

MY TRAINING AS AN APPLIED GEOGRAPHER

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I first became involved in applied geography at the beginning of the 1980s about 15 years after completing my university studies. Long before that, I had, of course, answered requests from places outside the university to participate in think tanks or action groups and to lead conferences outside the academic environment, but it was really only when I opened my own research laboratory and obtained my first contracts, and particularly when I hired the first researchers, that I thought I had truly become an 'applied geographer.'

In fact, in my opinion, to be an applied geographer it is not enough to give interviews for a widely read magazine, on radio, or on television, to lead conferences before a non-academic audience, or to offer one's students critical analyses of on-going projects, even solutions to these projects. A true applied geographer, or better still a professional geographer, is one who commits to a contractual relationship with a private or public representative with the goal of carrying out accurate work with terms of reference and payment. Such a commitment involves a certain maturity, hence my slightly belated commitment.

Here are a few words on my background. When I registered in the Department of Geography at the University of Liege in 1962, my dream was to take a position at an *Ecole Normale*, that is, a higher education college that trains primary school teachers. I had graduated from such a school—in Andenne—and wanted to return after my studies at University to train future teachers there. This kind of education appealed to me because of its active methods (group work, educational project methods, field training, etc.) and the significant effects that result from innovative training: all students would one day be able to implement in their own classes everything that they learned from their teachers during their studies. But when my studies came to an end, Professor O. Tulippe, who was in charge of the *Institut de Géographie*, suggested I apply to the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (FNRS) to begin a career as a researcher. It was an opportunity I could not pass up. . .

Therefore, I began my career by becoming an 'apprentice' at the FNRS. Professor J.A. Sporck, who at that time succeeded O. Tulippe, advised

strongly that I follow courses in a '*Certificat complémentaire en géographie appliquée*' that the University of Liege had created to prepare young graduates for the field of applied geography. I followed this very theoretical training without any great enthusiasm, my dream remaining to become a teacher. My research contract was renewed the following year but I decided to give it up to take up a position as assistant in a field that was not that of my research (the position was in regional geography and I was working in economic geography) because I wanted to be able to work with students.

Very quickly, while carrying out research work that would lead to a doctoral thesis, I put all my energy into reforming practical work for which I was responsible and to start new learning methods. I also obtained, in the early 1970s, the educational training for future qualified teachers in geographical sciences (training to prepare for the profession of teaching in secondary education). While Professor J.A. Sporck—as Professor O. Tulippe before him had done—was very involved in spatial planning (he completed several regional development plans), I was trying to keep my distance from all this work and focus in essence on a dual mission: research and pedagogical training of students.

Nevertheless, I slowly began to realise that the future of geography was to a large extent played out outside these two areas: could a discipline, in fact, merely produce knowledge and teach it to people who, in turn, will teach the same knowledge? Moreover, the knowledge and the know-how of geography seemed to me to be increasingly useful outside education to help resolve many problems. Why not, then, become involved?

After a broad review, in particular, in the UK, France, and the Netherlands, I decided to get myself started with the desire not to limit my actions to the public and development planning alone, and above all to record these actions in a true professional framework. But how to create this structure and make it known? Moreover, what will its 'core business' be, what services will it offer? And with whom will it be achieved? From the outset, a few principles were finalised: capitalise on the fields I had had the opportunity to study in the framework of my thesis (devoted to new industrial locations) and other research work (mainly the location of retail trade), create a specific service, work by contract and hire 'real' researchers and not students or employees partly funded by public subsidies. I also decided to give myself five years to test the feasibility of this formula.

The University of Liege gave me a chance for such an initiative; I only needed to prove I was able to get contracts and from then on assume all the costs. This was how, in 1985, one year following the creation of LMG (*Laboratoire de Méthodologie de la Géographie* with the goal of developing

applied research in didactics of geography by looking for contracts in didactics), SEGEFA (*Service d'Etude en Géographie économique fondamentale et appliquée*) came into being. As its name clearly indicates, this service, which has since obtained almost 300 different contracts (and has kept six to eight researchers and a graphic designer busy for about ten years), has always wanted to link together fundamental and applied research starting from the idea that a University service does not really perform unless it has the capacity to integrate the most recently acquired knowledge of research into the true observations and expectations of the terrain.

Working in applied geography therefore involves, I believe, connecting academic research with applied work, the two sustaining each other strongly. The first is essential because it provides the theoretical references, the adequate methodologies, and the critical sense indispensable to applied research. But the latter is equally precious as it expands on research issues, provides real cases, and brings information or data not always available in official statistics. And it is here that one fulfils the opportunity to be at the University where one has the duty to continue to produce knowledge or methods, but where one can also resolve concrete problems thanks to contracts with the outside world. Another advantage of being an applied geographer within the university environment is the importance of the network of relationships with colleagues from other universities; this network gives the applied geographer a broad knowledge of research from other places, opportunities to meet, even associations with other laboratories in the framework of certain contracts.

