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Is There Space for “Real Space” in British Civilisation Studies?

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Introduction

- 1 One way of looking at space, not “outer space” but “terrestrial space” - that down-to-earth, everyday connection of places across space - is to think about some of the complex ways in which university lecturers interact with space¹. The majority of lecturers live in the relatively affluent quarters of the towns and cities in which their universities are located. They travel under, over and through space to their out-of-town or city centre universities. There they continue to set in motion movements in spending and demanding state and private sector support for their own universities and those with which they collaborate, and those other “inter” partners required in order to tick all of the boxes for a grant application. These movements are in turn part of movements of credit and investment moneys that have a mix of positive and negative effects upon social and ecological life, locally and across the world. As the lecturers complete these tasks, so they earn sufficient salary to import back to their absolute space of tree-lined avenues all of the energy, avocado pears and various commodities they need to support their privileged lives. They might occasionally complain about, but don't actively resist, governments that support this manner of lifestyle. At the same time, however, they feel nervous, because they know that in the towns and cities in which they live there is a degree of anger about all things they stand for, not least given the growth in university real estate over the last 20 years. They talk about civic engagement, while at the same time using the hostile forces that surround them as subjects of their academic papers: from the housing crisis to student chariot chases in wheelie bins. Meanwhile, their consumption of energy and production of books printed on paper - the pulp of which comes from logging companies intent on closing down groups of environmental activists

- prove to be the straw that breaks the back of climate change and atmospheric patterns shift dramatically.
- 2 As these – more or less – imaginary scenarios make clear “even in the material world it is hard to remain confined to just one modality of spatial thinking and capture all the complexity of material processes”². This article tentatively explores how British civilisation studies has gone about addressing this task, how it has attempted to understand this thing called “space”. It does so by means of situating the domain of British civilisation studies within two contemporary debates. The first is “interdisciplinarity”, and the paradox faced by disciplinary specialists competing for research funding and academic prestige. The second debate concerns the so-called “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences, and its coincidence with what some writers see as the declining importance of space. It will be argued that while at first sight British civilisation studies has a temporal bias, it has engaged with space; indeed it would have been impossible not to do so. The task that lies ahead is to inject a more explicit spatial sensibility into its methodologies, empiricism and theorising. In order to consider how this project might be achieved, the article outlines some of the steps that might be taken on the way to developing a “geographical imagination” for scholars of British civilisation studies.

Premise 1: interdisciplinarity

- 3 Most authors agree that exchanges between disciplines form a hierarchy consisting of several concepts. The hierarchy starts with single disciplinary approaches (e.g. history, linguistics, literature, physics, etc.), followed successively by multi- (or pluri-), cross-, inter- and trans- disciplinary approaches. However, authors disagree on their understanding of levels. For the purposes of this article – following Petrisor³ – I define “interdisciplinary studies” as those in which researchers draw on several academic disciplines with different research paradigms in such a way that they cross subject boundaries in order to create new knowledge and theory. This definition differs to that of both multi- (or pluri-) disciplinary approaches and trans- disciplinary approaches. In the case of the former, while researchers from different disciplines exchange knowledge, they work in parallel rather than aiming to cross subject boundaries to create new knowledge and theory. In the case of trans-disciplinary approaches, the focus is on bringing together academic researchers from different disciplines and non-academic participants, such as practitioners and the public. While trans-disciplinary research may create new knowledge and theory, the emphasis is less on confronting and crossing disciplinary boundaries (cf. interdisciplinarity) and more on crossing a (real or perceived) academic versus non-academic divide.
- 4 In the early 1980s, Britain witnessed a significant increase in the number of so-called “interdisciplinary” degrees, with “studies” becoming the buzzword in higher education. The plate glass universities and the polytechnics, along with a few redbrick and civic universities, became the homes of departments of: cultural studies, gender studies, peace studies, environmental studies, media studies, etc. At the time, the idea of crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to create new knowledge and theories was exciting and challenging. However, almost 40 years later, while the challenge remains, the excitement or will to address it seems to have diminished. At the heart of this state of affairs is a seeming paradox: one of the three “i’s” of the assessment criteria for research funding is

“interdisciplinarity” (along with “impact” – formerly “internationality” – and “innovation”); while, amidst entrenched inter-departmental rivalries⁴, one of the key assessment criteria for research excellence is academic reputation built on subject-speciality. An illustration of the quest for “interdisciplinarity” is to be found in the criteria used by the Economic and Social Research Council⁵, while an illustration of subject-speciality is to be found at the tops of the tables of journal impact factors⁶.

