Book Reviews


Fieldwork Dilemmas is a collection of essays from 10 anthropologists’ experiences in postsocialist eastern Europe. The primary focus is not to recount the results of their ethnographic research, but to detail the many problems and dangers they encountered in conducting the research in communities undergoing tremendous change in almost every facet of life. Research reports from Armenia, Macedonia, Serbia, eastern Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Siberia, Uzbekistan, and Bulgaria are included into three collections.

Part One is entitled “Fieldwork in Dis-integrating and Reintegrating Nations and States” and includes three essays. These essays deal with conflicts of redefinitions of societies and cultures in the postsocialist world that result from the rebuilding of nations and states, and power relationships. Ethnographers in such situations are often forced to make difficult choices among neutrality, partisanship, academic integrity, and loyalty to their new friends. One of the more salient aspects of such research is that the research itself, when published, often becomes part of the conflict process.

Part Two is entitled “Fieldworkers in the Postsocialist Field” and includes four essays. This is probably the weakest part of the book. The essays deal with relationships, the position of the ethnographer, and redefinitions. However, there seems to be little here that is not covered more adequately, and clearly, in the other sections. A tremendous amount of time in these four essays is spent discussing ideology, and not fieldwork or ethnography.

Part Three, entitled “Negotiating Personal Relationships in the Postsocialist Field” includes three essays. This is, by far, the most valuable section of the book. This section tells us of some of the personal relationships developed by the ethnographers in the field and the dilemmas they faced. This is the only section of the book that actually includes salient exam-
ples from the field of the difficulties faced by the researchers, and the dissonance they felt in resolving these predicaments.

Overall, there is quite a bit of valuable information in Fieldwork Dilemmas. I believe many of the problems the authors faced in the postsocialist field are not necessarily postsocialist in nature, but it is refreshing to see ethnographers address these sorts of problems. Too often, it seems, ethnographers, and other social scientists, try to convince us, and themselves, that they are always being objective when they are, quite obviously, not. In fact, in several cases in the essays in this collection, the authors openly admit, among other things, to being raised in a home in which religion was unimportant, to being liberal, and to having a “drachma of Marxist blood.” While there is nothing wrong with these ideologies, it is refreshing to see social scientists admit to them and, more importantly, to see them attempt to address their fieldwork vis-à-vis these ideologies.

I enjoyed reading parts of this book, especially Part Three, but found other parts not especially satisfying, especially Part Two. Overall, however, I found Fieldwork Dilemmas to be valuable and instructive and would have no problem recommending it to others. Cultural geographers often face the same dilemmas faced by the ethnographers (anthropologists) here, thus I believe this would be of value. I recommend this collection to any social scientist concerned with such research dilemmas.

James D. Lowry, Jr.
Stephen F. Austin State University


The Coming Age of Scarcity is a collection of essays examining the relationship between population growth and resource depletion and genocide (and the collapse of our civilization!). The authors immediately jump into a fatalistic doomsday scenario. The Foreword, by John K. Roth, has the essence of strong anticapitalism bias. For example, Roth states “the great transformation from agricultural to . . . industrial societies has always been on the back of peasants” (4), refers to Eastern Europe as “once a highly self-sufficient economic and political system” (13), and states “markets, if left to themselves, cannot factor in long-term scarcity” (14). My objections are to the use of “always,” to the incorrect reference to Eastern Europe as self-sufficient, and to the fact that we’ve never left markets truly to themselves to determine whether or not they can, in fact, factor in long-term scarcity. Chapter One, the introduction written by the editors, includes such statements as “(T)he genocides of the twentieth century have unveiled the true heart of humanity” (16). I have greater faith in my fellow humans than do the editors (and many of their contributors).

Part One consists of two chapters. In the first, John B. Cobb, Jr., states that Cuba, to be admitted to the new global trading system, would have to “abandon its socialist experiment and return to the capitalism from which it had freed itself” (34) and “the Cuban people may decide they prefer subservience to the United States to hunger” (34–35). There are, literally, boatloads of Cubans who seem to prefer subservience to the United States. The latter chapter is no better in that Chris H. Lewis makes statements such as: after our global civilization collapses (which is a given and is necessary) “human societies and civilizations will continue to exist and develop on a smaller, regional scale. Yes, such civilizations will be violent, corrupt, and often cruel, but in the end, less so than our current global industrial civilization (59). How, I wonder, does he know they will be less violent, corrupt, and cruel? It is hard to even want to sort out fact from fiction in chapters such as these.

At this point, I was ready to stop reading. Luckily I read on. Part Two was far less extremist. This section is comprised of six chapters, two of which I found to be well written and factual. Virginia Aber-
nethy’s chapter, “Defining the New American Community” and Craig Dilworth’s chapter, “The Vicious Circle Principle” are far more practical and realistic in their approach to the problem and potential solutions. I also, mostly, liked Kurt Finsterbusch’s chapter, “The Social Impact of Scarcity” because he, unlike most of the other contributors, attempts to present both sides of the debate. In fact, Finsterbusch, is the first, and only, to mention the theories of Julian Simon (and does so in an unbiased manner). What I found troubling in this chapter is his proposal, which is shared by others, that minimum and maximum limits on income be set to deal with scarcity of resources and inequality. If we ever wish to defeat the human soul and rid ourselves of ambition and individuality we should do just that. Bill Gates puts far more food on the table than does any Marxist! Finally, the last chapter of this section, written by Joseph A. Tainter and entitled “Competition, Expansion, and Reaction,” is also fairly well balanced in its approach to the problem and solutions. The authors of the earlier chapters should have read “a morally neutral approach to history must be adopted or else dialogue reduces to accusations and defensiveness” (190).

