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# GEOGRAFICKÝ ČASOPIS

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## **SLOVAKIA IN XXTH CENTURY FRENCH GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH**

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The choice of the subject indicates the great interest that central Europe has always held for the "Ecole Francaise" of geographers. Literature on Slovakia includes three types of texts: informative papers, studies resulting from in-depth research work, and essays and syntheses. Different faces of Slovakia are highlighted through three recurring themes: relation between man and nature, regional development and geographical location.

Keywords: Slovakia, French geographical research, geographical paradigms

The choice of the subject "Slovakia in XXth century French geographical research" indicates, first of all, the great interest that central Europe has always held for the "Ecole Francaise" of geographers. Such a choice is not easy considering the two will result from our analysis - the image of Slovakia and that of geography. However, recent developments in the history and epistymology of geography have emphasized the need to adopt a critical approach in scientific publications; this is not to be confused with the usual bibliographical analysis established prior to any research project.

The very word "image" will not shed its ambiguity in our analysis. What is the essence of Slovakia, an image of unity or of plurality? Science no longer harbours its

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former belief in One truth, One theory, One image. Nevertheless, the quality and relevance of a scientific discipline is, in part, expressed by its ability to discern the questions that are the essence of reality and of the human adventure.

Can we then find any precursor to herald the growth of the autonomization process in the Slovak geographical space? The inaugural event of independence, born in the pacifist confusion of the crumbling two-bloc system, will provide the leading thread throughout our analysis of French geographical literature on Slovakia. Nevertheless, no one thread should be given over-importance retrospectively in regards to the corpus of literature available.

## 1 NUMBER, TIME AND NATURE

Although our list perhaps not exhaustive, the comparatively restricted number of titles available is minimal compared to the number found in German geography. However, our knowledge is not really so limited when we consider that even a Slovak geographer emphasized the lack of geographical literature in his own country (KRAL, 1930). Furthermore, no more than a comparable amount of literature is consecrated to Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia; all the more surprising given the links that exist between French and Czech intellectuals (Masaryk and Benes, for example) which leads one to expect that more works would be devoted to Bohemia.

Literature on Slovakia includes three types of texts:

- informative papers, often written especially for a seminar or after field research;
- veritable research articles resulting from in-depth research work observed first hand, often implying a knowledge of the Slovak language;
- essays and syntheses, written by authors already known for their previous research and their knowledge of Central Eastern Europe.

Almost all of this literature concerns "human geography", that is to say, geography in terms of the study of man and his relationship with the Earth. This is perhaps due to the highly mobile geo-political context of Central Europe as a whole and, more particularly, of the Czech and Slovak countries. The greatest diversity in geographical publications is found in articles written in the relatively brief period between the two world wars (when the French language was still used in scientific publications from Czechoslovakia): complex regional approaches, geomorphological studies, geo-political analyses. After 1945, geophysical research became almost impossible, being entirely incompatible with the secrecy enforced by the new political regime. The political crisis in 1968, followed by the federalization of a previous unitarian republic into two federal republics (Czech and Slovak), leaves no trace in French geography, be it direct or indirect. Progressively, over the eighties and into the nineties, the question of political territoriality and its links with geographical space once again find its place.

## 2 THREE PARALLEL PARADIGMS

The limited number of texts would render artificial and unfit any categorization founded on epistymological grounds. On the other hand, the different facets of Slovakia

can be highlighted through three recurring themes: the relation between Man and Nature, regional development and geographical location.

### *2.1 Relation between man and nature*

This relationship is the subject of a most original works, written by P. Deffontaines on "la vie forestière en Slovaquie" (1932). It is an anthropogeographical-type study, written at the height of the "Ecole Vidalienne", a monography on the regional individuality of Slovakia. The woody, mountainous environment of the Western Carpathes provides the permanent background, representing at the same time resource, obstacle and refuge. By following the history of settlement in the region, Deffontaines can explain the surprisingly different ways of life existing behind an apparently uniform way of life in a forest environment. This comparative attitude, especially between Slovakia and Bohemia, highlights what was for a longtime considered the peculiarity of Slovakia and what, in today's term, is known as the "Slovak geographical system" articulated around the forest. However, this geographical system exists no longer, now that almost 70% of the population is urban. Nevertheless, the turn-of-the-century paradigm that has taken over from that of Man/Nature to his environment is ever present in the French geographical interest in Slovakia. Indeed, the theme of the environment and the quality of life have been chosen as subjects of an agreement between the CNRS and the Czechoslovakian Academy of Science (1988) in the aim of carrying out parallel research.