- 5 In the context of British civilisation studies in France, one symptom of this paradox is the increasing use of the term “historian” in front, or as a qualifier, of the interdisciplinary term “civilisationist”. The temporal, as opposed to the spatial, bias of scholars of British civilisation studies in France is made clear in the descriptions used by members of the *Centre de Recherches et d’Études en Civilisation Britannique* (CRECIB) and the British Civilisation section of the *Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur* (SAES). While 49 members of CRECIB quality their entries by means of using the term “*histoire*”, only two members use the term “*géographie*”. Similarly, in the British Civilisation section of the SAES, under “*spécialité 2*” there are 74 mentions of “*siècle*” relative to only two mentions of “*espace*”. What is to be made of this apparent bias towards time rather than space in this domain? Are we simply to conclude that the domain is more temporal than spatial; that it is more concerned with sequences of events than with events occurring at the same time in different places connected across space? Does British civilisation studies go little further than an unquestioning use of spatial metaphors (region, place, space, landscape, etc.)? One means of addressing the role of space in British civilisation studies is to examine the extent to which the domain has been subject to the so-called “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences.

Premise 2: the “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences

- 6 This victory of time over space in British civilisation studies seems peculiar when placed alongside the work of “many writers (who) have argued that the nineteenth century was the epoch of time, the twentieth century the epoch of space, and that as ‘the modern’ yielded to ‘the postmodern’ so there has been a marked ‘spatial turn’ across the spectrum of the humanities and social sciences”⁷.
- 7 But as Derek Gregory’s four-page entry for “space” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* is quick to point out, the so-called “spatial turn” was contemporaneous with “the imminent ‘end of geography’, ‘the irrelevance of space’ and the ‘death of distance’ in ostensibly the same late, liquid or postmodern world”⁸.
- 8 So perhaps British civilisation studies – as revealed by this author’s admittedly crude search of key terms – has been right to prioritise time over space, perhaps it has been prescient rather than dragging its heels.
- 9 It is when we put these two positions alongside each other (a spatial turn versus the irrelevance of space) that – with the considerable help of the work of Doreen Massey – we can see that it is not difficult to reconcile these competing claims. As Massey made clear, this is because everything depends on *how* space is conceptualised⁹. This question of *how* can be applied directly to British civilisation studies, or more precisely: *how* do researchers in British civilisation studies make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space? But just as Massey raised the question, drawing on Henri Lefebvre, she pointed to

the enormity of the task ahead. In the opening arguments of *The production of space* (1991), Lefebvre notes that we often use the word “space” – in popular and academic discourses – without being fully conscious of what we mean by it¹⁰. Indeed, Raymond Williams in his *Keywords* did not take on the term; had he done so, we can be reasonably sure that he would have classed it amongst those words- such as “culture” and “nature” - as the most complicated terms in the English language¹¹.

British civilisation studies and the socio-spatial dialectic

- 10 There is no doubt that space and connections between places across space are integral to the everyday practices of British civilisation studies. By taking the example of the *French Journal of British Studies* (*FJBS*)/*Revue Française de civilisation britannique* (*RFCB*), a multitude of places come to mind. There are the physical places of production in which the committee members, peer reviewers, editors and authors are to be found, and from which they interact across space. There are the places of distribution via CRECIB, conferences, the SAES, the Presse Sorbonne Nouvelle, etc. There are the many places of consumption, including national and university libraries and people’s homes. And there are an increasing number of virtual places by which the journal is produced, distributed, indexed and consumed. The choice of a journal has some merits as a means of examining how we not only directly engage with space and place, but also how we do so conceptually. As scholars we use journals as a means of legitimising our rights to theorise, question our use of methodologies and justify our use of empirical data. The journal also acts as a gatekeeper, not least in terms of the work of those whom are granted the right to select, to review and to publish an article within. Academic reputation can be made by the inclusion of an article and questioned by the absence of one. The development of different forms of conceptual work can be encouraged or dismissed.
- 11 One way of looking at the socio-spatial importance of the *FJBS* is to consider the origins of articles in universities in France. Figure 1 represents SAES membership and numbers of articles according to university locations¹². Figure 2 represents number of articles against number of SAES members¹³. The darker the dot the better the ratio, and what this shows is that some of the better results are to be found outside of Paris. The socio-spatial (see below) does matter, but not necessarily in the way in which we might have first imagined. And in order to find out how and why, we need to delve below and beyond these representations of socio-spatial relations. We need to get into much more direct contact with the real spaces of British civilisation studies in France.

