

**Vidalian traces: *Genre de vie, culture and democracy***  
***Les traces vidaliennes : genre de vie, culture et démocratie***  
***Huellas vidalianas: género de vida, cultura y democracia***

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Revisiter la pensée de Paul Vidal de la Blache

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Résumé de l'article

Les géographes contemporains tendent à réinventer la discipline sans tenir compte de son passé. La relative absence de référence à Vidal de la Blache dans les travaux géographiques contemporains est symptomatique de cette amnésie. Dans le monde anglophone, on reconnaît Vidal pour son impact sur d'autres disciplines. En géographie, son oeuvre est passée du statut de classique relu par les générations successives à celui de canon géographique reconnu mais peu lu. C'est en partie la conséquence d'une interprétation étroite qui relie l'héritage vidalien au devenir changeant de la géographie régionale anglo-américaine. Le réexamen récent du dernier ouvrage de Vidal, *La France de l'Est (Lorraine-Alsace)*, a suggéré un Vidal plus multidimensionnel. Les relectures se sont concentrées sur la géographie politique. Mais son oeuvre concerne aussi des thèmes proches de ceux abordés par ses contemporains, Durkheim et Dewey. Or, les travaux contemporains s'appuyant sur Durkheim et Dewey ne reconnaissent pas jusqu'à présent la pertinence de Vidal.

# Vidalian traces: *Genre de vie*, culture and democracy

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## Abstract

Modern geographers have tended to reimagine their discipline with very little acknowledgement of a disciplinary past. The relative absence of reference to the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache in the current geographical literature illustrates this disciplinary amnesia. In Anglophone literature, Vidal is recognized for his impact in other disciplines. In geography, his work has moved from that of a classic that is reread by succeeding generations to being part of the acknowledged but largely unread geographical canon. In part this is a consequence of the narrow interpretation that links Vidal's legacy to the changing fortunes of Anglo-American regional geography. The recent reconsideration of Vidal's last publication, *La France de L'Est (Lorraine-Alsace)*, has suggested a more multidimensional Vidal. These rereadings have concentrated on political geography. However, he also engaged themes related to those found in the writings of his contemporaries, Durkheim and Dewey. Durkheim and Dewey have been common reference points in current scholarship in ways that have thus far eluded Vidal.

## Keywords

Vidal de la Blache, civil society, culture, democratic ways of life, John Dewey, Émile Durkheim.

*Les traces vidaliennes: genre de vie, culture et démocratie*

## Résumé

Les géographes contemporains tendent à réinventer la discipline sans tenir compte de son passé. La relative absence de référence à Vidal de la Blache dans les travaux géographiques contemporains est symptomatique de cette amnésie. Dans le monde anglophone, on reconnaît Vidal pour son impact sur d'autres disciplines. En géographie, son œuvre est passée du statut de classique relu par les générations successives à celui de canon géographique reconnu mais peu lu. C'est en partie la conséquence d'une interprétation étroite qui relie l'héritage vidalien au devenir changeant de la géographie régionale anglo-américaine. Le réexamen récent du dernier ouvrage de Vidal, *La France de l'Est (Lorraine-Alsace)*, a suggéré un Vidal plus multidimensionnel. Les relectures se sont concentrées sur la géographie politique. Mais son œuvre concerne aussi des thèmes proches de ceux abordés par ses contemporains, Durkheim et Dewey. Or, les travaux contemporains s'appuyant sur Durkheim et Dewey ne reconnaissent pas jusqu'à présent la pertinence de Vidal.

## Mots-clés

Vidal de la Blache, société civile, culture, genres de vie démocratiques, John Dewey, Émile Durkheim.

*Huellas vidalianas: género de vida, cultura y democracia*

## Resumen

Los geógrafos contemporáneos tienden a reinventar la disciplina sin considerar el pasado. La casi omisión de referencia a Vidal de la Blache en los trabajos geográficos contemporáneos ejemplariza esta amnesia. En el mundo anglófono se reconoce el impacto de Vidal sobre otras disciplinas. En Geografía, su obra, considerada clásica por diversas generaciones, se ha convertido en norma geográfica reconocida, pero poco leída. Esta situación es en parte consecuencia de una interpretación limitada que consiste a reunir la herencia de Vidal y el devenir variable de la geografía regional anglo-americana. El examen reciente de la obra de Vidal, *Francia del Este (Lorena-Alsacia)*, sugiere un Vidal más multidimensional. Las relecturas se concentraron en geografía política, pero su obra concierne también temas cercanos a los abordados por sus contemporáneos Durkheim y Dewey. Ahora bien, trabajos contemporáneos que refieren a Durkheim y Dewey no reconocen aún la pertinencia de Vidal.

