

# Oikumene

Oikos : residence, Oiken : to inhabit / inhabited, (implied gÃ©a) oikoumenÃ© : inhabited land

Notion relative to the "meaning and object of human geography", quoting the title of the article of Paul Vidal de la Blache which opens the "Principes de gÃ©ographie humaine". The object is the Earth, as the residence of the human species, while the meaning questions the interdependence relation between mankind and its habitat.

The "oikumenal" perspective is unevenly explicit in human geography works. It is displayed whenever the author wants to confer an ethic or ontological value to his discourse, and ambitions to rebuild the bases of the project of human geography, by going back to the origins and by underlining novelty.

## 1/ Antiquity

Oikumene as a reference notion to specifically geographical knowledge. Ancient geography, occidental in its bases, is Greek by its language and by its issues.

Greek culture questions the inhabited world from its location in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Geography is ethno-centred and the land inhabited by the Greeks, even though they are scattered, is the heart of the inhabited world. At the margins of this inhabited world, stand out the fringes - *eschatia* -, haunted by creatures that are not necessarily humans. On basis of a Greek way to humanly inhabit land, characterised by a settled way of life, institution of the city and of sanctuaries, are assessed the other ways of residence, of non-Greeks, barbarians and "exotic", which distinguish themselves by their habitat. Herodotus (490-425 BC) is representative from this standpoint, he considers that the fringes of inhabited land are the place where natural and cultural fantasy deploys. The geographical standpoint merges here with an ethnographic standpoint, which classify the inhabiting populations as well as their territories. (Map in : FranÃ§ois Hartog *Le miroir d'HÃ©rodote*, Gallimard BibliothÃ©ques des histoires, p.34 )

Construction of the alexandrine map or Eratosthenes map, so-called map of the inhabited world, may be considered as a positive affirmation of the geographical standpoint. It marks a breaking point, in that identification of the Earth as a dimensioned sphere will serve as a basis to locate and delimit its inhabited part. And in the background arises the question whether other oikumenes might exist on the Earth sphere (antipode map in Germaine Aujac, *La gÃ©ographie dans le monde antique*, PUF, QSJ, p. 67) It was in Volume 3 of his *Geography* that Eratosthenes (circa 275-193 BC), according to Strabon, analysed and commented his map of the inhabited world, from 12° to 66° latitude and from 140° longitude (map in Germaine Aujac p. 72-73). Of this inhabited and mapped world, Strabon (63 BC-25 AC) proposes to set down the geography "the geographer must describe the inhabited world in its known parts, neglect its unknown regions, as well as what is out of reach" (II, 5,5). This analytical and self-limited standpoint defines what is chorography : a knowledge of the inhabited world in those parts, but which refuses to reflect on the meaning of inhabitation.

## 2/ Classical geography and the notion of oikumene

Knowledge about the Earth sphere, its "discovery" by European cultures reveal other desert or inhabited, unevenly populated spaces, and other ways to inhabit. The cartographic inventory contributes to specifying locations and distributions, national geographic schools develop their concerns and their methods. The oikumenal standpoint of a single inhabited Earth becomes a marginal one through profusion, fragmentation of knowledge. It however remains preserved by a "philosophical" standby. E. Kant fits in this perspective when he explains the duty of cosmopolitanism : to inhabit the Earth is to behave as a citizen of the world. Awareness of terrestrial unity, its knowledge and its experience through travel, intercourse in the sense of visit, contribute to cosmopolitanism.

The use or re-use of the notion of oikumene in classical geography may be interpreted as an effect of cultural legacy combining the old hellenistic notion with the cosmopolite position of the philosophy of the Age of the Enlightenment; Alexander von Humboldt, with his hellenistic first name and as author of *Kosmos*, would be a plausible relay in this transition.

The issue of oikumene is more specifically re-worded with the apparition of a particular field of analysis and reflections, that of human geography. Vidal uses the term when asking to consider in general terms the relations between Earth and mankind : "Par dessus le localisme dont s'inspiraient les conceptions antÃ©rieures, des rapports gÃ©ographiques entre la terre et l'homme se font jour (...) Les solitudes ocÃ©aniques ont divisÃ© des oekoumÃ©nes longtemps ignorants les uns des autres (...) Aujourd'hui toutes les parties de la terre entrent en rapport, l'isolement est une anomalie qui semble un dÃ©fi". The evolution leading from mankind divided into several multiple oikumenes toward a gathered, if not unified oikumene complies with the principle of terrestrial unity which founds human geography

Pioneer spaces which make the oikumene extend by a colonisation process are integrated into the oikumene. Pierre Monbeig analyses the pioneer fronts as "L'extension de l'oekoumène ne continue de s'accomplir par la pénétration de groupes humains pionniers dans des secteurs de la planète encore peu habités. Une région pionnière peut se terminer comme l'un de ces secteurs en cours d'incorporation à l'oekoumène" ... He indeed suggests to distinguish between pioneer fronts and pioneer fringes "lesquelles sont des marges où se dessinent des "sub-oekoumènes plus ou moins temporairement colonisés" Les franges pionnières, Géographie Générale, Gallimard, La Pléiade, p. 974, 1966.