### *2.2 Regional development as applied to Slovakia*

The paradigm of regional growth and the analysis of the closing gap with Czech countries has given priority in all French geographical texts written since 1948. In fact, this is a worldwide priority since it is closely linked to post-war economic growth; it provides the geographical basis of interaction between local processes and national ones.

During the Socialist period, it was difficult to avoid such a paradigm: the facts were evident, even on the landscape, because of industrialization and urbanization, the extension of transport networks to former secular, Slovakian enclaves. Scholars, imbued with the teachings of the era of Marxism, spontaneously believe in a model that vehicles a purposeful spatial planning and a spatial equilibrium, and that represents an alternative value to the capitalist model of spontaneous but unbalanced polarization. Such an interpretation, often difficult to separate from the writings of propaganda, does not take into account the disparities and the virtual tension between Slovak and Czech regions. Even A. Blanc's short chapter entitled "le probleme slovaque" (1974) is an inventory of the growth-closing the gap policies favouring Slovakia. In other words, geographical analyses of regional development in Slovakia pay no heed to the mechanisms applied in the process, but rather remain caught in the state of the convergence of regional evolution. They give no hint of the rapid dislocation that was to take place after 1990. Unwittingly, this paradigm of regional development of space during the Socialist regime weakened itself because it did not develop a theoretical reflection on the nature of the spatial development process in the Socialist system. Here, nothing is said of the reproduction of the Centre/Peripherie mechanism,

which was lent such importance elsewhere. The illusion to consider the major contradictions as being resolved in the Socialist system appears retrospectively as the reason why even foreign geographers neglected to analyse the permanent mechanisms of spatial differentiation.

### *2.3 Geographical location and their interactional level*

The problem of territorial identity in Slovakia has remained the most recurring paradigm over the past century of French geographical literature. The question identity and of its territorial support is crucial throughout Central Europe and necessitates a geopolitical stance to be adopted, despite the fact that this is not usual in the "Ecole Francaise" of geography. Such a process involves a critical description of boundaries and an evaluation of the internal forces at work in the cohesion within the state territory, nevertheless without elaborating a specific geopolitical theory.

Although E. Reclus sketches us a surprising justification for the division into human regional units around the hydrographical basins, geographical analyses written between the two world wars are more circumspect on the degree of cohesion in these new political spaces resulting from the peace treaties of 1918-19. They underline the innovative aspects of the association of Slovakia and Bohemia and suggest a possible means of cohesion with the exploitation of the complementary potential of the two regions.... "Afin que la Slovaquie devienne peu á peu une province nationale..." (De Martonne, page 603). To allow Slovakia to become, little by little, a national province and to enable it to catch up with the times, it must become the wheat silo of Czechoslovakia, supplier of cheap labour and consumer market for industrial goods produced by the more urban and industrialized Bohemia.

During the eighties, Central Eastern Europe once again became the target of geographical research, this time in a new context. Former geopolitical divisions within Europe were questioned as the EEC gained impetus and polarities and attractions changed. People became aware of the amplitude of flows and their networks and of the importance of spatial interaction mechanism processes. The emphasis on growth in terms of space is overtaken by more explicitly geographical questions; the forms and the interactions between these forms, the spatial processes, are the targets of research: limits, boundaries, spatial discontinuity, network cores, spatial hinges. The "paradigm of geographical location" (M.C. Robic) and, since 1990, classical geopolitics (cf Herodote review) are more and more efficient to help in the understanding of spatial tension now operating in Central Europe. These work give no hint of the dislocation either, but they offer the theoretical and methodological support necessary to observe the rupture: complex tools used to analyse spatial discontinuities, the systems theory applied to geographical space, geographical data bases. (cf research carried out by the P.A.R.I.S. and R.E.C.L.U.S. teams).

