

BOOK REVIEWS

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE By Bret Wallach. New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2005.

"Muddy boots never won anybody a Nobel". As the author reminds his readers, many of them probably undergraduate students, geography deals with tangibles, and therefore seems to be inferior to other, more sophisticated branches of learning. Moreover: geographers are "supposed to be supremely pedestrian". Self-irony aside, *Understanding the Cultural Landscape* is more than a mere presentation of human geography on a global scale. It is an expression of the author's conviction that geography and the cultural landscape in particular matter. And indeed, beyond the vast information it presents and the insights it offers regarding issues and phenomena, this book succeeds in demonstrating the importance of human geography for understanding not only human habitats and modes of coping with the environment, but the human condition in general.

The book offers a global panorama of human geography that moves from the distant past to the present. It reinvigorates seemingly old-fashioned concepts e.g. diffusion, evolution and, notably, civilization, thereby reestablishing the once intimate relationship between anthropology, history and geography. The organizing principle of the book is civilizations—which the author, well aware of the pejorative associations of the term, defines simply as "societies with cities"—and their evolution rather than states or regions. With this, the evolution of civilization and its culmination in the technological civilization and its discontents, with which we are all familiar, provides an underlying coherence that allows much free room for the topical approach favored by the author. Thus we learn about features of cultural landscapes and the ideologies that sustain them, as well as about foragers and globalization, retail landscapes and modernist architecture, irrigation and transportation, cities and suburbia in North America and abroad, population and global warming, conservation and biodiversity.

Understanding the Cultural landscape is a well written book. This is not a minor thing when the norm requires the use of *academese*—a language that appears to be highly scientific but is often opaque. As the author informs his readers, they will rarely encounter words such as hypothesis, data or model. These are not dirty words, of course, but the author's intention is clear from the outset: to clarify rather than to mystify (and language, especially specialized language, as we all know, is too easily

conducive of mystification....). The arguments are put forward in an almost casual language; and as it becomes clear while reading the book, the simplicity of the prose is mostly very different from over-simplification. It is a strategic asset.

The book is refreshingly provocative in the sense that it attempts to revive an approach that increasingly seemed to be out of date, namely the 'Berkeley School' and the work of Carl Sauer and his students. These studies focused on 'culture regions' or cultural areas and emphasized the relationships between humans and the landscapes they inhabit and shape. This approach or method of geographical inquiry has been eclipsed since the 1980s by the so-called 'cultural turn' that has swept the social sciences and the humanities. The 'cultural turn' in human geography amounted to new thematic emphases and the employment of up-to-date theoretical insights that increasingly synchronized human geography with the concerns and terminology of contemporary social sciences and cultural studies e.g. identity politics and representation. As a result a distinction was made between an 'old' (or traditional) and a 'new' (or contemporary) human geography.

Understanding the Cultural landscape recasts an old tradition in a new mold. This new mold is the understanding that the 'here and now' matter, and that human geography should describe and explain the "world outside today's window"—in contrast to Sauer's aversion to the modern world. As the author notes, "a clever title for this book would be *An Old geography of a new World*; or maybe just *A New Old Geography*".

The author is very clear about where he stands in this disciplinary divide. For him, human geography belongs to the humanities and is not a 'science', even if it is a social science. He does not hide his disdain for the trendy effort to make human geography a 'science' and his aversion towards the new fashion associated with the 'cultural turn' (a term he does not mention). He prefers old-fashioned description and lucid prose to a theory or, heaven forbid, to the production of theory.

The book focuses on the concrete and the tangible. In this it is indeed very different from what is currently considered academically correct or academically prestigious. A prime achievement of this book is the reinvigoration of an old tradition of cultural geography: the notion that geographical facts matter and that a geographical survey of cultural landscapes and their evolution is still relevant for better understanding of the world.

Given the background of the old tradition of cultural geography, the weight given in this book to the geographical present and its emergence is indeed refreshing. However it also entails the danger of presenting a definitive account of controversial issues. This is especially important since this book is designed to serve as a textbook, and in this capacity may well be the only source of information for undergraduate students.

The author is to be commended for his balanced analysis of the phenomenon known as 'global warming'. After a careful discussion of the politics of 'global warming' the author's adds a warning. "It is easy to exaggerate here". The assertion

that "things aren't so simple" is well advised in a case of a heated debate that is saturated with horror scenarios that often assume eschatological dimensions.