## Palabras claves

Vidal de la Blache, sociedad civil, cultura, géneros de vida democráticos, John Dewey, Emilio Durkheim.

## Introduction

A centennial assessment of the legacy of Paul Vidal de la Blache within Anglo-American geography would seemingly begin and end with discussions of regional geography and possibilism. From this vantage point, Vidal's impact is almost exclusively associated with the idiographic regional monograph in which unique landscapes are formed through creative adaptation to natural environments and sustained through local ways of life. Discussions of the regional approach within the history of Anglophone geography have been framed in Manichean terms related to methodological and epistemological differences between chorology and spatial analysis, and they offer a narrow lens on Vidal's corpus (Claval, 1998; Berdoulay, 2011). Also, in an era of concerns over climate change, environmental adaptation research has focused on questions related to human causes and consequences, relegating possibilism to undergraduate history of geographic thought courses. In these broad areas of regional and environmental analysis, the works of Vidal are granted a place in what might be called the "canon" of geography as part of the foundational heritage but not as "classics" that need to be read anew with each generation (Keighren *et al.*, 2012).

This partial reading of Vidal's contributions to geography has reduced the perceived value of his work by diminishing the dimensionality of his thought and interests. Vidal engaged a complex mix of universalistic and particularistic themes and exhibited a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of interlocking areal scales, what Paul Claval (1998: 108) refers to as "*une approche qui joue constamment sur la dialectique des échelles*" that defy description as purely idiographic chorology (Berdoulay, 2008: 211-214). His central concepts, especially *genre de vie* or form of life, were equally flexible and semantically capacious for capturing the multiplicity of ways in which humans respond to environments through collective action (Vidal de la Blache, 1911a and 1911b). Form of life or *genre de vie*, like prominent geographic concepts (e.g., place, region, and landscape), are common terms found in everyday speech in their respective languages. Geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists, among others, have over the years sought to make these terms more technical, social scientific terms, but with limited success (Sorre, 1948a and 1948b; Curry, 1989). These concepts have maintained their relevance through generations of research precisely because of their successful resistance to such reductive impulses. Core concepts such as these

and the presuppositions behind them can speak across generations, especially if they are abstracted from the contingent facts of specific applications.

*Genres de vie* are potentially relevant to many current research themes in geography, notably those concerning cultural practices and contestations related to the politics of place-making. However, reference to Vidal is rarely found in the Anglo-American geography literature. Vidal remains largely buried in the virtual disciplinary archives while many of his non-geographer contemporaries, such as Émile Durkheim and John Dewey, have regained relevance in relation to research on these topics in other fields. For example, a vibrant cultural sociology has emerged from a re-examination of Durkheim, especially his later theoretical work, *The elementary forms of the religious life* (Durkheim, 1965; Alexander and Smith, 2005). Research in these areas has intersected with geographic themes concerning the conflicts over the meaning and social significance of space, place, and environment (Smith and Howe, 2015; Löw, 2016). Similarly, post-modernism and never-modernism have encouraged a renewed study of Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of democracy, especially as he has been interpreted through the writings of Richard Rorty (1982) and Bruno Latour (2007). Geographers' current interest in pragmatism as a guiding philosophy in exploring the spaces of participatory democracy have embraced Dewey's concern with the creation of "publics" as a flexible and inclusive means of participatory democracy (Barnett and Low, 2004; Barnes, 2008; Harney *et al.*, 2016). Such publics are always rooted in place and territory. The creative evolution fundamental to Vidal's natural science orientation is also consonant with Dewey's evolutionary naturalism, a dynamic, holistic, non-reductive, and non-determinist characterization of human-environment relations, as well as with the themes of Vidal's contemporary, Henri Bergson, whose philosophy has gained current interest among geographers promoting process philosophy, actor-network theory, and other forms of post-humanism (Entrikin, 2017).

Aspects of Vidal's corpus display commonalities with the legacies of these major twentieth-century intellectuals in ways that have little to do with debates over regional geography or environmental determinism, and instead they touch on concerns of cultural practices and the discourse of civil society. Vidal did not engage in extended analyses of these themes as independent topics, but they are nonetheless part of his work (Berdoulay, 2008). *Genre de vie* is relevant to these themes. When applied to

matters of collective solidarity, Vidal's writings have been interpreted as examples of his patriotic nationalism that was symptomatic of the era (Guermond, 2019). However, "ways of life" rooted in place and territory may be seen as not only particularistic resistances to cosmopolitanism but also as concrete expressions of universalistic values.

