



SPECIAL BOOK REVIEW

Geography Inside Out: Space, Place, and Society. RICHARD SYMANSKI (foreword by Peter Gould). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002. Pp. xxii + 277, photos, appendix, notes, illustrations, index. ISBN 0815607326.

This book evaluates writings of a number of geographers in an attempt to convey Richard Symanski's thoughts about recent scholarship in the discipline as practiced in the United States. The hyperspecialization and sometimes laziness that have left many geographers poorly read in their own discipline do not apply to this book. On another plane, it seeks to reclaim the empirical as the heart of geography over the armchair theoreticians who spin their ideas without much specificity of place or people. This tome also serves as a corrective to the cant of academic life that has elevated political correctness to normative behavior and encouraged self-serving departmental claims to putative excellence. Most importantly, this bold effort is intended to get geographical practitioners to think critically and relentlessly. Symanski may be right that the small size of the discipline and the incestuous nature of its professional and social milieu have made strong criticism of geographical practice unwelcome. It can be argued that he has merely appeared in print on topics that are the subject of innumerable freewheeling gossipy exchanges over beer. By pulling into his narrational orbit some of the social posturing, jealousy, rancor, egotism, egoism, and prevarication as it is lived in academic life, he introduces the reality of fragile egos and personal motives in a way rarely seen up to now in published form.

Symanski's method of critique is that of a tinker or *bricoleur*. By questioning assertions or pointing out the fuzziness in a person's prose or her feet of clay, the author uses ostensible flaws to undermine the validity of the essay written or the entire research corpus achieved by a particular scholar. The larger aim in divesting an emperor of his clothes is to make sweeping indictments of the whole field of geography as it is mirrored in its practitioners. About a dozen high-flying American geographers find their wings snagged in Symanski's spider web. Building on his decades-old criticism of a former Syracuse professor, we are told that Donald Meinig's hyperbole has resulted in "mediocre narrative history." Paul Starrs' book, which effectively brings into relief ranching as a *genre de vie* of the American West, becomes in Symanski's discussion a one-sided tirade about Starr's supposed bias toward the private rancher's use of public lands. Edward Soja gets attention for his audacity to follow his own intellectual directions that Symanski does not understand.

Yi-Fu Tuan, Nicholas Entriken, and Michael Curry are reproached for their "soft and irrelevant philosophy" who would not know how to do fieldwork if their lives depended on it. Robert Sack is called to task for platitudes about place and James Duncan for his "theoretical claptrap" and guilt-infused confessions of an academic colonialist. Peirce Lewis' description of New Orleans is totally inad-

equate to Symanski. Ideologues Richard Walker and Don Mitchell get knocked on the head for their one-tracked Marxist obsessions. A group of feminists, among them Cindi Katz, Audrey Kobayashi, and Kim England, are chided for the vacuousness of their gendered analyses. And so it goes, like pins in a bowling alley: accomplished scholars set up to be knocked down and all undoubtedly dismayed at being tricked. Side comments in these chapters imply that Symanski's own vaunted standards of scholarships go beyond those practiced by these and other individuals. Unfortunately no example of what the author considers good scholarship and good writing is rigorously assessed, leaving his harsh judgments to teeter between candor and slander with no comparative context. Most of these incursions into textual criticism impute unfounded motives to people that amount to suppositions on his part.

Other worthies of our discipline come under his ungracious purview, among them Carville Earle and Stanley Brunn as editors and Carl Sauer as mentor. Although name-calling offers nothing of intellectual value, Symanski is unable to resist the shallow trap. If Mr. Sauer was a "Teutonic bully", it immediately begs the question of what that makes Symanski—a "Polish jerk"? Rather than dwelling on how Mr. Sauer treated his Ph.D. student Henry Bruman—a story that has already been told elsewhere—a fresh critique of the Sauerian tradition would have been more to the point. To prop up his prejudices in this regard, Symanski deftly lifts phrases out of context in books of David Stoddart and myself. My sole reason for writing this review is to correct the malicious impression in Symanski's writing that I share his opprobrious opinion of Mr. Sauer. Nothing could be farther from the truth. His misrepresentation on that point was in keeping with the tenor of this book that distorts evidence, lays verbal traps, and assumes dark or hidden purpose.