The last section is comprised of five chapters, most of which are better than those in the first section but not as sound as those in the second. The lone exception is Leon Rappoport’s “Scarcity, Genocide, and the Postmodern Individual.” It would be fitting to deconstruct the chapter, however I will simply say that in it Rappoport liberally exposes his views on situational morality vis-à-vis MTV. This I can do without.

In the end I did not dislike the book as much as I initially feared I would. If nothing else it is thought provoking about an important global problem. I would not hesitate to use the chapters from the second section in class, but I would never subject my students to the first section. Overall, there is enough quality, balanced, material here to make this a somewhat worthwhile investment.

James D. Lowry, Jr.
Stephen F. Austin State University

Human Impact on Ancient Environments.

Having just taught conservation of natural resources to a small group of students over the summer, and just gearing up to teach it again in the fall, current environmental problems were foremost in my mind as I picked up Human Impact on Ancient Environments. Although my research background includes the Mayan culture area of MesoAmerica (via an interdisciplinary mix of geographers, archaeologists, and others) and I discuss their maladaptive environmental strategies in class, I offer them only briefly as an example of population growth and its relationship to environmental damage. My focus is on the present. In Human Impact Redman focuses on the past, but with the purpose of providing “an empirical basis for interpreting the past and to highlight the key relationships and processes involved in human-environment interactions” (195). The primary tool employed is the case study.

After three introductory chapters, which provide an excellent review of (or introduction to) the study of the environment, Redman has set the stage for the case studies. He begins by exploring Western (primarily Judeo-Christian, Greek, and Roman), non-Western (primarily Chinese), and contemporary (e.g., George Perkins Marsh, Carl Sauer) attitudes toward the environment. From there the reader is introduced to concepts from ecology, systems theory, human decision-making, and the coevolutionary perspective.

Of the many developments of human history and culture, the prehistoric loss of habitat and biodiversity, the impact of agrarian systems, the growth of world urbanism, and the forces that grew with societal evolution (centralized control, intensification of food production, etc.) are the focus of Redman’s analysis. This analysis examines the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, MesoAmerica, the American Southwest, and Polynesia. In every case Redman...
carefully examines the impact on the environment by the culture group and the impact on the culture group by the environment.

The two most important points Redman believes are essential for effective environmental decision-making are that there is no absolute when referring to the natural state of the environment and any definition of an ideal, or best, environment is a cultural construct. With respect to the first point, the environment is in a constant state of flux, thus any “natural” environment we seek to recreate is, by definition, unnatural if we attempt to sustain it. The second point is very simple, especially to cultural geographers. Wilderness, like everything else, varies from culture to culture.

One can not be a geographer and not find this book indispensable. Redman, in a truly interdisciplinary work, has shown he is more than familiar with the work of geographers. In fact, it is difficult to believe he is not a geographer. In addition, Redman addresses the environment without an alarmist agenda. Indeed, it is refreshing to see the only reference to Paul Ehrlich in the entire book make reference to his work on butterflies. All too often environmentalists, like Ehrlich, do more damage to the environmental movement with their alarmism and doomsday prophecies. Redman, on the other hand, with Human Impact has done a great service to the environmental movement by showing very clearly that what we do has an impact and that we should pay attention to the results of our actions on the environment.

I found the book highly readable, highly informative, and highly useful. I can’t recommend this book for all cultural geographers, nor can I recommend it to all geographers, I can only recommend this book in good conscience if I recommend it to all who care (and even to those who don’t) about the human impact on the environment, both past and present.

James D. Lowry, Jr.
Stephen F. Austin State University
THE GEOGRAPHICAL BULLETIN

The Geographical Bulletin is published semi-annually (May and November) by the Geography honor society Gamma Theta Upsilon. It is available by subscription to students for $4.00 (U.S.) and to other individuals and institutions $10.00 (U.S.). The quoted rates are for an annual subscription and include postage and handling. An authorized purchase order, personal or cashiers check, or money order in U.S. funds must accompany your subscription.

The Geographical Bulletin began publication in 1970. A complete 25-year cumulative bibliographic index, by author is printed in Volume 38, Number 1 (May, 1996). While supplies remain, back issues from 1970 through the present are available for $2.00 per issue.

Please make checks payable to The Geographical Bulletin and mail to:

Prof. C. Nicholas Raphael
The Geographical Bulletin
Department of Geography and Geology
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
Telephone: (734) 487-8591
Fax: (734) 487-6979

Moving?

Don’t leave Geographical Bulletin and GTU behind! To ensure you continue to receive the Bulletin and other mail, please send or fax us your old and new address:

Dr. C. Nicholas Raphael
The Geographical Bulletin
Department of Geography and Geology
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
Fax: (734) 487-6979

Please allow GTU 90 days to process changes.