

# Elective affinities or critique to the history of geography without class(es)

**Manoel Fernandes de Sousa Neto**

Universidade de São Paulo. Faculdade de Filosofia,  
Letras e Ciências Humanas. São Paulo.

São Paulo. Brasil

manoelfernandes@usp.br

 0000-0003-1541-3011

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# Elective affinities or critique to the history of geography without class(es)

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## Abstract

This essay raises questions of method on the history of geography's academic literature in Brazil, by proposing a critique of certain historiographical approaches through the concept of elective affinities.

**Keywords:** History of Geography. Elective affinities. Contextual Approach.

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## Afinidades eletivas ou crítica a uma história da geografia sem classe(s)

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### Resumo

O ensaio aborda questões de método relativas à historiografia da história da geografia no Brasil propondo uma crítica a certas abordagens historiográficas a partir do conceito de afinidades eletivas.

**Palavras-chave:** História da Geografia. Afinidades eletivas. Abordagem contextual.

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## Afinidades electivas o crítica a una historia de la geografía sin clase(s)

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### Resumen

El artículo aborda cuestiones de método relacionadas con la historiografía de la historia de la geografía en Brasil, proponiendo una crítica de ciertos enfoques historiográficos a partir del concepto de afinidades electivas.

**Palabras clave:** Historia de la Geografía. Afinidades electivas. Enfoque contextual.

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## Introduction

What follows aims to disentangle certain choices taken over by those who cope with the history of geographical thought in Brazil. They are, somehow, tied into an adamant refusal of Marxist approaches, namely that related to theories of history in this field of intellectual output and counting with important contributions such as those of Walter Benjamin and Michel Löwy.

What is sought is to stress the contextual approach within its given limitations, and to accent breaking-oriented prospects to certain notions of neutrality, a plurality, or historiographical relativism. In understanding how some geographies as social practices were produced, further in countries of colonial past like Brazil, cannot be ignored its inner bound with capitalist society developmental processes.

## Elective affinities

The first time we came across the term *elective affinities* took place when we have read one of Michel Löwy's works on the sociology of knowledge. Loosely translated, *The adventures of Karl Marx against the Baron of Münchhausen* (Löwy, 1987) is the poetic and facetious title of this book.

There we see besides surreal imagery such as that in which the Baron of Münchhausen pulls out of the sinking sand by his own hair himself and the horse on which he is riding, a beautiful exhibition about the many forms of building the history of knowledge. We also learn that historicism can either be swayed by positivism or steered by Marxist dialectic, the latter representing a method that cannot dispose of history.

The *elective affinities* are shown in Michel Löwy's book to conceal their origins in sociology, not in Karl Marx's sociology, but in that proposed by Max Weber. And here starts another binding connection that moves beyond our grasp of method. And further, it concerns many feasible approaches between Weber and Marx.

The fact is that Max Weber (2004) work out in a quite imprecise way along with his work with the notion of *elective affinities*, something noteworthy in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He reinforces striking aspects of how culture's universe and the religious sphere's *dangerous connections* can be subtly and closely linked to the bourgeois *ethos*. By doing so, he also provides some kind of praxis' synthesis in which Puritan spiritual practices cannot be divorced from the saving-money behavior.

There's one delicate and fundamental question of method in the Weberian perspective. He was a critic of capitalism, of course, but he never willed to put it under radical critique, the route to set up its overcoming. But which question of method? One that we can comfortably keep a lukewarm critique of the most baleful evidence of capitalism. And that means not to stress that the effective transformation of what has been taken as an object of criticism is imperative.

Max Weber holds another further contradiction regarding the notion of value judgment in the construction of the knowledge process. This one and its derivation to neutrality also is a movement that skirts around the concept of ideology through the emergence of *elective affinities*. *Pari passu*, negatively explains this promiscuity between the religious sphere and the (re) production of social life far beyond of causal relations.