Max. Sorre has adopted and largely developed this standpoint of oikumene's unity which Vidal had sketched. In a first step, he explains the formation of the oikumene by the biological ubiquity of the human species (Fdts Biol. Ch.III), which allows "celle-ci de couvrir la Terre presque entièrement" (M. Sorre uses the "cosmopolite" term). The Earth is first of all an habitat in the biological sense where the human species lives and breeds. The human species itself is divided into races adapted to the various environments. This perspective is followed up in the other books of his treaty through the study of settlement, densities and discontinuities of the oikumene, and of migrations as resettlement of the oikumene, of habitat as materialising the oikumene, of social and political structures as armatures of the oikumene. He concludes his treaty as follows "Il est possible de dégager quelques vues générales sur la constitution de l'oekoumène ; fin dernière de la géographie humaine". From biology to culture, Max. Sorre presents the oikumene as a key notion of human geography, understood in a classical and encyclopaedic perspective. This deep (and almost totalitarian) inspiration seems to close the cycle of classical human geography.

It can however be found back at the beginning of the seventies in two publications of O. Dolffus which ambition to re-formulate the geographical project :

"Le domaine de l'espace géographique dans son sens le plus large est "l'épiderme" de la Terre, c'est à dire la surface terrestre et la biosphère. Dans une acception qui n'est qu'en apparence plus restrictive c'est l'espace habitable l'oekoumène des Anciens, où les conditions naturelles permettent l'organisation de la vie en société. Jusqu'à une date récente l'oekoumène coïncidait à peu près avec les terres cultivables et utilisables pour l'agriculture et l'élevage. Les déserts où l'irrigation est impossible, le domaine glaciaire des hautes altitudes et de la haute montagne en étaient exclus. Cette notion de l'oekoumène doit être révisée. Le géographe Max Sorre, qui l'a largement développée et employée le constatait lui-même" (L'espace géographique, 1970, Introduction). In L'analyse géographique (1971) O. D. himself uses the notion for "les raseaux dans l'oekoumène" (p.62) and "les limites dans l'oekoumène" (p.84)

The Canadian use may also be noted, which distinguishes what is oikumene and what is outside oikumene. Analysis of the Canadian space and of its differentiation has made a very large use of the notion (L.E Hamelin, Le Canada; Magellan typologie de l'écoumène canadien; Dissertation of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society; thesis of P. Biays map)

3/ From oikumene to ecumene : change in spelling and / or shift of perspective?

Since the late eighties, spelling of the term has changed, it has lost its Greek letters for a Latinised written form, like economy and ecology coming from the same root. The author of this re-writing is A. Berque, who concedes that Max. Sorre had sensed that geography was "la science de l'écoumène c'est à dire de la Terre en tant qu'elle est humanisée : habitée, aménagée, représentée, imaginée par les sociétés humaines" (Encyclopédie de géographie p. 365, 1995). The thoughts developed by A. Berque about the ecumene are relieved of the factual let even say encyclopaedic aspects which loaded Max. Sorre's work. From this standpoint, simplification of the written form corresponds to a change of register, we leave the register of a treatise to discover that of an essay.

In its books *Etre humains sur la terre : principes d'éthique de l'écoumène* (1996) and *Écoumène, introduction à l'étude des milieux humains* (1999) A. Berque ambitions to broaden the study of the ecological relationship between man and inhabitable Earth to a reflection of ontological nature that takes into account the human character of the Earth and the earthen basis of mankind : "L'écoumène c'est l'ensemble et la condition des milieux humains en ce qu'ils ont proprement d'humain, mais non moins d'écologique et de physique. C'est cela l'écoumène qui est pleinement la demeure (oikos) de l'être de l'humain". This represents indeed a shift of perspective which marks a break from the positivist horizon represented by Max. Sorre, even tainted with a humanist tone.

If the ecumene is indeed the humanised space, this habitat is nonetheless not sheltered from brutal and more or less predictable manifestations of Nature, it is exposed to them and one may consider with Bernard Bousquet that irruption of physical processes in the inhabited space are "ecumene events".

Does the concept of ecumene still have a positive relevance, as one may consider that there are no more virgin spaces on the planet? Mankind is everywhere present on it, be it only through the traces of its releases at high latitudes and altitudes and in the oceans, the whole Earth is ecumene and there are no more spaces outside it. If the concept retains a value, it resides in the

relationship between man and his planet, the only one he can inhabit, and this particularity deserves his attention.

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## **Bibliographie**

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