



Call for Papers - Doctoral Colloquium



**Epistemology, methodology and reflexivity in geography:
diversifying and renewing views to embrace the practices.**

16-18 November 2022

Le Mans University, on site and online

The doctoral students of the *Junior International Geographers* (J.I. Geo) network are organizing a colloquium for young researchers supported by the French National Committee of Geography, *Comité National Français de Géographie* (CNFG). This network aims to promote collaborations between young researchers in geography around the world. The objectives of these panels are therefore to exchange on the different processes of knowledge production in geography and to animate transversal and international networks.

The Organizing Committee follows the International Geographical Union's Centennial Congress, a major event in 2022 for the geographers' community, and its theme "Time for geographers". Subject to the dominant logic of academic productivity, today's geographers pressured by the lack of time to think about their research and not only about its outputs. Through this first edition "Epistemology, methodology and reflexivity in geography: diversifying and renewing the views to embrace the practices" of the study days of the J.I. Geo network, the ambition is to take a step back and reflect on young researchers (postgraduate students and recent PhD graduates), including non-geographers, who use a geographical approach in their work, whether human, physical or geomatic, are invited to contribute to this reflection.¹

We make the assumption conferences tends to standardize the content by formalizing a way of producing thought (10-15 minutes communication, presentation format, etc.). This is why these panels will allow longer and freer interventions (video, dialogue, gesticulated conference, participative theater, sound immersion, etc.) and will favor times of exchange that go beyond simple questions and answers. In the perspective of the construction of the J.I. Geo network, physical presence will be recommended but remote participation will be made possible for speakers with travel constraints.²

¹ Please feel free to contact us before submitting your proposal if you want to make sure you are part of the event's target audience.

² Please feel free to contact the organizing committee to help you finding financing solutions for the trip to Le Mans.

Context

Why are we geographers? This question has a double meaning. Firstly, it is possible to answer it by exploring the reasons why each of us does geography. Curiosity is certainly one of them since this discipline is able to take on a diversity of objects and fields of investigation that seem infinite. It is certainly sometimes reduced to its character of knowledge production that locates and names the objects of the world. According to Brunet (1995, p. 477), “it is much more than that: it is to discover where we are. Or more precisely, in what, with whom, in the middle of what, at the end of what and from whom”.³ The second possibility is to make explicit what characterizes research in geography and defines the identity of the geographer. While this is a risky undertaking (Clément et al., 2021), understanding the world around us is the purpose of our work. Geography, is it not “to grasp the geographical ‘milieu’ where I live, where others live: a fundamental knowledge for any inhabitant-actor, for any undertaking, for any community which must manage its appropriated territory” (Brunet, 1995, p. 478)?⁴ To achieve this, as Di Méo (2014) points out, geographers can mobilize not only the natural sciences but also the humanities to nourish their approach. This panoptic character of a discipline that borrows from other disciplines while presenting the specificity of developing a spatialized and/or territorialized approach would be a characteristic of geography. Seeking, for example, historical explanations, climatic particularities, socio-economic reasons or geological productions, geography distinguishes itself by this capacity to consider together what surrounds it - the physical, material and social environment. This specificity constitutes an undeniable wealth for the production of knowledge, but it must also be considered in complementarity with its internationality to help reflect on what geography is and what it means to “do geography”. Crossing the views of geographers coming from different social, cultural and linguistic environments constitutes for us an opportunity to renew the approaches and theories of our discipline today, or at least to consciously reflect on them

To encourage these reflections, we propose a non-exhaustive set of questions. We divide them into three axes: methodology, epistemology and reflexivity. These axes are however porous and transversal proposals are possible since these three lines are intimately linked.

