

Karl Ritter

Karl Ritter (1779-1859). "Genius of geography" [efn_note]Title of the work by Hanno Beck (1979) cited in the bibliography[/efn_note], "founder" of modern geography – there are numerous laudatory epithets to refer to this geographer who for nearly forty years, from 1820 to 1859, occupied the chair of geography, ethnology and history (Länder- und Völkerkunde und der Geschichte) in Berlin university [efn_note]From 1820 to 1825 the chair carried the title "Erd-, Länder-, Völker- und Staatenkunde" (sciences of the Earth, countries, peoples and states)[/efn_note]. Karl Ritter is however a geographer who is not easy to approach, his work is complex and often obscure, and is little read today and only partially translated. He is known as the initiator of "comparative geography", and is remembered as a great pedagogue, influenced by the innovating ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1724-1793). It is often forgotten that he was also a resolved conservative, politically opposing liberal movements (Korinman, 1981). He was very influential in Berlin in academic, political, and military circles (from 1820 to 1853 he taught in the general military school in Berlin). He travelled relatively little, but was a man of networks and links (in 1828, with Alexander von Humboldt and Heinrich Berghaus, he founded the Berlin Geographical Society, thus contributing to the outreach of Prussian geography: some of his students, among whom Elisée Reclus (1830-1905) later ensured the circulation of his work across Europe, at a time when it was drawing criticism from the following generation of German geographers, in particular Oscar Peschel (1826-1875) or again Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) (Mehedinti, 1901).

Karl Ritter's work, profoundly influenced by theology and the historicist trend of classical philology [efn_note]Led by Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) and later August Boeckh (1785-1867), the texts studied by philologists came to be considered as fully-fledged historical sources enabling Antiquity to be restored in its historical singularity[/efn_note], differs considerably from that of «Alexander von Humboldt» (1769-1859), with whom he is frequently associated. Karl Ritter's work is pervaded by the historical approach and providentialism, making him a geographer firmly rooted in the German Romantic tradition of the first half of the 19th century, influenced, in particular in his conception of the relationship of Man with Nature, by Herderian philosophy (Naturphilosophie). In his first writings between 1800 and 1815, Ritter, like his colleague August Zeune, was an advocate of "pure geography" (reine Geographie), the aim of which he considered to be the study of the "natural divisions of the Earth's surface", escaping from contingent political frameworks by means of both civic studies (Staatskunde) and 18th-century German geography as exemplified by Anton Friedrich Büsching (1724-1793). This approach considers that «natural regions» (Länder) are identifiable from watersheds and mountain ranges which provide "eternal" boundaries. This new approach was at once intended to give geography a degree of autonomy in relation to cameralism, and to provide German nationalism with the opportunity to reappraise its borders against the backdrop of the territorial upheavals brought about under Napoleon (Garner, 2008).

From 1817 to his death in 1859, Ritter set to writing the work of his life: *Die Erdkunde im Verhältniß zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen : oder allgemeine vergleichende Geographie, als sichere Grundlage des Studiums und Unterrichts in physikalischen und historischen Wissenschaften* (a study of the Earth in its relationships with Nature and the history of Man, or General Comparative Geography as sound foundations for the study and teaching of physical and historical sciences). The agenda was extremely vast, since in line with a project set out in 1806, the aim was to study the "natural geography" of all the «continents», and to show its influence "on industry, trade, civilisation, and civic relationships between countries (Länder) and peoples at the present time" (Ritter, 1806, quoted by Garner, 2008, p.18). Ritter organised his work according to a teleological approach commonly advocated in discourse at the time and well-grounded by Hegel's philosophy of history: he claimed to follow "the progress of civilisation", from the continent estimated at the time to be the most "primitive", Africa, to the most "civilised", Europe (which was a volume he did not have time to complete before his death).

Ritter's purpose in this work was to provide sound scientific foundations for geography: he claimed that this implied moving beyond a strictly descriptive approach (Ritter's *Erdkunde*, in this respect, was intended to go further than Büsching's *Erdbeschreibung* (description of the Earth), so as to set up a genuine "science of relationships" (Verhältnisslehre). These relationships made it possible to quantify phenomena (for instance the relationship between the continental masses and the known emergent terrestrial mass, the number of islands and the length of coastlines and the surface area of a country) and to classify them. By comparing the results obtained, it was possible to establish correlations and derive explicative factors for the degree of development of a country or continent, whether commercial, industrial or in terms of civilisation. Ritter's geography, seeking new epistemological foundations, aimed to set out universal geographical laws, and to do this there was no hesitation in calling on the theories of Antiquity, such as Neo-Platonism's theory of Forms (Gestalt), taken up in particular by Schelling (1775-1854) [efn_note]On Ritter's axiomatic approach, see the introduction by Nicolas-Obadia[/efn_note], 1974. Maps were to back up the demonstration, and Ritter, anxious to "show the

world" to students, following the recommendations of Pestalozzi, contributed to the development of school atlases and wall maps in the teaching of German geography.

By adopting a comparative procedure which was developing at the time in the natural sciences – in particular in anatomy – and in the area of philology, Ritter's style of geography is part of an epistemological renewal, offering this new "scientific geography" a place in the German academic landscape. But the maintenance of the resolutely providentialist nature of this geography was at odds with a strong current deriving from the philosophy of Enlightenment, and Kant in particular, aspiring towards an autonomy of the human sciences with respect to theology. This probably partly explains why Ritter's work, *Die Erdkunde*, the "last great work of German providentialist geography" (Hanno Beck, 1979, p.121), a product of the Reformation, was rapidly overtaken by a more positivist brand of geography, and did not have the same career as Humboldt's *Cosmos* [efn_note]The Reformation gave rise to a series of geographical works the main aims of which were to bring readers to admire the work of the Creator. Providentialism, the belief in the providence (Vorsehung) of God as governing the world and mankind, tended in Calvinist thought towards strict divine predestination but in Lutheran thought allowed considerable room for free-will. The work of Ritter, a Lutheran from a pious background, was divided between these two trends: some of his texts suggest a relativisation of the "eternal essences" (see in particular the texts published by D & G Nicolas-Obadia) while his *Geographie* leans more towards a strict reiteration of the predestination of "geographical individuals". It is in this sense that we can say that Ritter's *Geographie* complies with a theological-geographic doctrine at large in Germany from the Reformation. It can be noted that the selection and choice of texts by Ritter for translation into French since the 19th century have often minimised this predestination component of his thought, thus providing a somewhat biased view of his geography. Concerning the links between theology and German geography, see the work by Manfred Büttner (Büttner, 1997, *Die Bedeutung der Reformation für die Neuausrichtung der Geographie im protestantischen Europa und ihre Folgen für die Entfaltung der Providentiallehre. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der wechselseitigen Beziehungen zwischen Theologie und Geographie*. In: *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, vol. 68, p. 209-225, and Büttner, 1998, *Geographie und Theologie. Zur Geschichte einer engen Beziehung. Geographie im Kontext* Bd. 2, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M., 161 p.)[/efn_note]

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