In other cases, however, the author eschews the distinction that "things aren't so simple". A case in point is contemporary Islamic radicalism. The author does not subscribe to the notion of a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West, though he does not specifically mention Huntington by name. His disagreement with current American policies is also clear, though he is careful not to be too specific. The sentence "Instead of encouraging secular education, however, we offer a War on Terrorism and, as a side dish, more getting and spending" is very revealing. The reader is only left to wonder how radical Islamists will view "encouraging secular education". Here I beg to differ and deeply doubt the alternative on offer, especially since it appears that for Islamists secularization is a threat rather than a blessing, the problem rather than the solution. I am doubtful that this strategy will enhance their friendliness towards the west...

The author's dislike for the so-called 'American unilateralism' is also insinuated, but the fact that Europe and Russia also have vested interests in the global quest for power is probably not worth mentioning. Unfortunately the author does not consider the European Community—a major player on the global arena—worthy of an analysis that unmasks the interests that underlie its creation. Unfortunately, the book was printed before the French and Dutch rejected the projected EU constitution, thereby leaving this super-state in limbo, at least for the near future.

Since I am not an expert on Vietnam or South America I can not judge the value of the author's accounts and I am in no position to expose ideological bias, if indeed such exists. Things are very different with Israel and the Palestinians. Unfortunately here I am compelled to determine that the author's account is not only lacking in relevant information, but is also distinctly partisan. The author's acquaintance with Israel/Palestine seems to be first hand; from the text it is to be inferred that he toured the area, though most of his observations concern the Palestinians. Where his sympathies are is also clear. We read about Arab Palestinians agricultural-extension officers who "can recite Wordsworth by the pound" (the author seems to like Wordsworth, whom he quotes twice elsewhere); but the only Israeli to be quoted is Israel Defense Forces' Chief of Staff, who apparently does not have the habit of impressing visitors by reciting Wordsworth.

I was fascinated by the author's account of the Israel/Palestine conflict. His disagreement with American support of Israel is easily inferred. Readers unfamiliar with this conflict will learn that the conflict actually began in 1967, when Israel conquered the Palestinian areas. The 1990s—the years of the Oslo Accord—are summed up in terms of a simple juxtaposition: The Palestinian invested money in development (some will doubt this assertion), the Israelis—assisted by loan guarantees from the US government—were busy in investing in settlements. The author seems to take the side of the Palestinians, which he of course is entitled to do, yet he presents it in the form of an objective account, which makes it problematic.

For me, as an Israeli, the way he described the effect of the second Intifada on Israel was both shocking and revealing. After mentioning the drop in tourism, he writes: "Those numbers are terrible, but they pale alongside the silent fears that Israelis repress every time they put one of their children on a bus". Why not spell out the simple word "terrorism"? Maybe because it would undermine the picture the author was keen on conveying to his readers. Ironically in the introduction the author dismisses those who think that "words are the only reality".

The presentation of the Israel/Palestine conflict reveals a fundamental shortcoming of an approach that favors 'facts' and "factual density": the extent to which 'facts' can not be divorced from pre-conceived opinions. Views and points of view are entwined. The author's surprise to discover British military cemeteries in Jerusalem and Khartoum—"There are military cemeteries in unexpected places"—is instructive. It tells us that a global view is always paired with a parochial perspective. It can not be otherwise, no matter how noble the intentions are.

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URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN CHINA, Edited by Aimin Chen, Gordon G. Liu and Kevin H. Zhang. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004.

Urban Transformation in China is a collection of 15 articles, 13 of which were selected from 90 papers originally presented at the international conference on Urbanization in China: Challenges and Strategies of Growth and Development organized by the Chinese Economists Society and held in Xiamen, China, in June, 2001. The other two papers were included as they compliment those that were presented at the conference. The papers from the conference include a topical identifier based on the *Journal of Economic Literature* Classification System. There is a preface by D. Gale Johnson, who died before this volume appeared, and an introduction by the three editors who while summarizing the content and commonalities of the papers make no attempt to resolve apparent contradictions between papers regarding the sources of urban growth. The papers are grouped according to four major themes Characteristics of China's Urbanization, Changing Urban Population, Urban Spatial Structures, and Urban Growth and Productivity. All of the papers are relatively short, averaging about 16 printed pages.

It appears that these essays are intended to be read independently of one another, since there is a degree of sameness that permeates virtually all the articles. For example, we are repeatedly told that China's experience with modern urbanization is both late and unique; we are reminded of the limitations and weaknesses of the demographic and economic data being used in the analyses; the same data sources are reviewed and critiqued time and again; regression is the mandatory statistical