

Realism

From a formalised viewpoint, it could be said that realism is a posture that assumes the constitutive autonomy of different phenomena in relation to our ability to understand them, and the reliability of our understanding in apprehending them correctly. Realism can be ontological (relating to a fundamental belief that cannot be demonstrated) or epistemological (and as such considered to be the only correct manner of scientific undertakings: confronting things as they exist, independently from our own volition). This means that realism requires a degree of confidence in the reliability of our openings onto the world (our sensory experience, report by others, scientific measures). Thus positivism can be said to be a form of realism that casts doubt on immediate experience and our spontaneous categorisations, tending to integrate these into protocols that aim to extract explicative relationships or laws from reality, these being the only objects worthy of being targeted by science.

Realism, in its different acceptations, is a term that has in the past been widely used among French geographers, even if conceived in rather implicit manner. Indeed, geographers focused on "realities", as far as possible "geographical" realities, these terms being used to embrace the notion of tangible objects, preferably material objects, that the geographer had the task of recording on maps or encompassing in explicative descriptions. At the same time, he was supposed to avoid being led astray by theoretical discourse, which was thought unsuited to giving an account of the diversity of the world. While realism was rarely presented as a geographer's stance, it served as a philosophy (in the non-philosophical sense) for generations of "traditional" geographers, and this remains true for many in the geographical community today.

French academic (university) geography developed a fairly specific form of realism, even at the time of its formation (at the start of the 20th century). While the academic community overall were realists in the first sense, the Vidal (and post-Vidal) school added several particular features. Most of its members shared the idea that the causal explanations for phenomena were already contained within these phenomena (this posture being found likewise with Durkheim). This required the geographer to undertake a process of confrontation and superimposition of "geographical facts". In this setting, the co-incidence of localization takes on a strong explicative value (deterministic or "complex"). Elsewhere, and more markedly, the small amount theoretical literature on the subject indicates that the purpose of the discipline is more to report or model facts than to fit them to wider general laws. Geography, and in particular regional geography, thus appears realist by vocation. It operates in direct contact with the world, by way of the fundamental experience provided by the field. It sets out to be "complete", "exhaustive" and at the same time "concrete", "dealing with facts". Between the first post-Vidal generation and the next, realism became consubstantial with the trade of the geographer (for instance in the "Guide de l'étudiant en géographie" by André Cholley, 1942 and 1953), and a central element of doctrine in the 1950s and 1960s.

This realism, which could be termed by some as "naïve" (G.Almeras) in its ambition to portray the world, gradually came up against major difficulties: it contributed to turning geographers away from the search for laws, and from a brand of general geography that was widely discredited (except in physical geography) after 1945. The ever-widening scope of investigation finally led to an encyclopaedic approach that was untenable in epistemological terms. This rendered the discourse of geography inaudible in a scientific field, which was dominated by the model of the theory to be supported. Geographical realism was later denounced, in the 1970s, as illusory description and an epistemological chimera by those that have come to be known as the New Geographers, in particular Claude Raffestin (in numerous writings), as well as in the course of the conference entitled Géopoint 78, Concepts et Construits en Géographie). Criticism emanating from Althusser's materialism, from positivism and from structuralism put the emphasis on «representations» or theories which serve as the interface between the given world and what the knowing subject perceives. In this sense the critique of the 1970s is mainly nominalist: it states that reality is unknowable as such, without however denying its existence, or rather its irreducibility to human thinking. Via the term "construct" and reference to Jean Piaget, this rejection of traditional realism foreshadows what we today know as «constructivism», even if it only partially corresponds to the present-day acceptations of the word in the social sciences.

Nevertheless, realism as a stance is far from absent in the present-day geographical community, even in its classic form. Among present-day practitioners there is a whole spectrum of positions ranging from the most classic attitudes to anti-realist stances that can countenance only representation and narrative. In these cases the researcher may be seen as not possessing any ability to grasp anything but figurations, discourse, or commented action, that is to say to scrutinise a reality that is independent from any human interference, whether deliberate or not. A position of this nature, sometimes viewed as relativism, is however not common in French geography, where the trend is rather a certain hostility towards this type of stance. However, that which is considered real can also, since Plato, not correspond to our immediate representations, but relate to pure ideas. In this sense, idealism is a particular form of

realism, a realism of ideas, which displaces the notion of reality on the grounds of the illusory nature of immediate experience. This stance can be found among numerous realist mathematicians (who consider the entities handled by their discipline as objects possessing an existence that is stripped of any experiential or sensory contingency). A similar stance is found with Roger Brunet, who considers that there is more reality independent from the researcher in choremes, geons or spatial systems than in material objects.

The debate on these epistemological positionings is nevertheless far less vexed today than it was in the 1970s, this being related to the more general decline in reflexivity among French geographers observed since the 1990s.

Olivier Orain

Bibliographie

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