

# Pierre Gourou

Pierre Gourou (1900 to 1999) lived through the 20th century, and his work spreads over an exceptionally long period. The list of his works, numbering some fourteen, is as abundant after 1970 as before. Indeed, as he himself said, the text expressing his thought in its most completed form, *Terres de bonne espérance, le monde tropical*, dates from 1982, thus published when he was already very advanced in age. His work spans sixty years, from Tonkin in 1931 to *L'Afrique Tropicale, main ou géant agricole?* in 1991, and despite being voluminous, it exhibits considerable unity. It follows a single line of reflection with recurrent issues concerning relations between humans and their natural habitats, through the prism of civilisation. Societies are approached via the «landscapes» they create and their ability to occupy space according to varying levels of population density.

Pierre Gourou was born in 1900 in Tunis to a French family from Languedoc. The books he read as a child led him very early on to dream of the Far East, its great civilisations and high population densities. After secondary schooling in Lycée Carnot in Tunis he followed a normal university curriculum in Lyon, culminating in 1923 with the agrégation in history and geography. His first appointment was to the Lycée in Tunis, and then in 1926 he decided to leave for Indochina, where, after a year in Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon, he obtained a post in Hanoi from 1927 to 1932 in the Lycée Albert Sarraut, and thereafter in the University of Hanoi in its early stages (1932-1935). He remained a little under ten years in the Vietnam delta, with which he became very familiar. It was there that he developed his own research methods, which he was to follow throughout his career.

It was on the basis of the exploration of maps and numerous field surveys that he developed his geography of the delta, which was the subject of his thesis, directed by «Albert Demangeon», *Les paysans du delta tonkinois, Étude de géographie humaine* (1936). He devoted particular attention to rural housing, "*genuine summaries of Vietnamese civilisation*", and his second thesis took up this theme: *Esquisse d'une Étude de l'habitation annamite dans l'Annam septentrional et central* (1936).

In his first book, *Le Tonkin*, published on the occasion of the 1931 colonial exhibition, Gourou stresses the "positive aspects" of colonisation in the areas of security, education and health, and the "*beneficial nature of the French protectorate*" (1931, 347). Unlike René Dumont, who was working in the same field in the same period, he did not see the rising nationalist claims of these colonised populations, and was more prompt to denounce "*Chinese economic domination*" than French colonial domination, which he describes as being "political protection provided by France" (1931, 345-346).

He was elected to a chair of geography in Brussels Free University in 1936, where «Elisée Reclus» had taught in 1894. But the 1939-1945 World war took him away from Belgium for a time. In 1940-41 he taught in Montpellier university, and among his students were Gilles Sautter and Jean Gallais. He was then in Bordeaux from 1942 to 1944, and taught Paul Pelissier and Guy Lasserre. Thirty years later these men were to be the main players in French "tropical geography" in ORSTOM (today IRD) and the Centre d'Etudes de la Géographie Tropical (a CNRS institution) in Bordeaux. Gourou presided the scientific committee there from 1968 to 1992.

After having been part of the Resistance movement, Gourou was vice-president of the Liberation Committee in Gironde, representing the France-Liberté movement, from August to December 1944. Before and after the Second World War he became an expert on development issues in Indochina, in particular for the development of the Mekong delta, via his book *L'Utilisation du sol en Indochine Française* (1940). In June 1947 he published a study entitled *L'Avenir de l'Indochine* (the future of Indochina) in which he opts for a federal solution in French Indochina, with arbitration powers for France. He took on a mission to the United States in December 1944 to "*discuss questions about the Pacific with the Americans, New Zealanders and Thais*", and then a mission to Indochina in 1946 where he took part in negotiation with a Vietminh delegation, which all came to nothing because of the confusion of French politics at the time. These missions deeply disappointed him because of the feeling of helplessness that he derived from them. They seem to mark a turning-point in his career, which took the form of a determination to stay away from any form of action alongside a political power whatever its nature.

