

***Handbook on the Geographies of Power*, edited by Mat Coleman and John Agnew, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2018, ISBN 978 1 78536 563 8, viii + 423 pp., £170**

Forthcoming in *Geographical Research*

In 1976 Michel Foucault was interviewed by the French Geography journal *Hérodote*. That interview, entitled “Questions on Geography”, has become well known. Two issues later, Foucault sent some questions to the journal, which were answered by a number of Geographers. Foucault suggested that ‘it seems to me that you link the analysis of space or of spaces less to production and to “resources” than to the exercise of power’. He then asked: ‘Could you outline what you understand by power?’

In the *Handbook on the Geographies of Power*, edited by Mat Coleman and John Agnew, we have as rich a set of answers as might be desired. The book is divided into four main sections, after an introduction to the editors. The sections are entitled “Bodies”, “Economy”, “Energy and Environment”, and “Warfare”, each preceded by a short introduction by one of the editors. It is therefore immediately obvious that the book does not approach the question of the relation of geography and power either regionally, by subdiscipline or settlement type, or via some of Geography’s obvious keywords—space, place, territory, scale, network, landscape, and so on. Rather than attempt to discuss all 24 chapters I will instead make some comments about each section, and then conclude with some more general thoughts.

In the Introduction, the editors suggest that while ‘power-as-domination is hardly redundant’, there are many other ways in which power operates (p.4). They rightly note the way that power is no longer seen as just a resource or a property, but as an ‘agentic medium’ (p.4), differentiated in its deployment across space as well as through the relation between actors and things. They are also clear that while political geographers have been at the forefront of thinking about the relation between power and space, they neither exhaust the work done on this theme, nor have always conceptualised the relation in ways that are helpful. Feminist work has not only challenged the gendered dimensions of earlier work, but also been part of a wider movement challenging state-centrism. Following critical realism, they then express a scepticism toward grand theoretical constructs, and pluralise power to look at powers. I wondered why this plural did not make it into the collection’s title, since it so clearly expresses the purpose and scope of the study, although it may have been too inelegant. Unsurprisingly, Foucault is a significant figure in their opening reflections, and in the chapters that follow, but so too is Henri Lefebvre, who they suggest needs to be read differently and dialectically, rather than too quickly in a ‘coherent, social science -y’ way (p.13). Their approach is to read Lefebvre through the *Critique of Everyday Life*, rather than just *The Production of Space*, though it is strange that his more explicitly political writings on space are not engaged. There are many more themes in this rich outline, which both criticises past-practice and praises recent innovations, as well as opens up themes to be explored in subsequent chapters.

Placing the section on “Bodies” right at the start immediately signals the book’s departure from some of the more traditional approaches. The intimate spaces of the corporeal mark out

the distinctiveness of the approach here, developing themes from feminist, cultural and humanist geographies, themselves building on work across the humanities and social sciences. Themes in this section include ethnography, sexuality, race, imprisonment, and bestiality—the latter through Claire Rasmussen and Michael Brown’s examination of the responses to a 2005 piece they wrote on this topic. Revisiting this piece, and the ways it has been engaged with, or not, also opens up the affective registers of laughter, silence, disgust, and discomfort.

In “Economy”, contributors discuss production and consumption, financial markets, business corporations, and elites, along with issues of justice, labour, and value. In themselves, these topics are perhaps unsurprising, and would feature in most surveys of economic geography or even more mainstream studies of political economy. But the emphasis on the geographies of these topics would be productively disruptive for the latter, and the focus on power would be a more fundamental challenge. Indeed, Agnew suggests that ‘one of the stranger features of modern social science is how much power is neglected in most brands of economic theory’ (p.119). Here, I found Vinay Gidwani’s chapter on informal labour and the discussion of Nancy Fraser’s work by Kendra Strauss particularly intriguing. The former forces us to recognise that so much political economy goes on in spaces outside the formal structures of the market and state, while the latter opens up significant questions of justice, and shows the value of Fraser’s political theory for debates about gender, childcare, and race.

