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Editorial : *Belgeo* and the four crises of geography

Christian Vandermotten and Christian Kesteloot

- 1 With this first issue of 2012, *Belgeo* turns from a printed and paying publication into a free access electronic journal¹. The journal also changes from being jointly published by de *Société Royale Belge de Géographie* (Belgian Geographical Society) and the *Belgische Vereniging voor Aardrijkskundige Studies/Société Belge d'Etudes Géographiques* (Belgian Society of Geographical Studies) into a publication of the *Belgian National Committee for Geography*² in association with the *Société Royale Belge de Géographie*.
- 2 We took the opportunity to restructure the Editorial Board of the journal and to enlarge it to 15 members from all Belgian universities providing courses in Geography and the Antwerp University. The Board is helped by an Advisory Board with 12 additional geographers or members of related disciplines from Belgian universities and 27 foreign members³, and by numerous external referees. Evidently, *Belgeo* will continue its policy of double-blind reference as well as publication in English, complemented with French, Dutch or even German language contributions.
- 3 These changes aim at a better visibility and a broader readership of the scientific journal that represents the community of Belgian geographers. In order to make this trajectory of *Belgeo* more intelligible, we clarify how it is embedded in four interrelated crises or tensions that affect geography and geographers and that open up as many occasions to redirect our discipline and its publications. We give a brief overview of these crises, starting from the most particular one, more related to the history and developments of Belgian geography, to the more general one, affecting the whole scientific endeavour (C. Vandermotten, 2012).

The crisis of the Geographical Societies

- 4 By giving way to a more “scientific” geography, classical or traditional geography in its physical, human and regional forms, has lost its ideological role and its practical use by the social elites in the 19th and the early 20th century. As a matter of fact, classical

geography has been largely used by the great powers to justify a nationalist and imperialist discourse and geographical methods and skills enabled to take stock of the resources in both potential and acquired colonies. After WWII, classical geography has been broadly abandoned for theoretical and quantitative geography and this shift has been presented as a departure from description to enable scientific explanation of the spatial organisation of nature and society by means of laws and theories. However, a closer look at the masterpieces of classical geography unveils a quite sophisticated theoretical background that presented society-space relations in terms of relatively strong forms of determinism or at least constraining dialectics. No wonder then that geographical societies appeared throughout Europe during the 19th and early 20th century in order to foster geographical research in which nation building and exploration were intimately interwoven with scientific endeavour. In Belgium the *Geographical Society of Antwerp* and the *Belgian Geographical Society* (Brussels) were both founded in 1876 in the wake of the first International Geographical Congress in Antwerp in 1871 and the Congress of Brussels devoted to Africa in 1876. They both published their own journal (De Brabander, 1993 ; Nicolaï, 2004).

- 5 The later forms of geography may claim a more scientific nature by reducing classical geography to description and inventory making, but they are nevertheless as much applied in economic affairs and social and political decision making and planning. Town and country planning can be seen as forms of applied geography ; geographical information systems offer information that parallels the 19th century geographical inventories and many geographers work in sectors like tourism, real estate, environmental management etc., which replicate the 19th century applied functions of geography in the present world. A crucial difference however, is that these societal uses of geography are much less visible in the media than they were in the late 19th and early 20th century. Meanwhile the role of unfolding the world has been taken over by journalists and “non scientific” literature as well as by tourism and it is still captivating a large audience as can be seen in television series and contests or in the longstanding success of the *National Geographical Magazine* and its many language versions.
- 6 Many geographical societies have been transformed into academic societies in the course of the 20th century and mainly after WWII. In other cases, new societies have been founded to cover the need to offer a platform for exchange and networking among the growing community of academic geographers. Thus, in Belgium, the *Belgian Society for Geographical Studies* was founded in 1931 as the interuniversity association of academic geographers, in the wake of the legal organisation of geography courses in both the State and the free universities in 1929. This association edited the *Bulletin of the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies* as a scientific journal, which contrasted with the publications of the older societies targeting the intellectuals, merchants, investors and army officers. In 1962, the meanwhile *Royal Belgian Geographical Society* was embedded in the Free University of Brussels and its journal started to reflect more exclusively academic research. Nevertheless, the crisis was not only set off by the shift of the broad public towards other sources of geographical knowledge, but also by the increasing specialisation (generating debates about the unity of geography), internationalisation and competition within the academic geographic community from the late 1980s on. Despite a series of efforts, like the merger of the *Bulletin of the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies* and the *Revue Belge de Géographie* (the publication of the *Royal Belgian Geographical Society*) into *Belgeo* and the organisation of Belgian Geography

