

# Maximilien Sorre

Maximilien Sorre (1880-1962), also known as Max Sorre, was a French geographer who, in the first half of the 20th century, was the advocate and developer of the intuitions and orientations proposed by P. Vidal de la Blache. The successive dedications of his works, starting with his thesis in 1913, *Les Pyrénées méditerranéennes*; Etude de géographie biologique, reflect this scientific and epistemological filiation, and the importance given to the paradigm of the relationship of Man with his environment.

Max Sorre is however not positioned in the strict Normale Supérieure lineage. He was a student from 1899 to 1901 in the Ecole Normale de Saint Cloud (which trained teachers for the state schools across France). Posted to Perpignan and then to Montpellier in 1903, he embarked on a university course in history and botany, attending the lectures of Charles Flahaut, who initiated him in the specificities of the Mediterranean environment. This course enabled him to enlist for a doctorate under Vidal de la Blache on a subject in the area of biological geography, in a region he already knew, the eastern Pyrenees. In 1913 he was thus able to present his pioneering thesis in record time. He was mobilised in 1914 as an officer, and seriously wounded in Artois in autumn 1915. He underwent an operation and a period of convalescence. He frequently visited Vidal de la Blache (who had lost his own son, also an officer) and thus formed a relationship of trust.

As a distinguished, decorated republican, a recognised academic and a convinced pedagogue, he found his place in the French university institutions between the two world wars. He was successively lecturer, professor and dean, and also had leanings towards the political left (head of primary education appointed by Jean Zay under the Front Populaire) which earned him sanctions under the Vichy regime.

Sorre's scientific work details, develops and refines the intuitions set out by Vidal de la Blache in his article of 1903, *La géographie humaine et ses rapports avec la géographie de la vie*. The orientations of his work and the reflection it contains can be related to the concept of the «oekumene», and among the key notions is that of pathogenic complexes in medical geography, and the value of the mesological approach.

With the concept of the oekumene, a long-standing notion in western geography which he reappraised against the backdrop of the globalisation of Empires, Sorre gives considerable importance to the study of human geography. He analyses the biological conditions of habitability across the globe, local and regional variations in the way lifestyles adapt to these conditions, and population and cultural transfers resulting from international migrations. Towards the end of his life he witnessed the intensification of global exchanges, and the East-West geopolitical divide. This led Sorre to wonder about the issue of the one-ness of the oekumene.

In his article in 1933, *Complexes pathogènes et géographie médicale*, he lays the foundations for an innovating approach to the multiple, interacting causalities that enable biological facts to be understood. Sorre includes contributions from the Pasteur tradition in his human geography, encountered in the course of his university functions. His main work, dated 1943, *Les fondements biologiques de la géographie*; *essai d'une écologie de l'homme*, provides a lively portrayal of these issues and the challenges involved, but the moment of publication meant that this original work remained somewhat in the shadows.

By putting emphasis on the study of «environment» (mesology) Sorre focuses on the aspects of physical geography; mainly the climate - that form the environment of living beings. In this he breaks away from the (very recent) hegemony of Martonian geomorphology, and links back to the Humboldt-inspired biogeographic origins of scientific geography. In the geographical environment he distinguishes several different environments: the physical environment, defined by measurable parameters, the composite, complex biological or living environment, and the human environment, articulated in terms of resources and constraints by the other two.

A man of contact and relations, with numerous academic, scientific and editorial responsibilities, Sorre did not have an academic following as such. He was however eagerly attentive towards innovation in the biological and social sciences. He followed medical research on pandemics, and was probably one of the first in France to have signalled the work underway in the Chicago school. In the last ten years of his life he debated with sociologists on lifestyles, so as to update and reappraise Vidal's "genre de vie". The bibliographies of his writing show the linguistic and scientific variety of his reading, and it can be said that they resume, at a given moment, the state of the art in subjects in which he is interested as a geographer, providing a sort of overview.

His conception of mesology makes him a more or less acknowledged precursor in environmental issues. In the dark days of the Occupation there are premonitory remarks: "Very slight indications tell us that climates will continue to change before our eyes. The natural atmosphere in which we live is for ever altering, and the course of infectious diseases shows that it is ingenious in varying its modes of attack. The sum of these influences will one day sway the balance. We have seen the oekumene enlarge and unify. Even if Man does not contribute by his madness, it will retract and break up. It may be that those who witness the decline of the human era will only have an obscure and reduced awareness of this". (Les fondements biologiques, 1943, p.417

## **Bibliographie**

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