Methodological axis

Geography offers a systematic and synthetic view, seen by some as a panoptic intelligence or by others as a multidisciplinary approach, on all the causes and consequences of our presence on Earth. However, it is common to divide or even oppose geographers, between those who do “physical”, “human” and/or “technical” geography. On the one hand, we note the confrontation of natural and technical sciences to the humanities and social sciences, which is sometimes compared to the opposition between the

³ Our translation from “c’est bien plus encore : c’est découvrir où l’on est. C’est-à-dire dans quoi, avec qui, au milieu de quoi, en bout de quoi et de qui”.

⁴ Ou translation from “saisir le “milieu” où je vis, où les autres vivent : un savoir fondamental pour tout habitant-acteur, pour toute entreprise, pour toute communauté qui doit gérer son territoire approprié “.

quantitative and qualitative (Blanchard, 2017). The prevalence of paradigms corresponding to the logical neopositivism inherited from the Vienna Circle (Hahn et al., 1929) - the idea of the positivism of the “hard” sciences remains debatable (Latour and Woolgar, 1988) - marks natural and technical sciences whereas humanities and social sciences largely consider socioconstructivist approaches. To this dualism can be added that of representational and non-representational, or even more-than-representational approaches (Lorimer, 2005). On the other hand, geography mobilizes a multitude of tools a priori incompatible with certain approaches. The analytical technique of decomposing the parts in order to understand the whole (Elias, 1993), like the way the Grenoble school “cut up” and distributed the Alps to its researchers, seems inappropriate to the study of social processes. Some geographical approaches recognize a share of subjectivity (Corcuff, 2011) and induction, which seem to be far from reasoning based more on detachment from the object studied and on the hypothetico-deductive scheme. We propose to expand our readings and methodologies, and even to renew them, by developing a truly geographical view within our discipline, but also by opening up to other methods and tools, as in the following examples:

- Are qualitative and quantitative irreconcilable, can we consider crossing their borders by considering that their procedures are ultimately convergent (Duchastel and Laberge, 2018) or can quantitative analysis be applied to qualitative data (Mukamurera et al., 2006)? Would it be possible to develop an interlocking of methods that transcends this divide (Blanchard, 2017)?
- How can geographers exploit the diversity of available tools by adapting them to the approaches they choose? For example, the necessary exclusiveness of the typological approach (Delès, 2018) could be reviewed in order to accept an overlap. How can we consider the existence of a continuum between methods instead of playing them off against each other? Is “mastered” subjectivity an opportunity for “objective” rigor (Cléret, 2013)? Does the speculative character of induction bring it closer to deductive logic (Guillemette, 2006)?

Epistemological axis

From a naturalistic, sometimes “deterministic” vision, to an increasingly culturalist view, our discipline has undergone successive evolutions by leading scholars of their time (Claval and Staszak, 2008). Without rejecting the classical geographers, the French *Géographes génération 1930* (Bataillon, 2009) or even more contemporary ones, it seems fundamental to us to discuss the history and epistemologies of geography. Every school of thought participates in the elaboration of current geography: the place of the environment, spatial analysis, the influence of politics, the socio-territorial experience, social justice, etc. Each of them constructs its own concepts or appropriates them to make them fundamental elements in the structuring of their thoughts. Through their diversity, they demonstrate the complexity of geographic thinking. The same concept can have different meanings depending on the approaches in which it is used, and even from one research culture to another. This being said, could not the concept

of “territory” constitute today the common denominator of geographers? Reflecting on these orientations and practices leads us to accept an epistemological thought in our endeavor to take a step back from geography:

- Is it still relevant to encourage research in geography according to fields of expertise, or does the coexistence of multiple schools of thought only reinforce the desire to specialize academic practice? What forms do these “segmentations” of the discipline take, particularly in the pedagogical models, and what are their consequences in terms of epistemology, as in the case of *urban studies*, which are prevalent internationally? Is it better to promote a geographic discipline that is fully integrated into the humanities, in the image of the French human geographic tradition (Vidal de la Blache, 1922), or to accentuate its hybridity between the human and social sciences and the natural and technical sciences?
- How does linking the different histories and evolutions of geography, related to local specificities, enrich the understanding of what makes our discipline? In facing new urgent challenges of the world (increasingly intense climate change, populism, the Covid-19 pandemic, the questioning of globalization), will geography experience new epistemological or even paradigmatic shifts? Is geography finally following on from what it can bring to society?