British civilisation studies’ engagement with human geography

- 12 But what type of articles are being accepted for publication by the journal, or in the context of this article, do the journal’s articles draw on recent theories of space as put forward in human geography? By “recent theories” I’m referring to work that has adopted a relational concept of space, in which spatial analysis becomes social analysis, and social analysis – ideally - becomes spatial analysis (more on the ‘ideal’ below); with “each ... incomplete without the other”¹⁴. This is not an enquiry which takes place at

some highly abstract level, but one that asks the more real world question: “How is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space?”¹⁵ The pioneers of such an approach are David Harvey working in geography¹⁶, and Anthony Giddens working in sociology¹⁷. Both set out to develop an interdisciplinary conversation, or what Harvey refers to as a “geographical imagination” in social theory. So have the works of some of the most pivotal authors working in this/these discipline(s) - including David Harvey, David Gregory, John Urry, Edward Soja and Doreen Massey - been used in British civilisation studies? The short answer is that those authors who set out to introduce a relational concept of space in interdisciplinary work are rarely cited in the *FJBS*. In my sampling of journal volumes, early on I drew hope from an article published in 1987 by François Poirier, in which he engaged with the work of Doreen Massey¹⁸. Poirier used the idea of a socio-spatial dialectic in order to argue that regional unemployment rates do not explain falls in trade union membership, but rather the restructuring of the economic base - which the older members of unions did not understand - is a more plausible explanation. Here Poirier engaged with the work of Doreen Massey and ideas about the socio-spatial dialectic put forward by Edward Soja, namely that space influences social actions which are in turn influenced by space¹⁹. Based on the sample of journals I have examined this is the sole article I have found which makes explicit reference to recent theory in human geography.

- 13 As I worked through the journals I found myself increasingly drawn to an argument I’d seen in the human geography literature itself, namely that the so-called “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities went little further than the adoption of a few geographical idioms - such as “margins” and “borders”, for the *FJBS* particular culprits are “regions” and “landscapes” - and that “much of it seemed resolutely ignorant of geographers and geography as a discipline”²⁰. Furthermore, I was aware of the concern that geographers had of the impact of the “cultural turn” on their own discipline; namely that (as did Hoggart²¹), in the second phase of the cultural turn researchers were deducing social realities at a step removed, that it is from cultural texts (songs, films, graffiti, etc.)
- 14 So if geography is not seemingly the preferred inter-disciplinary friend of British civilisation studies in the *FJBS*, is the latter’s friend second-generation cultural studies? Here I found some support for the domain having been subject to the cultural turn. I won’t say that references to the likes of Stuart Hall, John Fiske, David Morley, etc.²² abound but they are certainly more in evidence than references to the works of recent theorists in human geography.
- 15 But does a cultural turn defined solely in terms of interest in the *re*-presentations of space in British civilisation leave no space for the consideration of a wide range of socio-spatial practices? In order to address the possibly the wide range of socio-spatial practices scholars of British civilisation studies are engaging with I returned to the *FJBS*, this time using the analytic ‘grid’ provided by David Harvey²³ (which is based on and a “who’s who” of human geography theorists, recent and not so recent: Henri Lefebvre, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Ernst Cassirer and Georg Simmel, to name but a few). The grid works as follows. Down the vertical axis there are three conceptual categories of space. The first addresses material space: the space of experience and of perception open to physical touch and sensation. The second addresses the representation of space: space as conceived and represented. The third addresses spaces of representation: the lived space of sensation, the imagination, emotions and meanings incorporated in our lives and

practices. Along the horizontal axis Harvey mentions more practical orientations towards space, using the categories of: accessibility, appropriation, domination and production. This leads Harvey to suggest a number of “positionings” in the boxes of the grid.