Gourou belongs to the intellectual family of the Ecole des Annales by way of Lucien Febvre whom he always considered as his master, and Fernand Braudel who was not only his colleague in the Collège de France, but also one of his closest friends. Very early on, he placed the notion of civilisation at the centre of his approach. This idea appears systematically from the earliest works published after his thesis, which were extensions of that work in space: *L'utilisation du sol en Indochine française* (1940a) and *La terre et l'homme en Extrême-Orient* (1940b). A more conceptual account is found in an article on "*la civilisation du vâgâta*" (the

civilisation of plants) (1948, remarked upon by Febvre in the Annales in 1949). Here he distinguishes "production techniques" governing relationships that humans entertain with the natural environment and "techniques for territorial control" governing the relationships of humans one to another. Following his book *Pour une géographie humaine* (1973), he systematically refers to "techniques d'encadrement". These "encadrements" or frameworks relate to civilian society (family, language, land ownership, prejudices, mentalities, religion etc) and to political society (village, tribal, or state structures etc). Culture and politics are closely interwoven in this notion of frameworks.

Pierre Gourou was mainly known for some time for his work *Les pays tropicaux, principes d'une géographie humaine et économique* (1947). The book was very successful (translated into several languages) and it earned the author the creation in December 1947 of a chair of tropical studies (physical and human geography) in the Collège de France. He was to occupy the post until his retirement in 1970, alongside the chair of geography in the Free University of Brussels. Gourou had the opportunity in 1945 to spend two months in the library of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Dakar, which led him to discover a large number of English-language publications on tropical countries, in particular in Africa. This enabled him to broaden his knowledge about tropical areas outside Asia, and to gather material for his book, which was published the following year.

His inaugural lecture in the Collège de France and the first edition of *Les pays tropicaux* provide a very pessimistic view, still pervaded with naturalism, of the tropical world. Gourou develops a sort of "model" of these warm, wet regions characterised by low population densities. "These countries with their retarded civilisations and economies" are, he considers, hampered by the physical environment, presented as far more disadvantageous than that of temperate areas (insalubrity, poor soils). In the revised edition of 1966 of the book, however, he considerably attenuates the pessimism of the first edition, altering his conclusions on the poor soils, insalubrity and forestry resources. He stresses the fact that scientific and technological research on tropical areas is lagging behind. Gourou's pessimism of the 1940s, considerably tempered by 1966, turned to cautious optimism in the 1980s, in particular in *Terres de bonne espérance: le monde tropical*: "If the tropical world, drawing benefit from the improvements that this book suggests are possible, were to fully exploit its enormous wealth in terms of renewable solar energy, rainfall and river water, it could ensure its prosperity and the future food resources for our species" (1982, 416).

His aversion for theories, conceptualisations and models and his refusal to adopt and adapt them from other related disciplines make him the last great classic geographer in the Vidal tradition. His thought remains disciplinary, which is at once its strength and its weakness. His absolute empiricism, his aestheticism, and his elegant, concise style assign him to the lineage of the great historians and geographers of the start of the 20th century. Unlike his two friends and colleagues in the Collège de France, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Fernand Braudel, who both felt the need to extend and enrich their disciplinary approach by borrowing concepts and methods from the human and social sciences close to their own, Gourou rejected the idea of such borrowings, preferring to retain a geographical and historical approach in its strictest sense.

The British post-colonial current (G. Bowd, D. Clayton, 2005) has recently shown how Gourou's tropical geography was a discourse of power, and a way of focusing the essential otherness of a non-Western world, oriental and/or tropical. With his veneration of Western reasoning and science as essential tools for knowledge and development, and his admiration for the harmony and timelessness of the rice-growing landscapes of the Far East, Gourou's tropical orientalism contributed to maintaining a brand of tropical geography that remained aloof from the critical appraisal of the impact of colonialism, capitalism and the nationalist dynamics of the peoples of the Third World.

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