This latter progressive worldview is expressed in Vidal's republicanism, which has been an important theme in addressing his impact in elevating and strengthening the position of geography within the French educational system. As André-Louis Sanguin (1993: 326) writes, "*au cours de sa carrière, il développa une sorte de schéma personnel «républicainiste» en parfait accord avec la France de l'époque: libéralisme teinté de solidarité sociale, nationalisme, colonialisme, ruralisme fidèle au terroir, foi dans la science et dans le progrès, pragmatisme face aux problèmes.*"

Vidal's commitment to science led him to eschew statements of political ideology, but he remained committed to civic engagement throughout his career (Claval, 1998: 115). One consequence of this engagement was his success in placing geography as an independent discipline in the Third Republic's national curriculum as part of a reformed civic education directed against the perceived decadence associated with the clericalism and monarchial heritage of the Second Empire (Berdoulay, 2008: 109). The liberal values of the Third Republic were congruent with the then-current neo-Kantian epistemology and moral philosophy, which shaped Vidal's geography (*Idem*: 109-139).

These topics have been addressed in the rich and varied historiography on Vidal and the Vidalian School of Geography (e.g., Buttimer, 1971 and 1978; Andrews, 1984; Sanguin, 1993; Claval, 1998; Berdoulay, 2008). In keeping with the topic of this special section, however, the goal of this essay will be to selectively pull threads from Vidal's elegant tapestry in light of the present, in other words, to reflect on aspects of the modern relevance of Vidal's work through examination of Vidalian traces in current research themes. *Genre de vie* and his multi-scalar, ecological approach have the potential to inform current work on the creation, sustenance, and challenges of democratic civil society. These themes are not highlighted in Vidal's writings, but they are clearly a part of the underlying philosophical framework supporting his examination of the regional basis for national unity and international cooperation.

Vidal's French contemporary and sometime antagonist, Émile Durkheim, did not examine democracy as a major

theme nor did he systematically explore culture. His later work, however, especially *The elementary forms of the religious life*, provided the basis for a renewed cultural sociology that is centered upon the theme of cultural solidarity, which has been used as a key concept in renewed research on democratic civil society (Durkheim, 1965; Alexander, 2006). John Dewey (1916 and 1927), on the other hand, did offer a theory of democracy that went beyond definitions about rules for free elections and governing procedures toward a more all-encompassing conception of democracy as a way of life (Rockefeller, 1991: 30-32; Dewey, 1993: 240-245). Its value extended beyond matters of politics and governing to include other modes of social cooperation, such as in the workplace and in schools. Dewey's communitarian philosophy is not specifically geographical, and its philosophical roots are more Hegelian than Kantian, but it did recognize the importance of territorially bounded community and the issues of spatial scale in the formation and interactions of publics in support of democratic community (*Ibid.*; Westbrook, 1991: 314).

Both Durkheim and Dewey were more explicitly philosophical in their approach than was Vidal, and in part because of this quality, they have been more easily translated into twenty-first-century research. The writings of each have become beacons illuminating new subfields of twenty-first-century social science research, while the modern relevance of Vidal's writings has been largely left unexamined.

## Durkheim, Vidal and culture

Regional studies have largely disappeared from Anglophone geography except in certain specialized subdisciplines. Its closest approximation is in the regional development and political economy literature, in which the region is constructed either at the subnational or the supranational level, built around themes of networks and functional interdependence between and among territorial units (Paasi *et al.*, 2019). There is little recognition of early twentieth-century geographical ancestry in this literature.

Rather, one finds such recognition, and more specifically reference to Vidal, in the early stages of interest in what has become a renewed cultural geography. Mid-twentieth-century cultural geography had taken the form of culture area and diffusion studies and was challenged in the late twentieth century initially through the rise of humanistic cultural geography (Claval and Entrikin, 2004). Ley and Samuels (1978: 10) introduced their agenda-setting book, *Humanistic geography*, by stating that "the beginning of a

humanist perspective may be found in the rich tradition of French human geography following the example of Paul Vidal de la Blache.” The work of Anne Buttimer (1971 and 1978), an interpreter of Vidal and an early proponent of humanistic geography, further reinforced this lineage in highlighting the Vidalian narrative portraits of local ways of life, landscape, and place identity. These themes have continued currency, albeit in more highly politicized and subjectivist forms, in twenty-first-century cultural geography.