Getting an education in applied geography is then only possible if one could and one continues to train in geography. The disciplinary skills are, in fact, fundamental. But it is also advisable to develop such transversal skills as: knowing how to listen to requests, knowing how to interact with sponsors, associated teams or other participants, knowing how to communicate the results, knowing how to negotiate (a contract, a solution, etc.), knowing how to manage contracts, and above all knowing how to manage a team. In fact, except where one works alone, it is the quality of the research team that will directly depend on the work, emphasising the importance of the scientific quality of the researchers and of the quality of the relationships among the group members. And in this case nothing is ever acquired because of frequent changes that often affect this kind of team, the route into such a structure being seen by many young researchers as a springboard into their future professional lives.

The function of the springboard for employment was moreover also one of our initial objectives; we wanted to prepare young graduates better for their professional life through a few years at SEGEFA knowing full well that at the

time it was extremely difficult for a young geography graduate to find 'applied' work. And, without doubt, this objective has been successful since more than 50 seniors have been able to enter the professional world thanks to SEGEFA. But this high 'turn-over' is also a limitation for the structure that should continuously train new researchers. In this field, the pedagogical capacities are unquestionably very useful as they are in applied geography in general since the work carried out always involves listening and communicating, two essential qualities for a teacher. Another equally fundamental element is maintaining one or two senior researchers in the team to train the junior researchers.

Another angle taken when creating SEGEFA also proved very rich in our journey. It was the desire to work for both the private and the public sectors, which is rare in Belgium or France where most geographers work only for the public sector. Throughout its history, SEGEFA had the opportunity to link the two work groups that, without a doubt, allowed it to oblige collaboration between two worlds that certainly did not have the same purpose, but that should ultimately often work together in the field of economic development and spatial planning. From these two different perspectives, we have also learned a great deal about both the issues and the rationales of the different partners. Similarly, working on a project with teams from other disciplines or with teams from other Belgian or foreign universities was always very instructive.

When one questions retrospectively this course of applied geography, it is certainly possible to underscore all the positive aspects not only for the team members, but also for our discipline, the students we trained at the same time—we dare hope—for the regions or the places where we intervened to offer a solution to a problem. In fact, geography at Liege, in Wallonia and in Belgium has gained a great deal of social recognition, not only because of us, certainly, but also because of the development of applied work everywhere. Moreover, successive classes of students have benefited from instruction listening more to the concrete problems encountered in the field and without doubt more professionalising. In fact, a know-how and expertise provide greater credibility to the training given by showing tangibly what role the discipline plays in today's society. Certainly, strong involvement in applied geography could also have some pernicious effects: favouring concrete solutions over theoretical reflections, sometimes accepting contracts for the sake of accepting them (without any real intellectual added value) to preserve jobs, cutting oneself off from a certain traditional world of research because it is not always possible to 'do conferences' while involving oneself in specific projects with very inconvenient deadlines.

Of course, becoming an applied geographer also means wanting to be personally involved, daring to exceed the customary reservations of universities, accepting criticism in the media, occasionally being taken hostage by groups with differing opinions, and so on. Professional geographers are also a little like SME (small and medium sized company owners) who must continually adapt and face uncertainty, in particular of contracts, which — combined with their other functions as teachers and researchers — still requires a large capacity for work and a very clear code of conduct to prevent ‘losing one’s soul’ in compromises. Moreover, they should learn step-by-step, that is, hand on to their most faithful collaborators to guarantee a future for their laboratories.

As for the future of applied geography, it appears to be at once easier and more difficult than its recent past. First, it is easier because geographers are much better known and recognized than previously, and many companies or institutions (doubtlessly more public than private) call on these geographers or do not hesitate to hire them for various functions. But also more difficult because the subjects traditionally dealt with by geographers (localising economic activities, local and regional development, spatial planning, property markets, the environment, etc.) affect an increasing number of other disciplines; even the methods to which geographers resort, in particular cartography, have become more widely used by others, in particular since the development of GIS (Geographic Information Systems). What place will professional geographers occupy tomorrow? Will geography be progressively integrated into other disciplines while bringing them a spatial dimension or will it preserve an autonomous existence? These questions are very difficult to answer.

Finally, if it were necessary to recommend a course of training, I would argue for a solid basic training in geography before learning any applied geography because the professional geographer must first be an excellent geographer. Applied training need only take place at the end of education and should combine the most general of learning (like setting up and managing projects, methodology of the activities, interpersonal relationships, etc.) with project studies and case analyses, and of course one or more training periods.