- 16 Using this grid as a heuristic devise, I analysed a sample of journals in order to see what sorts of spatial practices or “positionings” are the subjects of their articles. To illustrate how I did this let me take the example of an article entitled “Bottom-up versus Top-down Campaigning at the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014” written by Peter Lynch and published in 2015²⁴. By having the Scottish Independence Referendum as its subject it falls under: “state and administrative divisions of space”, and “nationalism” and “geopolitics”. However, the article also deals with: campaigning techniques using different media, and can therefore be classified in the box “medium is the message”, and with reference to the attention it gives to places of campaigning “places of popular spectacle” and “advertising”. Indeed, Harvey makes clear that “the four dimensions of spatial practice are not independent of each other”²⁵.

Figure 3: Articles on spatial practices in a sample of volumes of the *FJBS*

	Accessibility and distanciation	Appropriation and use of space	Domination and control of space	Production of space
Material spatial practices (experience)				
Representations of space (perception)				
Spaces of representation (imagination)				

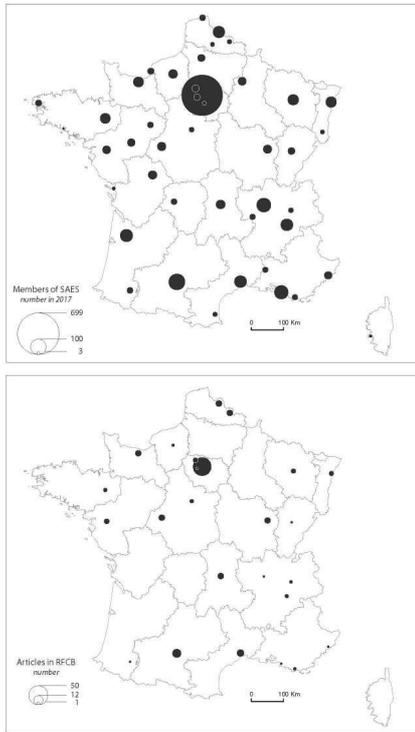
Key: The darker the tone the more a type of spatial practice is addressed in articles published in the *FJBS*.

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON A SAMPLE OF FJBS ARTICLES AND THE HEURISTIC DEVICE OF DAVID HARVEY’S “A ‘GRID’ OF SPATIAL PRACTICES” (SEE FOOTNOTE 23).

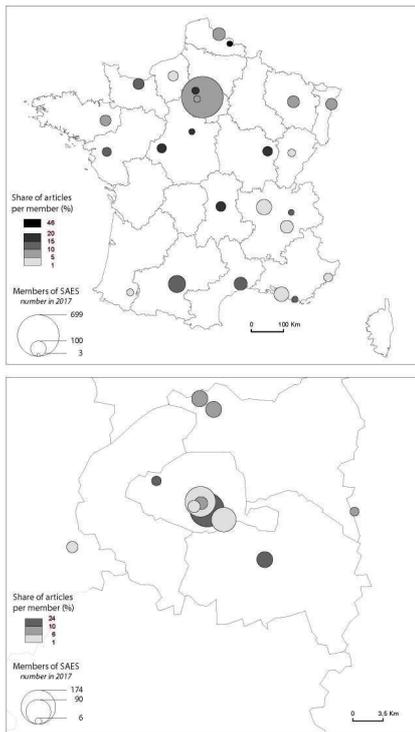
- 17 While there are some grid cells that indicate a degree of specialisation - which given the political science nature of the journal are to be expected (state and administrative divisions of space, and geopolitics) - it is evident from the sample of articles analysed in the *FJBS* (Figure3) that a full range of spatial practices are being addressed by scholars in the domain of British civilisation studies. Figure 3 is not the result of a thorough quantitative assessment of a sample of journals but rather as a preliminary excursion into the depths of research on place and space conducted by scholars of British civilisation studies. The results are based on this author’s subjective reading of articles. Figure 3 is presented as a possible means of continuing discussion on British civilisation studies’ attention to a range of spatial practices.