Two geographers mentioned in this volume are safe from his flying arrows, the late Peter Gould, and himself. The book's forward and introduction place Gould as Symanski's soulmate in their shared fondness for the fine art of vituperation. Gould is also described as Symanski's chief patron in persuading from his deathbed the Syracuse University Press to publish his manuscript. Given this heavy baggage leded down with heavy debt, it is not surprising that Symanski was not able to muster a similar critique of the sort with which he surveyed the geographers mentioned above. Instead, D. Stoddart (*Geographical Review*, 2000, p. 238-247) provides an incisive evaluation of Gould's work, which also stands as a model of how scholars deserve to be appraised in an even-handed way. Stoddart's consideration of Gould's strengths and weaknesses without personal grandstanding highlights the intellectual failure of Symanski's manic-driven capsules.

More than half of this volume is taken up with the author a.k.a. 'Korski', foaming, snapping, and barking his way across the badlands of scholarship like a rabid coyote. We read about his career change, family, travels, books, and professional tribulations that focus on the mean things that people have purportedly done to him. All eight pictures in the book are of him at various life stages and, to those attentive to the inner life, they provide clues. Little Richie's beatific expression on his first communion portrait shows him praying hard on his beads, perhaps in the hope of becoming someone important when he grows up. He has by

now achieved a certain notoriety in the narrow circles in which he has moved, but, although now past 60, he has not grown up. Like an adolescent whose hormones rage, Symanski comes across in this exercise as compulsive, prurient, rebellious, boastful, and vengeful. The *ressentiment* that Nietzsche wrote about with such perspicacity is the same emotion that galvanized Symanski to spend the hundreds of hours required to write his book but which also imprisoned his judgments. Cruel father, narrow-minded priest, crooked bosses at the accounting firm before he turned to geography, cowardly professors, spineless editors, lazy field assistants, jealous ex-colleagues and vindictive reviewers all come in for a piece of his indefatigable umbrage and gratuitous retribution. A subtext is that some of them sidetracked his promising career as one of the country's eminent geographers.

Readers might accept this book with more equanimity if Symanski had been as reproving of himself as he was of others. He also reveals little about his transformation from a self-righteous young quantifier who waylaid presenters not up to speed in the numbers game. At some early point, he presaged the collapse of the quantitative movement and, like a rat leaving a sinking ship, devoted himself to the shadow side of a disparate range of off-beat topics: the failed settlement of European Jews improbably stuck in the boondocks of Hispaniola; the louche socioeconomics of Nevada brothels; the mercenary behavior of Hondurans who capitalized on the flow of international aid relief in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. Two semi-popular geographical travel narratives about Australia are noteworthy for their racy dialogue, Darwinian argumentation, and shameless promotion of Professor N. Burley as a great avian biologist. She happens to be his wife to whom he partly owes his senior lecturer post (not "professor" as misstated on p.viii of the book) in the same Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department at the University of California, Irvine. A common thread of Symanski's diverse publications that comes through in this book under review is the author's eagerness to pile up one value judgment on top of another.

The reader who stays with this "opus hocus" under review must endure a heavy dose of poor Richard the victim. A banal sketch of locking horns with erstwhile departmental colleagues at a Midwestern university will bore most readers. One wonders, but only for a second, how his tale of these trivial events differs from those of the pseudonymous individuals he maligned. Careerist fiascos get prominent attention. His self-portrayal as the wronged recipient of departmental intrigue at the University of Texas at Austin is reported as having cost him the tenure he claims to have so richly deserved. On the basis of Symanski's thin contributions (then and now) to Latin Americanist geography for which he was hired, an impartial reader concerned with high scholarly standards might agree that Texas indeed made the right decision. Cavorting with foxy hookers in Havana and Tijuana scarcely translates into special insight about the geography of Latin America. Recounted here in aggrieved detail is the rebuff to his 1981 book on the geography of prostitution, a research idea he has attributed to Preston James. Some geographers at that time apparently could not fathom the crash landing of such an ostensibly disreputable topic into their cherished garden of knowledge. Symanski was ahead of his time as a practicing geographer dealing

with this kind of topic. Instead of transcending the pettiness of that episode, he maintains his vendetta against those who allegedly thwarted the distribution of that work to the profession. Although broadsides, salvos and obloquy are dished out with gusto throughout the volume, being on the receiving end of criticism is not at all to the author's liking. Prof. R. Doughty, who had prepared a reticent (though very much on target) review of Symanski's book *Blackhearts*, is accused of being "revengeful." In a ludicrous effort to play the victim, Symanski rebukes Robert Sack by alleging that the latter's strenuously negative evaluation of the manuscript that became this book infringed on Symanski's "first amendment rights" to have it published.