This retrospectively constructed lineage of humanistic geography selectively erased Vidal’s commitment to a natural science model of human geography (Entrikin, 1985; Claval, 1998; Claval and Entrikin, 2004; Berdoulay, 2008). Humanistic geography emphasizes interpretive human science that centers on the active human subject, and its practitioners largely argued against a naturalistic view of geographical science (Archer, 1993). Berdoulay (1978 and 2011) has illuminated the neo-Kantian emphasis on the moral subject in Vidal’s guiding philosophy, which provides a path toward humanistic studies of the individual agent, but Vidal did not explicitly engage the individual subject. Too often, his attractive and evocative prose style was itself mistaken for a sign of a literary as opposed to a scientific orientation.

The voluntarism inherent in Vidal’s work was similarly found in Durkheim’s writings. This commonality is frequently lost in commentary on Vidal and Durkheim, in which a positivist, structuralist Durkheim as social morphologist is contrasted with a neo-Kantian, voluntarist Vidal, each bounding their disciplinary terrain with contested areas of content overlap separated by opposing methodological principles. Durkheim’s search for social laws has been counterposed to Vidal’s ecological approach emphasizing the unique creativity of human adaptation to a changing natural world. However, as Alexander (1989) notes, Durkheim’s (1965) theoretical position changed significantly from his early social morphology years and his flirtation with sociological determinism to his later mature theoretical position elaborated in *The elementary forms of the religious life*. The book marks an important shift in Durkheim’s thought and has become the intellectual source for the growing movement known as the strong program of cultural sociology, often explicitly labeled as neo-Durkheimian sociology (Smith and Alexander, 2005). Both Durkheim and Vidal avoided the term “cultural” as a descriptor of their work and both used the natural sciences as a model, yet each has reappeared in their respective discipline’s

recent cultural turn; Durkheim at the center and Vidal on the distant horizon.

Among the reasons for this difference in relative centrality is the lack of a theoretical canon for geography and the tendency of modern geographers to seek intellectual legitimation externally rather than build on the foundation of reinterpretations of classic disciplinary texts so common in fields such as sociology (Alexander, 1989; Agnew 2012). For Durkheim, the constitution of social meaning, the rituals expressing and reinforcing collective bonds, and the powerful cultural code of sacred and profane underlie social cohesion and solidarity and thus form the basis of his theory of society. For Vidal, geographical meaning is found in descriptions of diverse ways of life and their associated milieu in relation to the overriding normative structures of civilization and their interconnectedness within and across spatial scales through circulation and communication. Unlike Durkheim, Vidal’s orientation was not formulated within an explicit theoretical framework but rather was structured through historical narrative and ecological synthesis. This lack of theoretical scaffolding for Vidalian geography did not, however, necessarily imply an idiographic approach. Rather, Vidal explored the universalistic through the descriptions of the particular.

Vidal’s last publication and only regional monograph, *La France de l’Est (Lorraine-Alsace)* (1917) demonstrates this mix of the universal and particular themes. As others have noted, this text contradicts much of the standard disciplinary interpretation of Vidal (Gregory, 1994; Lacoste, 1994; Berdoulay, 2008). Its exploration of population density and mobility, urban ways of life, the functional inter-scalar connections of industry and trade, and geopolitics challenges the commonly accepted means of dismissing the modern relevance of Vidal’s work as simply capturing a moment of French history through its chronicling of the disappearing French rural folkways and landscapes. *La France de l’Est* offers an historical geography of Alsace-Lorraine but is very much about continuity through dramatically changing environmental and social circumstances. For some observers, this volume demonstrates a remarkable shift in Vidalian thought while others see it as simply a continuation and adaptation of the Vidalian perspective to a rapidly changing world (Lacoste, 1994; Ribeiro, 2010).

Another reason for the relative absence of reference to Vidal in current cultural geography is his selective avoidance of collective mental phenomena (Claval and



Entrikin, 2004). His reflections on *genre de vie* were primarily about the material world of techniques used to manipulate the natural environment (Vidal de la Blache, 1911a and 1911b). However, ideational cultural concerns were not entirely absent from his writings. For example, he hints at the cultural power of *genres de vie* in referring to their ability to eventually create a set of social differences in advanced societies that overcome more particularistic cultural attachments. *Genres de vie* are thus portrayed as part of the modernizing process of nations in which different ways of life form a social mix that gain force over primordial differences, such as ethnicity. In Vidal's words, these social mixes "*balancent et finiront par dominer les différences ethniques*" (1911b: 304).

