

# Paul Vidal de la Blache

-Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918): the different facets of the scholar and his work

Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure (1863-1866) and obtained his Agrégation (highest French university teaching degree) (1866); he was a student at the Ecole Française of Athens, where he studied for a thesis in history and obtained a doctorate in 1872; from 1872, he was appointed to the Faculty of Arts in Nancy, where he requested geography as his only subject. From 1877, he embarked on a long career at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, before being given a chair in geography at the Sorbonne from 1898 to 1909 (after which time he took early retirement, but nevertheless continued to be intensively active). He published educational tools (wall maps and manuals), worked on an Atlas from 1883 and published versions of it for schools. With his student Marcel Dubois, he founded *Les Annales de Géographie* (1891) and an international geographical bibliography. The historian Ernest Lavisse commissioned from him a "tableau géographique" to be the first volume of a vast history of France from its origins up to the French revolution. Thus from the end of the 1880s, he worked on his *Tableau de la Géographie de la France*, which was published in 1903. The book was such a success that he became a member of the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1906. At the turn of the century he wrote several articles devoted to "human geography", explaining this neologism with reference to botanical ecology (1903), and developing themes such as densities and lifestyles in *Les Annales de Géographie* from the 1910s, which was a prelude to a treatise published posthumously (*Principes de Géographie humaine*, 1922). During the years 1900-1910, the drafting this work became his main objective, entrusting his students with the task of writing a universal geography (*Géographies*), for which Vidal designed the structure and selected the authors as early as 1907. During this same decade, his expertise was welcomed in fields such as teaching, territorial disputes and regional issues, which led him to suggest reflection on the role of mobilities and flows, on the modern functioning of cities, on the need for a strong national integration in the face of the "worldwide" competition that characterised his era, and to draw up a regionalisation map of France (1910). When the war broke out, he devoted his time to writing *La France de l'Est* (1917), a political geography study to demonstrate how far back the attachment of the Alsace-Lorraine people to the French political model went, and to denounce the German conception of hegemony founded on the domination of peoples. The book opens with the initial outlines of a geopolitical order. The founder of the French school of geography, recognised as such from the start of the 20th century, Vidal de la Blache was a precocious and clever pupil, but his career was relatively slow-moving. This was due to his personality, as his contemporaries testified (see annex "What was said about him"), and also to the complexity of his career, during which Vidal acquired a triple personal role, not to mention his role as a leader of a school of thought: as an authority in the teaching of geography in schools (primary, secondary and higher education), which was manifest from the 1890s on international and national levels; as the initiator of a modern geographical science, distancing itself from history, and the creator of "human geography" centred on relationships between humans and their environments, a subject that had to fight for its place at the turn of the century in the competitive field of the "social sciences"; and finally as a specialist, providing expertise applied to border issues, to national territorial organisation and to the drafting of peace treaties. These three geographer profiles: the pedagogue, the scholar and the expert in geography; developed in Vidal at the same time, whilst he was producing a variety of research, always on-going, open and renewed, research that should be examined through its dynamics and his successive moves. In this respect, his experience of Northern America in 1904 on the occasion of an international geographical congress, gave this scholar: who was less attentive to the past than sensitive to the historical depth of human constructions; a shock of modernity, which triggered in him a prospective way of thinking. This can be seen in education, in his critique of the classic forms of teaching (a "School of America" should be created on the model of the schools of Athens and Rome), and in his plea for "modern humanities", open to the state of the contemporary world, founded on science, which were the basis of the principles of secondary education reforms that were promoted in 1902 by the French republican administrative authorities. In political practice, this futuristic temporal regime demanded an adaptation to the spatial dimensions of a world that had become "global" (or "mondiale", a neologism at the time, which he endorsed): hence the nature of his projects for the territorial reorganisation of France and the reinforcement of the Empire, as well as his plea for the creation of federations or associations of States adjusted to this new grandeur (1917). Vidal de la Blache was the archetype of the republican academic, but he hated political commitment. He was a patriot, marked by the 1870 defeat, but he was also a cosmopolitan and a European, and was throughout his life crucially conscious of the virtues of free movement, in the manner of Saint-Simon.

-Influence and reception:

Vidal's role was more one of raising interest and permeating people's minds than dogmatic; he gathered around him a "school" of thought that rapidly filled universities and higher secondary schools with an educational policy promoting geography as a

subject (as much for ideological reasons as for economic pragmatism: a necessary awareness of resources and markets). This school, gathering people from generations that differed according to their initial qualifications, was far from homogeneous. The model was complex and stratified in the deployment of the work of Vidal himself, but it was not very formalised; it was developed in a variety of ways between the two world wars, when geography enjoyed a certain aura among students who were sensitive to its involvement in the political and economic events of the day and attracted by practices that were not subjected to classic university formalism. With the end of the Second World War, the great changes in the world, the ideological clashes linked to the Cold War and the re-launch of scientific innovation and social observation, a new cycle of intellectual debates was initiated, progressively affecting geography. Vidal's legacy was clearly relegated to a mode of "classic", followed by "traditional" practice during the 1960s, before being subjected to radical challenges at the start of the 70s. There were criticisms of his static representation of the environment (Georges Bertrand), of his scientific inconsistencies (Alain Reynaud), of his idiosyncratic graphic representations (Roger Brunet and the journal *Espace Géographique*; Jacques Lãvy and *EspacesTemps*), and of his a-political stance (Yves Lacoste and the journal *Hãrodote*); the new geographers of that era haphazardly denounced Vidal de la Blache the scholar and the tradition that he had engendered. In their strategies to reach prominence, his detractors used another weapon in the 1970s-1980s, which consisted in mobilising or rehabilitating another figure of the discipline, Jacques Elisãe Reclus. If the controversies among geographers, characterised by preoccupation with the present, produced caricatured analyses (often found in dictionaries and manuals), they also enabled the legacy of the geographical discipline to be re-examined, and a real historiographical interest to be reactivated for Vidal de la Blache and his work, as shown in the abundant literature that focuses on his modernity and complexity

Â -Legacy to today's world:

Beyond the interest of the discipline at different times in history, Vidal de la Blache's legacy to today's world resides in the echo between his work and current issues: his mobilisation in the 30s to counter the Geopolitik, or the current issues concerning national remembrance (see publications by Pierre Nora in the 1980s), or territorial organisation; challenges related to mobility and flows in a "global" context; the meaning of place and territory (symbolic, sensitive or vernacular) and how it can be put into words and images; the development of curiosity for what lies elsewhere; and the relationships between humans and the environment set out in his human geography, thus transgressing the (modern) nature-culture boundary, to the dismay of the Durkheim sociologists in particular. In this regard, the current environmental crisis could warrant a re-appraisal of his research program on the interaction between the "virtual" nature of places and human "possibilities", and of the "possibilism" that was attributed to Vidal, anchoring an intellectual reappraisal in the criticism of modern dualism. Despite Vidal's differences with today's thinking, his blurs and aporias, his work provides a hold to confront our contemporary context, particularly regarding our position towards the recent notions of the Anthropocene and the environmental humanities.

See also: [Albert Demangeon](#) and [Emmanuel de Martonne](#).

Marie-Claire Robic

Virtual exhibitions:

-To access BIS (Exhibitions and Collections): [www.nubis.univ-paris1.fr](http://www.nubis.univ-paris1.fr)

-To access ENS: <https://sherlock.ens.fr/exhibits/show/paulvidaldelablache>

*There are inter-connexions between these sites.*

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