Days, their membership rapidly shrank. Most societies have faced similar pressures, but the smaller ones, like the Belgian societies were not considered anymore as prestigious platforms of encounter and exchange for all sub-communities of geographers. The *Antwerp Society* is virtually dead since several years, the *Royal Belgian Society* experiences difficulties in maintaining occasional publications and events for its members and the *Belgian Society for Geographical Studies* has recently stopped its activities. The latter organized the Belgian Geography Days every two years since 2004 and this task has been taken over by the *National Committee*. Physical geographers have been the first to abandon the societies and to seek for international publication and encounter platforms. Being too small, the Belgian geographers' community was unable to organize itself in a powerful association like the French, Italian or Spanish ones or the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Geographie* who covers both academic and professional geographers as well as many local geography societies. The largest national communities and particularly the Association of American Geographers and the Institute of British Geographers could on the contrary maintain their role and attract international recognition through successful annual international conferences⁴.

- 7 This crisis is further deepened by the weakening of geography's place in the secondary education system, as a result of the waning interest of society in the ideological role of the discipline and of the specializations in academic geography which made the unity of the discipline less visible. And this happened in a context of growing competition between disciplines to carve out a larger place in the secondary education curricula (biology, physics, but also social sciences like history, sociology and economics thus compete with geography). Moreover, the problem is aggravated by the fact that the Belgian universities do not supply enough geography teachers, even if that teaching is limited to one or two hours a week. As a result, non-geographers teach geography in the secondary school with less background and often less enthusiasm than geographers would have. This failure in supply triggers a vicious circle : as geography teaching in the secondary schools only poorly reflects academic geography and the teachers are unable to tell the pupils what geography studies look like at the university, only few of them enrol in geography at the university. Meanwhile, the competition from other employers for geographers has tremendously increased and the former prestige of educational occupations has declined (Kesteloot *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, the usually thriving societies of geography teachers (VLA on the Dutch speaking side, FEGEPRO on the French speaking side) are facing a clear trend of declining numbers of their members.

The academic position of Belgian geography and the unity of the discipline

- 8 The small number of geographers produced by the Belgian universities is partly related to the exceptional position of geography within the Faculties of Science at the Belgian universities. Such a position implies a demanding and compulsory training in mathematics, but also physics, chemistry, biology and geology, which might deter students more interested in social, political or historical approaches in geography. This possibly produces geographers that are less reluctant to mathematical formulations and modelling than in other countries and contributes to an easy and much

appreciated employability outside education, a point that resonates with the former crisis.

- 9 Moreover, this position in the Faculty of Sciences increases the contacts between physical geographers and other natural scientists and this might reinforce their tendency to specialise and to follow a neo-positivist approach rather than developing a global geographic approach and favouring epistemological questioning (see further). These tendencies explain the physical geographers' reluctance to publish in general geographical journals and to favour international journals with high impact factors and rankings – a behaviour that is much more encouraged or even imposed by academic practice in the Faculties of Sciences compared to Social Sciences and Humanities.
- 10 Conversely, social geographers are not very well accepted by the other disciplines in their faculty and they tend more to publish in journals with impact factors that are perceived as insignificant by their faculty colleagues, who do not understand the local and regional embedding of their work. The latter point relates to the last two, more generalised crises of geography.
- 11 This leads to an uneasy cohabitation that also reflects the difficulties of re-creating the unity of geography, a debate that is resurging in other countries as well. On the one hand, global changes and challenges have created an urgent demand for integrated environmental and societal research and physical geographers can use some training in human geography and social sciences as an asset in their competition for jobs with engineers and bio-engineers in these fields. But on the other hand, the separated research traditions have created very different interpretations of nature, society and space. Simplifying, one could say that physical geography tends to define its societal role as uncovering the laws of nature to which human societies have to obey in order to maintain a liveable environment and to incorporate models of human behaviour (especially demographic and economic models) in order to complete an “earth system science” that would enable political decision makers to understand what they have to do. Human geography on the contrary, would emphasize social relations over society-environment relations. As far as they would consider the latter, they would conceive conceptions of nature and the environment as social constructs rather than given objective realities governed by their own laws. In other words, they would uncover the political dimension of society-environment relations.
- 12 Obviously, producing geographical knowledge that genuinely integrates physical and human geography is a difficult task and these difficulties might be strong enough to maintain the natural and social sciences into separate worlds.