Again, turning to *La France de l'Est*, one finds references, albeit limited ones, to collective beliefs that shape the local society, more specifically to a prevailing sense of "*l'esprit démocratique*" (Vidal de la Blache, 1917: 27). Vidal highlights this collective spirit as evidence for his characterization of a local culture more attached to the republican heritage of the French Revolutionary than to the political culture of imperial Germany (Mercier, 1995). There is implicit and sometimes explicit in Vidal's discussion of this spirit, a view that is central to the neo-Durkheimian cultural sociology of the civil sphere, for example, a sense of a locally specific articulation of the sacred and profane as underlying a civil discourse of democratic solidarity (Vidal de la Blache, 1917: 3, 96-105). As Alexander writes,

Strange as it may seem, universalism is most often articulated in concrete rather than abstract language. [...] Universalism anchors itself, in other words, in the everyday lifeworlds within which ordinary people make sense of the world and pass their time. [...] That civil language is symbolic and experiential, not only rational in the moral or strategic sense, that the very effort to speak universalism must always and everywhere take a concrete form, opens our consideration of civil society not only to the particularistic but also the repressive dimensions of modern democratic life. Because meaning is relational and relative, the civility of the self always articulates itself in language about the incivility of the other (Alexander, 2006: 49).

Vidal's language follows this path. His observation about the solidarity across all social classes that bound Alsace-Lorraine to France is one phrased in the ideals of universalism but associated with the concrete *genres de vie* of the Alsatian and Lorrainian people and the specific history of France (Vidal de la Blache, 1917: 105). It is an

expression of a French civil sphere that is posed against its other, the imperial German regime. It is the identification of a French sacred center as the basis for regional solidarity in contrast to a profane German foreign presence.

## Dewey, Vidal and democracy

A similar framing of national norms and democratic principles can be found in the writing of American pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, who drew a close association between American ways of life and democracy. As Louis Menand (2001: 401) describes, "Dewey was an Americanist and a modernist by desire. To Dewey, Americanism meant democracy, and modernity meant a life in which possibilities were unforfeited."

For Dewey, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916: 87). As associated living, Dewey's democratic communities are always rooted in place (Westbrook, 1991: 314). Such communities could be described as *genres de vie démocratiques* (Talisso, 2003; Rosales, 2012). Through this linkage of the democratic to place-based ways of life, the underlying tension between the particularistic and the universalistic is constantly at play (Entrikin, 1999). As Clive Barnett and Murray Low (2004: 11) asserted, "The fundamental question facing any critical analysis of democracy is whether or not the claims of universality built into democratic theory are nothing more than culturally specific norms."

Dewey's politics, like Vidal's, were liberal democratic and thus concerned with the relationship of the individual to the political community. For Dewey, individuals gain a sense of identity by living in and through community. The thickness of community ties gives a strong sense of belonging and identity but can breed isolation and intolerance. A thinness of ties can lead to alienation and anomie and a weakening of democratic institutions. The ecological concepts of harmony and balance, key concepts for Vidal as well, provided the basis for democratic community. Community was a vital theme for Dewey but the collective consciousness of Durkheim was not. Such consciousness, for Dewey, precluded the possibility of individual moral action.

Both Vidal and Dewey promoted the institutionalization of a civic education rooted in knowledge of history and geography (Entrikin, 2007; Berdoulay, 2008 and 2011). For Dewey (2016) and Fott (2009), education was essential to democracy. An educated citizenry familiar

with experimental science recognized the way in which democracy was an ongoing process of trial and error best supported through continuous inquiry by an engaged, participatory public. Democracy was fundamentally a form of life and not a formal set of procedures or structures.

Dewey's philosophy is naturalistic and strongly influenced by the evolutionary thought of his era. He maintained that the intellectual cul-de-sacs of classical philosophy could only be avoided if humans were viewed "as organisms in an environment that is both natural and cultural" (Ryan, 1995: 229). Successful human communities thrive within and through adaptive engagement with the natural environment. In his evolutionary philosophy, human communities and nature are continually interacting and changing. Experimentation and the application of scientific knowledge are the ways that humans adapt to their environments and reduce uncertainty. In its broad outline, Dewey's view is consonant with Vidal's *genres de vie*, in which collectives make adjustments to natural environments through creative experimentation with techniques and within the broad constraints of the norms of *civilisation*. For both, the application of scientific knowledge through the civil sphere was key to human progress (Dewey, 1993; Berdoulay and Soubeyran, 2002).

The "empirical naturalism" of Dewey went beyond Vidal in addressing the possible relationship of democracy and the natural world as can be seen in his posing of the following question: "Is democracy a comparatively superficial human expedient, a device of petty manipulation, or does nature itself, as that is uncovered and understood by our best contemporaneous knowledge, sustain and support our democratic hopes and aspirations?" (Dewey, 1993: 42).

