counterpart, the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, or *Die Erde*, the journal of the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde (Berlin), published accounts by travelers and reported all geographical advances in the colonies. These societies also served as a forum for colonial scholars, and were sometimes marked by violent debates which bear witness to the tensions between the home country and the field. Navy officers, merchants, colonial civil servants, architects, engineers, and missionaries published in their pages. Geographical societies were incidentally not the only ones to spread news of these explorations, as journals, such as *Le Tour du Monde*, played a leading role in the publications of travel journals.

The Colonial Terrain as the Subject of Knowledge

Upon their arrival in colonial territories—or territories in the process of being colonized—Europeans discovered spaces and populations previously unknown to them and which they had to confront. In order to identify this *terra incognita*, they conducted so-called “scientific” explorations, which involved description, comparison and measurement, as well as bringing back notes, sketches, and samples. The navigability of rivers was a major issue, as exemplified by the expeditions of David Livingstone on the Zambezi and Kasai Rivers, or the mission by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier on the Mekong between 1866-1868.

Military staff, scholars, or colonial civil servants led ethnographic surveys and gathered information from the population, resulting in regional monographs. This was notably the case in Tonkin during the years 1894-1897 and 1903-1904, when officers received very precise instructions regarding the questions they should ask and the form of reports to be provided to the administration, while the same practices can also be found with the British in neighbouring Burma.

European military officers were also producers of cartographic knowledge, as demonstrated by the various undertakings of Ordnance Survey maps published by geographical services, such as the *Survey of India* by the British, or the topographical maps produced in French possessions. In the field, cartographic officers proceeded via

road surveys and astronomical observations to give the exact coordinates of points on a map. They also sought information from local populations in order to learn the name of a waterway or a village. They integrated local knowledge into their European research—such was the case, as reported by Henri Bissuel in 1888, with the ephemeral map traced in the sand by a Touareg, which helped supplement existing European ones. The Mission Pavie, which took place between 1879 and 1895 throughout French Indochina, is an example of these colonial cartographical undertakings.

Studying the geographical practices used in the field makes it possible to nuance the connection between production of knowledge and the colonial enterprise, for there can be dichotomies between political interests and geographical knowledge. Boundary commissions in Africa or Asia demonstrate the difficulty in providing empirical confirmation for the theory of treaties. The reality on the ground, whether it be natural—mountaintop, waterway—or connected to humans—village, cultivated field—did not necessarily lend itself to the application of political decisions. The considerable back and forth between the home country and the field to reach a solution shows the complexity of geography in a colonial context.

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