“Energy and Environment” takes the book further than many political geography primers, in that it begins to think seriously about the relation between human and physical geography. Indeed, there is a further critique of Lefebvre in Coleman’s introduction to this part, in which Lefebvre’s emphasis on the *social* production of space is seen as too limiting. The chapters here, Coleman suggests, are attempts ‘to loosen or slacken this social take on how space is about power, and vice versa’ (p.197). In this section, I was particularly interested in Kathryn Yusoff’s development of Elizabeth Grosz’s notion of “geopower”, and her reading of the work of Elizabeth Povinelli, as a means of taking into account more than life—the *geos* as well as the *bios*. There are also chapters here about water as a way of unsettling static, dry understandings of space and power, and about the ways which object-oriented ideas, the work of Giorgio Agamben, and debates about materiality and the non-human can be useful in geographical debates.

“Warfare” is, in some respects, the most natural theme of this book. The relation between war and space is crucial—it is both the location of struggle and conquest is often its explicit aim. Political Geographers have long looked at this question, although the uses and abuses of geopolitical thought led to a long period where the focus was turned elsewhere. These topics have returned in the work of critical geopolitics in the 1990s and beyond, feminist approaches to war and the large amount of geographical work on the Bush-era “war on terror” and its contemporary continuations. Yet even here the chapters treat themes that have been somewhat neglected elsewhere, considering civilians, human shields, settler colonialism, the use of military contractors, and humanitarian aid, as well as imperialism, migration, cartography, and boundaries.

The final chapter on “Power’s Outsides” is written by the editors. It serves as a conclusion to the volume as a whole, and also opens up some new perspectives. One of the most significant of these perspectives relates to the insistence on spaces in the plural, paralleling the Introduction’s suggestion of powers. Structurally neat, this discussion—with its important critique of the distinctions often made between absolute, relative, and relational space—might have worked better in the book’s Introduction. The book as a whole, therefore, has some important theoretical claims, as well as many detailed empirical analyses. But here and there, especially in the editorial material, there is a critique of theorisations both within geography and in the wider literature. Agnew and Coleman stress the value of a critical realist approach, though this position does not seem to be shared by many of their contributors. The stakes of their critique are not always clear, as most of those explicitly named are the dead, white, male theorists of our reading lists, and this challenge seems in tension with work that develops theorisations and puts them to work, or develops those theories from empirical studies, both of which are found in this collection.

In conclusion, the book has several remarkable chapters, and a truly impressive list of contributors. Almost all are based in Geography departments or schools, with a few from Political Science, Environment, Law, Economics, and Urban Studies. The remit of the book clearly speaks beyond the narrowly conceived notion of geography as a discipline. The vast majority of the authors are based in the United States, with a good number from the United Kingdom, and a few voices from Canada, The Netherlands, Ireland, and Italy. The global reach of the topics, and the geographies of background and training of its contributors, however, are broader than this. The book does cover a lot of ground, much of it novel, even if those familiar with these debates will see the development of themes its authors have treated elsewhere. The chapters are not surveys of work in specific areas, but cutting-edge research and much the better for it. But why are these pieces in a collection such as this, rather than smaller edited collections or journals? I therefore cannot end this review without a comment on the price, and the business model of these kind of handbooks, companions, guides, and so on. At £170 or \$270, albeit with a small online discount available, the book is surely out of the reach of all but the richest institutional libraries. At the time of writing, six months after publication, Worldcat suggests only 23 institutions worldwide have copies. While I could imagine recommending some of the chapters on a reading list, they do not appear to be available individually, and no e-book is yet on sale. Chapter authors are not paid, though do get a copy of the book, and the editors are given a small advance against royalties. The model is such that large profit per copy can be made by the publisher on limited sales, rather than a small profit per copy with potentially much greater sales. It is such a shame that this excellent content is likely to be so little read, and this should make us critically reflect on the geographies of power in the modern academic publishing industry.

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