Geography's general epistemological crisis

- 13 While in the past geography has been capable of achieving epistemological integration around the regional question, it has been up to now unable to do so around the new and important research themes like environment and risk and other global changes. This failure is partly related to the neo-positivist stance and modelling approach that dominates in what is usually seen as “excellent” science. Indeed, this approach is confining research to analytical strategies, constantly reducing complex interactions to a few of their elements, rather than enabling synthetic understanding of reality (Kesteloot, 1985). This analytical nature of research is evidently driving the physical

and human geographers practicing this type of approach into many specialised and separated spheres of knowledge⁵.

- 14 Most of the countervailing forces in physical geography integrate their contributions, often in a problematic way in earth system sciences⁶. In human geography, fragmentation has been considerable. Even its approaching of other social sciences is not very helpful for more integration, even more because these sciences separately tend to integrate spatial dimensions in their body of knowledge.
- 15 The disintegrating impact of neo-positivism is not the only cause of fragmentation in human geography. Firstly, the numerous sub-disciplines, including environmental studies and area studies result as much from this cause as from the multifaceted nature of human geography. Some of these sub-disciplines are not considered specifically geographic anymore or are even sometimes fully claimed by other fields of sciences. Secondly, as in other social sciences, human geography developed along several paradigmatic approaches. The relative weight of each of these approaches varies over history, depending on the social and ideological function of science in society. Each of them has its own set of leading journals. From that point of view, the present-day ideological disarray explains the multiplication of disciplinary chapels, some of which even depart from the focus on understanding spatial structures. The last field of fragmentation is created by the split between theoretical and conceptual aspects and empirical approaches. Such a divide does not mean that no empirical work is considered in the first subfield or that theory is absent in the second. But in the first case empirical data are only considered for the purpose of the theoretical argument and this usually carries a very poor understanding of the local situation in case, while in the latter, the focus lies precisely on understanding what is happening with space in a precise geographical area and thus documenting the never ending process of production of space and reproduction of a dynamic society.
- 16 These three fields of fragmentation produce an exceptionally large amount of journals, to which one has to add the large number of national and regional journals, usually emanating from the national and local geographical societies described earlier⁷. And in turn, the large number of journals explains the general weak impact factors obtained by them. Only a few of these journals have reached international status – and they establish a broadly Anglo-Saxon hegemony on the subject (see further). This is slightly less the case with physical geography and deeply contrasts with other natural sciences. Besides this fragmentation, which is also present to a lesser degree in other sciences, the differences in impact factors also reflect the size of the scientific communities involved and their publication and reference culture.

Anglo-Saxon scientific imperialism and the culture of commodified excellence

- 17 The American, British, Dutch (but in English) and to a lesser extent Australian and New Zealand dominance in the international geography journals (both in terms of the seat of the journal and the composition of the editorial boards) forms a substantive handicap for geographers from other countries and non-native speakers. This fact also contributes to the weak competitiveness of the Belgian geographers within their Faculty of Sciences. Indeed, national and linguistic fragmentations are deeper in social geography than in other disciplines, precisely because it takes a spatial and regional

approach and because cultural and linguistic contexts deeply mark its objects of study. This is of course also true for British and American journals and as a consequence these so-called international journals express much more British and American points of view and approaches, rather than the diversity of situations and epistemological approaches in the world.

