

# Albert Demangeon

Albert Demangeon (1872-1940) was from a modest background. He was a brilliant student, and this gained him entry to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1892, where he discovered geography and the teaching of Paul Vidal de la Blache. He obtained the Agrégation in geography in 1895, and then became a secondary school teacher, and later a "caïman" in the Ecole Normale Supérieure (a slang expression for teachers preparing students for the Agrégation). After presenting his thesis (on Picardy, in 1905) he taught in Lille university, and then in the Sorbonne in Paris from 1911. During the First World War he served in the army's geographical corps, where he drafted memoranda for the military staff, and he later took part in the study committee for the preparation of peace. He held the seat of "economic geography" from 1925, and was still in activity when he died at the start of the German Occupation.

His work is impressive: a dozen books (more than ten school textbooks), and some hundred articles and reports. Up to 1914, his emphasis was on «regional geography» (his thesis on the Picardy plain was considered by his contemporaries to be a model of regional monographs) and he always defended its importance. More generally, he belongs to the sphere of chorological and idiographic geography. He worked on all scales: while he produced monographs on small regions (the Limousin upland areas) he was also the author of the first volumes of the *Géographie Universelle* headed by Vidal de la Blache and Gallois (covering the British Isles, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg), and also the last (on the economic and human aspects of France). In his first writings he appears concerned to preserve a balance between human and physical geography. His early work was mainly on physical geography (see an article on the relief of the Limousin in France, where he applied the theories of William Morris Davis) but when he was appointed to the Sorbonne, it was «Emmanuel de Martonne» who presided over the area of physical geography, leaving Demangeon to turn his hand to human geography. He often broaches the theme of the complexity of interactions between man and nature. He considered that human phenomena can have both natural and historical causes. While he was well aware of this complexity, he nevertheless sought to define laws of human geography.

Although from the start of the 1920s he published several studies on cities (London, Duluth, Cleveland, Birmingham, Antwerp, and above all Paris) his first specialisation was in rural geography, with a particular interest in rural habitat (he founded a commission on the subject in the International Geographic Union in 1925). He also made a name in economic geography via various articles that drew attention both by their subject matter (industrial issues, traffic issues) and by the scale of observation adopted. His contributions, which were often prospective, belong to what was later to be termed territorial development. He was also interested in the main contemporary problems; the end of European economic domination after the First World War (for instance his essay *Le Déclin de l'Europe*, which gained a wide audience), colonial issues (his book on the British Empire), the crisis of the 1930s, globalisation before the letter, etc. Nor did he hesitate to take up resolute positions towards the writings of German geopolitics, as early as 1932.

Although he does not generally acknowledge it, Demangeon adopts the methodological principles of the Vidal de la Blache following: the use of maps and archives (see for instance his secondary thesis *Les sources de la Géographie de la France aux Archives nationales*), and the emphasis on work in the field (matching the frequency of his excursions and travels). He however appears to have been reluctant to embark on theoretical writing. He did not succeed in producing a book on general human geography, while Emmanuel de Martonne's *Traité de géographie physique* was published in 1909, and *Géographie humaine* by Jean Brunhes was published in 1910. Demangeon's work on this theme was repeatedly postponed, and at the time of his death the general layout was planned, but only a few pages were actually drafted, concerning the definition, object and methods of human geography. These texts were published posthumously in a book entitled *Problèmes de géographie humaine* (1942), which also comprises a list of his publications and reprints of the articles considered at the time to be the most important.

He was much more a pedagogue than a theoretician, and his contemporaries praised his clarity. He wrote numerous school textbooks, and also turned his attention to primary education, with articles in a journal for primary school teachers (*Le Volume*, from 1899 to 1905). In 1927 he founded and headed a study group directed towards primary education. From a methodological point of view it is interesting to note the importance of his questionnaires, intended in particular for primary school teachers in the course of enquiries. He familiarised himself with this method in Picardy and above all Limousin (a standard questionnaire was published in 1909). In the 1930s he headed collective surveys under the Rockefeller Institute, in particular on rural habitat, agrarian structures and foreign labour in French agriculture. He was sensitive to the living conditions of his contemporaries, and sought solutions to the

problems of his time. He saw himself as an expert in varied domains ; for instance he arbitrated social conflicts during the Front Populaire movement.

As one of the first generation to have produced theses in geography, Demangeon also sought to spread the discipline, in particular to the three education cycles. From the start of his career, he defended Vidal orthodoxy, and also geography as such, as distinct from the social sciences (although he did not respond to the attacks of the Durkheim sociologists). He was concerned that geography should remain distinct from history, although history is widely present in his work, and rather more so than it was for a number of his colleagues. He collaborated with the historians involved in the *Annales*, in particular Lucien Febvre whom he helped to found and diffuse his journal (drafting numerous memoranda). He also wrote two books on the Rhine.

All in all, this diligent worker is surprising by the variety of the themes broached, the approaches adopted, the places chosen and the scales he worked on. He was open to the other human sciences (history and sociology), to new methods of research and to current affairs, and was sometimes a pioneer. A tireless advocate of geography, Demangeon was also a populariser. His authority within the French school of geography grew through his career, and he became one of its mainstays. He was not an organiser like Emmanuel de Martonne, but he played a more important part than many of his colleagues (such as Jules Sion or even Raoul Blanchard), thus becoming the leader of human geography after the death of Jean Brunhes in 1930.

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