According to Westbrook (1991: 321), William James' radical empiricism provided Dewey with a model of nature conducive to democracy, as did Dewey's own naturalistic philosophy. This was not a view of a natural foundation to democracy but rather a nature described as "friendly to democracy," a theme that resonated in the origins of the American ecological movement, for which Dewey's philosophy served as an important guide (*Ibid.*, Engel, 1983; McDonald, 2004).

## Vidal: From classic to canon

Durkheim and Dewey remain relevant to current social science research to a degree unmatched by Vidal even within his own discipline. For much of the twentieth

century, Vidal received accolades as the intellectual leader in French geography in terms of both his scholarship and his successful institutionalization of geography within the French university system. In a discipline that remains shaped by national schools segregated by language, his writings at one time achieved "classic" status internationally. Innes Keighren, Christian Abrahamsson, and Veronica Della Dora (2012) distinguish "classical" texts from "canonical" texts in terms of their continuing contributions to a disciplinary dialogue. Canonical texts provide the foundations of a discipline while classical texts still speak to current research. Current researchers and students still read and consult the latter, while the former fade into memory or discussions of disciplinary foundations. In the twenty-first century, Vidal's corpus and those of his followers have largely moved from classic to canon, in what many would argue to be an anti- or post-canonical era.

The contested existence of geographical canons, traditions, or paradigms has been debated by many within the field. It is often a contentious debate that begins with a questioning of the existence, relevance, and necessity of such a structure in characterizing a highly diverse and fluid discipline (Agnew 2012; Mayhew, 2015; Powell, 2015). Not all agree that there is a geographical canon; some view the concept as necessarily tainted by past exclusionary practices; and others simply question its value (Barnes, 2015). This discussion is a vibrant and useful one for disciplinary historians, but it is not the purpose of this essay to contribute to these debates. Rather, the need here is to find a precise and useful vocabulary for characterizing variations in the current responses to past disciplinary leaders. As the intellectual histories of Dewey, Durkheim, and Vidal illustrate, the continuing relevance of century-old ideas and concepts is only indirectly linked to standard measures of scholarly quality. The canon/classic dichotomy drawn by Keighren *et al.* (2012) offers a useful tool for illuminating these differences.

Outside of geography, Vidal's writings appear to have continuing relevance, especially in research associated with French identity. His influential role in one of the most important twentieth-century schools of historical scholarship, the *Annales*, has been noted (e.g., Dosse, 1994: 15-16, 57-58, 109-111). Its late twentieth century leader, Fernand Braudel (1972, 1973, 1980 and 1986), recognizes Vidal's contributions in numerous works, including *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip the II* (1972 and 1973), *On History* (1980), and most significantly in his *The Identity of France* (1986). In this

last volume, Braudel credits Vidal's awareness of the potentialities of the environment in shaping a nation: "As Vidal de la Blache rightly remarked, and he was thinking of France, 'the history of a people is inseparable from the country it inhabits, [...] One should start from the idea that a country is a storehouse of dormant energies whose seeds have been planted by nature but whose use depends on man'" (1986: 264).

The philosopher Paul Ricœur expresses a similar view in his discussion of the *Annales* approach and their sense of the relation of historical time and geographical space. He states that historians found appealing methodological innovations in the works of geographers: "Vidal de la Blache was the first, before Martonne, to react against the positivism of historicizing history and to give meaning to the notions of setting, lifestyle, and everydayness" (Ricœur, 2004: 151).

Even in distant fields such as film criticism, Vidal has been noted for his use of both cartography and thick description in presenting visualizations of the human/environment relationships that emphasized contingency and emergence over necessity (Lindaman, 2017; see also, Laplace-Treytore, this volume). For Lindaman (*Ibid.*), the possibilism of Vidal and his concern with connectivity, movement, and process were consistent with the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1944), an important influence on the modern philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1983), who has become a common referent in twenty-first-century human geography.

The role of both classic and canonical texts may be less relevant in twenty-first-century geography, in which there has been a decrease in disciplinary-focused debate (for example, the nature of geography and of geographical theory). As geographical research has rapidly spread across a broad, horizontal intellectual plane, critical debate over disciplinary themes has often been cast in the negative light of disciplining or narrowing discourse or at the very least, as irrelevant to the rapidly changing fashions of twenty-first-century human geography. Also, the grounds of interpretation of past works have shifted from issues of method and epistemology to an emphasis on morality and politics (e.g., Driver, 1995; Barnes and Shepard, 2010; Barnes and Minca, 2013). In many ways, this shift reflects current political and popular culture in which positions deemed morally deficient to current values and beliefs are retrospectively applied to leading figures of the past. Thus, in Vidal's case, French colonial expansion and its justification through the virtues of *civilisation* conflict with

the postcolonial sentiments and further contribute to the marginalization of his corpus.