- 18 This Anglo-Saxon dominance is based on the recognition of English as the international language – a consequence of the world hegemonic positions of Britain in the 19th century and the US in the 20th century. This language advantage offers a quasi-monopoly position in the dominant literature to Anglo-Saxon commercial publishers (as well as some similar ones like the Dutch *Elsevier*). This is particularly unfavourable to geographers, especially those who consider the articulation between theoretical knowledge and concrete and localized social situations. Even after a large round of globalization (and partly also because of it) most of the geography journals listed in the *Web of Science* rankings, and to a lesser extent in *Scopus*, are published in Anglo-Saxon countries and their editorial board is dominated by British and American geographers, and sometimes even shamelessly excludes the rest of the scientific community (or include just a few ostensible token non-Anglophones). This entails that publication formats are dictated by their own norms and that valuable contributions are rejected because they do not fit quite narrow expectations.
- 19 Moreover, books and chapters in books are poorly recognized in publication achievements, usually because they do not pass a referees' committee. This is regrettable, but not enough to dismiss these publications, as books chapters enable to develop a richer thinking, usually in dialogue with other authors and that single authored books allow the full development of ideas and the underlying philosophy of the researcher.
- 20 Between the requirements of the publishers and the search for academic recognition on the basis of (the dictatorship of?) debatable bibliometric indicators, a vicious circle develops with a narrowing formatting of publications, the generalization of compulsory references – like citing “famous” author for banal propositions or definitions, the increasing number of authors for single papers, or the splitting up of ideas and subjects into multiple papers. The fragmentation of the field into specialized journals also leads to strong networks of researchers who gradually share the same interests and ideas and who end up to positively referee each other – be it through the double-blind system – and who publish a plethora of papers on a single subject. Obviously this tendency can be lessened in more generalist journals of geography.
- 21 Meanwhile universities are suffering from the excessive cost of the commodified journals supplied by the international publishers and tend therefore to cut in their subscription of less prestigious journals, which are usually not less interesting. Today, the universities tend to criticize these criteria and practices, but yet, they feel compelled to continue to apply them as interuniversity competition and ranking force them to assess and quantify the achievements of their members. The same applies for obtaining research funding, even more because public financing of the universities is far insufficient. Research and publications are increasingly suffering from commodification, immediacy, “profitability” and consequent triteness and they tend to undervalue the two other missions of the university, namely education including pedagogical aspects and adult education, and services to the community.

- 22 Fortunately, reactions are growing in many places. A *Slow Science Academy* was founded in Berlin in 2010 ; researchers networks grow to share “a conception of research and relations between researchers centred on sociability, intelligibility, exchange, sound work and imagination” (Gosselain, 2011). The recent sacking of a researcher by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven because she was criticising “scientific” experiences which were in fact subjected to the requirements of private sector investors, has provoked heavy protest in the scientific community. More open access journals appear in the spirit of sharing and cooperation⁸. Thus, during the last *International Geographical Union* conference in Cologne, a website listing the geographical journals that avoid commercial and linguistic bias was presented (<http://www.igu-online.org/site>), after a very critical presentation on the practices of the largest commercial publishers. The debate about the assessment culture (or cult?) based on bibliometric norms that are in fact developed by these large publishers and diverted from their scientific purpose brought to light that influential academics decline editorial membership or even publishing in these commercial journals.
- 23 Beyond the question of hegemony of a few journals, the social and political claim of scientific “de-excelling” resonates with the social contribution of the geographer. And this contribution is probably much larger when he or she publishes a critical paper in a locally embedded, free open access journal⁹, than when he produces a text in a so-called international journal in order to increase his “excellence” and therefore accepts consciously or unconsciously to conform to self-reproduced and debilitating norms.