Reflexive axis

Finally, following the example of the inquiry narrative (Bizeul, 1998), we believe that taking a new view at geography requires stepping back in order to adopt a reflexive position. Questioning one’s neutrality as a researcher can increase the scientificity and legitimacy of the study (Corcuff, 2011), especially since it helps the person who “receives” the knowledge produced to appropriate its meaning (Faget, 2010). Here we invite young researchers to assume and further disseminate the interrelations they have with their investigations and their effects since their personal and scientific lives are intertwining in their research (Gibout, 2012), as evidenced by the “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1995) in feminist epistemologies distinguishing neutrality from objectivity. To this end, we feel it is necessary to reflect on our involvements (Elias, 1956) in our research motivations and practices, i.e., to do ego-geography (Calberac and Volvey, 2015) without falling into an egocentric geography.

- Does the choice and the constitution of the field - and of its methodology or its approach, for example - depend solely on purely scientific criteria, or also on less “objective” and more difficult factors to assume? We are thinking here of serendipity, that “art of making the most of unexpected opportunities” (Soldani, 2020, p. 69),⁵ or of the avoidance of “enclavage” (Moussaoui, 2012) by overcoming one’s own network of insertion in the field. Can the construction of the method also involve leaving the academic framework? Since the sample can be constrained by the duration of the doctorate (Guillemette, 2006) and the research ethic can

⁵ Our translation from “art de faire fructifier les opportunités inattendues”.

also be shaped *in situ*, should we not consider an “edge geography” as there is an “edge ethnography” (Dekeyser and Garrett, 2017)? The geographers who promote their improvisational skills (Buire, 2012) and consider their own emotions (Guinard and Tratnjek, 2016) in their fieldwork support this direction.

- Since Corcuff (1995) invites us to re-problematize the relationship between the researcher’s knowledge and that of the actors, as Guffanti reminds us that “it would be wrong to ignore the importance of the respondents’ feelings about the use of their lives in a scientific framework” (2011, para. 5),⁶ and considering that Barkham (2012) emphasizes the concerns of research subjects about the impacts of research on their own world, how is geography irrevocably tied to the world it studies and the way it looks at it? What are the implications of this? How do geographers deal with their involvements in their research practices? How can interrogating the “stages of neutrality” (Corcuff, 2011) be made more difficult by exposure to physical as well as psychological or symbolic dangers in the fieldwork (Beldame and Perera, 2020)? According to Morange (2012), this area is still largely lacking in geography and we aim to reflect on it together.

⁶ Our translation of “on aurait sans doute tort de négliger l’importance du ressenti des enquêtés face à l’utilisation de leur vie dans un cadre scientifique”.

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Conditions of participation

The proposal, in English or French, written at least jointly by two people, should develop an original reflection, seeking to renew our conceptions and practices of geography. The proposal should be of a maximum of 3,000 signs, including spaces, be accompanied by a bibliography of up to 5 references, and be written in Times New Roman font, 11, 1.5 line spacing. In addition to the usual criteria of originality and academic standards, collaborations between different domains of geography, as well as interdisciplinary, inter-university and international collaborations, or between research groups, will be favored in the selection of the proposals. Proposers should also send a 3-5 lines biography specifying their research areas and topic, their institutions, and a short description of the format of their participation (interview, poster or other graphic works, classical scientific article, etc.). Proposals should be sent to j.i.geographers@gmail.com no later than June 15, 2022. The results of the selection process will be communicated in mid-July 2022. A publication is envisaged at least in the form of conference proceedings. The full text of the papers is expected by the beginning of October 2022: 25 000 signs (including spaces).

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