

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Curiosity, inquiry, and the geographical imagination

by Daniel W. Gade, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2011, xviii + 307 pp., cloth \$59.95 (ISBN 9781433115417)

DOI: 10.1111/j.1541-0064.2013.12037.x

For reasons quite apparent in this absorbing exercise in autobiographical reflection, Daniel W. Gade remains one of our discipline's most eclectic practitioners. As resolute in his belief that fieldwork is the bedrock of knowledge as he is adamant in asserting the primacy of facts and empirical findings over the foibles of theory, Gade may actually be considered a theorist of sorts, and a very accomplished one, in spite of what he would no doubt maintain viscerally to the contrary. As he looks back on four decades of sustained contributions to cultural and historical geography, Gade could easily have culled from an oeuvre that includes over a hundred scholarly articles and chapters in books (to say nothing of entire monographs) to assemble a collection of "greatest hits" that would offer readers much to ponder about the links between nature and culture in specific settings on different continents, Old World and New. While he does resort to reprise in several instances, though always with the benefit of hindsight, by and large *Curiosity, inquiry, and the geographical imagination* grapples with the fundamental questions that have propelled Gade's work, rather than excerpting representative selections from it. The result is a giddy gestalt in which the whole truly does amount to palpably more than the sum of its parts.

But parts there are in this finely tuned distillation, three to be precise. The stage is set by Gade spelling out his terms of reference. "By curiosity," he writes, "I mean the pursuit of knowledge and by inquiry I refer to that pursuit in an academic calling" (pp. xiii-xiv). As for "geographical imagination," he holds that to be "a distinctive way of thinking that scholars and others construct to learn about the world at various scales," with "a particular sensitivity toward place, landscape, and the spatial patterns of the earth we

live on" (p. xiv). While he seeks "to explicate the particular perspective of a scholarly domain," namely "cultural-historical geography" (p. xiv), Gade aspires also to engage "issues of disciplinary practice, the culture of scholarship, and the university as institutional facilitator" (p. xiv), thereby offering "food for thought on the inquisitive spirit that merges science, art, philosophy, and history" (p. xiv). Anyone outside the discipline who becomes acquainted with Gade's eclectic brand on the basis of the offerings presented here will find themselves amply rewarded, as will geographers who have failed to pay him sufficient attention hitherto.

In Part One, "Exemplars of the inquisitive spirit," Gade makes trenchant observations about an array of "notably curious individuals" (p. 23). Himself an adopted Vermonter, Gade includes native Vermonter George Perkins Marsh (1801–1880) in a list of 14 luminaries, singling out Marsh for his "wide and arcane curiosity" (p. 35) that resulted in the publication of *Man and nature* (1864), a "landmark book" whose "grand theme, at the time stunningly original, was the human role in changing the face of the earth" (p. 34). Gade also addresses, at the level of society, how lack of curiosity can leave its mark too, contending that an oddly "incurious Spain," despite its incontestable global reach as an imperial power, lagged behind other European nations, taking "300 years to develop substantive interest in the diversity and character of its New World possessions" (pp. 18–19). One does not have to agree with Gade to take something away from what he has to say.

The maverick scholar is at his pithy best in Part Two, "Curiosity in disciplinary framework," above all when discussing "America's most lauded twentieth-century geographer" (p. 74), Carl O. Sauer (1889–1975). Gade reflects on Sauer by stating that, "when placed in the context of his publications, correspondence, and intellectual heroes," Sauer "fits squarely and unequivocally into a romantic mold," beholding "the past in the here and now," championing "the mastery of facts," and having nothing but disdain for "inventing definitions, setting up classifications, or drawing boundaries," passionate in his belief that "only curiosity led to deep learning"

(p. 75). Two engrossing chapters shed light not only on the “anima curiositas” (p. 97) of Sauer himself, but also on the “curious descendants” (p. 115) whose research interests he influenced, generation after generation. What made them, and makes others still, marvel at the man James J. Parsons (1976) declared “towered like a Chimborazo over the field of academic geography” (p. 97)? Gade critiques Sauer with incisive aplomb, asserting (among myriad traits besides an insatiable curiosity) that “like poems, Sauer’s words evoked more than one level of meaning” and “could even cast a spell” (p. 130). The maestro’s “skill in writing was a major element in his appeal to a wider audience” (p. 130), one that included cohorts of schoolchildren exposed to the radical ideas and moral message of *Man in nature* (1939). Sauer’s *First book in geography*, the title of which is a deliberate play on Marsh, may have begun life as a collaborative project, but in the end it consumed far more of Sauer’s time, energy, and craft than Gade allows (note 23, p. 158), and bears Sauer’s hallmark signature throughout.

In Part Three, “Curiosity in reflexive mode,” Gade invokes “the classical metaphor of the hedgehog and the fox” (p. 172), first conjured up by the ancient Greek poet Archilocus and later elaborated on by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, to identify two types of scholars. “Hedgehogs,” he notes, being “centripetally oriented,” in essence “focus on one big thing over a lifetime to become the uncontested guardian of a defined topic” (p. 172). Gade sees himself very much as a fox, with its “restless vulpine curiosity” and “centrifugal mind” less inclined “to impose discipline and to simplify the world” than “make it more complex by constantly unearthing new perspectives not previously recorded” (p. 172). He then offers an

insightful meditation on the nature of the research process, illustrating his unique approach to it first by discussing “research glimmerings” (p. 173) before treating us to more than a dozen “research vignettes” (pp. 192–238) that he presents “as markers in the continuum of project development” (p. 209) rather than full-fledged finished items. These range from the spread (or non-spread) of bullfighting in the Hispanic world to the manufacture of pipe organs in Quebec, from insect eating in highland Peru to the chestnut economy in France—all relayed with erudite charm.

Curiosity, Gade would surely wish us to know, didn’t just kill the cat but caused it to be cooked and eaten thereafter. This occurred either out of necessity or in keeping with tradition, whether by famished Spanish sailors during a transatlantic passage in the sixteenth century or at the Feast of Santa Efigenia, celebrated annually on September 22 by Afro-Peruvians who live south of Lima near San Luis de Cañete—to say nothing of the culinary habits of millions of South Chinese. Unlike other instances that Gade illuminates and informs us about with personal disclosures, he chooses not to divulge whether he himself has ever sampled cat; but in his one life as a geographer, he has reveled in producing more for edification than nine times most others.

Reference

Parsons. J. J. 1976. Carl Ortwin Sauer, 1889–1975. *The Geographical Review* 66(1): 83–89.

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