Two lessons can be drawn from this brief analysis of Slovakia's image in French geographical literature. In a facts and the cultural background, all of these being carries of or receptacles for any unprecedented mutations which may occur.

To return to one of the main ideas introduced in the opening paragraph i.e. political territoriality in Slovakia, I would like to point out that in an analogical approach, the theories of chaos and bifurcation could be useful. They offer an intelligible framework by means of which unexpected events, those seemingly representing a rupture of

observed evolution, can be understood. They show that small fluctuations of a secondary and hazardous nature can change the trajectory of a system if this system is far from being in equilibrium, in a temporary context of perturbation. Such a point of view forces us to take into account central Eastern Europe as a whole, and as a space specifically subject to tensions far from being in equilibrium. The "entre deux" (being astride) concept may be useful if we are to progress in our geographical analysis.

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## SLOVENSKO VO FRANCÚZSKOM GEOGRAFICKOM VÝSKUME DVADSIATEHO STOROČIA

Výber tejto témy sám osebe vyjadruje veľký záujem o strednú Európu zo strany geografov "francúzskej školy".

Literatúra o Slovensku zahŕňa tri typy publikácií:

- informatívne články, často písané pre semináre a po absolvovaní terénnych výskumov,
- vedecké príspevky ako výsledky hlbších vedeckých bádání,
- eseje a syntézy, ktoré písali autori, známi predchádzajúcimi výskumami a znalosťou strednej Európy.

Väčšina tejto literatúry sa zaoberá humánno-geografickou problematikou. Najväčšiu pestrosť v geografických publikáciách možno vidieť v článkoch z obdobia medzi dvoma svetovými vojnami (komplexný regionálny prístup, geomorfologické štúdie, geopolitické analýzy). Po roku 1945 sa geopolitický výskum stal prakticky nemožný pre svoju nezlučiteľnosť s politickou orientáciou nového režimu. Politická kríza v r. 1968 a následná federalizácia unitárneho štátu nezanechala žiadnu stopu vo francúzskej geografii. V osemdesiatych a devädesiatych rokoch sa znovu objavila otázka politickej teritoriality vo vzťahu ku geografickému priestoru.

Rôzne črty Slovenska osvetľujú tri opakujúce sa témy: vzťah človeka k prírode, regionálny rozvoj a geografická lokalizácia.

Vzťah človeka a prírody bol predmetom originálneho diela od P. Deffontainea "*La vie forestière en Slovaquie*" (1932). Je to antropogeografická štúdia - monografia o regionálnej jedinečnosti Slovenska. Storočie stará paradigma prevzatá zo vzťahu človek - príroda do životného prostredia je stále v strede zájmu francúzskej geografie o Slovensko.

Paradigma regionálneho rozvoja a analýza stierania rozdielu medzi Českom a Slovenskom boli prioritou v geografických textoch písaných od roku 1948. Táto priorita bola úzko spojená s povojnovým ekonomickým rastom. Bola geografickou bázou pre štúdium interakcií medzi procesmi na lokálnej a republikovej úrovni.

Problém teritoriálnej identity na Slovensku je najopakovanejšou témou vo francúzskej geografickej literatúre za ostatné storočie. Otázka národnej identity a jej teritoriálnej podpory je kľúčovou v celej strednej Európe a vyžaduje geopolitický postoj napriek tomu, že to nie je zaužívané vo francúzskej geografickej škole. Takýto proces zahŕňa kritický opis hraníc a hodnotenie medzinárodných síl v kohézii so štátnym teritóriom, aj bez vytvorenia špecifickej geopolitickej teórie. V priebehu osemdesiatych rokov sa stredná Európa znovu stala predmetom zájmu geografického výskumu, ale v nových kontextoch. Paradigma geografickej lokácie (M. C. Robic) a od roku 1990 klasická geopolitika pomáhajú pochopiť silnejúce priestorové napätie odohrávajúce sa v strednej Európe.