In a carefree conversation with Alexandrina Luz, she enlightened our lack of perception of that Michel Löwy's beautiful hint about the prowess of Baron of Münchhausen. She respectfully called into question the overused method proposals of Vicent Berloulay (2017) and his "circles of affinity". Thenceforth, she provoked us that it would be our duty to treat affinities better as subjective elections. In other words, those choices we make from *self-determination*, strictly in a *Lukacsian* sense.

Put simply, the question of method is ultimately a question of choice.

The memory of this terminology used by Max Weber and recalled by Alexandrina Luz, the *elective affinity notion*, has vanished quite completely. And for a long time, they just made part of our repertoire of discomfort with our historiographical choices in Geography.

And what has troubled us for so long and is still not entirely resolved?

Let us take up the array of objections and uneasiness over the process of institutionalization and professionalization of geography as a research field in Brazil. And all this malaise seems to inescapably be with us.

### **Between criticism and self-criticism**

We sought to criticize the very process attributed to the history of geographical thought that contributed to the de-historicization of what we conceive as the social history of science in countries with a colonial past such as Brazil. This was the first and valid criticism to be made. The frantic use of this terminology implied disregarding the possibility of other ways of doing science, which is also universal. Therefore, these forms allowed us to link the history of science and scientific disciplines beyond the Eurocentric historiographic canons (Sousa Neto, 2001).

The problem with this discomfort displacement is that we ended up creating another one. But which one? Needed to be said, for a long time we said that we had been doing geographic science in Brazil. But it was indeed six of one and half a dozen of the other. But why? To firmly condemn the maneuvers in which science was developed in those places of colonial past was not good enough. It was necessary to build a genuine geographic science made in tropical lands, unlike the dated narrative that our history-of-science forebears helped to enshrine. It must figure that we needed to search for elements that weren't just tied together with institutionalization, professionalization, or discourse.

The negative hence to appear as a "positivization" of science, that sometimes tricks us abysmally. In the slow-paced but qualified formation here in Brazil, we honed our skills to cope with documents. And even in the face of our early criticism of our predecessors' essayistic nature, it simply came to be a huge mistake.

Today, surely many of us know how to handle archives as we didn't roughly a decade ago. It is not rare to find very solid research repositories, and we are collectively organizing and serializing this documentation. It turns out, meanwhile, that the documents often speak on behalf of us. And worse, they began not only to acquire what Walter Benjamin (1987) called "*cult value*", but also to helplessly lead us to cling to the empiricist ventriloquism of one sophisticated positivist historicism.

To some extent, the historical geography field in Brazil went through institutionalization that produces heralds of the disciplinary past, those self-proclaimed canons of scientific memory, and the truthful keepers of the historiography (that somehow turns to official). It is crystal-clear that the thinking institutionalizing process often implies run the risk to succumb to the institutional conservative bias. And to be “part of the company” alike.

Indeed, the phenomenon engenders that specific specialization of our current division of labor. It also generates a certain appropriation of the field in which the emergence of radical theories is halted. The expectations then become the very past that the documentary evidence tries to represent as a source. In other words, from a given moment no one can sit at the table empty-handed anymore.

But the entire issue involving this documentary effort itself portrays just a minor discontent. For us, the problem concerns the strength that is given to historiography that they assume in the construction of the narratives of a given scientific, academic discipline or knowledge such as geography. Especially because the documents only come into life from the readings we make of them. This is the very point to be made here: how document-handling is being performed between us in past years. And this is undoubtedly our great discontent.

In contradiction, we are undertaking an effort to find out what Geography is whilst engaged in upholding its indispensability. But it actually needs neither a defense nor any compensation as a scientific discipline. To put any scientific discipline on a pedestal, thus promoting scientism, is a critical reductionism of thought. This reality finds its finest expression in that insightful comment by Antonio Carlos Robert Moraes. We are shielding a certain geographical pride, he points out, which also contributes to the proclamation of the end of history.