To put this acerbic tractate into perspective requires the reader to understand its author. Unless that is done, a review of this book is shorn of any larger philosophical meaning. Richard Symanski is a manifestation of a larger configuration known as the trickster, who, in Jungian terms, forms one of the universal archetypes of the human psyche. This shadow figure, who characteristically refuses to play by the rules, brings to the surface the underside of dominant values. A common subterfuge is to assume a double identity as a way to deflect and confuse. In North American Indian mythology, the trickster takes on the guise of a coyote or a crow; in modern American folklore, the trickster par excellence is the traveling salesman whose appetites drive his wanderings. In this archetype, outlandish ploys and sometimes-crude language are used to violate taboos of the social order. In the process, certain basic truths are revealed with which society does not want to deal. The ensuing chaos forces those under attack to confront their storehouse of norms internalized since childhood. Symanski is one of those scientists who fit the trickster mode rather than that of a "hero of knowing" [J. Valsiner, "Buggers in the field: researchers as tricksters in the universe of social sciences," *Culture & Psychology*, Vol. 8(4), p. 489-495].

Symanski's monolithic one-sided judgments about individual scholars, scholarly practice, and the discipline of geography actually tell us most about his own psychological contour. Fulsome self-reference guarantees that the focus of this book is not on "geography inside out" but on "Symanski outside in": the marginalized combatant and self-described untouchable ready to do battle. Like Hermes the tricksterish figure of ancient Greek myth, he is wily, deceptive, and infuriating. He delights in profaning the accepted scholarly assessments about the discipline. He uses false candor in his determination to *épater le bourgeois*, settle old scores, and make the reader's blood pressure rise. Another device is allegory, featuring real geographers given pseudonyms but presumably identifiable to the cognoscenti, as a way of parodying Marxist geography's theater of the absurd. His double identity as "Korski" is another classic schizophrenic gambit of the archetype. Like the late Carlos Castaneda, Don Ricardo del Korski is a coyote chasing his own tale/tail through life. If books represent a form of construction and inspiration, Symanski's chthonian edifice, glued together with the ooze of egotism and resentment, would have most appropriately been dedicated to the dream god Hermes.

In its postmodernist hermeneutical stance, this book symbolizes the multivalence, ambiguities, and perversities of knowledge realms and of life. No bor-

ders are sacrosanct. This particular exercise of a critical but pedomorphic mind leads one to appreciate the delicate balance between creativity and destructiveness. The book is also instructive in showing why a particular reflexive approach to knowledge fails. Reflexivity cannot achieve its considerable potential in scholarship unless the author has the self-knowledge to discern his own *modus operandi* and compulsions. Little between these two hard covers suggests the author is capable of enough introspection to be conscious of his own personal psychology. This book is much less about geography or geographers than it is about the three shadowy figures of Oedipus, Eros, and Narcissus, who lurk in nearly every sentence of Symanski's prose.

By not demanding a higher level of perspicacity on the part of the author, the Syracuse University Press as ultimate gatekeeper bears part of the responsibility for foisting this abominable screed on a discipline that already has too much to read. Blinded by an assumption that a gossipy exposé would stand out among its list of imprints and bring them the attention they crave, this publishing organization in upstate New York has unleashed a puerile work bereft of the sound philosophical and psychological base that would have rescued it as a useful footnote in the history of geography. Instead, this publication stands as an autistic exhibit of how distorted deconstructional dabbling can be in the hands of a psychotic.

Yet, in spite of all protestations, this self-serving parable of the anti-establishment does contain a kernel of social utility. It forces the reader to reflect on the self-aggrandizement of academic life and the fetish of publication. When a scholar gains attention, he or she should expect to be eventually brought down to size: it happens to the best of them sooner or later. It also opens a realization that a space should be reserved for individuals whose sacred function is to topple what prevails and to reveal and, temporarily at least, disrupt the very things on which a subculture such as the discipline of geography is based. The author as trickster may be seen as a creative mediator between an orderly, reasonably predictable discipline and unorderly, unorthodox ideas. In this particular case, we also get the grand paradox: by engaging in deconstruction without the requisite self-knowledge, the book actually affirms many of the values so indignantly contested.

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