Conclusion : a programme for Belgeo

- 24 What are the ambitions and the editorial demands to be fixed for Belgeo in this new format, when considering these reflections? The degree of freedom is small between the ambition to diffuse high quality geography as far as possible and to make it useful to society on the one hand and to refuse to comply with narrowly defined academic recognition on the other hand.
- 25 To succeed in this endeavour, we consider that Belgeo in open and free access for authors as well as readers must :
- keep its generalist approach and meanwhile multiply thematic or transversal issues without excluding spontaneous and/or isolated contributions ;
 - maintain among the published papers a balance and an articulation between the general and the local, theory and empirical work, and to offer a substantial share to maps and other (geo)graphical material ;
 - favour work that emphasises the social responsibilities of geographers and their contribution to intellectual and political debates ;
 - be a privileged publication space for geographic knowledge about Belgium ;
 - be perceived as a demanding journal to its referees, but without falling into censorship of epistemological positions of the authors or into a strict formalism, that narrow critical thinking and generate obligated citations and references ;
 - publish largely in English, but without making it the exclusive language. Using one or more other languages may extend the diffusion of ideas and research results to other publics and will also increase the richness of ideas, since language and modes of thought are fairly interrelated ;

- be a forum for all Belgian geographers and particularly, but not exclusively to social geographers, as well as for foreigners . This entails a continuation of the policy developed between 2000 and 2011 (Table 1) ;
- encourage the publication of high quality work by young Belgian geographers ;
- increase its readership not only among geographers but also among other disciplines and outside the academic work.

Table 1. Distribution of Belgeo papers, by language and author's working place (2000-2011 ; 291 papers).

	English	French	Other languages (Dutch mainly and German)	Total
Authors working in Belgium	19 %	22 %	3 %	44 %
Authors working abroad	37 %	18 %	1 %	56 %
Total	56 %	40 %	4 %	100 %

- 26 Paradoxically, these aims also involve the improvement of Belgeo's position in rankings, particularly in *Scopus*, with a better cover of the social sciences and humanities than the *Web of Sciences*. But we firmly refuse to subordinate our editorial policy exclusively to the ranking logic. These aims perfectly lie within the lines developed by the *International Geographical Union* to foster the diffusion of a diversified and high quality geography literature and contribute to the mission of the *National Committee of Geography* which is to promote, illustrate and defend Belgian geography.

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NOTES

1. The articles published from 2000 on will gradually be made available on the web as well.
2. The National Committees for each scientific discipline emanate from the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian Academies. They are composed on equal linguistic terms by representatives of the different Belgian universities. The National Committee for Geography represents Belgium at the International Geographic Union.
3. Among which 5 work in France, 4 in the UK, 2 in Switzerland, in Luxemburg, in Spain, in Italy and the Netherlands, 1 in Czech Republic, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, the US, Russia and in Senegal.
4. The Royal Geographical Society was able to combine its historical *raison d'être* – be it by profoundly modernising it – and a new role of organising and diffusing knowledge for the British geographic community by merging with its academic counterpart, the *Institute of British Geographers* in 1995. Not all large societies succeeded in the same way : the Paris *Société de Géographie* for instance evolves into a conferences and travels agency for a large audience.
5. A point forcefully illustrated by the creation of two separated journals from the once unitary *Progress in Geography* in 1977.
6. See e.g. the Pitman-Johnston debate in *Geoforum* (2005). A completely different attempt towards integration, is the introduction of political economy and ecology into physical geography (see e.g. Blaikie, 1985 ; Veyret, 2000 ; Showers, 2005).
7. Harris & Fellmann counted 3445 geographical publications from 105 countries in 55 languages in their third and last edition of the *International List of Geographical Serials*, a number that seems to be reduced as a consequence of internationalisation and ranking (see Vandermotten in this issue).
8. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* is a successful forerunner in this (see <http://www.acme-journal.org/Home.html>).
9. A good example is *Brussels Studies*, a free open access journal financed by the Brussels Government and managed by the university institutions of the Region. It publishes peer reviewed papers about the city and is successful to the point that other cities in Europe take it as an example of successful diffusion of knowledge among their citizens. Most *Brussels Studies* papers are relayed by the local media.

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