There is little question that intellectual traditions in geography are more instrumentally and selectively employed in twenty-first-century geography and are less shaping and guiding than they were in the past (Driver, 1995; Agnew 2012; Keighren *et al.*, 2012). According to John Agnew (2012), geography has been relatively free from guiding canons or traditions through much of its recent history. It has been resistant to, and to a degree repellent of, overriding unifying frameworks. He notes, however, the downside of this freedom as being an increased susceptibility to intellectual fashion and fixation on celebrity, in which geographers

are all increasingly fans of opening acts (Foucault, Latour *et al.*) more than self-critical intellectuals or scholars building on sources within our own 'tradition'. So, writers, typically non-geographers who have some fugitive but golden nugget of spatiality hidden deeply in their writings, are exploited to provide novel agenda-setting articles for some fashionable and potentially profitable gloss on some 'problem' not necessarily of obvious geographical relevance (*Idem*: 323).

Human geography is not unique in this regard, but its relatively small size makes the impact of this chasing of fashion much more consequential, like the differential impact of the same-size rock falling into a small pond versus a large lake. Modern geography has been shaped more by imported methods and metatheory than by its own traditions. However, a consideration of presuppositions, or less formally intellectual traces, offers insight into lines of continuity often ignored in geography's constant search for the next new "opening act" or obscured by the binary caricatures shaping the common recitals of the history of geographic thought (*Ibid.*; Jones, 2003).

### Vidalian traces: *Genres de vie démocratiques*

Numerous unacknowledged traces of Vidalian geography may be found in the current Anglophone geographical literature. These include place studies as whole/part narratives, the interpenetration between and among regions at differing geographic scales, technological adaptation to environmental change, the significance of material culture, the cartographic visualization of a dynamic human-environment relationship, and the universal/



particular duality inherent to characterizations of place and landscape. The sedimentation of meaning from the rapidly shifting intellectual currents of human geography often obscures the Vidalian traces associated with these topics, but they are there for those willing to seek them out. Some are sufficiently significant to merit further elaboration and study. Others are so feint as to be simply historical anecdotes. Among the most visible of these that blend many elements of the topics discussed above are the constitutive relationships between place and *genre de vie*.

Territorially bounded forms of life at the local and regional level and their interactions with political, economic, and social spheres at a variety of spatial scales is a core component of a geographic perspective. Democracy as a form of life and the different ways that it may be manifested remains a central theme not only in political theory but also in the professional practices engaged in place-making, from urban and regional planning to architecture and environmental conservation. The renewed intellectual engagement with Durkheim's theory, which provides the foundations for an understanding of the collective meaning structures underlying democratic civil society, and with Dewey's political philosophy, which provides a model for participatory democracy, support these explorations of democratic place-making (Entrikin, 2007).

There was overlap between the two in that Dewey addressed many of the Durkheimian themes of collective meaning structures, public rituals, and the moral order of societies, and Durkheim engaged the work of Dewey and American pragmatism, although primarily as critic of the more individualistic pragmatism of William James (Ryan, 1995: 235, 359; Deledalle, 2002). Vidal distanced his work from Durkheim and was most likely unaware of Dewey. He did not associate Durkheimian concerns of collective solidarity with *genres de vie*, but a sense of collective spirit was nonetheless implicit and sometimes explicit in his work. Indeed, one could not speak of a democratic spirit of a regional group, as Vidal did in *La France de l'Est*, without a concept of collective consciousness and social solidarity. *Genre de vie* itself carries a similar implication of shared meaning structures that support the rituals and traditions of a territorial collective. These shared meanings were more reported than examined and generally expressed in terms of material relations of societies and nature, but they are necessary for making the concept of *genre de vie* cogent.

The most common expression of collective meaning is found in Vidal's explorations of national unity and identity.

He characterized national unity as consistent with the respect for regional differences that were allowed to flourish under the umbrella of shared liberal values (Vidal de la Blache, 1889: 64-65). For example, he extolled the ability of the Swiss to form a national union that did not diminish these community attachments, "*La Suisse a pu développer sa vie nationale sans porter atteinte aux libertés de ses membres. Elle a pu limiter au strict nécessaire le mécanisme du pouvoir central, et laisser ainsi aux organismes locaux toute facilité d'agir et de se mouvoir à leur guise. Cela explique le genre d'attachement qui unit entre eux les citoyens de cette libre communauté. État créé en dehors, ou plutôt au-dessus des considérations de religions et de races...*" (Idem: 65)

Vidal (1903) shifts the focus of political geography from a nation's capital and boundaries to the diversity of territories constructed by the *genres de vie* of local populations. His *Tableau de la géographie de la France* (1903) highlights a republic consisting of distinct regional communities linked together through *circulation* and *communication*.