Conclusions

- 18 This article has tentatively started to examine some of the ways in which researchers in British civilisation studies connect from places across space, the importance they attach to the question of *how* to address place and space, and the range of spatial practices they address in their research. The small number of samples the research is based on limits the “conclusions”, but the samples do suggest that it is overly simplistic to accuse the domain of having a temporal bias. This is not only because research in British civilisation studies engages with a wide range of spatial practices but also because – as recent theorising in human geography has made clear – in order to develop a “geographical imagination” the individual needs to consider both time and space, and to make connections between disciplines.
- 19 David Harvey²⁶ developed the idea of a geographical imagination as a correlate to the C. Wright Mill’s “sociological imagination”, and the latter’s concern with history and biography²⁷. For Harvey, the geographical imagination:
- enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his (sic) own biography, to relate to the spaces he (sic) sees around him (sic), and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the spaces that separate them²⁸.
- 20 While this notion has not gone without criticism, not least for its “masculinist” stance²⁹, it has played a pivotal role in the incorporation of ideas from the social sciences and humanities in human geography. This has in turn made human geography more questioning of notions such as class, “race” and gender.
- 21 Such notions are not new to researchers in British civilisation studies. By engaging with recent theory on space and place in human geography, the domain has much to offer in terms of developing interdisciplinary research. Such an engagement can be in the real places of our university departments, research groups, ministries, international relations, etc.; and in our everyday real places of home, taking a walk around town, developing civic engagement, etc. In essence, it’s about developing a habit of mind, it’s about our ability to develop an awareness of connections between places across space and the power relations involved. For an interdisciplinary domain such as British civilisation studies this should not be unsettling, but that depends on how we – in all of our places of research – take on the task of interdisciplinarity versus subject specialisation.
- 22 **Susan Ball is a Senior Lecturer in British Civilisation at the University of Paris 8. Her main areas of research are land use planning policy, property research, and socio-spatial relations.**
- 23 **APPENDIX**
- 24 **Figures 1: Number of members of the SAES and number of articles in the FJBS.**
- 25 *Source: author, using SAES data and a sample of FJBS journals.*



26 **Figures 2: Number of members of the SAES and share of articles by member. % (no. of articles x 100 / no. of members)**



27 *Source: author, using SAES data and a sample of FJBS journals.*

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NOTES

1. In doing this I have adapted scenarios developed by David Harvey with reference to an imagined gated community in New Jersey. David Harvey 'Space as a Key Word', (Paper for Marx and Philosophy Conference, 29 May 2004, Institute of Education, London, pp.10-11).
2. *Ibid*, p.11.
3. Alexandra-Ionut Petrisor, "Multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinarity. Essential conditions for the sustainable development of human habitat." *Urbanism, Architectura Constructii*, 4:2, 2013.
4. Paul Ramsden, *Learning to Lead in Higher Education* (London, Routledge, 1998) p 257.
5. One example is the criteria used by the Economic and Social Research Council: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/impact-innovation-and-interdisciplinarity/> [20 June 2018]
6. This point applies to the natural and social sciences but is less applicable to the humanities and arts, which have resisted statistical rankings of journal prestige: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/jun/27/journals-index-angers-european-academics> [20 June 2018] The waters are further muddied by the two meanings of "impact": the impact factor of a journal or the impact factor on the community.
7. Derek Gregory *et al.* *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Chichester, Blackwell, 2009). p 707.
8. *Ibid* p 707.
9. Doreen Massey *for space* (London, Sage, 2005).
10. Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991).
11. Raymond Williams *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London, Fontana Paperbacks, 1976).
12. SAES membership data is for 2017. The articles were sampled from the period 2002-2017.
13. This sample is comprised of articles published in the *FJBS* between 1980 and 1993.
14. Derek Gregory *et al.* *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Chichester, Blackwell, 2009, p 708).
15. David Harvey *Social Justice and the City* (London, Edward Arnold, 1973 p 14).
16. David Harvey *op. cit.*
17. Anthony Giddens *Central Problems in Social Theory: action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (London, Macmillan, 1979); *The Constitution of Society: outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984).
18. François Poirier 'Aspects organisationnels de la crise syndicale en Grande-Bretagne' en "Attitudes Face à la Crise en Grande-Bretagne" Ravier et Poirier eds, *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, IV: 3, 1987, pp. 57-82.
19. Edward Soja *Postmodern Geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (London, Verso 1989).
20. Mike Crang & Nigel Thrift (eds.) *Thinking Space* (London, Routledge, 2000, p xi).
21. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: aspects of working class life* (London, Transaction, 1957).
22. On the second generation of the "cultural turn", and particularly with reference to the spatiality – at a national level in Britain – of "cultural studies", refer to Graeme Turner *British Cultural Studies* (London, Routledge, 2003, 3rd edition, pp. 33-68).
23. David Harvey "A 'Grid' of Spatial Practices", *The Condition of Postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, Table 3.1 pp.220-21).
24. Peter Lynch "Bottom-up versus Top-down Campaigning at the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014", *French Review of British Studies*, XX:2 (2015) [Online], XX-2 | 2015, Online since