And what to say about the youngster’s growing concern with the classics? This is both legitimate and worrying since frequently we are too apt to toss the classics out the windows, just to see them come back through our doors. However, the classics are being perilously revisited under the cult of Eurocentrism, something that sells a promise that we can be saved from our delay in this branch of knowledge and its methods. And from this angle, the history of geography in Brazil only flashes into existence because of this emancipatory uninvited outside intervention. From our historiography, we live something that happens, with few exceptions, to almost all the up-to-date geography made in Brazil. We have been targets of one that a blessing recolonization that makes us as much more epistemically globalized as theoretically uncritical.

And we ought to bear in mind that we are not proposing that one should not read those classic references in every single language. Instead, it is recommended for us to read them without assuming poster boys’ or girls’ position. Not least because we do not advocate that classics shall be banished from history. But only that they be placed properly with its limited range, instead of speaking for us.

Discontent comes into light precisely in the inevitable process of loss which stems from our movement towards a critical view of its own. To our astonishment, this is due to the very process of professionalizing the history of geography in Brazil.

Professionalization takes us back to the *elective affinities* issue, in which the choices for particular investigative issues are increasingly trapped by the institutional-interest games. In fact, they are hostages, whether they are liaised to research funding, career-building, or circulation by transnational research networks. And let me be clear, we are not bringing somewhat of a moralist reflection. Instead, we are arguing that the history of geography made in Brazil has entered the postmodern, neoliberal, and globalized science-based businesses. There are few exceptions to this, although the humanities and this research field are not a too promising business.

The professionalization of geography in Brazil may even be a critical key. But only if we lay down the *elective affinities* notion to understand how certain institutional mobility or theoretical and methodological affiliation takes place. Marxism was for some the great wound that *de-geographized* the Brazilian-made geography in the 1980s-90s. Not enough, it was quickly replaced by Deleuzian, Foucauldian, and Boaventurist adherences, with their stoic-evental readings, or in the subjects' open-air funerals, ending with the dawn of the epistemologies of the south.

## Concluding remarks

We're told by Michel Löwy (2014) and Hermano Thiry-Cherques (2004) that alchemists interested in understanding how complex interactions took place between different substances consequently altering their syntheses, gave rise to the notion of *elective affinities*. Of this alchemical curiosity, the search continues to decode the way that certain singular elements are realized in other substances or contexts. And by rule, they are being determined by conditions of their own integration and change. A very similar process to what Hegel would have done in his *Science of Logic*. He proposed that musical notation can only be made by their difference, based on the multiple affinities between different sounds (Thiry-Cherques, 2004, p. 66-67). Music is thus not just a sequence of sounds for its own sake but is the structured expression in sounds of inner subjectivity.

Following the same pathway, the *elective affinities* emerge when we associate the history of geography with the historical geography of capitalism. To make the diverse cultural and discursive forms of geography engage in dialogue and interaction with their own practices of expanding the commodity form as part of everyday life. Our task here is to understand how this intimate relationship was created, and the different capitalist territorial organizations intertwined with the spatial subjectivations of value. The searching for a geographical ethics for an *ethos* of geography. So we can move away from this Weber that we appropriated out of Marx.

Still regarding the *elective affinities* notion, we can remember Goethe's novel of the same name (Benjamin, 2016), and not to forget that if there is chemistry in love, there is also in poetry. Max Weber, the man of methodological rigor in science, went looking for this precious metaphor outside of it. Such metaphor is as precious as that by René Magritte (Arbex, 2007), also termed elective affinities, in which one egg takes up the whole coop, and if we can hop over every analysis that has been done out of the drying oil used by this great Belgian painter, and what we can assert is simply illustrative of our concern over the method in two aspect. The first is that the egg of what was once the critical geography unfortunately hatched into a bird just inside the science-based business cage. The second is that the world that is born in a cage, under the strength of steel, is just the capitalist world that emerges after the fourth part coming. It still

perhaps is waiting for history, under its elective affinities with the revolution, to make geography a bird that inhabits the sky of non-capitalist sociability.

This is a clear-cut issue for us: only by adopting some class perspective, we can envision winds of change, because a neutral history of geography definitely will not take us out of the cage.

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