*La France de l'Est* offers an illustration of republican values as integral to the *genre de vie* of the region. According to Vidal (1917: 78), the French Revolution had reinforced and given forceful expression to the ideals of democracy, liberty, and equality in a region that, according to Vidal (1917: 78), had already exhibited these shared values: "*Le sentiment démocratique invétéré, qui fermentait toujours en Alsace, capable d'explosions violentes comme au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, recevait ainsi un renfort nouveau.*" (Idem: 51). Even under the authoritarian regimes of the nineteenth century, "*l'opinion républicaine était la seule qui subsistât*" (Idem: 103).

This unity through diversity refers to both a variation in geographic scale, for example, the region blending into the nation, and to diverse local ways of life coalescing around universal values. For Vidal, such fusion is the basis for national identity as well as international cooperation. He describes a set of European states separated by histories, geographies, languages, and ethnicities but whose commitment to shared values of liberal democracy offers a basis for cooperative engagement: "*Peu à peu les communautés de vues sur l'idéal des sociétés, sur les notions de liberté et de justice, se sont montrées plus fortes que les différences de langues, que les raisons mystiques tirées de prétendues supériorités de race, ou même que les ressentiments des luttes passées*" (Idem: 207).

This local *genres de vie* that lead to distinctive human-environment relations and a mosaic of local communities are

linked together through commerce and communication into larger wholes, or nation-states, that themselves have the potential to create similarly integrated forms of multistate cooperation rooted in shared political values. Such bonds among states are thus formed not only from shared material needs but also from common normative interests.

Dewey similarly saw the public formation at the local level as essential to the creation of a healthy national publics, and these national publics could be combined into an international community. Both Dewey and Vidal viewed the collective identity of the local, regional, and national as mutually constitutive. Vidal believed in the unifying power and moral value of French *civilisation*, and Dewey expressed the moral value and power of Americanization (Ryan, 1995: 153, 169, 172). Both endorsed the positive value of a national culture committed to democratic values and saw education and scientific inquiry as essential to sustaining such a culture. Neither sought to analytically separate humans from their natural environments and each saw the relationship as contingent, dynamic, mutually transformative, and non-reductive. For each, local customs and cooperation provided the source and energy of the democratic spirit for the nation and beyond.

Despite the many overlapping themes, it is not surprising that references to Durkheim and Dewey are more likely to be found in the current writings of Anglophone geographers than references to Vidal. It is an easier path to trace out new avenues of research from broad theoretical and metatheoretical texts than to seek new directions from writers like Vidal who built their universalizing narratives through descriptions of the concrete, contingent, and particular. Rediscovering the insights involved in concepts such as *genre de vie* or other central elements of Vidal's *Les genres de vie dans la géographie humaine* involves an abstraction from their original applications from over a century ago to a very different set of facts on the ground.

Such an effort, however, is not without possible reward. In the current era of deeply partisan political strife and rising populist extremism in Western democracies, the possibility of integrating civil society, the public, and *genre de vie* presents an intriguing conceptual hybrid. Such a composite offers the potential for helping make sense of the existence of inclusive and tolerant forms of localism, regionalism, and nationalism along reactionary, virulently intolerant forms. As "forgotten" regions rise in opposition to perceived metropolitan elites, modern democratic societies struggle with a fragile agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2000;

Talisse, 2003). There is a very thin line separating an atavistic and progressive collective spirit that can easily be crossed in the performance of the civil sphere. Exploration of differing *genres de vie démocratiques* offers the possibility of insight into the complexities and vulnerabilities of ties that bind localities, regions, and nations. Creative use of the *genre de vie* has the potential to fill a gap in the analysis of civic solidarity in that it adds the geographical, that is the explicit incorporation of place and environment.

The potential flexibility of Vidalian concepts and the dynamic ecological perspective that characterized his portrayal of the human-environment relationship have made them a poor fit within the chorological framework that has so often been used in Anglo-American geography to catalogue his contribution to the discipline. Before a correction can be made, however, a necessary first step is a retrieval of concepts such as *genre de vie* from the dead space of the disciplinary canon and a reassignment to the active space of the classics. Its application to the aspatial research on democracy and civil society, or equally to its dark side of populist extremism, offers the potential for adding crucial dimensionality to themes of current theoretical and practical importance. Equally important is the opportunity to add a more explicit dimension of collective meaning structures to a concept that has most frequently been used as an expression of material practices. Neither dimension should be ignored and there is room for both.

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