23 July 2015, connection on 30 September 2016. URL : <http://rfcb.revues.org/405> ; DOI : 10.4000/rfcb.405; viewed 15 July 2018.

25. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p 222).

26. David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*. (London, Edward Arnold, 1973); pp.24-7 (Oxford, Blackwell,1988).

27. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959).

28. Harvey *op. cit.* p 24.

29. Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography : the limits of geographical knowledge*. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993).

ABSTRACTS

This paper starts from two premises. First, interdisciplinary studies are those in which researchers draw on several academic disciplines with different research paradigms in such a way that they are faced with the challenge of crossing subject boundaries in order to create new knowledge and theory. Second, a "spatial turn" has been identified across the field of humanities and social sciences. Based on these premises, British civilisation studies - as an interdisciplinary domain - can be expected to have undergone a spatial turn and to have engaged with the paradigms of human geography on space. Using a sample of articles published in previous issues of the *French Journal of British Studies*, this article points to the socio-spatial dialectic of British civilisation studies in France. It then goes on to examine the terms on which research in British civilisation studies has engaged with human geography over the last 20 years. It is argued that alongside a spatial turn, the cultural turn in both human geography and British civilisation studies has played an important role in framing how researchers have addressed the dialectical relationship between space and society. One consequence of this has been that - rather than viewing space as a structure created by society - researchers all too frequently merely represent space as a context for society. In the conclusions it is argued that British civilisation studies' long standing concern with the dynamic processes of social, economic and political relations may lead researchers to address space in relation to these processes and - in turn - to develop a geographical imagination.

Cet article commence avec deux postulats. Le premier est que les études interdisciplinaires sont celles où les chercheurs s'inspirant de plusieurs disciplines ayant leurs propres paradigmes de recherche doivent trouver les moyens de franchir les frontières disciplinaires. Le second est qu'un tournant spatial (spatial turn) a été identifié tout au long des dernières décennies en sciences humaines et sociales. En se basant sur ces deux postulats, on peut anticiper que les études de civilisation britannique - en tant que domaine interdisciplinaire - ont participé au spatial turn et se sont confrontées aux nouveaux paradigmes de la géographie humaine sur l'espace. En utilisant un corpus d'articles publiés dans la Revue française de civilisation britannique, cet article s'intéresse à la façon dont la dialectique socio-spatiale est utilisée au sein des études de civilisation britannique en France, et sur la manière avec laquelle les études de civilisation britannique ont dialogué avec la géographie humaine au cours des deux dernières décennies. Il apparaît que le cultural turn a joué un rôle beaucoup plus important que le spatial turn à la fois dans le domaine des études de civilisation britannique et de la géographie humaine.

Par conséquent au lieu de voir l'espace comme une structure créée par la société et vice versa, les chercheurs représentent très fréquemment l'espace comme un contexte pour la société. L'orientation de longue date des civilisationist(e)s avec la dynamique des relations sociales, économiques et politiques peut donner l'occasion aux chercheurs en civilisation britannique d'analyser l'espace en relation avec ces processus et – en retour- de développer une imagination géographique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: espace, civilisation britannique, imagination géographique, interdisciplinarité

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